

Lucretia, Volume 6.

Edward Bulwer-Lytton

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CHAPTER XVIII.

RETROSPECT.

We have now arrived at that stage in this history when it is necessary to look back on the interval in Lucretia's life,--between the death of Dalibard, and her reintroduction in the second portion of our tale.

One day, without previous notice or warning, Lucretia arrived at William Mainwaring's house; she was in the deep weeds of widowhood, and that garb of mourning sufficed to add Susan's tenderest commiseration to the warmth of her affectionate welcome. Lucretia appeared to have forgiven the past, and to have conquered its more painful recollections; she was gentle to Susan, though she rather suffered than returned her caresses; she was open and frank to William. Both felt inexpressibly grateful for her visit, the forgiveness it betokened, and the confidence it implied. At this time no condition could be more promising and prosperous than that of the young banker. From the first the most active partner in the bank, he had now virtually almost monopolized the business. The senior partner was old and infirm; the second had a bucolic turn, and was much taken up by the care of a large farm he had recently purchased; so that Mainwaring, more and more trusted and honoured, became the sole managing administrator of the firm. Business thrived in his able hands; and with patient and steady perseverance there was little doubt but that, before middle age was attained, his competence would have swelled into a fortune sufficient to justify him in realizing the secret dream of his heart,--the parliamentary representation of the town, in which he had already secured the affection and esteem of the inhabitants.

It was not long before Lucretia detected the ambition William's industry but partially concealed; it was not long before, with the ascendancy natural to her will and her talents, she began to exercise considerable, though unconscious, influence over a man in whom a thousand good qualities and some great talents were unhappily accompanied by infirm purpose and weak resolutions. The ordinary conversation of Lucretia unsettled his mind and inflamed his vanity,--a conversation able, aspiring, full both of knowledge drawn from books and of that experience of public men which her residence in Paris (whereon, with its new and greater Charlemagne, the eyes of the world were turned) had added to her acquisitions in the lore of human life. Nothing more disturbs a mind like William Mainwaring's than that species of eloquence which rebukes its patience in the present by inflaming all its hopes in the future. Lucretia had none of the charming babble of women, none of that tender interest in household details, in the minutiae of domestic life, which relaxes the intellect while softening the heart. Hard and vigorous, her sentences came forth in eternal appeal to the reason, or address to the sterner passions in which love has no share. Beside this strong thinker, poor Susan's sweet talk seemed frivolous and inane. Her soft hold upon Mainwaring loosened. He ceased to consult her upon business; he began to repine that the partner of his lot could have little sympathy with his dreams. More often and more bitterly now did his discontented glance, in his way homeward, rove to the rooftops of the rural member for the town; more eagerly did he read the parliamentary debates; more heavily did he sigh at the thought of eloquence denied a vent, and ambition delayed in

its career.

When arrived at this state of mind, Lucretia's conversation took a more worldly, a more practical turn. Her knowledge of the speculators of Paris instructed her pictures of bold ingenuity creating sudden wealth; she spoke of fortunes made in a day,--of parvenus bursting into millionnaires; of wealth as the necessary instrument of ambition, as the arch ruler of the civilized world. Never once, be it observed, in these temptations, did Lucretia address herself to the heart; the ordinary channels of vulgar seduction were disdained by her. She would not have stooped so low as Mainwaring's love, could she have commanded or allured it; she was willing to leave to Susan the husband reft from her own passionate youth, but leave him with the brand on his brow and the worm at his heart,--a scoff and a wreck.

At this time there was in that market-town one of those adventurous, speculative men, who are the more dangerous impostors because imposed upon by their own sanguine chimeras, who have a plausibility in their calculations, an earnestness in their arguments, which account for the dupes they daily make in our most sober and wary of civilized communities. Unscrupulous in their means, yet really honest in the belief that their objects can be attained, they are at once the rogues and fanatics of Mammon. This person was held to have been fortunate in some adroit speculations in the corn trade, and he was brought too frequently into business with Mainwaring not to be a frequent visitor at the house. In him Lucretia saw the very instrument of her design. She led him on to talk of business as a game, of money as a realizer of cent per cent; she drew him into details, she praised him, she admired. In his presence she seemed only to hear him; in his absence, musingly, she started from silence to exclaim on the acuteness of his genius and the accuracy of his figures. Soon the tempter at Mainwaring's heart gave signification to these praises, soon this adventurer became his most intimate friend. Scarcely knowing why, never ascribing the change to her sister, poor Susan wept, amazed at Mainwaring's transformation. No care now for the new books from London, or the roses in the garden; the music on the instrument was unheeded. Books, roses, music,--what are those trifles to a man thinking upon cent per cent? Mainwaring's very countenance altered; it lost its frank, affectionate beauty: sullen, abstracted, morose, it showed that some great care was at the core. Then Lucretia herself began grievously to notice the change to Susan; gradually she altered her tone with regard to the speculator, and hinted vague fears, and urged Susan's remonstrance and warning. As she had anticipated, warning and remonstrance came in vain to the man who, comparing Lucretia's mental power to Susan's, had learned to despise the unlearned, timid sense of the latter.

It is unnecessary to trace this change in Mainwaring step by step, or to measure the time which sufficed to dazzle his reason and blind his honour. In the midst of schemes and hopes which the lust of gold now pervaded came a thunderbolt. An anonymous letter to the head partner of the bank provoked suspicions that led to minute examination of the accounts. It seemed that sums had been irregularly advanced (upon bills drawn by men of straw) to the speculator by Mainwaring; and the destination of these sums could be traced to gambling operations in trade in which Mainwaring had a private interest and partnership. So great, as we have said, had been the confidence placed in William's abilities and honour that the facilities afforded him in the disposal of the joint stock far exceeded those usually granted to the partner of a firm, and the breach of trust appeared the more flagrant from the extent of the

confidence misplaced. Meanwhile, William Mainwaring, though as yet unconscious of the proceedings of his partners, was gnawed by anxiety and remorse, not unmixed with hope. He depended upon the result of a bold speculation in the purchase of shares in a Canal Company, a bill for which was then before parliament, with (as he was led to believe) a certainty of success. The sums he had, on his own responsibility, abstracted from the joint account were devoted to this adventure. But, to do him justice, he never dreamed of appropriating the profits anticipated to himself. Though knowing that the bills on which the moneys had been advanced were merely nominal deposits, he had confidently calculated on the certainty of success for the speculations to which the proceeds so obtained were devoted, and he looked forward to the moment when he might avow what he had done, and justify it by doubling the capital withdrawn. But to his inconceivable horror, the bill of the Canal Company was rejected in the Lords; the shares bought at a premium went down to zero; and to add to his perplexity, the speculator abruptly disappeared from the town. In this crisis he was summoned to meet his indignant associates.

The evidence against him was morally damning, if not legally conclusive. The unhappy man heard all in the silence of despair. Crushed and bewildered, he attempted no defence. He asked but an hour to sum up the losses of the bank and his own; they amounted within a few hundreds to the 10,000 pounds he had brought to the firm, and which, in the absence of marriage-settlements, was entirely at his own disposal. This sum he at once resigned to his associates, on condition that they should defray from it his personal liabilities. The money thus repaid, his partners naturally relinquished all further inquiry. They were moved by pity for one so gifted and so fallen,--they even offered him a subordinate but lucrative situation in the firm in which he had been partner; but Mainwaring wanted the patience and resolution to work back the redemption of his name,--perhaps, ultimately, of his fortunes. In the fatal anguish of his shame and despair, he fled from the town; his flight confirmed forever the rumours against him,--rumours worse than the reality. It was long before he even admitted Susan to the knowledge of the obscure refuge he had sought; there, at length, she joined him. Meanwhile, what did Lucretia? She sold nearly half of her own fortune, constituted principally of the moiety of her portion which, at Dalibard's death, had passed to herself as survivor, and partly of the share in her deceased husband's effects which the French law awarded to her, and with the proceeds of this sum she purchased an annuity for her victims. Was this strange generosity the act of mercy, the result of repentance? No; it was one of the not least subtle and delicious refinements of her revenge. To know him who had rejected her, the rival who had supplanted, the miserable pensioners of her bounty, was dear to her haughty and disdainful hate. The lust of power, ever stronger in her than avarice, more than reconciled her to the sacrifice of gold. Yes, here she, the despised, the degraded, had power still; her wrath had ruined the fortunes of her victim, blasted the repute, embittered and desolated evermore the future,--now her contemptuous charity fed the wretched lives that she spared in scorn. She had no small difficulty, it is true, in persuading Susan to accept this sacrifice, and she did so only by sustaining her sister's belief that the past could yet be retrieved, that Mainwaring's energies could yet rebuild their fortunes, and that as the annuity was at any time redeemable, the aid therefore was only temporary. With this understanding, Susan, overwhelmed with gratitude, weeping and broken-hearted, departed to join the choice of her youth. As the men deputed by the auctioneer to arrange and ticket the furniture for sale entered the desolate house, Lucretia then, with the step of a conqueror,

passed from the threshold.

"Ah!" she murmured, as she paused, and gazed on the walls, "ah, they were happy when I first entered those doors,--happy in each other's tranquil love; happier still when they deemed I had forgiven the wrong and abjured the past! How honoured was then their home! How knew I then, for the first time, what the home of love can be! And who had destroyed for me, upon all the earth, a home like theirs? They on whom that home smiled with its serene and taunting peace! I--I, the guest! I--I, the abandoned, the betrayed,--what dark memories were on my soul, what a hell boiled within my bosom! Well might those memories take each a voice to accuse them; well, from that hell, might rise the Alecto! Their lives were in my power, my fatal dowry at my command,--rapid death, or slow, consuming torture; but to have seen each cheer the other to the grave, lighting every downward step with the eyes of love,--vengeance so urged would have fallen only on myself! Ha! deceiver, didst thou plume thyself, forsooth, on spotless reputation? Didst thou stand, me by thy side, amongst thy perjured household gods and talk of honour? Thy home, it is reft from thee; thy reputation, it is a, scoff; thine honour, it is a ghost that shall haunt thee! Thy love, can it linger yet? Shall the soft eyes of thy wife not burn into thy heart, and shame turn love into loathing? Wrecks of my vengeance, minions of my bounty, I did well to let ye live; I shake the dust from my feet on your threshold. Live on, homeless, hopeless, and childless! The curse is fulfilled!"

From that hour Lucretia never paused from her career to inquire further of her victims; she never entered into communication with either. They knew not her address nor her fate, nor she theirs. As she had reckoned, Mainwaring made no effort to recover himself from his fall. All the high objects that had lured his ambition were gone from him evermore. No place in the State, no authority in the senate, awaits in England the man with a blighted name. For the lesser objects of life he had no heart and no care. They lived in obscurity in a small village in Cornwall till the Peace allowed them to remove to France; the rest of their fate is known.

Meanwhile, Lucretia removed to one of those smaller Londons, resorts of pleasure and idleness, with which rich England abounds, and in which widows of limited income can make poverty seem less plebeian. And now, to all those passions that had hitherto raged within her, a dismal apathy succeeded. It was the great calm in her sea of life. The winds fell, and the sails drooped. Her vengeance satisfied, that which she had made so preternaturally the main object of existence, once fulfilled, left her in youth objectless.

She strove at first to take pleasure in the society of the place; but its frivolities and pettiness of purpose soon wearied that masculine and grasping mind, already made insensible to the often healthful, often innocent, excitement of trifles, by the terrible ordeal it had passed. Can the touch of the hand, scorched by the burning iron, feel pleasure in the softness of silk, or the light down of the cygnet's plume? She next sought such relief as study could afford; and her natural bent of thought, and her desire to vindicate her deeds to herself, plunged her into the fathomless abyss of metaphysical inquiry with the hope to confirm into positive assurance her earlier scepticism,--with the atheist's hope to annihilate the soul, and banish the presiding God. But no voice that could satisfy her reason came from those dreary deeps; contradiction on contradiction met her in the maze. Only when, wearied with book-lore, she turned her eyes to the visible Nature, and beheld everywhere harmony, order, system, contrivance, art, did she start with

the amaze and awe of instinctive conviction, and the natural religion revolted from her cheerless ethics. Then came one of those sudden reactions common with strong passions and exploring minds, but more common with women, however manlike, than with men. Had she lived in Italy then, she had become a nun; for in this woman, unlike Varney and Dalibard, the conscience could never be utterly silenced. In her choice of evil, she found only torture to her spirit in all the respites afforded to the occupations it indulged. When employed upon ill, remorse gave way to the zest of scheming; when the ill was done, remorse came with the repose.

It was in this peculiar period of her life that Lucretia, turning everywhere, and desperately, for escape from the past, became acquainted with some members of one of the most rigid of the sects of Dissent. At first she permitted herself to know and commune with these persons from a kind of contemptuous curiosity; she desired to encourage, in contemplating them, her experience of the follies of human nature: but in that crisis of her mind, in those struggles of her reason, whatever showed that which she most yearned to discover,--namely, earnest faith, rooted and genuine conviction, whether of annihilation or of immortality, a philosophy that might reconcile her to crime by destroying the providence of good, or a creed that could hold out the hope of redeeming the past and exorcising sin by the mystery of a Divine sacrifice,--had over her a power which she had not imagined or divined. Gradually the intense convictions of her new associates disturbed and infected her. Their affirmations that as we are born in wrath, so sin is our second nature, our mysterious heritage, seemed, to her understanding, willing to be blinded, to imply excuses for her past misdeeds. Their assurances that the worst sinner may become the most earnest saint; that through but one act of the will, resolute faith, all redemption is to be found,--these affirmations and these assurances, which have so often restored the guilty and remodelled the human heart, made a salutary, if brief, impression upon her. Nor were the lives of these Dissenters (for the most part austere moral), nor the peace and self-complacency which they evidently found in the satisfaction of conscience and fulfilment of duty, without an influence over her that for a while both chastened and soothed.

Hopeful of such a convert, the good teachers strove hard to confirm the seeds springing up from the granite and amidst the weeds; and amongst them came one man more eloquent, more seductive, than the rest,--Alfred Braddell. This person, a trader at Liverpool, was one of those strange living paradoxes that can rarely be found out of a commercial community. He himself had been a convert to the sect, and like most converts, he pushed his enthusiasm into the bigotry of the zealot; he saw no salvation out of the pale into which he had entered. But though his belief was sincere, it did not genially operate on his practical life; with the most scrupulous attention to forms, he had the worldliness and cunning of the carnal. He had abjured the vices of the softer senses, but not that which so seldom wars on the decorums of outer life. He was essentially a money-maker,--close, acute, keen, overreaching. Good works with him were indeed as nothing,--faith the all in all. He was one of the elect, and could not fall. Still, in this man there was all the intensity which often characterizes a mind in proportion to the narrowness of its compass; that intensity gave fire to his gloomy eloquence, and strength to his obstinate will. He saw Lucretia, and his zeal for her conversion soon expanded into love for her person; yet that love was secondary to his covetousness. Though ostensibly in a flourishing business, he was greatly distressed for money to carry on operations which swelled beyond

the reach of his capital; his fingers itched for the sum which Lucretia had still at her disposal. But the seeming sincerity of the man, the persuasion of his goodness, his reputation for sanctity, deceived her; she believed herself honestly and ardently beloved, and by one who could guide her back, if not to happiness, at least to repose. She herself loved him not,--she could love no more. But it seemed to her a luxury to find some one she could trust, she could honour. If you had probed into the recesses of her mind at that time, you would have found that no religious belief was there settled,--only the desperate wish to believe; only the disturbance of all previous infidelity; only a restless, gnawing desire to escape from memory, to emerge from the gulf. In this troubled, impatient disorder of mind and feeling, she hurried into a second marriage as fatal as the first.

For a while she bore patiently all the privations of that ascetic household, assisted in all those external formalities, centred all her intellect within that iron range of existence. But no grace descended on her soul,--no warm ray unlocked the ice of the well. Then, gradually becoming aware of the niggardly meanness, of the harsh, uncharitable judgments, of the decorous frauds that, with unconscious hypocrisy, her husband concealed beneath the robes of sanctity, a weary disgust stole over her,--it stole, it deepened, it increased; it became intolerable when she discovered that Braddell had knowingly deceived her as to his worldly substance. In that mood in which she had rushed into these ominous nuptials, she had had no thought for vulgar advantages; had Braddell been a beggar, she had married him as rashly. But he, with the inability to comprehend a nature like hers,--dim not more to her terrible vices than to the sinister grandeur which made their ordinary atmosphere,--had descended cunningly to address the avarice he thought as potent in others as himself, to enlarge on the worldly prosperity with which Providence had blessed him; and now she saw that her dowry alone had saved the crippled trader from the bankrupt list. With this revolting discovery, with the scorn it produced, vanished all Lucretia's unstable visions of reform. She saw this man a saint amongst his tribe, and would not believe in the virtues of his brethren, great and unquestionable as they might have been proved to a more dispassionate and humbler inquirer. The imposture she detected she deemed universal in the circle in which she dwelt; and Satan once more smiled upon the subject he regained. Lucretia became a mother; but their child formed no endearing tie between the ill-assorted pair,--it rather embittered their discord. Dimly even then, as she bent over the cradle, that vision, which now, in the old house at Brompton, haunted her dreams and beckoned her over seas of blood into the fancied future, was foreshadowed in the face of her infant son. To be born again in that birth, to live only in that life, to aspire as man may aspire, in that future man whom she would train to knowledge and lead to power,--these were the feelings with which that sombre mother gazed upon her babe. The idea that the low-born, grovelling father had the sole right over that son's destiny, had the authority to cabin his mind in the walls of form, bind him down to the sordid apprenticeship, debased, not dignified, by the solemn mien, roused her indignant wrath; she sickened when Braddell touched her child. All her pride of intellect, that had never slept, all her pride of birth, long dormant, woke up to protect the heir of her ambition, the descendant of her race, from the defilement of the father's nurture. Not long after her confinement, she formed a plan for escape; she disappeared from the house with her child. Taking refuge in a cottage, living on the sale of the few jewels she possessed, she was for some weeks almost happy. But Braddell, less grieved by the loss than shocked by the scandal, was indefatigable in his researches,--he discovered her retreat. The scene

between them was terrible. There was no resisting the power which all civilized laws give to the rights of husband and father. Before this man, whom she scorned so unutterably, Lucretia was impotent. Then all the boiling passions long suppressed beneath that command of temper, which she owed both to habitual simulation and intense disdain, rushed forth. Then she appalled the impostor with her indignant denunciations of his hypocrisy, his meanness, and his guile. Then, throwing off the mask she had worn, she hurled her anathema on his sect, on his faith, with the same breath that smote his conscience and left it wordless. She shocked all the notions he sincerely entertained, and he stood awed by accusations from a blasphemer whom he dared not rebuke. His rage broke at length from his awe. Stung, maddened by the scorn of himself, his blood fired into juster indignation by her scoff at his creed, he lost all self-possession and struck her to the ground. In the midst of shame and dread at disclosure of his violence, which succeeded the act so provoked, he was not less relieved than amazed when Lucretia, rising slowly, laid her hand gently on his arm and said, "Repent not, it is passed; fear not, I will be silent! Come, you are the stronger,--you prevail. I will follow my child to your home."

