CLARA VAUGHAN, VOLUME III (OF III)

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Author: R. D. Blackmore

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Cover

CLARA VAUGHAN

A NOVEL

IN THREE VOLUMES
VOL III.
R. D. Blackmore

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CLARA VAUGHAN

BOOK IV. (*continued*).

CHAPTER X.
STORY OF EDGAR VAUGHAN.

Child Clara, for your own dear sake, as well as mine and my sweet love's, I will not dwell on that tempestuous time. If you cannot comprehend it without words, no words will enable you. If you can, and I fear you do, no more words are wanted; and, as an old man weary of the world, I know not whether to envy

or to pity you.

Hither and thither I was flung, to the zenith star of ecstasy or the nadir gulf of agony, according as my idol pet chose to smile or frown. Though she was no silly child, but a girl of mind and feeling, she had a store, I must confess, of clouds as well as dazzling sunlight in the empyrean of her eyes. Her nature, like my love, was full of Southern passion. It is like the air they breathe, the beauty they behold. One minute of such love compresses in a thunder flood all the slow emotions stealing through the drought-scrimped channel, where we dredge for gold deposits, through ten years of Saxon courtship. Instead of Lily-bloom, she should have been called the Passion-flower.

My life, my soul–how weak our English words are–she loved me from the first, I can take my oath she did, although her glory was too great for her to own it yet, though now and then her marvellous eyes proved traitors. Sometimes when she was racking me most, feigning even, with those eyes cast down, her pellucid fingers point to point, and her little foot tapping the orchid bloom, feigning, I say, in cold blood, to reckon her noble lovers–long names all and horribly hateful to me–suddenly, while I trembled, and scowled like a true-born Briton, suddenly up would leap the silky drooping lashes, and a spring of soft electric light would flutter through them to the very core of my heart.

As for me, I abandoned myself. I made no pretence of waiting a moment. I flung my heart wide open to her, and if she would not come in, desert it should be for ever.

She did come. That life-blood of my soul came in, and would and could live nowhere else for ever.

It was done like this. One August evening, when the sun was sinking, and the air was full of warmth and wooing sounds, the cicale waking from his early nap, the muffro leaping for the first dew-drop, the love-birds whispering in the tamarind leaves, Fiordalisa sat with me, under a giant cork-tree on the western slope. The tower was still in Vendetta siege, and the grave and reverend Signor knew better than to come out, when the Sbirri were gone to the town. Lily-bloom was sitting by me in a mass of flowers; her light mandile was laid by, that her glorious hair might catch the first waft of the evening breeze. All down her snow-white shoulders fell the labyrinth of tresses, twined by me with red Tacsonia, and two pale carnations. Her form was pillowed in rich fern, that feathered round her waist; of all the fronds and plumes and stems, not one so taper, light, and rich as that. The bloom upon her cheeks was deepened by my playing with her hair, and her soft large eyes were beaming with delicious wonder.

We knew, as well as He who made us, that we loved one another. None who did not love for ever could interchange such looks. Suddenly, and without a word, in an ecstasy of admiration, I passed my left arm round her little waist, drew

her close to me–she was very near before–and looking full into her wondrous eyes, found no protest but a thrill of light; then tried her lips and met her whole heart there. Darling, how she kissed me! No English girl can do it. And then the terror of her maiden thoughts. The recollection of her high-born pride, and higher because God-born innocence. How she wept, and blushed, and trembled; trembled, blushed, and wept again; and then vouchsafed one more entrancing kiss, to atone for the unwitting treason. Even thus I would not be content. I wanted words as well.

"Do you love me, my own Lily, with every atom of your heart?"

"I have not left one drop of blood for all the world besides."

And it was true. And so it was with me. I told her father that same night. And now in the heaven of gladness and wild pleasure, beyond all dreams of earth, opened the hell of my wickedness and crime; which but for mercy and long repentance would sever me from my Lily in the world to come. To some the crime may seem a light one, to me it is a most atrocious sin, enhanced tenfold by its awful consequences.

By my crime, I do not mean my sinful adoration, as cold men may call it, of a fellow mortal. Nature has no time to waste, and unless she meant my Lily to be worshipped, she would not have lavished all her skill in making her so divine. No, I mean my black deceit, in passing for my brother. Oh, Clara, don't go from me.

Like many another ruinous sin, it was committed without thought, or rather without deliberation. No scheme was laid, not even the least intention cherished; but the moment brought it, and the temptation was too great. Who could have that loving pet gazing at him so, and not sell his soul almost to win her to his arms?

Laurence Daldy was a lazy ass. I do not want to shift my blame to him, but merely state a fact. If he had not been a lazy ass, your father would be living now–ay, and my Fiordalisa. When he chose, he could write very good Italian, and a clear, round hand, and oh, rare accomplishment for an officer, he could even spell. But his letter to Signor Dezio, scrawled betwixt two games of pool, was a perfect magpie's nest of careless zigzag, wattles, and sand slap-dash. In those days a hasty writer used to flick his work with sand, which stanched but did not dry the ink. The result was often a grimy dabble, like a child's face blotched with blackberries.

Lily and I had quite arranged how we should present ourselves. Like two children we rehearsed it under the twilight trees. "And then, you know," my sweet love whispered, "I shall give you a regular kiss beneath the dear father's beard, and you will see what an effect it will have. Thence he will learn, oh sweetest mine, that there is no help for it; because we Corsican girls are so chary of our

lips."

"Are you indeed, my beautiful Lily? I must teach you liberality, to me, and to me alone."

"Sweetest mine," she always called me from the moment she confessed her love; and so, no doubt, she is calling me now in heaven.

The curtain hung in heavy folds across the narrow doorway of the long dark room. The hospitable board was gay with wine and dainty fruit, melons, figs, and peaches, plums of golden and purple hue, pomegranates, pomi d'oro, green almonds, apricots, and muscatels from the ladders of Cape Corso. Through them and upon them played the mellow light from a single lamp, with dancing lustres round it. All the rest of the room was dark. At the head of the table sat Signor Dezio Della Croce, waiting for his guest and daughter. Posted high at the end window on a ledge of rough-hewn board, stood the ancient warder, who had lived for fifty years among them, and whose great fusil commanded the only approach to the castle.

As we entered timidly, the maiden's right hand on my neck, my left arm round her ductile waist, our other hands clasped firmly, I glanced toward that noxious sentinel.