In this unexpected submission in one so imperious, Braddell's imperfect comprehension of character saw but fear, and his stupidity exulted in his triumph. Lucretia returned with him. A few days afterwards Braddell became ill; the illness increased,--slow, gradual, wearying. It broke his spirit with his health; and then the steadfast imperiousness of Lucretia's stern will ruled and subjugated him. He cowered beneath her haughty, searching gaze, he shivered at her sidelong, malignant glance; but with this fear came necessarily hate, and this hate, sometimes sufficing to vanquish the fear, spitefully evinced itself in thwarting her legitimate control over her infant. He would have it (though he had little real love for children) constantly with him, and affected to contradict all her own orders to the servants, in the sphere in which mothers arrogate most the right. Only on these occasions sometimes would Lucretia lose her grim self-control, and threaten that her child yet should be emancipated from his hands, should yet be taught the scorn for hypocrites which he had taught herself. These words sank deep, not only in the resentment, but in the conscience, of the husband. Meanwhile, Lucretia scrupled not to evince her disdain of Braddell by markedly abstaining from all the ceremonies she had before so rigidly observed. The sect grew scandalized. Braddell did not abstain from making known his causes of complaint. The haughty, imperious woman was condemned in the community, and hated in the household.

It was at this time that Walter Ardworth, who was then striving to eke out his means by political lectures (which in the earlier part of the century found ready audience) in our great towns, came to Liverpool. Braddell and Ardworth had been schoolfellows, and even at school embryo politicians of congenial notions; and the conversion of the former to one of the sects which had grown out of the old creeds, that, under Cromwell, had broken the sceptre of the son of Belial and established the Commonwealth of Saints, had only strengthened the republican tenets of the sour fanatic. Ardworth called on Braddell, and was startled to find in his schoolfellow's wife the niece of his benefactor, Sir Miles St. John. Now, Lucretia had never divulged her true parentage to her husband. In a union so much beneath her birth, she had desired to conceal from all her connections the fall of the once-honoured heiress. She had descended, in search of peace, to obscurity; but her pride revolted from the thought that her low-born husband might boast of her connections and parade her descent to his level. Fortunately, as she

thought, she received Ardworth before he was admitted to her husband, who now, growing feebler and feebler, usually kept his room. She stooped to beseech Ardworth not to reveal her secret; and he, comprehending her pride, as a man well-born himself, and pitying her pain, readily gave his promise. At the first interview, Braddell evinced no pleasure in the sight of his old schoolfellow. It was natural enough that one so precise should be somewhat revolted by one so careless of all form. But when Lucretia imprudently evinced satisfaction at his surly remarks on his visitor; when he perceived that it would please her that he should not cultivate the acquaintance offered him,--he was moved, by the spirit of contradiction, and the spiteful delight even in frivolous annoyance, to conciliate and court the intimacy he had at first disdained: and then, by degrees, sympathy in political matters and old recollections of sportive, careless boyhood cemented the intimacy into a more familiar bond than the sectarian had contracted really with any of his late associates.

Lucretia regarded this growing friendship with great uneasiness; the uneasiness increased to alarm when one day, in the presence of Ardworth, Braddell, writhing with a sudden spasm, said: "I cannot account for these strange seizures; I think verily I am poisoned!" and his dull eye rested on Lucretia's pallid brow. She was unusually thoughtful for some days after this remark; and one morning she informed her husband that she had received the intelligence that a relation, from whom she had pecuniary expectations, was dangerously ill, and requested his permission to visit this sick kinsman, who dwelt in a distant county. Braddell's eyes brightened at the thought of her absence; with little further questioning he consented; and Lucretia, sure perhaps that the barb was in the side of her victim, and reckoning, it may be, on greater freedom from suspicion if her husband died in her absence, left the house. It was, indeed, to the neighbourhood of her kindred that she went. In a private conversation with Ardworth, when questioning him of his news of the present possessor of Laughton, he had informed her that he had heard accidentally that Vernon's two sons (Percival was not then born) were sickly; and she went into Hampshire secretly and unknown, to see what were really the chances that her son might yet become the lord of her lost inheritance.

During this absence, Braddell, now gloomily aware that his days were numbered, resolved to put into practice the idea long contemplated, and even less favoured by his spite than justified by the genuine convictions of his conscience. Whatever his faults, sincere at least in his religious belief, he might well look with dread to the prospect of the training and education his son would receive from the hands of a mother who had blasphemed his sect and openly proclaimed her infidelity. By will, it is true, he might create a trust, and appoint guardians to his child. But to have lived under the same roof with his wife,--nay, to have carried her back to that roof when she had left it,--afforded tacit evidence that whatever the disagreement between them, her conduct could hardly have merited her exclusion from the privileges of a mother. The guardianship might therefore avail little to frustrate Lucretia's indirect contamination, if not her positive control. Besides, where guardians are appointed, money must be left; and Braddell knew that at his death his assets would be found insufficient for his debts. Who would be guardian to a penniless infant? He resolved, therefore, to send his child from his roof to some place where, if reared humbly, it might at least be brought up in the right faith,--some place which might defy the search and be beyond the perversion of the unbelieving mother. He looked round, and discovered no instrument for his purpose that seemed so ready as Walter Ardworth; for by this time he had thoroughly excited the

pity and touched the heart of that good-natured, easy man. His representations of the misconduct of Lucretia were the more implicitly believed by one who had always been secretly prepossessed against her; who, admitted to household intimacy, was an eye-witness to her hard indifference to her husband's sufferings; who saw in her very request not to betray her gentle birth, the shame she felt in her election; who regarded with indignation her unfeeling desertion of Braddell in his last moments, and who, besides all this, had some private misfortunes of his own which made him the more ready listener to themes on the faults of women; and had already, by mutual confidences, opened the hearts of the two ancient schoolfellows to each other's complaints and wrongs. The only other confidant in the refuge selected for the child was a member of the same community as Braddell, who kindly undertook to search for a pious, godly woman, who, upon such pecuniary considerations as Braddell, by robbing his creditors, could afford to bestow, would permanently offer to the poor infant a mother's home and a mother's care. When this woman was found, Braddell confided his child to Ardworth, with such a sum as he could scrape together for its future maintenance. And to Ardworth, rather than to his fellow-sectarian, this double trust was given, because the latter feared scandal and misrepresentation if he should be ostensibly mixed up in so equivocal a charge. Poor and embarrassed as Walter Ardworth was, Braddell did not for once misinterpret character when he placed the money in his hands; and this because the characters we have known in transparent boyhood we have known forever. Ardworth was reckless, and his whole life had been wrecked, his whole nature materially degraded, by the want of common thrift and prudence. His own money slipped through his fingers and left him surrounded by creditors, whom, rigidly speaking, he thus defrauded; but direct dishonesty was as wholly out of the chapter of his vices as if he had been a man of the strictest principles and the steadiest honour.

The child was gone, the father died, Lucretia returned, as we have seen in Grabman's letter, to the house of death, to meet suspicion, and cold looks, and menial accusations, and an inquest on the dead; but through all this the reft tigress mourned her stolen whelp. As soon as all evidence against her was proved legally groundless, and she had leave to depart, she searched blindly and frantically for her lost child; but in vain. The utter and penniless destitution in which she was left by her husband's decease did not suffice to terminate her maddening chase. On foot she wandered from village to village, and begged her way wherever a false clew misled her steps.

At last, in reluctant despair, she resigned the pursuit, and found herself one day in the midst of the streets of London, half-famished and in rags; and before her suddenly, now grown into vigorous youth,-- blooming, sleek, and seemingly prosperous,--stood Gabriel Varney. By her voice, as she approached and spoke, he recognized his stepmother; and after a short pause of hesitation, he led her to his home. It is not our purpose (for it is not necessary to those passages of their lives from which we have selected the thread of our tale) to follow these two, thus united, through their general career of spoliation and crime. Birds of prey, they searched in human follies and human errors for their food: sometimes severed, sometimes together, their interests remained one. Varney profited by the mightier and subtler genius of evil to which he had leashed himself; for, caring little for luxuries, and dead to the softer senses, she abandoned to him readily the larger share of their plunder. Under a variety of names and disguises, through a succession of frauds, some vast and some mean, but chiefly on the Continent, they had pursued their course, eluding all danger and baffling all law.

Between three and four years before this period, Varney's uncle, the painter, by one of those unexpected caprices of fortune which sometimes find heirs to a millionaire at the weaver's loom or the labourer's plough, had suddenly, by the death of a very distant kinsman whom he had never seen, come into possession of a small estate, which he sold for 6,000 pounds. Retiring from all his profession, he lived as comfortably as his shattered constitution permitted upon the interest of this sum; and he wrote to his nephew, then at Paris, to communicate the good news and offer the hospitality of his hearth. Varney hastened to London. Shortly afterwards a nurse, recommended as an experienced, useful person in her profession, by Nicholas Grabman, who in many a tortuous scheme had been Gabriel's confederate, was installed in the poor painter's house. From that time his infirmities increased. He died, as his doctor said, "by abstaining from the stimulants to which his constitution had been so long accustomed;" and Gabriel Varney was summoned to the reading of the will. To his inconceivable disappointment, instead of bequeathing to his nephew the free disposal of his 6,000 pounds, that sum was assigned to trustees for the benefit of Gabriel and his children yet unborn,—"An inducement," said the poor testator, tenderly, "for the boy to marry and reform!" So that the nephew could only enjoy the interest, and had no control over the capital. The interest of 6,000 pounds invested in the Bank of England was flocci nauci to the voluptuous spendthrift, Gabriel Varney.

Now, these trustees were selected from the painter's earlier and more respectable associates, who had dropped him, it is true, in his days of beggary and disrepute, but whom the fortune that made him respectable had again conciliated. One of these trustees had lately retired to pass the remainder of his days at Boulogne; the other was a hypochondriacal valetudinarian,—neither of them, in short, a man of business. Gabriel was left to draw out the interest of the money as it became periodically due at the Bank of England. In a few months the trustee settled at Boulogne died; the trust, of course, lapsed to Mr. Stubmore, the valetudinarian survivor. Soon pinched by extravagances, and emboldened by the character and helpless state of the surviving trustee, Varney forged Mr. Stubmore's signature to an order on the bank to sell out such portion of the capital as his wants required. The impunity of one offence begot courage for others, till the whole was well-nigh expended. Upon these sums Varney had lived very pleasantly, and he saw with a deep sigh the approaching failure of so facile a resource.

In one of the melancholy moods engendered by this reflection, Varney happened to be in the very town in France in which the Mainwarings, in their later years, had taken refuge, and from which Helen had been removed to the roof of Mr. Fielden. By accident he heard the name, and, his curiosity leading to further inquiries, learned that Helen was made an heiress by the will of her grandfather. With this knowledge came a thought of the most treacherous, the most miscreant, and the vilest crime that even he yet had perpetrated; so black was it that for a while he absolutely struggled against it. But in guilt there seems ever a Necessity that urges on, step after step, to the last consummation. Varney received a letter to inform him that the last surviving trustee was no more, that the trust was therefore now centred in his son and heir, that that gentleman was at present very busy in settling his own affairs and examining into a very mismanaged property in Devonshire which had devolved upon him, but that he hoped in a few months to discharge, more efficiently than his father had done, the duties of trustee, and that some more profitable investment than the Bank of England would

probably occur.

This new trustee was known personally to Varney,--a contemporary of his own, and in earlier youth a pupil to his uncle. But, since then, he had made way in life, and retired from the profession of art. This younger Stubmore he knew to be a bustling, officious man of business, somewhat greedy and covetous, but withal somewhat weak of purpose, good-natured in the main, and with a little lukewarm kindness for Gabriel, as a quondam fellow-pupil. That Stubmore would discover the fraud was evident; that he would declare it, for his own sake, was evident also; that the bank would prosecute, that Varney would be convicted, was no less surely to be apprehended. There was only one chance left to the forger: if he could get into his hands, and in time, before Stubmore's bustling interference, a sum sufficient to replace what had been fraudulently taken, he might easily manage, he thought, to prevent the forgery ever becoming known. Nay, if Stubmore, roused into strict personal investigation by the new power of attorney which a new investment in the bank would render necessary, should ascertain what had occurred, his liabilities being now indemnified, and the money replaced, Varney thought he could confidently rely on his ci-devant fellow-pupil's assent to wink at the forgery and hush up the matter. But this was his only chance. How was the money to be gained? He thought of Helen's fortune, and the last scruple gave way to the imminence of his peril and the urgency of his fears.

With this decision, he repaired to Lucretia, whose concurrence was necessary to his designs. Long habits of crime had now deepened still more the dark and stern colour of that dread woman's sombre nature. But through all that had ground the humanity from her soul, one human sentiment, fearfully tainted and adulterated as it was, still struggled for life,--the memory of the mother. It was by this, her least criminal emotion, that Varney led her to the worst of her crimes. He offered to sell out the remainder of the trust-money by a fresh act of forgery, to devote such proceeds to the search for her lost Vincent; he revived the hopes she had long since gloomily relinquished, till she began to conceive the discovery easy and certain. He then brought before her the prospect of that son's succession to Laughton: but two lives now between him and those broad lands,--those two lives associated with just cause of revenge. Two lives! Lucretia till then did not know that Susan had left a child, that a pledge of those nuptials, to which she imputed all her infamy, existed to revive a jealousy never extinguished, appeal to the hate that had grown out of her love. More readily than Varney had anticipated, and with fierce exultation, she fell into his horrible schemes.

Thus had she returned to England and claimed the guardianship of her niece. Varney engaged a dull house in the suburb, and looking out for a servant not likely to upset and betray, found the nurse who had watched over his uncle's last illness; but Lucretia, according to her invariable practice, rejected all menial accomplices, reposed no confidence in the tools of her black deeds. Feigning an infirmity that would mock all suspicion of the hand that mixed the draught, and the step that stole to the slumber, she defied the justice of earth, and stood alone under the omniscience of Heaven.

Various considerations had delayed the execution of the atrocious deed so coldly contemplated. Lucretia herself drew back, perhaps more daunted by conscience than she herself was distinctly aware, and disguising her scruples in those yet fouler refinements of hoped revenge which her conversations with Varney have betrayed to the reader. The failure of

the earlier researches for the lost Vincent, the suspended activity of Stubmore, left the more impatient murderer leisure to make the acquaintance of St. John, steal into the confidence of Helen, and render the insurances on the life of the latter less open to suspicion than if effected immediately on her entrance into that shamble-house, and before she could be supposed to form that affection for her aunt which made probable so tender a forethought. These causes of delay now vanished, the Parcae closed the abrupt woof, and lifted the impending shears.

Lucretia had long since dropped the name of Braddell. She shrank from proclaiming those second spousals, sullied by the degradation to which they had exposed her, and the suspicions implied in the inquest on her husband, until the hour for acknowledging her son should arrive. She resumed, therefore, the name of Dalibard, and by that we will continue to call her. Nor was Varney uninfluential in dissuading her from proclaiming her second marriage till occasion necessitated. If the son were discovered, and proofs of his birth in the keeping of himself and his accomplice, his avarice naturally suggested the expediency of wringing from that son some pledge of adequate reward on succession to an inheritance which they alone could secure to him; out of this fancied fund not only Grabman, but his employer, was to be paid. The concealment of the identity between Mrs. Braddell and Madame Dalibard might facilitate such an arrangement. This idea Varney locked as yet in his own breast. He did not dare to speak to Lucretia of the bargain he ultimately meditated with her son.

CHAPTER XIX.

MR. GRABMAN'S ADVENTURES.

The lackeys in their dress liveries stood at the porch of Laughton as the postilions drove rapidly along the road, sweeping through venerable groves, tinged with the hues of autumn, up to that stately pile. From the window of the large, cumbrous vehicle which Percival, mindful of Madame Dalibard's infirmity, had hired for her special accommodation, Lucretia looked keenly. On the slope of the hill grouped the deer, and below, where the lake gleamed, the swan rested on the wave. Farther on to the left, gaunt and stag-headed, rose, living still, from the depth of the glen, Guy's memorable oak. Coming now in sight, though at a distance, the gray church-tower emerged from the surrounding masses of solemn foliage. Suddenly the road curves round, and straight before her (the rooks cawing above the turrets, the sun reflected from the vanes) Lucretia gazes on the halls of Laughton. And didst thou not, O Guy's oak, murmur warning from thine oracular hollows? And thou who sleepest below the church-tower, didst thou not turn, Miles St. John, in thy grave, when, with such tender care, the young lord of Laughton bore that silent guest across his threshold, and with credulous, moistened eyes, welcomed Treason and Murder to his hearth?

There, at the porch, paused Helen, gazing with the rapt eye of the poetess on the broad landscape, checkered by the vast shadows cast from the setting sun. There, too, by her side lingered Varney, with an artist's eye for the stately scene, till a thought, not of art, changed the face of the earth, and the view without mirrored back the Golgotha of his soul.

Leave them thus; we must hurry on.

One day a traveller stopped his gig at a public-house in a village in Lancashire. He chuckled the rein to the hostler, and in reply to a question what oats should be given to the horse, said, "Hay and water; the beast is on job." Then sauntering to the bar, he called for a glass of raw brandy for himself; and while the host drew the spirit forth from the tap, he asked carelessly if some years ago a woman of the name of Joplin had not resided in the village.

"It is strange," said the host, musingly. "What is strange?"

"Why, we have just had a gent asking the same question. I have only been here nine year come December; but my old hostler was born in the village, and never left it. So the gent had in the hostler, and he is now gone into the village to pick up what else he can learn."

This intelligence seemed to surprise and displease the traveller.

"What the deuce!" he muttered; "does Jason mistrust me? Has he set another dog on the scent? Humph!" He drained off his brandy, and sallied forth to confer with the hostler.

"Well, my friend," said Mr. Grabman,--for the traveller was no other than that worthy,--"well, so you remember Mrs. Joplin more than twenty years ago, eh?"

"Yees, I guess; more than twenty years since she left the pleck [Lancashire and Yorkshire synonym for place]."

"Ah, she seems to have been a restless body. She had a child with her?"

"Yees, I moind that."

"And I dare say you heard her say the child was not her own,--that she was paid well for it, eh?"

"Noa; my missus did not loike me to chaffer much with neighbour Joplin, for she was but a bad 'un,--pretty fease, too. She lived agin the wogh [Anglice, wall] yonder, where you see that gent coming out."

"Oho! that is the gent who was asking after Mrs. Joplin?"

"Yes; and he giv' me half-a-croon!" said the clever hostler, holding out his hand.

Mr. Grabman, too thoughtful, too jealous of his rival, to take the hint at that moment, darted off, as fast as his thin legs could carry him, towards the unwelcome interferer in his own business.

Approaching the gentleman,--a tall, powerful-looking young man,--he somewhat softened his tone, and mechanically touched his hat as he said, -

"What, sir, are you, too, in search of Mrs. Joplin?"

"Sir, I am," answered the young man, eying Grabman deliberately; "and you, I suppose, are the person I have found before me on the same search,--first at Liverpool; next at C----, about fifteen miles from that

town; thirdly, at I---; and now we meet here. You have had the start of me. What have you learned?"

Mr. Grabman smiled. "Softly, sir, softly. May I first ask--since open questioning seems the order of the day--whether I have the honour to address a brother practitioner,--one of the law, sir, one of the law?"

"I am one of the law."

Mr. Grabman bowed and scowled.

"And may I make bold to ask the name of your client?"

"Certainly you may ask. Every man has a right to ask what he pleases, in a civil way."

"But you'll not answer? Deep! Oh, I understand! Very good. But I am deep too, sir. You know Mr. Varney, I suppose?"

The gentleman looked surprised. His bushy brows met over his steady, sagacious eyes; but after a moment's pause the expression of his face cleared up.

"It is as I thought," he said, half to himself. "Who else could have had an interest in similar inquiries?--Sir," he added, with a quick and decided tone, "you are doubtless employed by Mr. Varney on behalf of Madame Dalibard and in search of evidence connected with the loss of an unhappy infant. I am on the same quest, and for the same end. The interests of your client are mine. Two heads are better than one; let us unite our ingenuity and endeavours."

"And share the pec, I suppose?" said Grabman, dryly, buttoning up his pockets.

"Whatever fee you may expect you will have, anyhow, whether I assist you or not. I expect no fee, for mine is a personal interest, which I serve gratuitously; but I can undertake to promise you, on my own part, more than the ordinary professional reward for your co-operation."

"Well, sir," said Grabman, mollified, "you speak very much like a gentleman. My feelings were hurt at first, I own. I am hasty, but I can listen to reason. Will you walk back with me to the house you have just left? And suppose we then turn in and have a chop together, and compare notes."

"Willingly," answered the tall stranger, and the two inquisitors amicably joined company. The result of their inquiries was not, however, very satisfactory. No one knew whither Mrs. Joplin had gone, though all agreed it was in company with a man of bad character and vagrant habits; all agreed, too, in the vague recollection of the child, and some remembered that it was dressed in clothes finer than would have been natural to an infant legally and filially appertaining to Mrs. Joplin. One old woman remembered that on her reproaching Mrs. Joplin for some act of great cruelty to the poor babe, she replied that it was not her flesh and blood, and that if she had not expected more than she had got, she would never have undertaken the charge. On comparing the information gleaned at the previous places of their research, they found an entire agreement as to the character personally borne by Mrs. Joplin. At the village to which their inquiry had been first directed, she was known as

a respectable, precise young woman, one of a small congregation of rigid Dissenters. She had married a member of the sect, and borne him a child, which died two weeks after birth. She was then seen nursing another infant, though how she came by it none knew. Shortly after this, her husband, a journeyman carpenter of good repute, died; but to the surprise of the neighbours, Mrs. Joplin continued to live as comfortably as before, and seemed not to miss the wages of her husband,--nay, she rather now, as if before kept back by the prudence of the deceased, launched into a less thrifty mode of life, and a gayety of dress at variance both with the mourning her recent loss should have imposed, and the austere tenets of her sect. This indecorum excited angry curiosity, and drew down stern remonstrance. Mrs. Joplin, in apparent disgust at this intermeddling with her affairs, withdrew from the village to a small town, about twenty miles distant, and there set up a shop. But her moral lapse became now confirmed; her life was notoriously abandoned, and her house the resort of all the reprobates of the place. Whether her means began to be exhausted, or the scandal she provoked attracted the notice of the magistrates and imposed a check on her course, was not very certain, but she sold off her goods suddenly, and was next tracked to the village in which Mr. Grabman met his new coadjutor; and there, though her conduct was less flagrant, and her expenses less reckless, she made but a very unfavourable impression, which was confirmed by her flight with an itinerant hawker of the lowest possible character. Seated over their port wine, the two gentlemen compared their experiences, and consulted on the best mode of remending the broken thread of their research; when Mr. Grabman said coolly, "But, after all, I think it most likely that we are not on the right scent. This bantling may not be the one we search for."

"Be not misled by that doubt. To arrive at the evidence we desire, we must still track this wretched woman."

"You are certain of that?"

"Certain."

"Hem! Did you ever hear of a Mr. Walter Ardworth?"

"Yes, what of him?"

"Why, he can best tell us where to look for the child."

"I am sure he would counsel as I do."

"You know him, then?"

"I do."

"What, he lives still?"

"I hope so."

"Can you bring me across him?"

"If necessary."

"And that young man, who goes by his name, brought up by Mr. Fielden?"

"Well, sir?"

"Is he not the son of Mr. Braddell?"

The stranger was silent, and, shading his face with his hand, seemed buried in thought. He then rose, took up his candle, and said quietly,--

"Sir, I wish you good-evening. I have letters to write in my own room. I will consider by to-morrow, if you stay till then, whether we can really aid each other further, or whether we should pursue our researches separately." With these words he closed the door; and Mr. Grabman remained baffled and bewildered.

However, he too had a letter to write; so, calling for pen, ink, and paper, and a pint of brandy, he indited his complaints and his news to Varney.

"Jason, (he began) are you playing me false? Have you set another man on the track with a view to bilk me of my promised fee? Explain, or I throw up the business."

Herewith, Mr. Grabman gave a minute description of the stranger, and related pretty accurately what had passed between that gentleman and himself. He then added the progress of his own inquiries, and renewed, as peremptorily as he dared, his demand for candour and plain dealing. Now, it so happened that in stumbling upstairs to bed, Mr. Grabman passed the room in which his mysterious fellow-seeker was lodged, and as is the usage in hotels, a pair of boots stood outside the door, to be cleaned betimes in the morning. Though somewhat drunk, Grabman still preserved the rays of his habitual astuteness. A clever and a natural idea shot across his brain, illuminating the fumes of the brandy; he stooped, and while one hand on the wall steadied his footing, with the other he fished up a boot, and peering within, saw legibly written: "John Ardworth, Esq., Gray's Inn." At that sight he felt what a philosopher feels at the sudden elucidation of a troublesome problem. Downstairs again tottered Grabman, re-opened his letter, and wrote,--

"P.S.--I have wronged you, Jason, by my suspicions; never mind,-- jubilate! This interloper who made me so jealous, who think you it is? Why, young Ardworth himself,--that is, the lad who goes by such name. Now, is it not clear? Of course no one else has such interest in learning his birth as the lost child himself,--here he is! If old Ardworth lives (as he says), old Ardworth has set him to work on his own business. But then, that Fielden,--rather a puzzler that! Yet--no. Now I understand,--old Ardworth gave the boy to Mrs. Joplin, and took it away from her again when he went to the parson's. Now, certainly, it may be quite necessary to prove,--first, that the boy he took from Mr. Braddell's he gave to Mrs. Joplin; secondly, that the boy he left with Mr. Fielden was the same that he took again from that woman: therefore, the necessity of finding out Mother Joplin, an essential witness. Q. E. D., Master Jason!"

It was not till the sun had been some hours risen that Mr. Grabman imitated that luminary's example. When he did so, he found, somewhat to his chagrin, that John Ardworth had long been gone. In fact, whatever the motive that had led the latter on the search, he had succeeded in gleaning from Grabman all that that person could communicate, and their interview had inspired him with such disgust of the attorney, and so small an opinion of the value of his co-operation (in which last belief, perhaps, he was mistaken), that he had resolved to continue his inquiries alone, and had already, in his early morning's walk through the village,

ascertained that the man with whom Mrs. Joplin had quitted the place had some time after been sentenced to six months' imprisonment in the county jail. Possibly the prison authorities might know something to lead to his discovery, and through him the news of his paramour might be gained.

CHAPTER XX.

MORE OF MRS. JOPLIN.

One day, at the hour of noon, the court boasting the tall residence of Mr. Grabman was startled from the quiet usually reigning there at broad daylight by the appearance of two men, evidently no inhabitants of the place. The squalid, ill-favoured denizens lounging before the doors stared hard, and at the fuller view of one of the men, most of them retreated hastily within. Then, in those houses, you might have heard a murmur of consternation and alarm. The ferret was in the burrow,—a Bow-Street officer in the court! The two men paused, looked round, and stopping before the dingy towerlike house, selected the bell which appealed to the inmates of the ground-floor, to the left. At that summons Bill the cracksman imprudently presented a full view of his countenance through his barred window; he drew it back with astonishing celerity, but not in time to escape the eye of the Bow-Street runner.

"Open the door, Bill,—there's nothing to fear; I have no summons against you, 'pon honour. You know I never deceive. Why should I? Open the door, I say."

No answer.

The officer tapped with his cane at the foul window.

"Bill, there's a gentleman who comes to you for information, and he will pay for it handsomely."

Bill again appeared at the casement, and peeped forth very cautiously through the bars.

"Bless my vitals, Mr. R----, and it is you, is it? What were you saying about paying handsomely?"

"That your evidence is wanted,—not against a pal, man. It will hurt no one, and put at least five guineas in your pocket."

"Ten guineas," said the Bow-Street officer's companion. "You be's a man of honour, Mr. R----!" said Bill, emphatically; "and I scorns to doubt you, so here goes."

With that he withdrew from the window, and in another minute or so the door was opened, and Bill, with a superb bow, asked his visitors into his room.

In the interval, leisure had been given to the cracksman to remove all trace of the wonted educational employment of his hopeful children. The urchins were seated on the floor playing at push-pin; and the Bow-Street officer benignly patted a pair of curly heads as he passed them, drew a chair to the table, and wiping his forehead, sat down, quite at home.

Bill then deliberately seated himself, and unbuttoning his waistcoat, permitted the butt-ends of a brace of pistols to be seen by his guests. Mr. R----'s companion seemed very unmoved by this significant action. He bent one inquiring, steady look on the cracksman, which, as Bill afterwards said, went through him "like a gimlet through a penny," and taking out a purse, through the network of which the sovereigns gleamed pleasantly, placed it on the table and said,--

"This purse is yours if you will tell me what has become of a woman named Joplin, with whom you left the village of ----, in Lancashire, in the year 18--."

"And," put in Mr. R----, "the gentleman wants to know, with no view of harming the woman. It will be to her own advantage to inform us where she is."

"Pon honour again?" said Bill.

"Pon honour!"

"Well, then, I has a heart in my buzzom, and if so be I can do a good turn to the 'oman wot I has loved and kep' company with, why not?"

"Why not, indeed?" said Mr. R----. "And as we want to learn, not only what has become of Mrs. Joplin, but what she did with the child she carried off from ----, begin at the beginning and tell us all you know."

Bill mused. "How much is there in the pus?"

"Eighteen sovereigns."

"Make it twenty--you nod--twenty then? A bargain! Now I'll go on right ahead. You see as how, some months arter we--that is, Peggy Joplin and self--left ----, I was put in quod in Lancaster jail; so I lost sight of the blowen. When I got out and came to Lunnun, it was a matter of seven year afore, all of a sudding, I came bang up agin her,--at the corner of Common Garden. 'Why, Bill!' says she. 'Why, Peggy!' says I; and we bussed each other like winky. 'Shall us come together agin?' says she. 'Why, no,' says I; 'I has a wife wots a good 'un, and gets her bread by setting up as a widder with seven small childern. By the by, Peg, what's a come of your brat?' for as you says, sir, Peg had a child put out to her to nurse. Lor', how she cuffed it! 'The brat!' says she, laughing like mad, 'oh, I got rid o' that when you were in jail, Bill.' 'As how?' says I. 'Why, there was a woman begging agin St. Poll's churchyard; so I pertended to see a frind at a distance: "'Old the babby a moment," says I, puffing and panting, "while I ketches my friend yonder." So she 'olds the brat, and I never sees it agin; and there's an ind of the bother!' 'But won't they ever ax for the child,--them as giv' it you?' 'Oh, no,' says Peg, 'they left it too long for that, and all the tin was agone; and one mouth is hard enough to feed in these days,--let by other folks' bantlings.' 'Well,' says I, 'where do you hang out? I'll pop in, in a friendly way.' So she tells me,--som'ere in Lambeth,--I forgets hexactly; and many's the good piece of work we ha' done together."

"And where is she now?" asked Mr. R----'s companion.

"I doesn't know purcisely, but I can com' at her. You see, when my poor wife died, four year com' Chris'mas, and left me with as fine a famuly, though I says it, as h-old King Georgy himself walked afore, with his

gold-headed cane, on the terris at Vindsor,--all heights and all h-ages to the babby in arms (for the little 'un there warn't above a year old, and had been a brought up upon spoon-meat, with a dash o' blueruin to make him slim and ginteel); as for the bigger 'uns wot you don't see, they be doin' well in forin parts, Mr. R----!"

Mr. R. smiled significantly.

Bill resumed. "Where was I? Oh, when my wife died, I wanted sum 'un to take care of the childern, so I takes Peg into the 'ous. But Lor! how she larrupped 'em,--she has a cruel heart, has n't she, Bob? Bob is a 'cute child, Mr. R----. Just as I was a thinking of turning her out neck an' crop, a gemman what lodges aloft, wot be a laryer, and wot had just saved my nick, Mr. R----, by proving a h-alibi, said, 'That's a tidy body, your Peg!' (for you see he was often a wisiting here, an' h-indeed, sin' then, he has taken our third floor, No. 9); 'I've been a speakin' to her, and I find she has been a nuss to the sick. I has a frind wots a h-uncle that's ill: can you spare her, Bill, to attind him?' That I can,' says I; 'anything to obleedge.' So Peg packs off, bag and baggidge."

"And what was the sick gentleman's name?" asked Mr. R----'s companion.

"It was one Mr. Warney,--a painter, wot lived at Clap'am. Since thin I've lost sight of Peg; for we had 'igh words about the childern, and she was a spiteful 'oman. But you can larn where she be at Mr. Warney's, if so be he's still above ground."

"And did this woman still go by the name of Joplin?"

Bill grinned: "She warn't such a spooney as that,--that name was in your black books too much, Mr. R----, for a 'spectable nuss for sick bodies; no, she was then called Martha Skeggs, what was her own mother's name afore marriage. Anything more, gemman?"

"I am satisfied," said the younger visitor, rising; "there is the purse, and Mr. R---- will bring you ten sovereigns in addition. Good-day to you."

Bill, with superabundant bows and flourishes, showed his visitors out, and then, in high glee, he began to romp with his children; and the whole family circle was in a state of uproarious enjoyment when the door flew open, and in entered Grabman, his brief-bag in hand, dust-soiled and unshaven.

"Aha, neighbour! your servant, your servant; just come back! Always so merry; for the life of me, I couldn't help looking in! Dear me, Bill, why, you're in luck!" and Mr. Grabman pointed to a pile of sovereigns which Bill had emptied from the purse to count over and weigh on the tip of his forefinger.

"Yes," said Bill, sweeping the gold into his corduroy pocket; "and who do you think brought me these shiners? Why, who but old Peggy, the 'oman wot you put out at Clapham."

"Well, never mind Peggy, now, Bill; I want to ask you what you have done with Margaret Joplin, whom, sly seducer that you are, you carried off from--"

"Why, man, Peggy be Joplin, and Joplin be Peggy! And it's for that piece

of noos that I got all them pretty new picters of his Majesty Bill,--my namesake, God bliss 'im!"

"D--n," exclaimed Grabman, aghast; "the young chap's spoiling my game again!" And seizing up his brief-bag, he darted out of the house, in the hope to arrive at least at Clapham before his competitors.

CHAPTER XXI.

BECK'S DISCOVERY.

Under the cedar-trees at Laughton sat that accursed and abhorrent being who sat there, young, impassioned, hopeful, as Lucretia Clavering,--under the old cedar-trees, which, save that their vast branches cast an imperceptibly broader shade over the mossy sward, the irrevocable winters had left the same. Where, through the nether boughs the autumn sunbeams came aslant, the windows, enriched by many a haughty scutcheon, shone brightly against the western rays. From the flower-beds in the quaint garden near at hand, the fresh yet tranquil air wafted faint perfumes from the lingering heliotrope and fading rose. The peacock perched dozily on the heavy balustrade; the blithe robin hopped busily along the sun-track on the lawn; in the distance the tinkling bells of the flock, the plaining low of some wandering heifer, while breaking the silence, seemed still to blend with the repose. All images around lent themselves to complete that picture of stately calm which is the character of those old mansion-houses, which owner after owner has loved and heeded, leaving to them the graces of antiquity, guarding them from the desolation of decay.

Alone sat Lucretia under the cedar-trees, and her heart made dismal contrast to the noble tranquillity that breathed around. From whatever softening or repentant emotions which the scene of her youth might first have awakened; from whatever of less unholy anguish which memory might have caused when she first, once more, sat under those remembered boughs, and, as a voice from a former world, some faint whisper of youthful love sighed across the waste and ashes of her devastated soul,--from all such rekindled humanities in the past she had now, with gloomy power, wrenched herself away. Crime such as hers admits not long the sentiment that softens remorse of gentler error. If there wakes one moment from the past the warning and melancholy ghost, soon from that abyss rises the Fury with the lifted scourge, and hunts on the frantic footsteps towards the future. In the future, the haggard intellect of crime must live, must involve itself mechanically in webs and meshes, and lose past and present in the welcome atmosphere of darkness.