"Never mind him, sweetest mine. Don't believe that he is there. Grandpapa, I call him, and he knows all my secrets."

Signor Dezio looked amazed, as we glided towards him. His life had been one series of crushing blows from heaven. Three brave sons had been barbarously murdered in Vendetta, and his graceful loving wife had broken her heart and died. The sole hope of his house, his petling Fiordalisa, though she called herself a woman and was full sixteen, he looked upon her still in his trouble-torn chronology, as only ripe enough to be dandled on his lap. Still he called her his "Ninnina," and sang nannas to her, as he had been obliged to do after her mother's death.

As he sat there, too astonished to smile, or frown, or say a word, Lily dropped upon her knees before him, as a Grecian maiden would. We English are not supple-jointed; but for Lily's sake, I could not stand beside her. Then she placed her soft right hand in the centre of my hard palm, flung the other arm round my neck, and with her eyes upon her father's, gave me a long affectionate kiss. This done, she drew her father's head down, and kissed his snow-white beard. Now, she told me, after this, any father who is obdurate, must according to institution blame himself and no one else, if harm befall the maiden.

All this time, I spoke not, and thought of nothing except to screen my Lily. Signor Dezio kept a stately silence, but the tears were in his eyes, and the long white beard was quivering. Lily bent her head, and waited for his words.

"Mother of God! My little child, what are you thinking of?"

"Only thinking of being married, father."

"And set another Vendetta afoot, and be killed yourself! Signor"–turning haughtily to me–"this lady is betrothed, from her early infancy, to her cousin Lepardo Della Croce."

"Oh, I hate him," cried Fiordalisa, clasping her hands piteously. "Ah, Madonna, I hate him so; and thank our Lady, no one has seen him for six years. He is dead no doubt in some Cannibal Island. Saints of mercy, keep him. I saw it in the Spalla, in the Shepherd's Spalla, and I saw my own love there, the eve before he came."

"Grace of Holy Mary! Who read the Spalla for you?"

"The hoary goatherd from Ghidazzo." And up sprang Fiordalisa, flew to an inner room, and fetched from the dark niche in the wall the box of holy relics. With these she knelt before her father, and placed her right hand on the box.

"My child, it is not needful. I believe you without an oath. Never yet have you passed the boundary of truth."

The old chief bowed his head in thought. He had lost his last surviving son by neglecting the Spalla's decree. The Spalla is the shoulder blade of a goat, polished, and used for divination; upon it had been read Sampiero's death, and the destiny of Napoleon. The old man who had forecast the latter was still alive, and of immense renown, and traversed the island now like an ancient prophet. He was the hoary goatherd of Ghidazzo.

Lily saw that she was conquering; she leaped upon her father's knee and hugged him; and her triumph was complete. While she wept upon his breast, and told him all her little tale, and whispered in his ear, and while he kissed, and comforted her, and thought of her dear mother, I rushed out and leaped the Vinea, and wept beneath the olive-trees.

At last the old man rose and called me, he durst not venture from the door; but he did what was far better, he sent my own love after me. At length when we returned, and we found cause not to hurry,–

"Signor Vogheno," he began, "I have observed you well. I am a man of very keen observation"–Lily's eyes gave me a twinkle full of fun–"or I should not be alive this moment. I have observed you, sir, and I approve your character. I cannot say as much, sir, of all the Englishmen I have been privileged to meet. There is about them very much of the nature of a dog. Forgive me, sir; pray interrupt me not. I only judge by what I have seen. God forbid that I should say so to you, while you were my guest. Now you are one of my family, and entitled to the result of my observations. Of the little island itself I know nothing at all, though I am informed that its institutions are of a barbarous character."

"Vendetta for instance," was on my lips, but Lily's glance just saved it. And I thought of his three brave sons.

”But, Signor beloved, you are different from them; indeed you have the nobility of the Corsican nature. And what is most of all, my little child has fixed her heart upon you. But she is very young, sir, quite a child you see.” I saw nothing of the sort, but a blooming maiden figure, growing lovelier every day. Poor Lily dropped her long eyelashes, and smiled through a glowing blush. So blushed Lavinia under the eyes of Turnus.

”This darling child is now the heiress to these lands of mine. And if her cousin Lepardo, whose death she has seen on the Spalla, be indeed removed from us, she is the very last of all the Della Croce. I cannot easily read the billet of your brother. He does not write good Corsican of our side of the mountains, but some outlandish Tuscan. There is something first which I cannot well decipher, and then I see your name Signor Valentine Vogheno, and that you are the lord of very large estates, in some district called Gloisterio?” He looked at me inquiringly.

Instead of explaining that I was only the brother of the great Signor Valentino, I bowed, alas I bowed with a hot flush on my cheeks. What could it matter, and why should I interrupt him, if he chose to deceive himself? Lily charmed away all hesitation, by clapping her little hands, and crying, ”Sweetest mine, I am so glad.”

”Then, upon two conditions I will give you my daughter. The first, that you leave this island, and do not see our Lily, write to, or even hear from her, for a period of six months. If she has not outgrown her love, she will then be almost old enough to wed. I mean, of course, if Lepardo does not appear. The other condition is that you shall promise on the holy relics, and you as well, my flower, never to part with these old estates, but keep them for Lily while she lives, and transmit them to her second child.”

A load of terror was off my heart–I thought he was going to bind me to the accursed Vendetta. Even for my Lily, I could hardly have taken that pledge. So I assented readily to the last stipulation, though it was based upon a virtual lie of mine. But with Lily’s eyes upon me, brimming as they were with tears at the first condition, and her round arms trembling to enfold me, could I stick at anything short of downright murder? The first proviso I fought against in vain. Even Lily coaxed and cried, without any good effect.

When at last we yielded to the stern decree, the venerable father, as we knelt before him, joined our hands together, and poured a blessing on us, which I did not lack. He had given me my blessing.

After this we sat down to supper, and the trusty musketeer, who had watched the whole scene grimly, and without hearing all, knew what the result was, he, I say, upon his perch began to improvise, or haply to adapt, and sing to a childish air, some little verses upon the glad occasion. Having exhausted his stock, down he leaped without permission, and drank our health in a bumper of

Luri wine.

Lily was now in due course of promotion. No longer was she the handmaid, whose eyes created and rejoiced in countless mistakes of mine. Now she was sitting by my side, as she had good right to be, and was lost in pretty raptures at my gallant attentions. They were very nice, she owned, but thoroughly un-Corsican. How I wished her father and the old fusileer away!