Thus while Lucretia sat, and her eyes rested upon the halls of her youth, her mind overleaped the gulf that yet yawned between her and the object on which she was bent. Already, in fancy, that home was hers again, its present possessor swept away, the interloping race of Vernon ending in one of those abrupt lines familiar to genealogists, which branch out busily from the main tree, as if all pith and sap were monopolized by them, continue for a single generation, and then shrink into a printer's bracket with the formal laconism, "Died without issue." Back, then, in the pedigree would turn the eye of some curious descendant, and see the race continue in the posterity of Lucretia Clavering.

With all her ineffable vices, mere cupidity had not, as we have often seen, been a main characteristic of this fearful woman; and in her design to endow, by the most determined guilt, her son with the heritage of her ancestors, she had hitherto looked but little to mere mercenary advantages for herself: but now, in the sight of that venerable and broad domain, a covetousness, absolute in itself, broke forth. Could she have gained it for her own use rather than her son's, she would have felt a greater zest in her ruthless purpose. She looked upon the scene as a deposed monarch upon his usurped realm,--it was her right. The early sense of possession in that inheritance returned to her.

Reluctantly would she even yield her claims to her child. Here, too, in this atmosphere she tasted once more what had long been lost to her,--the luxury of that dignified respect which surrounds the well-born. Here she ceased to be the suspected adventuress, the friendless outcast, the needy wrestler with hostile fortune, the skulking enemy of the law. She rose at once, and without effort, to her original state,--the honoured daughter of an illustrious house. The homeliest welcome that greeted her from some aged but unforgotten villager, the salutation of homage, the bated breath of humble reverence,--even trifles like these were dear to her, and made her the more resolute to retain them. In her calm, relentless onward vision she saw herself enshrined in those halls, ruling in the delegated authority of her son, safe evermore from prying suspicion and degrading need and miserable guilt for miserable objects. Here, but one great crime, and she resumed the majesty of her youth! While thus dwelling on the future, her eye did not even turn from those sunlit towers to the forms below, and more immediately inviting its survey. On the very spot where, at the opening of this tale, sat Sir Miles St. John sharing his attention between his dogs and his guest, sat now Helen Mainwaring; against the balustrade where had lounged Charles Vernon, leaned Percival St. John; and in the same place where he had stationed himself that eventful evening, to distort, in his malignant sketch, the features of his father, Gabriel Varney, with almost the same smile of irony upon his lips, was engaged in transferring to his canvas a more faithful likeness of the heir's intended bride. Helen's countenance, indeed, exhibited comparatively but little of the ravages which the pernicious aliment, administered so noiselessly, made upon the frame. The girl's eye, it is true, had sunk, and there was a languid heaviness in its look; but the contour of the cheek was so naturally rounded, and the features so delicately fine, that the fall of the muscles was less evident; and the bright, warm hue of the complexion, and the pearly sparkle of the teeth, still gave a fallacious freshness to the aspect. But as yet the poisoners had forborne those ingredients which invade the springs of life, resorting only to such as undermine the health and prepare the way to unsuspected graves. Out of the infernal variety of the materials at their command, they had selected a mixture which works by sustaining perpetual fever; which gives little pain, little suffering, beyond that of lassitude and thirst; which wastes like consumption, and yet puzzles the physician, by betraying few or none of its ordinary symptoms. But the disorder as yet was not incurable,--its progress would gradually cease with the discontinuance of the venom.

Although October was far advanced, the day was as mild and warm as August. But Percival, who had been watching Helen's countenance with the anxiety of love and fear, now proposed that the sitting should be adjourned. The sun was declining, and it was certainly no longer safe for Helen to be exposed to the air without exercise. He proposed that they should walk through the garden, and Helen, rising cheerfully, placed her hand on his arm. But she had scarcely descended the steps of the

terrace when she stopped short and breathed hard and painfully. The spasm was soon over, and walking slowly on, they passed Lucretia with a brief word or two, and were soon out of sight amongst the cedars.

"Lean more on my arm, Helen," said Percival. "How strange it is that the change of air has done so little for you, and our country doctor still less! I should feel miserable indeed if Simmons, whom my mother always considered very clever, did not assure me that there was no ground for alarm,--that these symptoms were only nervous. Cheer up, Helen; sweet love, cheer up!"

Helen raised her face and strove to smile; but the tears stood in her eyes. "It would be hard to die now, Percival!" she said falteringly.

"To die--oh, Helen! No; we must not stay here longer,--the air is certainly too keen for you. Perhaps your aunt will go to Italy. Why not all go there, and seek my mother? And she will nurse you, Helen, and--and--" He could not trust his voice farther.

Helen pressed his arm tenderly. "Forgive me, dear Percival, it is but at moments that I feel so despondent; now, again, it is past. Ah, I so long to see your mother! When shall you hear from her? Are you not too sanguine? Do you really feel sure she will consent to so lowly a choice?"

"Never doubt her affection, her appreciation of you," answered Percival, gladly, and hoping that Helen's natural anxiety might be the latent cause of her dejected spirits; "often, when talking of the future, under these very cedars, my mother has said: 'You have no cause to marry for ambition,--marry only for your happiness.' She never had a daughter: in return for all her love, I shall give her that blessing."

Thus talking, the lovers rambled on till the sun set, and then, returning to the house, they found that Varney and Madame Dalibard had preceded them. That evening Helen's spirits rose to their natural buoyancy, and Percival's heart was once more set at ease by her silvery laugh.

When, at their usual early hour, the rest of the family retired to sleep, Percival remained in the drawing-room to write again, and at length, to Lady Mary and Captain Greville. While thus engaged, his valet entered to say that Beck, who had been out since the early morning, in search of a horse that had strayed from one of the pastures, had just returned with the animal, who had wandered nearly as far as Southampton.

"I am glad to hear it," said Percival, abstractedly, and continuing his letter.

The valet still lingered. Percival looked up in surprise. "If you please, sir, you said you particularly wished to see Beck when he came back."

"I--oh, true! Tell him to wait; I will speak to him by and by. You need not sit up for me; let Beck attend to the bell."

The valet withdrew. Percival continued his letter, and filled page after page and sheet after sheet; and when at length the letters, not containing a tithe of what he wished to convey, were brought to a close, he fell into a revery that lasted till the candles burned low, and the clock from the turret tolled one. Starting up in surprise at the lapse

of time, Percival then, for the first time, remembered Beck, and rang the bell.

The ci-devant sweeper, in his smart livery, appeared at the door.

"Beck, my poor fellow, I am ashamed to have kept you waiting so long; but I received a letter this morning which relates to you. Let me see,--I left it in my study upstairs. Ah, you'll never find the way; follow me,--I have some questions to put to you."

"Nothin' agin my carakter, I hopes, your honour," said Beck, timidly.

"Oh, no!"

"Noos of the mattris, then?" exclaimed Beck, joyfully.

"Nor that either," answered Percival, laughing, as he lighted the chamber candlestick, and, followed by Beck, ascended the grand staircase to a small room which, as it adjoined his sleeping apartment, he had habitually used as his morning writing-room and study.

Percival had, indeed, received that day a letter which had occasioned him much surprise; it was from John Ardworth, and ran thus:--

MY DEAR PERCIVAL,--It seems that you have taken into your service a young man known only by the name of Beck. Is he now with you at Laughton? If so, pray retain him, and suffer him to be in readiness to come to me at a day's notice if wanted, though it is probable enough that I may rather come to you. At present, strange as it may seem to you, I am detained in London by business connected with that important personage. Will you ask him carelessly, as it were, in the mean while; the following questions:--

First, how did he become possessed of a certain child's coral which he left at the house of one Becky Carruthers, in Cole's Building?

Secondly, is he aware of any mark on his arm,--if so, will he describe it?

Thirdly, how long has he known the said Becky Carruthers?

Fourthly, does he believe her to be honest and truthful?

Take a memorandum of his answers, and send it to me. I am pretty well aware of what they are likely to be; but I desire you to put the questions, that I may judge if there be any discrepancy between his statement and that of Mrs. Carruthers. I have much to tell you, and am eager to receive your kind congratulations upon an event that has given me more happiness than the fugitive success of my little book. Tenderest regards to Helen; and hoping soon to see you, Ever affectionately yours.

P.S.--Say not a word of the contents of this letter to Madame Dalibard, Helen, or to any one except Beck. Caution him to the same discretion. If you can't trust to his silence, send him to town.

When the post brought this letter, Beck was already gone on his errand, and after puzzling himself with vague conjectures, Percival's mind had been naturally too absorbed with his anxieties for Helen to recur much to the subject.

Now, refreshing his memory with the contents of the letter, he drew pen and ink before him, put the questions seriatim, noted down the answers as desired, and smiling at Beck's frightened curiosity to know who could possibly care about such matters, and feeling confident (from that very fright) of his discretion, dismissed the groom to his repose.

Beck had never been in that part of the house before; and when he got into the corridor he became bewildered, and knew not which turn to take, the right or the left. He had no candle with him; but the moon came clear through a high and wide skylight: the light, however, gave him no guide. While pausing, much perplexed, and not sure that he should even know again the door of the room he had just quitted, if venturing to apply to his young master for a clew through such a labyrinth, he was inexpressibly startled and appalled by a sudden apparition. A door at one end of the corridor opened noiselessly, and a figure, at first scarcely distinguishable, for it was robed from head to foot in a black, shapeless garb, scarcely giving even the outline of the human form, stole forth. Beck rubbed his eyes and crept mechanically close within the recess of one of the doors that communicated with the passage. The figure advanced a few steps towards him; and what words can describe his astonishment when he beheld thus erect, and in full possession of physical power and motion, the palsied cripple whose chair he had often seen wheeled into the garden, and whose unhappy state was the common topic of comment in the servants' hall! Yes, the moon from above shone full upon that face which never, once seen, could be forgotten. And it seemed more than mortally stern and pale, contrasted with the sable of the strange garb, and beheld by that mournful light. Had a ghost, indeed, risen from the dead, it could scarcely have appalled him more. Madame Dalibard did not see the involuntary spy; for the recess in which he had crept was on that side of the wall on which the moon's shadow was cast. With a quick step she turned into another room, opposite that which she had quitted, the door of which stood ajar, and vanished noiselessly as she had appeared.

Taught suspicion by his earlier acquaintance with the "night-side" of human nature, Beck had good cause for it here. This detection of an imposture most familiar to his experience,—that of a pretended cripple; the hour of the night; the evil expression on the face of the deceitful guest; Madame Dalibard's familiar intimacy and near connection with Varney,—Varney, the visitor to Grabman, who received no visitors but those who desire, not to go to law, but to escape from its penalties; Varney, who had dared to brave the resurrection man in his den, and who seemed so fearlessly at home in abodes where nought but poverty could protect the honest; Varney now, with that strange woman, an inmate of a house in which the master was so young, so inexperienced, so liable to be duped by his own generous nature,—all these ideas, vaguely combined, inspired Beck with as vague a terror. Surely something, he knew not what, was about to be perpetrated against his benefactor,—some scheme of villany which it was his duty to detect. He breathed hard, formed his resolves, and stealing on tiptoe, followed the shadowy form of the poisoner through the half-opened doorway. The shutters of the room of which he thus crossed the threshold were not closed,—the moon shone in bright and still. He kept his body behind the door, peeping in with straining, fearful stare. He saw Madame Dalibard standing beside a bed round which the curtains were closed,—standing for a moment or so motionless, and as if in the act of listening, with one hand on a table beside the bed. He then saw her take from the folds of her dress something white and glittering, and pour from it what appeared to him but

a drop or two, cautiously, slowly, into a phial on the table, from which she withdrew the stopper; that done, she left the phial where she had found it, again paused a moment, and turned towards the door. Beck retreated hastily to his former hiding-place, and gained it in time. Again the shadowy form passed him, and again the white face in the white moonlight froze his blood with its fell and horrible expression. He remained cowering and shrinking against the wall for some time, striving to collect his wits, and considering what he should do. His first thought was to go at once and inform St. John of what he had witnessed. But the poor have a proverbial dread of deposing aught against a superior. Madame Dalibard would deny his tale, the guest would be believed against the menial,—he would be but dismissed with ignominy. At that idea, he left his hiding-place, and crept along the corridor, in the hope of finding some passage at the end which might lead to the offices. But when he arrived at the other extremity, he was only met by great folding-doors, which evidently communicated with the state apartments; he must retrace his steps. He did so; and when he came to the door which Madame Dalibard had entered, and which still stood ajar, he had recovered some courage, and with courage, curiosity seized him. For what purpose could the strange woman seek that room at night thus feloniously? What could she have poured, and with such stealthy caution, into the phial? Naturally and suddenly the idea of poison flashed across him. Tales of such crime (as, indeed, of all crime) had necessarily often thrilled the ear of the vagrant fellow-lodger with burglars and outlaws. But poison to whom? Could it be meant for his benefactor? Could St. John sleep in that room? Why not? The woman had sought the chamber before her young host had retired to rest, and mingled her potion with some medicinal draught. All fear vanished before the notion of danger to his employer. He stole at once through the doorway, and noiselessly approached the table on which yet lay the phial. His hand closed on it firmly. He resolved to carry it away, and consider next morning what next to do. At all events, it might contain some proof to back his tale and justify his suspicions. When he came once more into the corridor, he made a quick rush onwards, and luckily arrived at the staircase. There the blood-red stains reflected on the stone floors from the blazoned casements daunted him little less than the sight at which his hair still bristled. He scarcely drew breath till he had got into his own little crib, in the wing set apart for the stable-men, when, at length, he fell into broken and agitated sleep,—the visions of all that had successively disturbed him waking, united confusedly, as in one picture of gloom and terror. He thought that he was in his old loft in St. Giles's, that the Gravestealer was wrestling with Varney for his body, while he himself, lying powerless on his pallet, fancied he should be safe as long as he could retain, as a talisman, his child's coral, which he clasped to his heart. Suddenly, in that black, shapeless garb, in which he had beheld her, Madame Dalibard bent over him with her stern, colourless face, and wrenched from him his charm. Then, ceasing his struggle with his horrible antagonist, Varney laughed aloud, and the Gravestealer seized him in his deadly arms.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE TAPESTRY CHAMBER.

When Beck woke the next morning, and gradually recalled all that had so startled and appalled him the previous night, the grateful creature felt,

less by the process of reason than by a brute instinct, that in the mysterious resuscitation and nocturnal wanderings of the pretended paralytic, some danger menaced his master; he became anxious to learn whether it was really St. John's room Madame Dalibard stealthily visited. A bright idea struck him; and in the course of the day, at an hour when the family were out of doors, he contrived to coax the good-natured valet, who had taken him under his special protection, to show him over the house. He had heard the other servants say there was such a power of fine things that a peep into the rooms was as good as a show, and the valet felt pride in being cicerone even to Beck. After having stared sufficiently at the banquet-hall and the drawing-room, the armour, the busts, and the pictures, and listened, open-mouthed, to his guide's critical observations, Beck was led up the great stairs into the old family picture-gallery, and into Sir Miles's ancient room at the end, which had been left undisturbed, with the bed still in the angle; on returning thence, Beck found himself in the corridor which communicated with the principal bedrooms, in which he had lost himself the night before.

"And vot room be that vith the littul vite 'ead h-over the door?" asked Beck, pointing to the chamber from which Madame Dalibard had emerged.

"That white head, Master Beck, is Floorer the goddess; but a heathen like you knows nothing about goddesses. Floorer has a half-moon in her hair, you see, which shows that the idolatrous Turks worship her; for the Turkish flag is a half-moon, as I have seen at Constantinople. I have travelled, Beck."

"And vot room be it? Is it the master's?" persisted Beck.

"No, the pretty young lady, Miss Mainwaring, has it at present. There is nothing to see in it. But that one opposite," and the valet advanced to the door through which Madame Dalibard had disappeared,--"that is curious; and as Madame is out, we may just take a peep." He opened the door gently, and Beck looked in. "This, which is called the turret-chamber, was Madame's when she was a girl, I have heard old Bessy say; so Master pops her there now. For my part, I'd rather sleep in your little crib than have those great gruff-looking figures staring at me by the firelight, and shaking their heads with every wind on a winter's night." And the valet took a pinch of snuff as he drew Beck's attention to the faded tapestry on the walls. As they spoke, the draught between the door and the window caused the gloomy arras to wave with a life-like motion; and to those more superstitious than romantic, the chamber had certainly no inviting aspect.

"I never sees these old tapestry rooms," said the valet, "without thinking of the story of the lady who, coming from a ball and taking off her jewels, happened to look up, and saw an eye in one of the figures which she felt sure was no peeper in worsted."

"Vot vos it, then?" asked Beck, timidly lifting up the hangings, and noticing that there was a considerable space between them and the wall, which was filled up in part by closets and wardrobes set into the walls, with intervals more than deep enough for the hiding-place of a man.

"Why," answered the valet, "it was a thief. He had come for the jewels; but the lady had the presence of mind to say aloud, as if to herself, that she had forgotten something, slipped out of the room, locked the door, called up the servants, and the thief--who was no less a person

than the under-butler--was nabbed."

"And the French 'oman sleeps 'ere?" said Beck, musingly.

"French 'oman! Master Beck, nothing's so vulgar as these nicknames in a first-rate situation. It is all very well when one lives with skinflints, but with such a master as our'n, respect's the go. Besides, Madame is not a French 'oman; she is one of the family,--and as old a family it is, too, as e'er a lord's in the three kingdoms. But come, your curiosity is satisfied now, and you must trot back to your horses."

As Beck returned to the stables, his mind yet more misgave him as to the criminal designs of his master's visitor. It was from Helen's room that the false cripple had walked, and the ill health of the poor young lady was a general subject of compassionate comment. But Madame Dalibard was Helen's relation: from what motive could she harbour an evil thought against her own niece? But still, if those drops were poured into the healing draught for good, why so secretly? Once more he revolved the idea of speaking to St. John: an accident dissuaded him from this intention,--the only proof to back his tale was the mysterious phial he had carried away; but unluckily, forgetting that it was in his pocket, at a time when he flung off his coat to groom one of the horses, the bottle struck against the corn-bin and broke; all the contents were spilt. This incident made him suspend his intention, and wait till he could obtain some fresh evidence of evil intentions. The day passed without any other noticeable occurrence. The doctor called, found Helen somewhat better, and ascribed it to his medicines, especially to the effect of his tonic draught the first thing in the morning. Helen smiled. "Nay, Doctor," said she, "this morning, at least, it was forgotten. I did not find it by my bedside. Don't tell my aunt; she would be so angry." The doctor looked rather discomposed.