CHAPTER XI.

"Six long months to be away from Lily! And perhaps forget her, and find some lovelier maiden."

"By Lily's side, all maids are burdocks. And yet what if I do?"

She showed a small stiletto toy with a cross upon the handle, and ground her pearly teeth together.

"Will it be for me, or her?"

"Both; and Lily afterwards."

"Oh you wholesale little murderer! Three great kisses directly, one for every murder."

"Only if you promise, on the relics, never to look twice at a pretty maiden."

And so we spent the precious time,–ten days allowed me to prepare my yacht–in talking utter nonsense, and conning fifty foolish schemes, to make us seem together. I was for departing at once, that the period might begin to run; but Lily was for keeping me to the last possible moment, and of course she had her way. It was fixed that I should sail on the 10th day of September. My little boat, now called the "Lily flower," was brought from Calvi, and moored in a secluded cove, where my love could see it from her bedroom window. It was no longer Corsican law that I should live in the castle. The privileges of a guest were gone; and the rigorous code of suitorship began. But to me and my own darling it made very little difference. I never left Vendetta tower, as I lightly named it, until my pet was ordered off to bed; and every morn I climbed the heights, after a long swim in the sapphire ripple, and met my own sweet Lily sparkling from the dew of her early toilet. How she loved me, how I loved her; which more than other let angels say; for we could not decide. That ancient Corsican her father, albeit little versed in books, was as upright and downright a gentleman as ever knew when his presence was not required. Therefore he took my word of honour for

his Lily's safety; and left her to her own sweet will; and her sweet will was to spend with me all her waking hours. For her as yet there was no fear of the blood-avenger. According to their etiquette they cannot shoot the daughter, until they have shot the father. As to the sons the restriction does not hold. The feud we were concerned in had lasted now 120 years, and cost the lives of 130 people. It lay between the ancient races of Della Croce, and De Gentili, and owed its origin to the discovery of a dead mule on the road to church. The question was which family should be exterminated first. For many years the house of Della Croce had been in the ascendant, having produced a long succession of good shots and clever bushmen. At one time all the hopes of the De Gentili hung upon one infant life, which was not thought worth the taking. Fatal error–that one life had proved a mighty trump. One after one the Della Croce fell before that original artist, who invented a patent method of trunking himself in olive bark and firing from a knot-hole. Many a story Lily told me of his devilish wiles; and in those stories I rejoiced, because she clung around my neck, and trembled so that I must hold her. Happily now this olive-branch was dead, having received his death-wound while he administered one to Lily's youngest brother. Ever since that, the feud had languished, and strict etiquette required that the Della Croce should perpetrate the next murder. But her father, said my Lily, with her sweet head on my breast and her soft eyes full of fire, her father did not seem to care even to shoot the cousin of the man who had shot her brothers.

Darling Lily, my blood runs cold, even with your beauty in my arms, to hear you talk of murder so. Own pet, I shall change you. You heaven meant for love, and softness, and delight: human devilry has tainted even you. It was not an easy task to change her. Of all human passions revenge is far the strongest. Clara, how your eyes flash. You ought to have been a Corsican. It was not an easy task; but love loves difficulties. In my ten short days of delicious wretchedness, almost I taught Fiordalisa to despise revenge. And what do you think availed me most? Not the Bible. No, her mind and soul were swathed by Popery in the rags of too many saints. What helped me most, and the only thing that helped me at all, except caresses, was the broad and free expanse of the ever changing sea. Her nature was all poetry, her throbbing breast an Idyl. Upon my little quarter-deck I had a cushioned niche for her, and there we sat and steered ourselves while the sailors slept below. Alone upon the crystal world, pledged for life or death together, drinking deepest draughts of passion and thirsting still for more, what cared we for petty hatreds, we whose all in all was love? How she listened as I spoke, how her large eyes grew enlarged.

At last those eyes, pure wells of love, were troubled with hot tears. The fatal day was come. Tokens we had interchanged, myriad vows, and countless pledges, which even love could scarce remember. With all the passion of her race,

and all the fervour of the clime, she bared her beautiful round arm, the part that lay most near the heart and touched it with the keen stiletto, then she threw her breast on mine, and I laid the crimsoned ivory on my lips. How the devil–excuse me, Clara–how the devil I got away, only phlegmatic Englishmen can tell. No Frenchman, or Italian, would have left that heavenly darling so. We put it off to the last moment, till it was quite dangerous to pass the rocky jaws. As my bad luck would have it, there was a purpling sunset breeze. My own love on the furthest point, her white feet in the water, growing smaller and smaller yet, and standing upon tiptoe to be seen for another yard; my own darling love of ages, she loosed her black hair down her snowy vest, for me to know her from the rocks behind; then she waved and waved her sweet palm hat, fragrant of my Lily,–I had kissed every single inch of it,–until she thought I could not see her; and then, as my telescope showed me, back she fell upon a ledge of rocks, and I could see or fancy her delicious bosom heaving to the fury of her tears. We glided past the cavern mouth, and the silver beach beyond it, whence we had often watched the sunset; and then a beetling crag took from me the last view of Lily.

However long the schoolboy may have bled from some big coward's bullying, or the sway of the rustling birch and the bosky thrill that follows, however sore he may have wept while hung head-downwards through the midnight hours, with a tallow candle between his teeth, or in the pang of nouns heteroclite and brachycatalectic dinners; yet despite these minor ills, his fond heart turns through after life to the scene of foot-ball and I-spy, to the days when he could jump or eat any mortal thing. And so it is with bygone love. Even the times of separation or of bitter quarrel, the aching heart whereon the keepsake lies, the spasms of jealousy, the tenterhooks of doubt; remembrance looks upon them all as treasures of a golden age.

Over the darkening sea, we bore away for Sardinia. Hours and hours, I gazed upon the cushions, where my own pet darling used to lean and love me. To me they were fairer than all the stars, or the phosphorescent sea. From time to time our Corsican pilot kept himself awake, by chanting to strangely mournful airs some of the voceros or dirges, the burden of many ages in that lamenting land. Fit home for Rachel, Niobe, or Cassandra, where half a million gallant beings, twice the number of the present population, have fallen victims to the blood-revenge. So Corsican historians tell; a thousand violent deaths each year, for the last five centuries. Sometimes the avenger waits for half a lifetime, lurking till his moment comes. Before his victim has ceased to quiver, or the shot to ring down the rocky pass, he is off for the bush or the mountains, and leads thenceforth a bandit's life.

They tell me, Clara, that things are better now, and this black stain on a

chivalrous race is being purged by Christian civilization. Be it as it may, I love the island of my Lily still; and hope, please God, to see it once more, before I go to her.

Banished though I was, for the present, from the only place I cared for, it seemed still greater severance to go further than I could help. Therefore instead of returning to England, I spent the winter in cruising along the western coast of Italy, and the south of Spain; and coasted back to Genoa. To Seville, and other places famed for beautiful women, I made especial trips, to search for any fit to compare with my own maiden. Of course I knew none could be found; but it gave me some employment, and bitter pleasure, to observe how inferior were all. To my eyes, bright with one sweet image, no other form had grace enough to be fit pillow for my charmer's foot. How I longed and yearned for some fresh token of her: all her little gifts I carried ever in my bosom, but never let another's eyes rest one moment on them. Not even would I tell my friends one word about my love; it seemed as if it would grow common by being talked about. To Peter Green I wrote, resigning my commission, although I did not tell him that I had found the olives. No, friend Peter, those olives are much too near my Lily; and I won't have you or any other stranger there. I know she would not look at you; still I would rather have you a thousand miles away. Free trade, if you like, when I have made my fortune; which by the bye is somewhat the maxim of that school. My fortune, not in olives, oil, or even guineas–all that rubbish you are welcome to–but my fortune where my heart and soul are all invested, and now, no more my fortune, but my certain fate in Lily.

At length and at last my calendar–like a homesick pair at school, we had made one for each other, thanking God that it was not a leap-year–my calendar so often counted, so punctually erased, began to yield and totter to the stubborn sap of time. My patience long ago had yielded, my blood was in a fever. Another thing began to yield, alas it was my money. Green, Vowler, and Green had behaved most liberally; but of course the expenses of my vessel had been heavy on me; and now my salary had ceased. Peter Green wrote to me in the kindest and most handsome manner, pressing me, if tired (as he concluded) of those murderous Corsicans, to accept another engagement in Sardinia. Even without imparting my last discovery, I had done good service to the firm. I smiled at the idea of my being weary of Corsicans: even now the mere word sends a warm tide to my heart.

It was not for the beauty of the scene, or the works of art, that I remained in Genoa; but because it was the likeliest place to see the Negro's head. As we lay at the end of the mole, my glass commanded all that entered; and every lugger or xebec that bore the sacred emblem–off my little dingy pushed from our raking stern, and with one man, now my friend because a thorough Corsican, I boarded

her, at all hazards of imprisonment; and craved for tidings of the sacred land. Although, of course, I would not show the nest of all my thoughts, yet by beating about the bush, I got some scraps of news. The great Signor was flourishing, and had harvested an enormous crop of olives: his lovely daughter, now becoming the glory of the island, had been ill of something like marsh-fever, but was now as blooming as the roses. They did say, but the captain could not at all believe it, that she had been betrothed to some foreign olive-merchant. What disgrace! The highest blood and the sweetest maid in Corsica, to be betrayed to an oilman! Plenty of other news I gathered–the good people are great gossips–but this was all I cared for. Meanwhile your father, Clara dear, replied most warmly to my letter, sending me a sum on loan, which quite relieved me from cheese-paring. And now the wind was in the north, and it was almost time to start for the arms of Lily. If I waited any longer, I should be too mad to bear the voyage. At the break of day we left the magnificent harbour, and the cold wind from the maritime Alps chilled all but the fire of love. Up and down the little deck, up and down all day and night; sleep I never would again, until I touched my Lily. On the evening of the 8th of March, we were near Cape Corso; next day we coasted down the west to the lively breeze of spring, and so upon the 9th we moored to the tongue of Calvi. At midnight we were under way, and when the sun could reach the sea over the snowy peaks, we glided past the mountain crescent that looks on the Balagna. In the early morning still, when the dew was floating, we rounded the gray headland of Signor Dezio's cove, and I climbed along the bowsprit to glance beyond the corner.

What is that white dress I see fluttering at the water's edge? Whose is that red-striped mandile tossed on high and caught again? And there the flag-staff I erected, with my colours flying! Only one such shape on earth–only two such arms–out with the boat or I must swim, or run the yacht ashore. The boat has been towing alongside for the last six hours: Lily can't wait for the boat any more than I can. From rock to rock she is leaping; which is the nearest one? Into the water she runs, then away in blushing terror–she forgot all about the other men. But I know where to find her, she has dropped her little shoe, she must be in my grotto.

There I press her to my heart of hearts, trembling, weeping, laughing, all unable to get close enough to me.

"Sweetest mine, ten thousand times, I have been so wretched." Her voice is like a silver bell.

"My own, I am so glad to hear it. But how well you look!"

If she were lovely when I left her, what shall I call her now? There is not one atom of her but is pure perfection. I hold her from me for one moment, to take in all her beauties. She has a most delicious fragrance that steals upon my senses.

Toilet bottles she never heard of; what she has is nature's gift, and unperceived except by love. I have often told her of it, but she won't believe it. It is not your breath, you darling; your breath is only violets; it comes from every fibre of you, even from your hair; it is as when the wind has kissed a lily of the valley.

The ancient Signor being a man of very keen observation, did not delay our wedding any longer than could be helped. That evening we hauled down the family fusileer, gave him a goblet of wine, and sent him about his business: for one night we would take our chance even of Vendetta. At supper-time the Signor was in wonderful spirits, and drank our health with many praises of our constancy and obedience. One little fact he mentioned worth a thousand propinations; his daughter's fever had been cured by some chance news of me. He even went away to fetch a bottle of choicest Rogliano, when he saw how I was fidgetting to get my arm round Lily. Then after making his re-entrance, with due clumsiness at the door, he quite disgraced himself, while drawing the cork, by even winking at me, as he said abruptly,

"Fiordalisa, when would you like to be married?"

My Lily blushed, I must confess, but did not fence with the question.

"As soon as ever you please, papa. That is, if my love wishes it." But she would not look at me to ask. In the porch she whispered to me, that it was only from her terror of the bad Lepardo coming. Did the loving creature fancy that I would believe it?