"Well," said he, soon recovering his good humour, "since you are certainly better to-day without the draught, discontinue it also to-morrow. I will make an alteration for the day after." So that night Madame Dalibard visited in vain her niece's chamber: Helen had a reprieve.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE SHADES ON THE DIAL.

The following morning was indeed eventful to the family at Laughton; and as if conscious of what it brought forth, it rose dreary and sunless. One heavy mist covered all the landscape, and a raw, drizzling rain fell pattering through the yellow leaves.

Madame Dalibard, pleading her infirmities, rarely left her room before noon, and Varney professed himself very irregular in his hours of rising; the breakfast, therefore, afforded no social assembly to the family, but each took that meal in the solitude of his or her own chamber. Percival, in whom all habits partook of the healthfulness and simplicity of his character, rose habitually early, and that day, in spite of the weather, walked forth betimes to meet the person charged with the letters from the post. He had done so for the last three or four days, impatient to hear from his mother, and calculating that it was full time to receive the

expected answer to his confession and his prayer. He met the messenger at the bottom of the park, not far from Guy's Oak. This day he was not disappointed. The letter-bag contained three letters for himself,--two with the foreign postmark, the third in Ardworth's hand. It contained also a letter for Madame Dalibard, and two for Varney.

Leaving the messenger to take these last to the Hall, Percival, with his own prizes, plunged into the hollow of the glen before him, and, seating himself at the foot of Guy's Oak, through the vast branches of which the rain scarcely came, and only in single, mournful drops, he opened first the letter in his mother's hand, and read as follows:--

MY DEAR, DEAR SON,--How can I express to you the alarm your letter has given to me! So these, then, are the new relations you have discovered! I fondly imagined that you were alluding to some of my own family, and conjecturing who, amongst my many cousins, could have so captivated your attention. These the new relations,--Lucretia Dalibard, Helen Mainwaring! Percival, do you not know ---- No, you cannot know that Helen Mainwaring is the daughter of a disgraced man, of one who (more than suspected of fraud in the bank in which he was a partner) left his country, condemned even by his own father. If you doubt this, you have but to inquire at ----, not ten miles from Laughton, where the elder Mainwaring resided. Ask there what became of William Mainwaring. And Lucretia, you do not know that the dying prayer of her uncle, Sir Miles St. John, was that she might never enter the house he bequeathed to your father. Not till after my poor Charles's death did I know the exact cause for Sir Miles's displeasure, though confident it was just; but then amongst his papers I found the ungrateful letter which betrayed thoughts so dark and passions so unwomanly that I blushed for my sex to read it. Could it be possible that that poor old man's prayers were unheeded, that that treacherous step could ever cross your threshold, that that cruel eye, which read with such barbarous joy the ravages of death on a benefactor's face, could rest on the hearth by which your frank, truthful countenance has so often smiled away my tears, I should feel indeed as if a thunder-cloud hung over the roof. No, if you marry the niece, the aunt must be banished from your house. Good heavens! and it is the daughter of William Mainwaring, the niece and ward of Lucretia Dalibard, to whom you have given your faithful affection, whom you single from the world as your wife! Oh, my son,--my beloved, my sole surviving child,--do not think that I blame you, that my heart does not bleed while I write thus; but I implore you on my knees to pause at least, to suspend this intercourse till I myself can reach England. And what then? Why, then, Percival, I promise, on my part, that I will see your Helen with unprejudiced eyes, that I will put away from me, as far as possible, all visions of disappointed pride,--the remembrance of faults not her own,--and if she be as you say and think, I will take her to my heart and call her 'Daughter.' Are you satisfied? If so, come to me,--come at once, and take comfort from your mother's lip. How I long to be with you while you read this; how I tremble at the pain I so rudely give you! But my poor sister still chains me here, I dare not leave her, lest I should lose her last sigh. Come then, come; we will console each other. Your fond (how fond!) and sorrowing mother,
ST. JOHN. SORRENTO, October 3, 1831.

P.S.--You see by this address that we have left Pisa for this place, recommended by our physician; hence an unhappy delay of some days in my reply. Ah, Percival, how sleepless will be my pillow till I hear from you!

Long, very long, was it before St. John, mute and overwhelmed with the sudden shock of his anguish, opened his other letters. The first was from Captain Greville.

What trap have you fallen into, foolish boy? That you would get into some silly scrape or another, was natural enough. But a scrape for life, sir,—that is serious! But—God bless you for your candour, my Percival; you have written to us in time—you are old-fashioned enough to think that a mother's consent is necessary to a young man's union; and you have left it in our power to save you yet. It is not every boyish fancy that proves to be true love. But enough of this preaching; I shall do better than write scolding letters,—I shall come and scold you in person. My servant is at this very moment packing my portmanteau, the laquais-de-place is gone to Naples for my passport. Almost as soon as you receive this I shall be with you; and if I am a day or two later than the mail, be patient: do not commit yourself further. Break your heart if you please, but don't implicate your honour. I shall come at once to Curzon Street. Adieu!

H. GREVILLE.

Ardworth's letter was shorter than the others,--fortunately so, for otherwise it had been unread:--

If I do not come to you myself the day after you receive this, dear Percival,--which, indeed, is most probable,--I shall send you my proxy, in one whom, for my sake, I know that you will kindly welcome. He will undertake my task, and clear up all the mysteries with which, I trust, my correspondence has thoroughly bewildered your lively imagination.

Yours ever,
ARDWORTH. GRAY'S INN.

Little indeed did Percival's imagination busy itself with the mysteries of Ardworth's correspondence. His mind scarcely took in the sense of the words over which his eye mechanically wandered.

And the letter which narrated the visit of Madame Dalibard to the house thus solemnly interdicted to her step was on its way to his mother,--nay, by this time would almost have reached her! Greville was on the road,--nay, as his tutor's letter had been forwarded from London, might perhaps be in Curzon Street that day. How desirable to see him before he could reach Laughton, to prepare him for Madame Dalibard's visit, for Helen's illness, explain the position in which he was involved, and conciliate the old soldier's rough, kind heart to his love and his distress.

He did not dread the meeting with Greville,--he yearned for it. He needed an adviser, a confidant, a friend. To dismiss abruptly his guests from his house,--impossible; to abandon Helen because of her father's crime or her aunt's fault (whatever that last might be, and no clear detail of it was given),--that never entered his thoughts! Pure and unsullied, the starry face of Helen shone the holier for the cloud around it. An inexpressible and chivalrous compassion mingled with his love and confirmed his faith. She, poor child, to suffer for the deeds of others,--no. What availed his power as man, and dignity as gentleman, if they could not wrap in their own shelter the one by whom such shelter was now doubly needed? Thus, amidst all his emotions, firm and resolved at least on one point, and beginning already to recover the hope of his sanguine nature, from his reliance on his mother's love, on the promises that softened her disclosures and warnings, and on his conviction that Helen had only to be seen for every scruple to give way, Percival wandered back towards the house, and coming abruptly on the terrace, he

encountered Varney, who was leaning motionless against the balustrades, with an open letter in his hand. Varney was deadly pale, and there was the trace of some recent and gloomy agitation in the relaxed muscles of his cheeks, usually so firmly rounded. But Percival did not heed his appearance as he took him gravely by the arm, and leading him into the garden, said, after a painful pause,--

"Varney, I am about to ask you two questions, which your close connection with Madame Dalibard may enable you to answer, but in which, from obvious motives, I must demand the strictest confidence. You will not hint to her or to Helen what I am about to say?"

Varney stared uneasily on Percival's serious countenance, and gave the promise required.

"First, then, for what offence was Madame Dalibard expelled her uncle's house,--this house of Laughton?"

"Secondly, what is the crime with which Mr. Mainwaring, Helen's father, is charged?"

"With regard to the first," said Varney, recovering his composure, "I thought I had already told you that Sir Miles was a proud man, and that in consequence of discovering a girlish flirtation between his niece Lucretia (now Madame Dalibard) and Mainwaring, who afterwards jilted her for Helen's mother, he altered his will; 'expelled her his house' is too harsh a phrase. This is all I know. With regard to the second question, no crime was ever brought home to William Mainwaring; he was suspected of dealing improperly with the funds of the bank, and he repaid the alleged deficit by the sacrifice of all he possessed."

"This is the truth?" exclaimed Percival, joyfully.

"The plain truth, I believe; but why these questions at this moment? Ah, you too, I see, have had letters,--I understand. Lady Mary gives these reasons for withholding her consent."

"Her consent is not withheld," answered Percival; "but shall I own it? Remember, I have your promise not to wound and offend Madame Dalibard by the disclosure: my mother does refer to the subjects I have alluded to, and Captain Greville, my old friend and tutor, is on his way to England; perhaps to-morrow he may arrive at Laughton."

"Ha!" said Varney, startled, "to-morrow! And what sort of a man is this Captain Greville?"

"The best man possible for such a case as mine,--kind-hearted, yet cool, sagacious; the finest observer, the quickest judge of character,--nothing escapes him. Oh, one interview will suffice to show him all Helen's innocent and matchless excellence."

"To-morrow! this man comes to-morrow!"

"All that I fear is,--for he is rather rough and blunt in his manner,--all that I fear is his first surprise, and, dare I say displeasure, at seeing this poor Madame Dalibard, whose faults, I fear, were graver than you suppose, at the house from which her uncle--to whom, indeed, I owe this inheritance--"

"I see, I see!" interrupted Varney, quickly. "And Madame Dalibard is the most susceptible of women,--so well-born and so poor, so gifted and so helpless; it is natural. Can you not write, and put off this Captain Greville for a few days,--until, indeed, I can find some excuse for terminating our visit?"

"But my letter may be hardly in time to reach him; he may be in town to-day."

"Go then to town at once; you can be back late at night, or at least to-morrow. Anything better than wounding the pride of a woman on whom, after all, you must depend for free and open intercourse with Helen."

"That is exactly what I thought of; but what excuse--"

"Excuse,--a thousand! Every man coming of age into such a property has business with his lawyers. Or why not say simply that you want to meet a friend of yours who has just left your mother in Italy? In short, any excuse suffices, and none can be offensive."

"I will order my carriage instantly."

"Right!" exclaimed Varney; and his eye followed the receding form of Percival with a mixture of fierce exultation and anxious fear. Then, turning towards the window of the turret-chamber in which Madame Dalibard reposed, and seeing it still closed, he muttered an impatient oath; but even while he did so, the shutters were slowly opened, and a footman, stepping from the porch, approached Varney with a message that Madame Dalibard would see him in five minutes, if he would then have the goodness to ascend to her room.

Before that time was well expired, Varney was in the chamber. Madame Dalibard was up and in her chair; and the unwonted joy which her countenance evinced was in strong contrast with the sombre shade upon her son-in-law's brow, and the nervous quiver of his lip.

"Gabriel," she said, as he drew near to her, "my son is found!"

"I know it," he answered petulantly. "You! From whom?"

"From Grabman."

"And I from a still better authority,--from Walter Ardworth himself. He lives; he will restore my child!" She extended a letter while she spoke. He, in return, gave her, not that still crumpled in his hand, but one which he drew from his breast. These letters severally occupied both, begun and finished almost in the same moment.

That from Grabman ran thus:--

DEAR JASON,--Toss up your hat and cry 'hip, hip!' At last, from person to person, I have tracked the lost Vincent Braddell. He lives still! We can maintain his identity in any court of law. Scarce in time for the post, I have not a moment for further particulars. I shall employ the next two days in reducing all the evidence to a regular digest, which I will despatch to you. Meanwhile, prepare, as soon as may be, to put me in possession of my fee,--5000 pounds; and my expedition merits something more.

Yours,

NICHOLAS GRABMAN.

The letter from Ardworth was no less positive:--

MADAM,--In obedience to the commands of a dying friend, I took charge of his infant and concealed its existence from his mother,--yourself. On returning to England, I need not say that I was not unmindful of my trust. Your son lives; and after mature reflection I have resolved to restore him to your arms. In this I have been decided by what I have heard, from one whom I can trust, of your altered habits, your decorous life, your melancholy infirmities, and the generous protection you have given to the orphan of my poor cousin Susan, my old friend Mainwaring. Alfred Braddell himself, if it be permitted to him to look down and read my motives, will pardon me, I venture to feel assured, this departure from his injunctions. Whatever the faults which displeased him, they have been amply chastised. And your son, grown to man, can no longer be endangered by example, in tending the couch, or soothing the repentance of his mother.

These words are severe; but you will pardon them in him who gives you back your child. I shall venture to wait on you in person, with such proofs as may satisfy you as to the identity of your son. I count on arriving at Laughton to-morrow. Meanwhile, I simply sign myself by a name in which you will recognize the kinsman to one branch of your family, and the friend of your dead husband.

J. WALTER ARDWORTH.

CRAVEN HOTEL, October, 1831.

"Well, and are you not rejoiced?" said Lucretia, gazing surprised on Varney's sullen and unsympathizing face.

"No! because time presses; because, even while discovering your son, you may fail in securing his heritage; because, in the midst of your triumph, I see Newgate opening to myself. Look you, I too have had my news,--less pleasing than yours. This Stubmore (curse him!) writes me word that he shall certainly be in town next month at farthest, and that he meditates, immediately on his arrival, transferring the legacy from the Bank of England to an excellent mortgage of which he has heard. Were it not for this scheme of ours, nothing would be left for me but flight and exile."

"A month,--that is a long time. Do you think, now that my son is found, and that son like John Ardworth (for there can be no doubt that my surmise was right), with genius to make station the pedestal to the power I dreamed of in my youth, but which my sex forbade me to attain,--do you think I will keep him a month from his inheritance? Before the month is out, you shall replace what you have taken, and buy your trustee's silence, if need be, either from the sums you have insured, or from the rents of Laughton."

"Lucretia," said Varney, whose fresh colours had grown livid, "what is to be done must be done at once. Percival St. John has heard from his mother. Attend." And Varney rapidly related the questions St. John had put to him, the dreaded arrival of Captain Greville, the danger of so keen an observer, the necessity, at all events, of abridging their visit, the urgency of hastening the catastrophe to its close.

Lucretia listened in ominous and steadfast silence.

"But," she said at last, "you have persuaded St. John to give this man the meeting in London,--to put off his visit for the time. St. John will return to us to-morrow. Well, and if he finds his Helen is no more! Two nights ago I, for the first time, mingled in the morning draught that which has no antidote and no cure. This night two drops more, and St. John will return to find that Death is in the house before him. And then for himself,--the sole remaining barrier between my son and this inheritance,--for himself, why, grief sometimes kills suddenly; and there be drugs whose effect simulates the death-stroke of grief."

"Yet, yet, this rapidity, if necessary, is perilous. Nothing in Helen's state forbodes sudden death by natural means. The strangeness of two deaths, both so young; Greville in England, if not here,--hastening down to examine, to inquire. With such prepossessions against you, there must be an inquest."

"Well, and what can be discovered? It was I who shrank before,--it is I

who now urge despatch. I feel as in my proper home in these halls. I would not leave them again but to my grave. I stand on the hearth of my youth; I fight for my rights and my son's! Perish those who oppose me!"

A fell energy and power were in the aspect of the murderess as she thus spoke; and while her determination awed the inferior villany of Varney, it served somewhat to mitigate his fears.

As in more detail they began to arrange their execrable plans, Percival, while the horses were being harnessed to take him to the nearest post-town, sought Helen, and found her in the little chamber which he had described and appropriated as her own, when his fond fancy had sketched the fair outline of the future.

This room had been originally fitted up for the private devotions of the Roman Catholic wife of an ancestor in the reign of Charles II; and in a recess, half veiled by a curtain, there still stood that holy symbol which, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic, no one sincerely penetrated with the solemn pathos of sacred history can behold unmoved,--the Cross of the Divine Agony. Before this holy symbol Helen stood in earnest reverence. She did not kneel (for the forms of the religion in which she had been reared were opposed to that posture of worship before the graven image), but you could see in that countenance, eloquent at once with the enthusiasm and the meekness of piety, that the soul was filled with the memories and the hopes which, age after age, have consoled the sufferer and inspired the martyr. The soul knelt to the idea, if the knee bowed not to the image, embracing the tender grandeur of the sacrifice and the vast inheritance opened to faith in the redemption.

The young man held his breath while he gazed. He was moved, and he was awed. Slowly Helen turned towards him, and, smiling sweetly, held out to him her hand. They seated themselves in silence in the depth of the overhanging casement; and the mournful character of the scene without, where dimly, through the misty rains, gloomed the dark foliage of the cedars, made them insensibly draw closer to each other in the instinct of love when the world frowns around it. Percival wanted the courage to say that he had come to take farewell, though but for a day, and Helen spoke first.

"I cannot guess why it is, Percival, but I am startled at the change I feel in myself--no, not in health, dear Percival; I mean in mind--during

the last few months,--since, indeed, we have known each other. I remember so well the morning in which my aunt's letter arrived at the dear vicarage. We were returning from the village fair, and my good guardian was smiling at my notions of the world. I was then so giddy and light and thoughtless, everything presented itself to me in such gay colours, I scarcely believed in sorrow. And now I feel as if I were awakened to a truer sense of nature,--of the ends of our being here; I seem to know that life is a grave and solemn thing. Yet I am not less happy, Percival. No, I think rather that I knew not true happiness till I knew you. I have read somewhere that the slave is gay in his holiday from toil; if you free him, if you educate him, the gayety vanishes, and he cares no more for the dance under the palm-tree. But is he less happy? So it is with me!"

"My sweet Helen, I would rather have one gay smile of old, the arch, careless laugh which came so naturally from those rosy lips, than hear you talk of happiness with that quiver in your voice,--those tears in your eyes."

"Yet gayety," said Helen, thoughtfully, and in the strain of her pure, truthful poetry of soul, "is only the light impression of the present moment,--the play of the mere spirits; and happiness seems a forethought of the future, spreading on, far and broad, over all time and space."

"And you live, then, in the future at last; you have no misgivings now, my Helen? Well, that comforts me. Say it, Helen,--say the future will be ours!"

"It will, it will,--forever and forever," said Helen, earnestly; and her eyes involuntarily rested on the Cross.

In his younger spirit and less imaginative nature Percival did not comprehend the depth of sadness implied in Helen's answer; taking it literally, he felt as if a load were lifted from his heart, and kissing with rapture the hand he held, he exclaimed: "Yes, this shall soon, oh, soon be mine! I fear nothing while you hope. You cannot guess how those words have cheered me; for I am leaving you, though but for a few hours, and I shall repeat those words, for they will ring in my ear, in my heart, till we meet again."

"Leaving me!" said Helen, turning pale, and her clasp on his hand tightening. Poor child, she felt mysteriously a sentiment of protection in his presence.

"But at most for a day. My old tutor, of whom we have so often conversed, is on his way to England,--perhaps even now in London. He has some wrong impressions against your aunt; his manner is blunt and rough. It is necessary that I should see him before he comes hither,--you know how susceptible is your aunt's pride,--just to prepare him for meeting her. You understand?"

"What impressions against my aunt? Does he even know her?" asked Helen. And if such a sentiment as suspicion could cross that candid innocence of mind, that sentiment towards this stern relation whose arms had never embraced her, whose lips had never spoken of the past, whose history was as a sealed volume, disturbed and disquieted her.

"It is because he has never known her that he does her wrong. Some old story of her indiscretion as a girl, of her uncle's displeasure,--what

matters now?" said Percival, shrinking sensitively from one disclosure that might wound Helen in her kinswoman. "Meanwhile, dearest, you will be prudent,—you will avoid this damp air, and keep quietly at home, and amuse yourself, sweet fancier of the future, in planning how to improve these old halls when they and their unworthy master are your own. God bless you, God guard you, Helen!"

He rose, and with that loyal chivalry of love which felt respect the more for the careless guardianship to which his Helen was intrusted, he refrained from that parting kiss which their pure courtship warranted, for which his lip yearned. But as he lingered, an irresistible impulse moved Helen's heart. Mechanically she opened her arms, and her head sank upon his shoulder. In that embrace they remained some moments silent, and an angel might unrepvingly have heard their hearts beat through the stillness.

At length Percival tore himself from those arms which relaxed their imploring hold reluctantly; she heard his hurried step descend the stairs, and in a moment more the roll of the wheels in the court without; a dreary sense, as of some utter desertion, some everlasting bereavement, chilled and appalled her. She stood motionless, as if turned to stone, on the floor; suddenly the touch of something warm on her hand, a plaining whine, awoke her attention; Percival's favourite dog missed his master, and had slunk for refuge to her. The dread sentiment of loneliness vanished in that humble companionship; and seating herself on the ground, she took the dog in her arms, and bending over it, wept in silence.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MURDER, TOWARDS HIS DESIGN, MOVES LIKE A GHOST.

The reader will doubtless have observed the consummate art with which the poisoner had hitherto advanced upon her prey. The design conceived from afar, and executed with elaborate stealth, defied every chance of detection against which the ingenuity of practised villany could guard. Grant even that the deadly drugs should betray the nature of the death they inflicted, that by some un conjectured secret in the science of chemistry the presence of those vegetable compounds which had hitherto baffled every known and positive test in the posthumous examination of the most experienced surgeons, should be clearly ascertained, not one suspicion seemed likely to fall upon the ministrant of death. The medicines were never brought to Madame Dalibard, were never given by her hand; nothing ever tasted by the victim could be tracked to her aunt. The helpless condition of the cripple, which Lucretia had assumed, forbade all notion even of her power of movement. Only in the dead of night when, as she believed, every human eye that could watch her was sealed in sleep, and then in those dark habiliments which (even as might sometimes happen, if the victim herself were awake) a chance ray of light struggling through chink or shutter could scarcely distinguish from the general gloom, did she steal to the chamber and infuse the colourless and tasteless liquid [The celebrated acqua di Tufania (Tufania water) was wholly without taste or colour] in the morning draught, meant to bring strength and healing. Grant that the draught was untouched, that it was examined by the surgeon, that the fell admixture could be detected, suspicion would wander anywhere rather than to that crippled and helpless

kinswoman who could not rise from her bed without aid.

But now this patience was to be abandoned, the folds of the serpent were to coil in one fell clasp upon its prey.

Fiend as Lucretia had become, and hardened as were all her resolves by the discovery of her son, and her impatience to endow him with her forfeited inheritance, she yet shrank from the face of Helen that day; on the excuse of illness, she kept her room, and admitted only Varney, who stole in from time to time, with creeping step and haggard countenance, to sustain her courage or his own. And every time he entered, he found Lucretia sitting with Walter Ardworth's open letter in her hand, and turning with a preternatural excitement that seemed almost like aberration of mind, from the grim and horrid topic which he invited, to thoughts of wealth and power and triumph and exulting prophecies of the fame her son should achieve. He looked but on the blackness of the gulf, and shuddered; her vision overleaped it, and smiled on the misty palaces her fancy built beyond.

Late in the evening, before she retired to rest, Helen knocked gently at her aunt's door. A voice, quick and startled, bade her enter; she came in, with her sweet, caressing look, and took Lucretia's hand, which struggled from the clasp. Bending over that haggard brow, she said simply, yet to Lucretia's ear the voice seemed that of command, "Let me kiss you this night!" and her lips pressed that brow. The murderess shuddered, and closed her eyes; when she opened them, the angel visitor was gone.

Night deepened and deepened into those hours from the first of which we number the morn, though night still is at her full. Moonbeam and starbeam came through the casements shyly and fairylike as on that night when the murderess was young and crimeless, in deed, if not in thought,--that night when, in the book of Leechcraft, she meted out the hours in which the life of her benefactor might still interpose between her passion and its end. Along the stairs, through the hall, marched the armies of light, noiseless and still and clear as the judgments of God amidst the darkness and shadow of mortal destinies. In one chamber alone, the folds, curtained close, forbade all but a single ray; that ray came direct as the stream from a lantern; as the beam reflected back from an eye,--as an eye it seemed watchful and steadfast through the dark; it shot along the floor,--it fell at the foot of the bed.

Suddenly, in the exceeding hush, there was a strange and ghastly sound,--it was the howl of a dog! Helen started from her sleep. Percival's dog had followed her into her room; it had coiled itself, grateful for the kindness, at the foot of the bed. Now it was on the pillow, she felt its heart beat against her hand,--it was trembling; its hairs bristled up, and the howl changed into a shrill bark of terror and wrath. Alarmed, she looked round; quickly between her and that ray from the crevice a shapeless darkness passed, and was gone, so undistinguishable, so without outline, that it had no likeness of any living form; like a cloud, like a thought, like an omen, it came in gloom, and it vanished.

Helen was seized with a superstitious terror; the dog continued to tremble and growl low. All once more was still; the dog sighed itself to rest. The stillness, the solitude, the glimmer of the moon,--all contributed yet more to appall the enfeebled nerves of the listening, shrinking girl. At length she buried her face under the clothes, and towards daybreak fell into a broken, feverish sleep, haunted with

threatening dreams.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE MESSENGER SPEEDS.

Towards the afternoon of the following day, an elderly gentleman was seated in the coffee-room of an hotel at Southampton, engaged in writing a letter, while the waiter in attendance was employed on the wires that fettered the petulant spirit contained in a bottle of Schweppe's soda-water. There was something in the aspect of the old gentleman, and in the very tone of his voice, that inspired respect, and the waiter had cleared the other tables of their latest newspapers to place before him. He had only just arrived by the packet from Havre, and even the newspapers had not been to him that primary attraction they generally constitute to the Englishman returning to his bustling native land, which, somewhat to his surprise, has contrived to go on tolerably well during his absence.

We use our privilege of looking over his shoulder while he writes:--

Here I am, then, dear Lady Mary, at Southampton, and within an easy drive of the old Hall. A file of Galignani's journals, which I found on the road between Marseilles and Paris, informed me, under the head of "fashionable movements," that Percival St. John, Esquire, was gone to his seat at Laughton. According to my customary tactics of marching at once to the seat of action, I therefore made direct for Havre, instead of crossing from Calais, and I suppose I shall find our young gentleman engaged in the slaughter of hares and partridges. You see it is a good sign that he can leave London. Keep up your spirits, my dear friend. If Perce has been really duped and taken in,--as all you mothers are so apt to fancy,--rely upon an old soldier to defeat the enemy and expose the ruse. But if, after all, the girl is such as he describes and believes,--innocent, artless, and worthy his affection,--oh, then I range myself, with your own good heart, upon his side. Never will I run the risk of unsettling a man's whole character for life by wantonly interfering with his affections. But there we are agreed.

In a few hours I shall be with our dear boy, and his whole heart will come out clear and candid as when it beat under his midshipman's true-blue. In a day or two I shall make him take me to town, to introduce me to the whole nest of them. Then I shall report progress. Adieu, till then! Kind regards to your poor sister. I think we shall have a mild winter. Not one warning twinge as yet of the old rheumatism. Ever your devoted old friend and preux chevalier,

H. GREVILLE.

The captain had completed his letter, sipped his soda-water, and was affixing to his communication his seal, when he heard the rattle of a post-chaise without. Fancying it was the one he had ordered, he went to the open window which looked on the street; but the chaise contained travellers, only halting to change horses. Somewhat to his surprise, and a little to his chagrin,--for the captain did not count on finding company at the Hall,--he heard one of the travellers in the chaise ask the distance to Laughton. The countenance of the questioner was not familiar to him. But leaving the worthy captain to question the

landlord, without any satisfactory information, and to hasten the chaise for himself, we accompany the travellers on their way to Laughton. There were but two,--the proper complement of a post-chaise,--and they were both of the ruder sex. The elder of the two was a man of middle age, but whom the wear and tear of active life had evidently advanced towards the state called elderly. But there was still abundant life in his quick, dark eye; and that mercurial youthfulness of character which in some happy constitutions seems to defy years and sorrow, evinced itself in a rapid play of countenance and as much gesticulation as the narrow confines of the vehicle and the position of a traveller will permit. The younger man, far more grave in aspect and quiet in manner, leaned back in the corner with folded arms, and listened with respectful attention to his companion.

"Certainly, Dr. Johnson is right,--great happiness in an English post-chaise properly driven; more exhilarating than a palanquin. 'Post equitem sedet atra cura,'--true only of such scrubby hacks as old Horace could have known. Black Care does not sit behind English postboys, eh, my boy?" As he spoke this, the gentleman had twice let down the glass of the vehicle, and twice put it up again.

"Yet," he resumed, without noticing the brief, good-humoured reply of his companion,--"yet this is an anxious business enough that we are about. I don't feel quite easy in my conscience. Poor Braddell's injunctions were very strict, and I disobey them. It is on your responsibility, John!"

"I take it without hesitation. All the motives for so stern a severance must have ceased, and is it not a sufficient punishment to find in that hoped-for son a--"

"Poor woman!" interrupted the elder gentleman, in whom we begin to recognize the soi-disant Mr. Tomkins; "true, indeed, too true. How well I remember the impression Lucretia Clavering first produced on me; and to think of her now as a miserable cripple! By Jove, you are right, sir! Drive on, post-boy, quick, quick!"

There was a short silence.

The elder gentleman abruptly put his hand upon his companion's arm.

"What consummate acuteness; what patient research you have shown! What could I have done in this business without you? How often had that garrulous Mrs. Mivers bored me with Becky Carruthers, and the coral, and St. Paul's, and not a suspicion came across me,--a word was sufficient for you. And then to track this unfeeling old Joplin from place to place till you find her absolutely a servant under the very roof of Mrs. Braddell herself! Wonderful! Ah, boy, you will be an honour to the law and to your country. And what a hard-hearted rascal you must think me to have deserted you so long."

"My dear father," said John Ardworth, tenderly, "your love now recompenses me for all. And ought I not rather to rejoice not to have known the tale of a mother's shame until I could half forget it on a father's breast?"

"John," said the elder Ardworth, with a choking voice, "I ought to wear sackcloth all my life for having given you such a mother. When I think what I have suffered from the habit of carelessness in those confounded money-matters ('irritamenta malorum,' indeed!), I have only one

consolation,--that my patient, noble son is free from my vice. You would not believe what a well-principled, honourable fellow I was at your age; and yet, how truly I said to my poor friend William Mainwaring one day at Laughton (I remember it now) 'Trust me with anything else but half-a-guinea!' Why, sir, it was that fault that threw me into low company,--that brought me in contact with my innkeeper's daughter at Limerick. I fell in love, and I married (for, with all my faults, I was never a seducer, John). I did not own my marriage; why should I?--my relatives had cut me already. You were born, and, hunted poor devil as I was, I forgot all by your cradle. Then, in the midst of my troubles, that ungrateful woman deserted me; then I was led to believe that it was not my own son whom I had kissed and blessed. Ah, but for that thought should I have left you as I did? And even in infancy, you had the features only of your mother. Then, when the death of the adulteress set me free, and years afterwards, in India, I married again and had new ties, my heart grew still harder to you. I excused myself by knowing that at least you were cared for, and trained to good by a better guide than I. But when, by so strange a hazard, the very priest who had confessed your mother on her deathbed (she was a Catholic) came to India, and (for he had known me at Limerick) recognized my altered person, and obeying his penitent's last injunctions, assured me that you were my son,--oh, John, then, believe me, I hastened back to England on the wings of remorse! Love you, boy! I have left at Madras three children, young and fair, by a woman now in heaven, who never wronged me, and, by my soul, John Ardworth, you are dearer to me than all!"

The father's head drooped on his son's breast as he spoke; then, dashing away his tears, he resumed,--

"Ah, why would not Braddell permit me, as I proposed, to find for his son the same guardianship as that to which I intrusted my own? But his bigotry besotted him; a clergyman of the High Church,--that was worse than an atheist. I had no choice left to me but the roof of that she-hypocrite. Yet I ought to have come to England when I heard of the child's loss, braved duns and all; but I was money-making, money-making,--retribution for money-wasting; and--well, it's no use repenting! And--and there is the lodge, the park, the old trees! Poor Sir Miles!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SPY FLIES.

Meanwhile at Laughton there was confusion and alarm. Helen had found herself more than usually unwell in the morning; towards noon, the maid who attended her informed Madame Dalibard that she was afraid the poor young lady had much fever, and inquired if the doctor should be sent for. Madame Dalibard seemed surprised at the intelligence, and directed her chair to be wheeled into her niece's room, in order herself to judge of Helen's state. The maid, sure that the doctor would be summoned, hastened to the stables, and seeing Beck, instructed him to saddle one of the horses and to await further orders. Beck kept her a few moments talking while he saddled his horse, and then followed her into the house, observing that it would save time if he were close at hand.

"That is quite true," said the maid, "and you may as well wait in the corridor. Madame may wish to speak to you herself, and give you her own

message or note to the doctor."

Beck, full of gloomy suspicions, gladly obeyed, and while the maid entered the sick-chamber, stood anxiously without. Presently Varney passed him, and knocked at Helen's door; the maid half-opened it.

"How is Miss Mainwaring?" said he, eagerly.

"I fear she is worse, sir; but Madame Dalibard does not think there is any danger."

"No danger! I am glad; but pray ask Madame Dalibard to let me see her for a few moments in her own room. If she come out, I will wheel her chair to it. Whether there is danger or not, we had better send for other advice than this country doctor, who has perhaps mistaken the case; tell her I am very uneasy, and beg her to join me immediately."

"I think you are quite right, sir," said the maid, closing the door.

Varney then, turning round for the first time, noticed Beck, and said roughly,--

"What do you do here? Wait below till you are sent for."

Beck pulled his forelock, and retreated back, not in the direction of the principal staircase, but towards that used by the servants, and which his researches into the topography of the mansion had now made known to him. To gain these back stairs he had to pass Lucretia's room; the door stood ajar; Varney's face was turned from him. Beck breathed hard, looked round, then crept within, and in a moment was behind the folds of the tapestry.

Soon the chair in which sat Madame Dalibard was drawn by Varney himself into the room.

Shutting the door with care, and turning the key, Gabriel said, with low, suppressed passion,--

"Well; your mind seems wandering,--speak!"

"It is strange," said Lucretia, in hollow tones, "can Nature turn accomplice, and befriend us here?"

"Nature! did you not last night administer the--"

"No," interrupted Lucretia. "No; she came into the room, she kissed me here,--on the brow that even then was meditating murder. The kiss burned; it burns still,--it eats into the brain like remorse. But I did not yield; I read again her false father's protestation of love; I read again the letter announcing the discovery of my son, and remorse lay still. I went forth as before, I stole into her chamber, I had the fatal crystal in my hand--"

"Well, well!"

"And suddenly there came the fearful howl of a dog, and the dog's fierce eyes glared on me. I paused, I trembled; Helen started, woke, called aloud. I turned and fled. The poison was not given."

Varney ground his teeth. "But this illness! Ha! the effect, perhaps, of the drops administered two nights ago."

"No; this illness has no symptoms like those the poison should bequeath,-it is but natural fever, a shock on the nerves; she told me she had been wakened by the dog's howl, and seen a dark form, like a thing from the grave, creeping along the floor. But she is really ill; send for the physician; there is nothing in her illness to betray the hand of man. Be it as it may,--that kiss still burns; I will stir in this no more. Do what you will yourself!"

"Fool, fool!" exclaimed Varney, almost rudely grasping her arm. "Remember how much we have yet to prepare for, how much to do,--and the time so short! Percival's return,--perhaps this Greville's arrival. Give me the drugs; I will mix them for her in the potion the physician sends. And when Percival returns,--his Helen dead or dying,--I will attend on him! Silent still? Recall your son! Soon you will clasp him in your arms as a beggar, or as the lord of Laughton!"

Lucretia shuddered, but did not rise; she drew forth a ring of keys from her bosom, and pointed towards a secretary. Varney snatched the keys, unlocked the secretary, seized the fatal casket, and sat down quietly before it.

When the dire selections were made, and secreted about his person, Varney rose, approached the fire, and blew the wood embers to a blaze.

"And now," he said, with his icy irony of smile, "we may dismiss these useful instruments,--perhaps forever. Though Walter Ardworth, in restoring your son, leaves us dependent on that son's filial affection, and I may have, therefore, little to hope for from the succession, to secure which I have risked and am again to risk my life, I yet trust to that influence which you never fail to obtain over others. I take it for granted that when these halls are Vincent Braddell's, we shall have no need of gold, nor of these pale alchemies. Perish, then, the mute witnesses of our acts, the elements we have bowed to our will! No poison shall be found in our hoards! Fire, consume your consuming children!"

As he spoke, he threw upon the hearth the contents of the casket, and set his heel upon the logs. A bluish flame shot up, breaking into countless sparks, and then died.