Once more we sailed together over the amethyst sea; she was as fond of the water as a true-born Briton. In her thoughts and glances was infinite variety. None could ever guess the next thing she would say. Thoroughly I knew her heart, because I lived therein, and sweeter lodgings never man was blessed with. But of her mind she veiled as yet the maiden delicacies, strictly as she would the glowing riches of her figure. What amazed me more than all, was that while most Corsican girls are of the nut-brown order, no sun ever burned the snowy skin of Lily: she always looked so clear and clean, as if it were impossible for anything to stain her. Clara, you are always talking of your lovely Isola. I wonder where she got her name: it is no stranger to me. Something in your description of her reminds me of my Lily. I long to see the girl: and you must have some reason for so obstinately preventing me.

CHAPTER XII.

Though Lily and I were most desirous to keep things as quiet as possible, by this time our engagement was talked of in every house of the Balagna. That paternal fusileer and my merry yachtsmen, although they looked the other way whenever we approached, would not permit the flower of Corsica, as she was now proclaimed, to blush with me unseen. My sailors attended to her far more than to their business, and would have leaped into the water for one smile of Lily.

It is the fashion of the island to make a wedding jubilee; and the Signor was anxious to outdo all that had ever been done. We, absorbed in one another, did our best to disappoint him; but he scorned the notion of any private marriage. I never shall forget how he knit his silver brows when I made a last attempt to bring him to our views. "Signor Vogheno, to me you appear to forget whose daughter it is that loves you. Perhaps in your remote, but well regarded island maidens may be stolen before their fathers can look round. Indeed, I have heard that they leap over a broomstick. That is not the custom here. Fiordalisa Della Croce is my only child–the child of my old age; and not altogether one to be ashamed of. I can afford to be hospitable, and I mean to be so."

The Corsicans are a most excitable race, and, when affronted, seem to lash their sides as they talk. By the time the good Signor had finished his speech, every hair of his beard was curling with indignation. But his daughter sprang into his arms and kissed away the tempest, and promised, if it must be so, to make herself one mass of gold and coral. So the Parolanti, or mediators, were invoked; an armistice for a week was signed, and honour pledged on either side. Free and haughty was the step of the Signor Dezio as he set forth for the town to order everything he could see; and very wroth again he was, because I would not postpone the day for him to get a shipload of trumpery from Marseilles. This time I was resolved to have my way. Besides the fervour of my passion and my dread of accidents, the one thing of all others I detest is to be stared at anywhere. And it is far worse to be stared at by a foreign race. The Corsicans are gentlemen by nature, but they could not be expected to regard without some curiosity the lucky stranger who had won their Lily.

I will not weary you, as I myself was wearied, with all the ceremonies of the wedding-day. All I wanted was my bride, and she wanted none but me: yet we could not help being touched by the hearty good-will of the commune. The fame of Lily's beauty had spread even to Sardinia, and many a handsome woman came to measure her own thereby. Clever as they are at such things, not one of them could find a blemish or defect in Lily, and our fair Balagnese told them to go home and break their mirrors.

It was a sweet spring morning, and amid a fearful din of guns and trumpets, mandolins and fiddles, I waited with a nervous smile under the triumphal arch in front of my fictitious house. A sham house had been made of boards, and boughs,

and flowers, because it is most essential that the bride should be introduced to the bridegroom's dwelling. Here I was to receive the procession, which at last appeared. First came fifty well-armed youths, crowned with leaves and ribbons; then four-and-twenty maidens dressed alike, singing and scattering flowers, and then a boy of noble birth, mounted on a pony, and carrying the freno, symbol of many scions. None of them I looked at; only for my Lily. On a noble snow-white palfrey, decked from head to foot with flowers, her father walking at her side, came the bloom, the flower, the lily of them all, arrayed in clear white muslin, self-possessed, and smiling. One glorious wreath was round her head; it was her own black hair by her own sweet fingers twined with sprigs of myrtle. A sash, or fazoletto, of violet transparent crape, looped at the crown of her head, fell over the shy lift of her bosom, parting like a sunset cloud, where the boddice opened below the pear-like waist. To me she looked like a white coralline rising through an amethyst sea. Behind her came the authorities of the commune. The sham keys were already hanging at her slender zone. It was my place to lift her down and introduce her formally. This I did with excellent grace, feeling the weight of eyes upon me. But when I got her inside, I spoiled the folds of the fazoletto. I heard the old man shouting, "Who are ye gallant sons of the mountain, who have carried off my daughter? To me, indeed, ye seem to be brave and noble men, yet have ye taken her rather after the manner of bandits. Know ye not that she is the fairest flower that ever was reared in Corsica?"

"Yes, old fellow, I know that well enough; and that's the very reason why I have got her here." One more virgin kiss, and with Lily on my arm, forth I sally to respond.

"Friends we are, who claim some hospitality. We have plucked the fairest flower on all the strands of Corsica, and we bear her to the priest, fit offering for Madonna."

"Bide on, my noble friends; then come and enjoy my feast."

No more delay. The maids have got all they can do to keep in front of us with their flowers. The armed youths stand on either side at the entrance to the church. The tapers are already lit, the passage up the little church is strewed with flowering myrtle. Lily, holding her veil around her, walks hand in hand with me.

Fiordalisa Della Croce now is Lily Vaughan; amidst a world of shouting, shooting, and cornamusas, we are led to the banqueting-room; there they seat us in two chairs, and a fine fat baby is placed on Lily's lap, to remind her of her duties. She dandles it, and kisses it as if she understood the business, and then presents it with a cap of corals and gay ribbons. Now Lily Vaughan throws off her fazoletto, and gives me for a keepsake the myrtles in her hair. Then all who can claim kin with her, to the fortieth generation, hurry up and press her hand, and wish the good old wish. "Long life and growing pleasure, sons like him, and

daughters like yourself."

After the banquet, we were free to go, having first led off the ballo in the Cerca dance. Thank God, my Lily is at last my own; she falls upon my bosom weary and delighted. Clara, remember this: the little church in which we were married is called St. Katharine's on the cliff; and I signed the record in my proper name, Edgar Malins Vaughan: the Malins, very likely, they did not know from Valentine, for I always wrote it with a flourish at the end. The Signor, with all his friends, escorted us to the limits of his domain; there we bade them heartily farewell, and they returned to renew the feast. My little yacht was in the bay, and we saw the boat push off to fetch us as had been arranged. We were to sail for Girolata, where the Signor had a country-house, lonely enough even for two such lovers. Three or four hours would take us thither, and the sun was still in the heavens. As no one now could see us, Lily performed a little dance for my especial delight. How beaming she looked, how full of spirits, now all the worry was over. Then she tripped roguishly at my side to the winding rocky steps that lead to St. Katharine's cove. The cove was like a well scooped in the giant cliffs. As we descended the steep and narrow stairs, my Lily trembled on my arm. The house and all the merry-makers were out of sight and hearing. Of course we stopped every now and then, for the boat could not be at the landing yet, and we had much to tell each other.

As we stepped upon the beach, and under the eaves of a jutting rock, a tall man stood before us. His eyes and beard were black as jet, and he wore the loose dress of a Southern seaman. Three sailors, unmistakeably English, were smoking and playing cards in the corner shade of the cliff. Lily started violently, turned pale, and clung to me, but faced the intruder bravely. He was quite amazed at her beauty, I at his insolent gaze.

"Fiordalisa Della Croce," he said with a pure Tuscan accent, "behold me! I am come to claim you."

He actually laid his small, but muscular hand upon my Lily's shoulder. She leaped back as from a snake. I knew it must be Lepardo.

"Sir," I said, as calmly as I could, "oblige me by allowing my wife to pass."

The sneering, supercilious look which he hardly deigned to spare me, was honest, compared to his foul stare at her.

"Signor, she is too beautiful. I must have my rights. Come for her when I am tired, if any can tire of her."

And he thrust his filthy, hairy lips under my own pet's hat. My muscles leaped, and my soul was in the blow. Down he went like a flail, and I thought he was stunned for an hour; but while I was bearing my pet to the boat, which now was close to the beach, up he leaped, and rushed at me with a dagger–a dagger like one which you know. I did not see him, but Lily did over my shoulder; she

sprang from my arms and flung herself between us. He thrust her aside, and leaped at me like a panther, aiming straight at my heart. How he missed me I cannot tell, but think it was through Lily. Before he recovered, I closed with him, wrested away the weapon and flung it far into the sea. But one main thing I omitted; I ought to have stunned him thoroughly. Into the boat with Lily–I caught up an oar, and away we dashed. The three English sailors were running up. As a wave took the boat about, one of them grasped the stern; down on his knuckles crashed my oar, and with a curse he let go. All right, all clear, off for the yacht for your lives. I would show fight, for my blood is up, but what would become of Lily? And we are but three against four, and none of us have arms.

Meanwhile, that black Italian, I can never call him a Corsican, sneaked away to a tuft of sea-grass for his double-barrelled fusil. Bowing with all my might, I saw him examine the priming, lay his red cap on a rock, and the glistening gun on the cap, and, closing one eye, take steady aim, not at me, but at Lily. Poor Lily sat on the thwart at my side, faintly staring with terror. No time to think; oar and all I dashed in front of my darling. A ping in the air, a jar on my wrist, a slight blow on my breast, and at my feet dropped the bullet. It had passed through the tough ash handle. Down, Lily, down, for God's sake; he is firing the other barrel. I flung her down in the bilge water; the brute cannot see her now. Not quite so easily off. Up a steep rock he climbed like a cat, the cursed gun still in his hand. He won fifty feet of vantage, and commanded the whole of the boat. We were not eighty yards away. There he coolly levelled at my prostrate Lily. I had grey hairs next morning. Forward, I threw myself, over my wife; me he might kill if he chose. One lurch of the boat–a short sea was running–and my darling's head was shown. He saw his chance and fired. Thank God, he had too little powder in; my own love is untouched. The ball fell short of Lily, and passed through my left foot, in at the sole and out below the instep. Luckily I had retained my dancing shoes, or my thick boots would have kept the ball in my foot. The brute could not see that he had hit any one, and he cursed us in choice Italian.

Poor Lily had quite swooned away, and knew nothing of my wound. Over the side of the yacht I lifted her myself, standing upon one leg. No one else should touch her. So furious I was with that cold-blooded miscreant, that if I could only have walked, I would have returned to fight him. My men, too, were quite up for it. But when Lily came to herself, and threw her arms round me and wept, and thanked God and her saints, I found my foot quite soaked in a pool of blood, and stiffening. Poor little dear! what a fuss she did make about it! I would have borne ten times the pain for the smiles and tears she gave me. One thing was certain–under the mercy of God, we owed our lives to each other, and held them henceforth in common.

As, with a flowing sheet, we doubled the craggy point, concealed close under the rocks we saw a low and snake-like vessel, of the felucca build. She was banked for three pair of sweeps, and looked a thorough rover. This was, of course, Lepardo's boat. We now bore away for Ajaccio, dear Lily having implored me not to think of Girolata, where no medical aid could anyhow be procured. Moreover, she wanted to fly from that dark Lepardo; and I am quite willing to own that, despite my delicious nursing, I was not ambitious to stand as target again during our honeymoon.

CHAPTER XIII.

At first I thought a great deal more of the pain than the danger of my wound; but when I showed it to the French surgeon at Ajaccio, he surprised me by shrugging his shoulders formidably, and declaring that it was the good God if I kept my foot. Being of a somewhat sceptical turn, I thought at first that he only wanted to gild the frame of his work; but when I began to consider it, I found that he was quite right. The fact was, that I had thought much more of my bride than of my metatarsals. Two of these were splintered where the bullet passed between them, and it was a question whether it had not been poisoned. Many of the mountaineers are skilled in deadly drugs, and use them rarely for the bowl, not so rarely for the sword and gun.

At one time there were symptoms even of mortification, and my wife, who waited hand and foot upon me, joined the surgeon in imploring me to submit to amputation.

"Sweetest mine! do you suppose that I shall love you any the less because you walk on crutches, and all through your love of me? And what other difference can it make to either of us? I shall cry a great deal at first, for I love your little toe-nails more than I do my own eyes; but, darling, we shall get over it."

As she loved my toes so much, I resolved to keep them, if it was only for her sake; and, after a narrow crisis, my foot began to get better. To her care and tenderness I owed my recovery, far more than to the skill of the clever surgeon. Six months elapsed before I could walk again, and our little yacht was sent to Calvi to explain the long delay. Fond as I was of the "Lily-flower," I was anxious now to sell her; but my darling nurse, although she knew before our marriage that I was not a wealthy man, would not listen to the scheme at all; for the doctor

ordered me, as I grew stronger, to be constantly on the water.