Lucretia watched him without speaking.

In coming back towards the table, Varney felt something hard beneath his tread; he stooped, and picked up the ring which has before been described as amongst the ghastly treasures of the casket, and which had rolled on the floor almost to Lucretia's feet, as he had emptied the contents on the hearth.

"This, at least, need tell no tales," said he; "a pity to destroy so rare a piece of workmanship,--one, too, which we never can replace!"

"Ay," said Lucretia, abstractedly; "and if detection comes, it may secure a refuge from the gibbet. Give me the ring."

"A refuge more terrible than the detection," said Varney,--"beware of such a thought," as Lucretia, taking it from his hand, placed the ring on her finger.

"And now I leave you for a while to recollect yourself,--to compose your countenance and your thoughts. I will send for the physician."

Lucretia, with her eyes fixed on the floor, did not heed him, and he withdrew.

So motionless was her attitude, so still her very breathing, that the unseen witness behind the tapestry, who, while struck with horror at what he had overheard (the general purport of which it was impossible that he could misunderstand), was parched with impatience to escape to rescue his beloved master from his impending fate, and warn him of the fate hovering nearer still over Helen, ventured to creep along the wall to the threshold, to peer forth from the arras, and seeing her eyes still downcast, to emerge, and place his hand on the door. At that very moment Lucretia looked up, and saw him gliding from the tapestry; their eyes met: his were fascinated as the bird's by the snake's. At the sight, all her craft, her intellect, returned. With a glance, she comprehended the terrible danger that awaited her. Before he was aware of her movement, she was at his side; her hand on his own, her voice in his ear.

"Stir not a step, utter not a sound, or you are--"

Beck did not suffer her to proceed. With the violence rather of fear than of courage, he struck her to the ground; but she clung to him still, and though rendered for the moment speechless by the suddenness of the blow, her eyes took an expression of unspeakable cruelty and fierceness. He struggled with all his might to shake her off; as he did so, she placed feebly her other hand upon the wrist of the lifted arm that had smitten her, and he felt a sharp pain, as if the nails had fastened into the flesh. This but exasperated him to new efforts. He extricated himself from her grasp, which relaxed as her lips writhed into a smile of scorn and triumph, and, spurning her while she lay before the threshold, he opened the door, sprang forward, and escaped. No thought had he of tarrying in that House of Pelops, those human shambles, of denouncing Murder in its lair; to fly to reach his master, warn, and shield him,--that was the sole thought which crossed his confused, bewildered brain.

It might be from four to five minutes that Lucretia, half-stunned, half-senseless, lay upon those floors,--for besides the violence of her fall, the shock of the struggle upon nerves weakened by the agony of apprehension, occasioned by the imminent and unforeseen chance of detection, paralyzed her wondrous vigour of mind and frame,--when Varney entered.

"They tell me she sleeps," he said, in hoarse, muttered accents, before he saw the prostrate form at his very feet. But Varney's step, Varney's voice, had awakened Lucretia's reason to consciousness and the sense of peril. Rising, though with effort, she related hurriedly what had passed.

"Fly, fly!" she gasped, as she concluded. "Fly, to detain, to secrete, this man somewhere for the next few hours. Silence him but till then; I have done the rest!" and her finger pointed to the fatal ring. Varney waited for no further words; he hurried out, and made at once to the stables: his shrewdness conjectured that Beck would carry his tale elsewhere. The groom was already gone (his fellows said) without a word, but towards the lodge that led to the Southampton road. Varney ordered the swiftest horse the stables held to be saddled, and said, as he sprang

on his back,--

"I, too, must go towards Southampton. The poor young lady! I must prepare your master,--he is on his road back to us;" and the last word was scarce out of his lips as the sparks flew from the flints under the horse's hoofs, and he spurred from the yard.

As he rode at full speed through the park, the villain's mind sped more rapidly than the animal he bestrode,--sped from fear to hope, hope to assurance. Grant that the spy lived to tell his tale,--incoherent, improbable as the tale would be,--who would believe it? How easy to meet tale by tale! The man must own that he was secreted behind the tapestry,--wherefore but to rob? Detected by Madame Dalibard, he had coined this wretched fable. And the spy, too, could not live through the day; he bore Death with him as he rode, he fed its force by his speed, and the effects of the venom itself would be those of frenzy. Tush! his tale, at best, would seem but the ravings of delirium. Still, it was well to track him where he went,--delay him, if possible; and Varney's spurs plunged deep and deeper into the bleeding flanks: on desperately scoured the horse. He passed the lodge; he was on the road; a chaise and pair dashed by him; he heard not a voice exclaim "Varney!" he saw not the wondering face of John Ardworth; bending over the tossing mane, he was deaf, he was blind, to all without and around. A milestone glides by, another, and a third. Ha! his eyes can see now. The object of his chase is before him,--he views distinctly, on the brow of yon hill, the horse and the rider, spurring fast, like himself. They descend the hill, horse and horseman, and are snatched from his sight. Up the steep strains the pursuer. He is at the summit. He sees the fugitive before him, almost within hearing. Beck has slackened his steed; he seems swaying to and fro in the saddle. Ho, ho! the barbed ring begins to work in his veins. Varney looks round,--not another soul is in sight; a deep wood skirts the road. Place and time seem to favour; Beck has reined in his horse,--he bends low over the saddle, as if about to fall. Varney utters a half-suppressed cry of triumph, shakes his reins, and spurs on, when suddenly--by the curve of the road, hid before--another chaise comes in sight, close where Beck had wearily halted.

The chaise stops; Varney pulls in, and draws aside to the hedgerow. Some one within the vehicle is speaking to the fugitive! May it not be St. John himself? To his rage and his terror, he sees Beck painfully dismount from his horse, sees him totter to the door of the chaise, sees a servant leap from the box and help him up the step, sees him enter. It must be Percival on his return,--Percival, to whom he tells that story of horror! Varney's brute-like courage forsook him; his heart was appalled. In one of those panics so common with that boldness which is but animal, his sole thought became that of escape. He turned his horse's head to the fence, forced his way desperately through the barrier, made into the wood, and sat there, cowering and listening, till in another minute he heard the wheels rattle on, and the horses gallop hard down the hill towards the park.

The autumn wind swept through the trees, it shook the branches of the lofty ash that overhung the Accursed One. What observer of Nature knows not that peculiar sound which the ash gives forth in the blast? Not the solemn groan of the oak, not the hollow murmur of the beech, but a shrill wail, a shriek as of a human voice in sharp anguish. Varney shuddered, as if he had heard the death-cry of his intended victim. Through briers and thickets, torn by the thorns, bruised by the boughs, he plunged deeper and deeper into the wood, gained at length the main path cut

through it, found himself in a lane, and rode on, careless whither, till he had reached a small town, about ten miles from Laughton, where he resolved to wait till his nerves had recovered their tone, and he could more calmly calculate the chances of safety.

CHAPTER XXVII.

LUCRETIA REGAINS HER SON.

It seemed as if now, when danger became most imminent and present, that that very danger served to restore to Lucretia Dalibard her faculties, which during the earlier day had been steeped in a kind of dreary stupor. The absolute necessity of playing out her execrable part with all suitable and consistent hypocrisy, braced her into iron. But the disguise she assumed was a supernatural effort, it stretched to cracking every fibre of the brain; it seemed almost to herself as if, her object once gained, either life or consciousness could hold out no more.

A chaise stopped at the porch; two gentlemen descended. The elder paused irresolutely, and at length, taking out a card, inscribed "Mr. Walter Ardworth," said, "If Madame Dalibard can be spoken to for a moment, will you give her this card?"

The footman hesitatingly stared at the card, and then invited the gentleman into the hall while he took up the message. Not long had the visitor to wait, pacing the dark oak floors and gazing on the faded banners, before the servant reappeared: Madame Dalibard would see him. He followed his guide up the stairs, while his young companion turned from the hall, and seated himself musingly on one of the benches on the deserted terrace.

Grasping the arms of her chair with both hands, her eyes fixed eagerly on his face, Lucretia Dalibard awaited the welcome visitor.

Prepared as he had been for change, Walter was startled by the ghastly alteration in Lucretia's features, increased as it was at that moment by all the emotions which raged within. He sank into the chair placed for him opposite Lucretia, and clearing his throat, said falteringly,--

"I grieve indeed, Madame, that my visit, intended to bring but joy, should chance thus inopportunist. The servant informed me as we came up the stairs that your niece was ill; and I sympathize with your natural anxiety,--Susan's only child, too; poor Susan!"

"Sir," said Lucretia, impatiently, "these moments are precious. Sir, sir, my son,--my son!" and her eyes glanced to the door. "You have brought with you a companion,--does he wait without? My son!"

"Madame, give me a moment's patience. I will be brief, and compress what in other moments might be a long narrative into a few sentences."

Rapidly then Walter Ardworth passed over the details, unnecessary now to repeat to the reader,--the injunctions of Braddell, the delivery of the child to the woman selected by his fellow-sectarian (who, it seemed, by John Ardworth's recent inquiries, was afterwards expelled the community, and who, there was reason to believe, had been the first seducer of the

woman thus recommended). No clew to the child's parentage had been given to the woman with the sum intrusted for his maintenance, which sum had perhaps been the main cause of her reckless progress to infamy and ruin. The narrator passed lightly over the neglect and cruelty of the nurse, to her abandonment of the child when the money was exhausted. Fortunately she had overlooked the coral round its neck. By that coral, and by the initials V. B., which Ardworth had had the precaution to have burned into the child's wrist, the lost son had been discovered; the nurse herself (found in the person of Martha Skeggs, Lucretia's own servant) had been confronted with the woman to whom she gave the child, and recognized at once. Nor had it been difficult to obtain from her the confession which completed the evidence.

"In this discovery," concluded Ardworth, "the person I employed met your own agent, and the last links in the chain they traced together. But to that person--to his zeal and intelligence--you owe the happiness I trust to give you. He sympathized with me the more that he knew you personally, felt for your sorrows, and had a lingering belief that you supposed him to be the child you yearned for. Madame, thank my son for the restoration of your own!"

Without sound, Lucretia had listened to these details, though her countenance changed fearfully as the narrator proceeded. But now she groaned aloud and in agony.

"Nay, Madame," said Ardworth, feelingly, and in some surprise, "surely the discovery of your son should create gladder emotions! Though, indeed, you will be prepared to find that the poor youth so reared wants education and refinement, I have heard enough to convince me that his dispositions are good and his heart grateful. Judge of this yourself; he is in these walls, he is--"

"Abandoned by a harlot,--reared by a beggar! My son!" interrupted Lucretia, in broken sentences. "Well, sir, have you discharged your task! Well have you replaced a mother!" Before Ardworth could reply, loud and rapid steps were heard in the corridor, and a voice, cracked, indistinct, but vehement. The door was thrown open, and, half-supported by Captain Greville, half dragging him along, his features convulsed, whether by pain or passion, the spy upon Lucretia's secrets, the denouncer of her crime, tottered to the threshold. Pointing to where she sat with his long, lean arm, Beck exclaimed, "Seize her! I 'cuse her, face to face, of the murder of her niece,--of--of I told you, sir--I told you--"

"Madame," said Captain Greville, "you stand charged by this witness with the most terrible of human crimes. I judge you not. Your niece, I rejoice to bear, yet lives. Pray God that her death be not traced to those kindred hands!" Turning her eyes from one to the other with a wandering stare, Lucretia Dalibard remained silent. But there was still scorn on her lip, and defiance on her brow. At last she said slowly, and to Ardworth,--

"Where is my son? You say he is within these walls. Call him forth to protect his mother! Give me at least my son,--my son!"

Her last words were drowned by a fresh burst of fury from her denouncer. In all the coarsest invective his education could supply, in all the hideous vulgarities of his untutored dialect, in that uncurbed licentiousness of tone, look, and manner which passion, once aroused,

gives to the dregs and scum of the populace, Beck poured forth his frightful charges, his frantic execrations. In vain Captain Greville strove to check him; in vain Walter Ardworth sought to draw him from the room. But while the poor wretch--maddening not more with the consciousness of the crime than with the excitement of the poison in his blood--thus raved and stormed, a terrible suspicion crossed Walter Ardworth; mechanically,--as his grasp was on the accuser's arm,--he bared the sleeve, and on the wrist were the dark-blue letters burned into the skin and bearing witness to his identity with the lost Vincent Braddell.

"Hold, hold!" he exclaimed then; "hold, unhappy man!--it is your mother whom you denounce!"

Lucretia sprang up erect; her eyes seemed starting from her head. She caught at the arm pointed towards her in wrath and menace, and there, amidst those letters that proclaimed her son, was the small puncture, surrounded by a livid circle, that announced her victim. In the same instant she discovered her child in the man who was calling down upon her head the hatred of Earth and the justice of Heaven, and knew herself his murderess!

She dropped the arm, and sank back on the chair; and whether the poison had now reached to the vitals, or whether so unwonted a passion in so frail a frame sufficed for the death-stroke, Beck himself, with a low, suffocated cry, slid from the hand of Ardworth, and tottering a step or so, the blood gushed from his mouth over Lucretia's robe; his head drooped an instant, and, falling, rested first upon her lap, then struck heavily upon the floor. The two men bent over him and raised him in their arms; his eyes opened and closed, his throat rattled, and as he fell back into their arms a corpse, a laugh rose close at hand,--it rang through the walls, it was heard near and afar, above and below; not an ear in that house that heard it not. In that laugh fled forever, till the Judgment-day, from the blackened ruins of her lost soul, the reason of the murderess-mother.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE LOTS VANISH WITHIN THE URN.

Varney's self-commune restored to him his constitutional audacity. He returned to Laughton towards the evening, and held a long conference with Greville. Fortunately for him, perhaps, and happily for all, Helen had lost all more dangerous symptoms; and the physician, who was in the house, saw in her state nothing not easily to be accounted for by natural causes. Percival had arrived, had seen Helen,--no wonder she was better! Both from him and from Helen, Madame Dalibard's fearful condition was for the present concealed. Ardworth's story, and the fact of Beck's identity with Vincent Braddell, were also reserved for a later occasion. The tale which Beck had poured into the ear of Greville (when, recognizing the St. John livery, the captain stopped his chaise to inquire if Percival were at the Hall, and when thrilled by the hideous import of his broken reply, that gentleman had caused him to enter the vehicle to explain himself further), Varney, with his wonted art and address, contrived to strip of all probable semblance. Evidently the poor lad had been already delirious; his story must be deemed the nightmare of his disordered reason. Varney insisted upon surgical examination as to the cause of his

death. The membranes of the brain were found surcharged with blood, as in cases of great mental excitement; the slight puncture in the wrist, ascribed to the prick of a rusty nail, provoked no suspicion. If some doubts remained still in Greville's acute mind, he was not eager to express, still less to act upon them. Helen was declared to be out of danger; Percival was safe,--why affix by minute inquiry into the alleged guilt of Madame Dalibard (already so awfully affected by the death of her son and by the loss of her reason) so foul a stain on the honoured family of St. John? But Greville was naturally anxious to free the house as soon as possible both of Varney and that ominous Lucretia, whose sojourn under its roof seemed accursed. He therefore readily assented when Varney proposed, as his obvious and personal duty, to take charge of his mother-in-law, and remove her to London for immediate advice.

At the dead of the black-clouded night, no moon and no stars, the son of Olivier Dalibard bore away the form of the once-formidable Lucretia,--the form, for the mind was gone; that teeming, restless, and fertile intellect, which had carried along the projects with the preterhuman energies of the fiend, was hurled into night and chaos. Manacled and bound, for at times her paroxysms were terrible, and all partook of the destructive and murderous character which her faculties, when present, had betrayed, she was placed in the vehicle by the shrinking side of her accomplice.

Long before he arrived in London, Varney had got rid of his fearful companion. His chaise had stopped at the iron gates of a large building somewhat out of the main road, and the doors of the madhouse closed on Lucretia Dalibard.

Varney then hastened to Dover, with intention of flight into France; he was just about to step into the vessel, when he was tapped rudely on the shoulder, and a determined voice said, "Mr. Gabriel Varney, you are my prisoner!"

"For what? Some paltry debt?" said Varney, haughtily.

"For forgery on the Bank of England!"

Varney's hand plunged into his vest. The officer seized it in time, and wrested the blade from his grasp. Once arrested for an offence it was impossible to disprove, although the very smallest of which his conscience might charge him, Varney sank into the blackest despair. Though he had often boasted, not only to others, but to his own vain breast, of the easy courage with which, when life ceased to yield enjoyment, he could dismiss it by the act of his own will; though he had possessed himself of Lucretia's murderous ring, and death, if fearful, was therefore at his command,--self-destruction was the last thought that occurred to him; that morbid excitability of fancy which, whether in his art or in his deeds, had led him to strange delight in horror, now served but to haunt him with the images of death in those ghastliest shapes familiar to them who look only into the bottom of the charnel, and see but the rat and the worm and the loathsome agencies of corruption. It was not the despair of conscience that seized him, it was the abject clinging to life; not the remorse of the soul,--that still slept within him, too noble an agency for one so debased,--but the gross physical terror. As the fear of the tiger, once aroused, is more paralyzing than that of the deer, proportioned to the savageness of a disposition to which fear is a novelty, so the very boldness of Varney, coming only from the perfection of the nervous organization, and unsupported by one moral

sentiment, once struck down, was corrupted into the vilest cowardice. With his audacity, his shrewdness forsook him. Advised by his lawyer to plead guilty, he obeyed, and the sentence of transportation for life gave him at first a feeling of reprieve; but when his imagination began to picture, in the darkness of his cell, all the true tortures of that penalty,--not so much, perhaps, to the uneducated peasant-felon, inured to toil, and familiarized with coarse companionship, as to one pampered like himself by all soft and half-womanly indulgences,--the shaven hair, the convict's dress, the rigorous privation, the drudging toil, the exile, seemed as grim as the grave. In the dotage of faculties smitten into drivelling, he wrote to the Home Office, offering to disclose secrets connected with crimes that had hitherto escaped or baffled justice, on condition that his sentence might be repealed, or mitigated into the gentler forms of ordinary transportation. No answer was returned to him, but his letter provoked research. Circumstances connected with his uncle's death, and with various other dark passages in his life, sealed against him all hope of a more merciful sentence; and when some acquaintances, whom his art had made for him, and who, while grieving for his crime, saw in it some excuses (ignorant of his feller deeds), sought to intercede in his behalf, the reply of the Home Office was obvious: "He is a fortunate man to have been tried and condemned for his least offence." Not one indulgence that could distinguish him from the most execrable ruffian condemned to the same sentence was conceded.