"Not by any means, my own, will we sell our little love-boat. I should cry after it like a baby; and another thing, far more important, you can bear no motion except on board our *Lily*. Papa has got great heaps of money, and he never can refuse me anything when I coax in earnest."

Conscious as I was of my vile deceit, I would rather have died than apply to Signor Dezio, albeit I am quite sure that he would soon have forgiven me. So I wrote again to my good-natured brother and banker, and told him all that had happened, but begged him not to impart it even to your mother. I have strong reason for suspecting that he did not conceal it from her; but as I never alluded to the subject before her, she was too much a lady ever to lead me towards it. My motive for this reserve was at first some ill-defined terror lest my fraud upon Signor Dezio should come to light prematurely. Also I hate to be talked about among people whom I despise. Afterwards, as you will perceive, I had other and far more cogent reasons.

I need not say that your father–dear Clara, I ought to love you, if only on his account!–your father wrote me a kind and most warm-hearted letter, accompanied by a most handsome gift–no loan this time, but a wedding-gift, and a very noble one. Also he pressed me to come home with my bride the moment I could endure the voyage. Ah! if I had only obeyed him, not Lily and Henry, but myself would have been the victim.

We returned as soon as possible to Vendetta tower, and found the good Signor in excellent spirits, delighted to see his sweet daughter again, and still more delighted by hope of a little successor to the gray walls and the olive groves. When this hope was realized, and a lusty young grandson was laid in his arms, he became so wild in his glory, that he went about boasting all over the commune, feasting all who came near him, forgetting the very name of the blood-revenge. Many a time we reminded and implored him to be more careful. He replied, that his life was of no importance now; he had come to his haven among his own dear ones, and was crowning the old ship with flowers. Moreover, he knew that the De' Gentili were of a nobler spirit than to shed the blood of a gray-haired man, when institution did not very loudly demand it. And so I believe they were.

Alas! the poor old man!–a thorough and true gentleman as one need wish to see–choleric albeit, and not too wide of mind; but his heart was in the right place, and made of the right material, and easy enough to get at. He was free to confess his own failings, and could feel for a man who was tempted. Deeply thankful I am that, before his white beard was laid low, I acknowledged to him my offence, and obtained his hearty forgiveness. Little Henry was on his lap, going off into smiles of sleep, with his mother's soft finger in his mouth. At first my confession quite took the poor Signor aback; for I did not attempt to gloss the

dishonour of what I had done; but I told him truly that the meanness was not in my nature, and although I had won my pet Lily, the road ran through hemlock and wormwood. And now I perceived how uncalled-for and stupid the fraud had been.

When the old man recovered a little from the shock caused by the dishonesty–towards which recovery the tears of his daughter and the smiles of his grandson contributed–he was really glad to find that I was not a landed Signor. He rubbed his hands and twitched his beard with delight, for now his little Enrico would never be taken away to the barbarous English island. Was he not rightful successor to the lands of the Della Croce? and what more could he possibly want? What could he care for the property in Gloisterio? However, he made us promise that if the present remarkable baby, Master Henry Vaughan, should ever enjoy the property in the unpronounceable county, Lily's second child, if she had one, should take the Corsican lordships; for his great fear was, that the Malaspina and Della Croce estates should become a servient tenement to the frozen fields of the North. To express and ensure his wishes, he had a deed-poll prepared according to his own fancy, read it to us and some witnesses, then signed, sealed, and enrolled it. This was one of the documents which you, my brave Clara, rescued from that vile, stealthy ghost.

And now, for a short time, we enjoyed deep, quiet, delicious happiness. The crime which had haunted me was confessed and forgiven. Amply possessed of the means, and even the abundance of life, I was blessed with strong health again, and freedom among the free. Richest and best of all blessings, I had a sweet, most lovely, and most loving wife, and loved her once and for all. No more beautiful vision has any poet imagined than young Lily Vaughan sitting under the vine-leaves, her form more exquisite than ever, her soft-eyed infant in her lap wondering at his mother's beauty, while her own deep-lustred eyes carried to her husband's, without the trouble of thinking, all that flowed into her heart–joy at belonging to him, hope of bliss to come, fear of over-happiness, pride in all the three of us, and shame at feeling proud. Then a gay coquettish glance, as quick youth warms the veins, and some humorous thought occurs, a tickle for the baby, and a feint of cold-shouldering me. But, jealous as I was, desperately jealous, for my love was more passionate than ever, I can honourably state that Lily's one and only trial to arouse my jealousy was an ignominious failure, recoiling only on the person of the dear designer. However exacting little Harry might be, I never grudged him his double share of attention. In the first place I looked upon him as a piece of me, still holding on; and, in the next place, I knew that all he laid claim to was only a loan to him, and belonged in fee simple to his father.

At this time I wrote to my brother again, announcing the birth of our boy, and that we had made him his namesake; dispensing, too, with all further reserve

on the subject of our marriage. This letter was never delivered to your dear father. That much I know, for certain; and at one time I strongly suspected that our cold-blooded, crafty foe contrived to intercept it. But no; if he had, he would have known better afterwards.

After that cowardly onslaught upon my bride and myself, I had of course learned all I could of the history of this Lepardo. He was the only son of the Signor's only brother, but very little was known of him in the neighbourhood, as he came from Vescovato on the east side of the island. He was said to have great abilities and very great perseverance, and under the guardianship of his uncle had been intended and partly educated for the French Bar. But his disposition was most headstrong and sullen; and at an early age he displayed a ferocity unusual even in a Corsican. Neither had he the great redeeming trait of the islanders, I mean their noble patriotism. One good quality, however, he did possess, and that was fidelity to his word. With one of the contradictions so common in human nature, he would even be false in order to be true: that is, he would be treacherous wherever he was unpledged, if it assisted him towards a purpose to which he was committed. While he was yet a boy, his intended career was cut short by an act of horrible violence. He disliked all the lower animals, horses and mules especially; and one day he was detected by a master of the Paoli College, screaming, and yelling at, and lashing, from a safe distance, a poor little pony whom he had tied to a fence. The master, an elderly man, very humane and benevolent, rebuked him in the most cutting manner, and called him a low coward. The young villain ran off, with his eyes flashing fire, procured a stiletto, and stabbed the poor man in the back. Then he leaped on the horse he had been ill-treating, and pricking him with the dagger, rode away furiously in the direction of Bastia. The pursuers could not trace him through the wild mountain district, but it was believed that he reached the town and took refuge in an English brig, which was lying off the harbour, and sailed for Genoa that evening. The pony was found dead, lying by the roadside with the brute's dagger in its throat. No wonder Lily, who told me all this, with true Corsican rage in her eyes, no wonder my Lily hated him. Even as a little girl, for she was but ten years old when he disappeared, she always felt a strong repugnance towards him. He was about six years older than Fiordalisa, and four years younger than I; so when he shot at Lily, he must have been three-and-twenty. It was reported that after his disappearance he took to a sea-faring life, and made himself very useful, by his knowledge of languages, in the English merchant service. Quarrelling with his employers, he was said to have resorted to smuggling in the Levant, if not to downright piracy.