The idea of the gibbet lost all its horror. Here was a gibbet for every hour. No hope,--no escape. Already that Future Doom which comprehends the "Forever" opened upon him black and fathomless. The hour-glass was broken up, the hand of the timepiece was arrested. The Beyond stretched before him without limit, without goal,--on into Annihilation or into Hell.

EPILOGUE TO PART THE SECOND.

Stand, O Man! upon the hill-top in the stillness of the evening hour, and gaze, not with joyous, but with contented eyes, upon the beautiful world around thee. See where the mists, soft and dim, rise over the green meadows, through which the rivulet steals its way. See where, broadest and stillest, the wave expands to the full smile of the setting sun, and the willow that trembles on the breeze, and the oak that stands firm in the storm, are reflected back, peaceful both, from the clear glass of the tides. See where, begirt by the gold of the harvests, and backed by the pomp of a thousand groves, the roofs of the town bask, noiseless, in the calm glow of the sky. Not a sound from those abodes floats in discord to thine ear; only from the church-tower, soaring high above the rest, perhaps faintly heard through the stillness, swells the note of the holy bell. Along the mead low skims the swallow,--on the wave the silver circlet, breaking into spray, shows the sport of the fish. See the Earth, how serene, though all eloquent of activity and life! See the Heavens, how benign, though dark clouds, by yon mountain, blend the purple with the gold! Gaze contented, for Good is around thee,--not joyous, for Evil is the shadow of Good! Let thy soul pierce through the veil of the senses, and thy sight plunge deeper than the surface which gives delight to thine eye. Below the glass of that river, the pike darts on his prey; the circle in the wave, the soft splash amongst the reeds, are but signs of Destroyer and Victim. In the ivy round the oak by the margin, the owl hungers for the night, which shall give its beak

and its talons living food for its young; and the spray of the willow trembles with the wing of the redbreast, whose bright eye sees the worm on the sod. Canst thou count too, O Man! all the cares, all the sins, that those noiseless rooftops conceal? With every curl of that smoke to the sky, a human thought soars as dark, a human hope melts as briefly. And the bell from the church-tower, that to thy ear gives but music, perhaps knolls for the dead. The swallow but chases the moth, and the cloud, that deepens the glory of the heaven and the sweet shadows on the earth, nurses but the thunder that shall rend the grove, and the storm that shall devastate the harvests. Not with fear, not with doubt, recognize, O Mortal, the presence of Evil in the world. [Not, indeed, that the evil here narrated is the ordinary evil of the world,--the lesson it inculcates would be lost if so construed,--but that the mystery of evil, whatever its degree, only increases the necessity of faith in the vindication of the contrivance which requires infinity for its range, and eternity for its consummation. It is in the existence of evil that man finds his duties, and his soul its progress.] Hush thy heart in the humbleness of awe, that its mirror may reflect as serenely the shadow as the light. Vainly, for its moral, dost thou gaze on the landscape, if thy soul puts no check on the dull delight of the senses. Two wings only raise thee to the summit of Truth, where the Cherub shall comfort the sorrow, where the Seraph shall enlighten the joy. Dark as ebon spreads the one wing, white as snow gleams the other,--mournful as thy reason when it descends into the deep; exulting as thy faith when it springs to the day-star.

Beck sleeps in the churchyard of Laughton. He had lived to frustrate the monstrous design intended to benefit himself, and to become the instrument, while the victim, of the dread Eumenides. That done, his life passed with the crimes that had gathered around, out of the sight of mortals. Helen slowly regained her health in the atmosphere of love and happiness; and Lady Mary soon learned to forget the fault of the father in the virtues of the child. Married to Percival, Helen fulfilled the destinies of woman's genius, in calling forth into action man's earnest duties. She breathed into Percival's warm, beneficent heart her own more steadfast and divine intelligence. Like him she grew ambitious, by her he became distinguished. While I write, fair children play under the cedars of Laughton. And the husband tells the daughters to resemble their mother; and the wife's highest praise to the boys is: "You have spoken truth, or done good, like your father."

John Ardworth has not paused in his career, nor belied the promise of his youth. Though the elder Ardworth, partly by his own exertions, partly by his second marriage with the daughter of the French merchant (through whose agency he had corresponded with Fielden), had realized a moderate fortune, it but sufficed for his own wants and for the children of his later nuptials, upon whom the bulk of it was settled. Hence, happily perhaps for himself and others, the easy circumstances of his father allowed to John Ardworth no exemption from labour. His success in the single episode from active life to literature did not intoxicate or mislead him. He knew that his real element was not in the field of letters, but in the world of men. Not undervaluing the noble destinies of the author, he felt that those destinies, if realized to the utmost, demanded powers other than his own, and that man is only true to his genius when the genius is at home in his career. He would not renounce for a brief celebrity distant and solid fame. He continued for a few years in patience and privation and confident self-reliance to drudge on, till the occupation for the intellect fed by restraint, and the learning accumulated by study, came and found the whole man developed and

prepared. Then he rose rapidly from step to step; then, still retaining his high enthusiasm, he enlarged his sphere of action from the cold practice of law into those vast social improvements which law, rightly regarded, should lead and vivify and create. Then, and long before the twenty years he had imposed on his probation had expired, he gazed again upon the senate and the abbey, and saw the doors of the one open to his resolute tread, and anticipated the glorious sepulchre which heart and brain should win him in the other. John Ardworth has never married. When Percival rebukes him for his celibacy, his lip quivers slightly, and he applies himself with more dogged earnestness to his studies or his career. But he never complains that his lot is lonely or his affections void. For him who aspires, and for him who loves, life may lead through the thorns, but it never stops in the desert.

On the minor personages involved in this history, there is little need to dwell. Mr. Fielden, thanks to St. John, has obtained a much better living in the rectory of Laughton, but has found new sources of pleasant trouble for himself in seeking to drill into the mind of Percival's eldest son the elements of Euclid, and the principles of Latin syntax.

We may feel satisfied that the Miverses will go on much the same while trade enriches without refining, and while, nevertheless, right feelings in the common paths of duty may unite charitable emotions with graceless language.

We may rest assured that the poor widow who had reared the lost son of Lucretia received from the bounty of Percival all that could comfort her for his death.

We have no need to track the dull crimes of Martha, or the quick, cunning vices of Grabman, to their inevitable goals, in the hospital or the prison, the dunghill or the gibbet.

Of the elder Ardworth our parting notice may be less brief. We first saw him in sanguine and generous youth, with higher principles and clearer insight into honour than William Mainwaring. We have seen him next a spendthrift and a fugitive, his principles debased and his honour dimmed. He presents to us no uncommon example of the corruption engendered by that vulgar self-indulgence which mortgages the morrow for the pleasures of to-day. No Deity presides where Prudence is absent. Man, a world in himself, requires for the development of his faculties patience, and for the balance of his actions, order. Even where he had deemed himself most oppressively made the martyr,—namely, in the profession of mere political opinions,—Walter Ardworth had but followed out into theory the restless, uncalculating impatience which had brought adversity on his manhood, and, despite his constitutional cheerfulness, shadowed his age with remorse. The death of the child committed to his charge long (perhaps to the last) embittered his pride in the son whom, without merit of his own, Providence had spared to a brighter fate. But for the faults which had banished him his country, and the habits which had seared his sense of duty, could that child have been so abandoned, and have so perished?

It remains only to cast our glance over the punishments which befell the sensual villany of Varney, the intellectual corruption of his fell stepmother.

These two persons had made a very trade of those crimes to which man's law awards death. They had said in their hearts that they would dare the

crime, but elude the penalty. By wonderful subtlety, craft, and dexterity, which reduced guilt to a science, Providence seemed, as in disdain of the vulgar instruments of common retribution, to concede to them that which they had schemed for,—escape from the rope and gibbet. Varney, saved from detection of his darker and more inexpiable crimes, punished only for the least one, retained what had seemed to him the master boon,—life. Safer still from the law, no mortal eye had plumbed the profound night of Lucretia's awful guilt. Murderess of husband and son, the blinded law bade her go unscathed, unsuspected. Direct, as from heaven, without a cloud, fell the thunderbolt. Is the life they have saved worth the prizing? Doth the chalice, unspilt on the ground, not return to the hand? Is the sudden pang of the hangman more fearful than the doom which they breathe and bear? Look, and judge.

Behold that dark ship on the waters! Its burdens are not of Ormus and Tyre. No goodly merchandise doth it waft over the wave, no blessing cleaves to its sails; freighted with terror and with guilt, with remorse and despair, or, more ghastly than either, the sullen apathy of souls hardened into stone, it carries the dregs and offal of the old world to populate the new. On a bench in that ship sit side by side two men, companions assigned to each other. Pale, abject, cowering, all the bravery rent from his garb, all the gay insolence vanished from his brow,—can that hollow-eyed, haggard wretch be the same man whose senses opened on every joy, whose nerves mocked at every peril? But beside him, with a grin of vile glee on his features, all muscle and brawn in the form, all malice, at once spiteful and dull, in the heavy eye, sits his fit comrade, the Gravestealer! At the first glance each had recognized each, and the prophecy and the vision rushed back upon the daintier convict. If he seek to escape from him, the Gravestealer claims him as a prey; he threatens him with his eye as a slave; he kicks him with his hoof as they sit, and laughs at the writhings of the pain. Carry on your gaze from the ship, hear the cry from the masthead, see the land arise from the waste,—a land without hope. At first, despite the rigour of the Home Office, the education and intelligence of Varney have their price,—the sole crime for which he is convicted is not of the darkest. He escapes from that hideous comrade; he can teach as a schoolmaster,—let his brain work, not his hands. But the most irredeemable of convicts are ever those of nurture and birth and culture better than the ruffian rest. You may enlighten the clod, but the meteor still must feed on the marsh; and the pride and the vanity work where the crime itself seems to lose its occasion. Ever avid, ever grasping, he falls, step by step, in the foul sink, and the colony sees in Gabriel Varney its most pestilent rogue. Arch-convict amidst convicts, doubly lost amongst the damned, they banish him to the sternest of the penal settlements; they send him forth with the vilest to break stones upon the roads. Shrivelled and bowed and old prematurely, see that sharp face peering forth amongst that gang, scarcely human, see him cringe to the lash of the scornful overseer, see the pairs chained together, night and day! Ho, ho! his comrade hath found him again,—the Artist and the Gravestealer leashed together! Conceive that fancy so nurtured by habit, those tastes, so womanized by indulgence,—the one suggesting the very horrors that are not; the other revolting at all toil as a torture.

But intellect, not all gone, though hourly dying heavily down to the level of the brute, yet schemes for delivery and escape. Let the plot ripen, and the heart bound; break his chain, set him free, send him forth to the wilderness. Hark, the whoop of the wild men! See those things that ape our species dance and gibber round the famishing, hunted wretch. Hark, how he shrieks at the torture! How they tear and they pinch and

they burn and they rend him! They, too, spare his life,--it is charmed. A Caliban amidst Calibans, they heap him with their burdens, and feed him on their offal. Let him live; he loved life for himself; he has cheated the gibbet,--LET HIM LIVE! Let him watch, let him once more escape; all naked and mangled, let him wander back to the huts of his gang. Lo, where he kneels, the foul tears streaming down, and cries aloud: "I have broken all your laws, I will tell you all my crimes; I ask but one sentence,--hang me up; let me die!" And from the gang groan many voices: "Hang us up; let us die!" The overseer turns on his heel, and Gabriel Varney again is chained to the laughing Gravestealer.

You enter those gates so jealously guarded, you pass, with a quick beat of the heart, by those groups on the lawn, though they are harmless; you follow your guide through those passages; where the open doors will permit, you see the emperor brandish his sceptre of straw, hear the speculator counting his millions, sigh where the maiden sits smiling the return of her shipwrecked lover, or gravely shake the head and hurry on where the fanatic raves his Apocalypse, and reigns in judgment on the world; you pass by strong gates into corridors gloomier and more remote. Nearer and nearer you hear the yell and the oath and blaspheming curse; you are in the heart of the madhouse, where they chain those at once cureless and dangerous,--who have but sense enough left them to smite and to throttle and to murder. Your guide opens that door, massive as a wall; you see (as we, who narrate, have seen her) Lucretia Dalibard,--a grisly, squalid, ferocious mockery of a human being, more appalling and more fallen than Dante ever fabled in his spectres, than Swift ever scoffed in his Yahoos! Only, where all other feature seems to have lost its stamp of humanity, still burns with unquenchable fever the red, devouring eye. That eye never seems to sleep, or in sleep, the lid never closes over it. As you shrink from its light, it seems to you as if the mind, that had lost coherence and harmony, still retained latent and incommunicable consciousness as its curse. For days, for weeks, that awful maniac will preserve obstinate, unbroken silence; but as the eye never closes, so the hands never rest,--they open and grasp, as if at some palpable object on which they close, vicelike, as a bird's talons on its prey; sometimes they wander over that brow, where the furrows seem torn as the thunder scars, as if to wipe from it a stain, or charm from it a pang; sometimes they gather up the hem of that sordid robe, and seem, for hours together, striving to rub from it a soil. Then, out from prolonged silence, without cause or warning, will ring, peal after peal (till the frame, exhausted with the effort sinks senseless into stupor), the frightful laugh. But speech, intelligible and coherent, those lips rarely yield. There are times, indeed, when the attendants are persuaded that her mind in part returns to her; and those times experience has taught them to watch with peculiar caution. The crisis evinces itself by a change in the manner,--by a quick apprehension of all that is said; by a straining, anxious look at the dismal walls; by a soft, fawning docility; by murmured complaints of the chains that fetter; and (though, as we have said, but very rarely) by prayers, that seem rational, for greater ease and freedom.

In the earlier time of her dread captivity, perhaps when it was believed at the asylum that she was a patient of condition, with friends who cared for her state, and would liberally reward her cure, they in those moments relaxed her confinement, and sought the gentler remedies their art employs; but then invariably, and, it was said, with a cunning that surpassed all the proverbial astuteness of the mad, she turned this indulgence to the most deadly uses,--she crept to the pallet of some adjacent sufferer weaker than herself, and the shrieks that brought the

attendants into the cell scarcely saved the intended victim from her hands. It seemed, in those imperfectly lucid intervals, as if the reason only returned to guide her to destroy,--only to animate the broken mechanism into the beast of prey.

Years have now passed since her entrance within those walls. He who placed her there never had returned. He had given a false name,--no clew to him was obtained; the gold he had left was but the quarter's pay. When Varney had been first apprehended, Percival requested the younger Ardworth to seek the forger in prison, and to question him as to Madame Dalibard; but Varney was then so apprehensive that, even if still insane, her very ravings might betray his share in her crimes, or still more, if she recovered, that the remembrance of her son's murder would awaken the repentance and the confession of crushed despair, that the wretch had judged it wiser to say that his accomplice was no more,--that her insanity had already terminated in death. The place of her confinement thus continued a secret locked in his own breast. Egotist to the last, she was henceforth dead to him,--why not to the world? Thus the partner of her crimes had cut off her sole resource, in the compassion of her unconscious kindred; thus the gates of the living world were shut to her evermore. Still, in a kind of compassion, or as an object of experiment,--as a subject to be dealt with unscrupulously in that living dissection-hall,--her grim jailers did not grudge her an asylum. But, year after year, the attendance was more slovenly, the treatment more harsh; and strange to say, while the features were scarcely recognizable, while the form underwent all the change which the shape suffers when mind deserts it, that prodigious vitality which belonged to the temperament still survived. No signs of decay are yet visible. Death, as if spurning the carcass, stands inexorably afar off. Baffler of man's law, thou, too, hast escaped with life! Not for thee is the sentence, "Blood for blood!" Thou livest, thou mayst pass the extremest boundaries of age. Live on, to wipe the blood from thy robe,--LIVE ON!

Not for the coarse object of creating an idle terror, not for the shock upon the nerves and the thrill of the grosser interest which the narrative of crime creates, has this book been compiled from the facts and materials afforded to the author. When the great German poet describes, in not the least noble of his lyrics, the sudden apparition of some "Monster Fate" in the circles of careless Joy, he assigns to him who teaches the world, through parable or song, the right to invoke the spectre. It is well to be awakened at times from the easy commonplace that surrounds our habitual life; to cast broad and steady and patient light on the darker secrets of the heart,--on the vaults and caverns of the social state over which we build the market-place and the palace. We recover from the dread and the awe and the half-incredulous wonder, to set closer watch upon our inner and hidden selves. In him who cultivates only the reason, and suffers the heart and the spirit to lie waste and dead, who schemes and constructs, and revolves round the axle of self, unwarmed by the affections, unpoised by the attraction of right, lies the germ Fate might ripen into the guilt of Olivier Dalibard. Let him who but lives through the senses, spreads the wings of the fancy in the gaudy glare of enjoyment corrupted, avid to seize, and impatient to toil, whose faculties are curbed but to the range of physical perception, whose very courage is but the strength of the nerves, who develops but the animal as he stifles the man,--let him gaze on the villany of Varney, and startle to see some magnified shadow of himself thrown dimly on the glass! Let those who, with powers to command and passions to wing the powers, would sweep without scruple from the aim to the end, who, trampling beneath their footprint of iron the humanities that bloom up in their path, would

march to success with the proud stride of the destroyer, hear, in the laugh of yon maniac murderess, the glee of the fiend they have wooed to their own souls! Guard well, O Heir of Eternity, the portal of sin,--the thought! From the thought to the deed, the subtler thy brain and the bolder thy courage, the briefer and straighter is the way. Read these pages in disdain of self-commune,--they shall revolt thee, not instruct; read them, looking steadfastly within,--and how humble soever the art of the narrator, the facts he narrates, like all history, shall teach by example. Every human act, good or ill, is an angel to guide or to warn; and the deeds of the worst have messages from Heaven to the listening hearts of the best. Amidst the glens in the Apennine, in the lone wastes of Calabria, the sign of the cross marks the spot where a deed of violence has been done; on all that pass by the road, the symbol has varying effect: sometimes it startles the conscience, sometimes it invokes the devotion; the robber drops the blade, the priest counts the rosary. So is it with the record of crime; and in the witness of Guilt, Man is thrilled with the whisper of Religion.

Our acts our angels are, or good or ill,
The fatal shadows that walk by us still.
FLETCHER.

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