Clara, for reasons I cannot explain, I wish you to follow my story step by step in its order, noting each landing-place. To do this with advantage, you must have the dates carved upon each of the latter: therefore I beg you to copy them

as you pass.

I arrived in Corsica, as you heard, during the month of May, 1829. On the 12th of August in that same year I first beheld my Lily. That day I remember, beside other reasons, because I had wondered, as I rode idly along, whether my brother was opening his usual Highland campaign, and whether he would like to shoot the muffrone. Lily and I were married on the 21st of March, 1830, when I was twenty-seven years old: and our little Henry first saw the light on the 24th of December following, more than two years before your birth. Your father having no children as yet, I looked upon my Harry as heir presumptive to these estates. Although your birth appeared to divest him of the heirship, it has since, through causes then unknown to me, proved otherwise; and if he were living now, he would in strict law be entitled to this property after my death. But if he were alive, he never should have an inch of it, that is if I could prevent it; because in strict righteousness all belongs to you. And now I hold the property in fee simple, under an Act which abolishes fines and recoveries; for I have suffered so much from remorse, ever since your dear mother's death, that even before you saved my life, dearest child, I enrolled a deed in Chancery, which gives me disposing powers; and as I think you know, I made thereupon a will devising the lands to you. This also was one of the documents you caught that vile hypocrite stealing.

To return to the old Signor. He was now as happy as the day was long, and desirous, as an old man often is, to set on foot noteworthy schemes, which might survive his time. Of this desire I took advantage to inoculate him with some English views. It was rather late to learn another catechism, at threescore years and five; but a green old age was his, hale and hearty as could be. "Why should all those noble olives shed, and rot upon the ground, all those grapes of divers colours be of no more use than rainbows? Why should all the dazzling marbles slumber in the quarry, the porphyry of Molo, the verde antique of Orezza, the Parian of Cassaconi, the serpentine near Bastia, and the garnets of Vizzavona–nay even the matchless white alabaster–

"Mother of our Lord, I have got such pretty stuff in my cavern on the gulf of Porto. Some one told me it was the very finest alabaster. But then it would require cutting out." The last thought seemed a poser.

"Well, father"–so I called him now–"when Harry has finished his tooth, suppose we go all together in the yacht and see it."

And so we did; and it was worth a voyage all the way from London only to look at it. Pillars of snow, pellucid, and fancifully veined, like a glacier shot with sea-weed; clean-working moreover, and tough, and of even texture, as I proved to my Lily's delight. There is now a small piece in the drawer of my walnut-wood desk. But I took home a square block with me, and under my wife's most original criticisms, worked it into a rough resemblance of the baby Henry. Perhaps I have

a natural turn for sculpture, perhaps it was a wife's flattery; but at any rate the young mother was so charmed with it, that in one of her pensive moments she even made me promise, that if she died soon and alone, I would have the little recumbent figure laid upon her breast.

Meanwhile the Signor was gayer than ever: he told us to have no anxiety about anything less than a score of children; to such effect would he work his great olive grounds, quarries, and vineyards. Some ingenious plan he formed, which delighted him hugely, but was past my comprehension. As fast as he quarried his alabaster, he would plant young vines in the holes, and every one knew how the vine delighted to run away over the rocks. So at once he must set off for Corte, the central town of the island, to procure a large stock of tools well-tempered in the Restonica. That turbulent little river possesses a magic power. Its water is said to purify steel so highly that it never can rust again. I have even heard that the cutlers of Northern Italy import it, for the purpose of annealing their choicest productions. For my part, little as I knew of commerce, I strongly recommended that arrangements for shipping and selling the alabaster should be made, before it was quarried. But the Signor scorned the idea.

Having in prospect all the riches of Croesus, and in possession enough to make us happy, and having worked, as we thought, uncommonly hard, we all four indulged in a tour through Sicily and Italy, proposing to visit and criticise the principal marble quarries. By the time we had done all this and enjoyed it thoroughly–dear me, how my wife was admired in the sculptor's studio!–and by the time we had fallen to work again, surveyed and geologised all the estates, taken, or rather listened to, long earfuls of advice, settled all our plans summarily over the Rogliano, and reopened them all the next morning, by this time, I say, nearly three years of bliss had slipped by, since my recovery from the lingering wound; and it was now the summer of 1833. My loving wife was twenty years old, and we were looking forward to the birth of a brother or sister for Harry. Meanwhile we had heard of your birth, which delighted us all, especially my Lily. She used to talk, in the fond way mothers discover, to Harry, now gravely perched up on a stool, about his little sweetheart away in the dark north country.

It was in the month of July 1833 that the Signor found he could no longer postpone his visit to Corte. Alone he would go, riding his favourite jennet, as sure-footed as a mule, and as hardy as a mustang. Behind him he slung his trusty fusil, with both barrels loaded, for he had to traverse a desert and mountainous district haunted by banditti. He was to travel through by-ways to Novella, and so on to the bridge where the roads from Calvi and Bastia meet, put up in rude quarters there for the night, and follow the steep descent to the town of Corte next day. In vain we begged him to take some escort, or at least to let me go with him. No, I must stop to guard the Lily and the little snow-drop; could he possibly

take me at such a time from home, and did I think a Della Croce was afraid of bandits? It was a Monday morning when he left the tower, and he would be back on Saturday in good time for supper. He kissed and blessed his Lily, and the little snow-drop as he called young Harry, who cried at his departure; and then he gave me too an earnest trembling blessing. By this time he and I had come to love each other, as a father and a son.

I went with him quite to the borders of the commune; and there, in a mountain defile, I lit for him his cigar. With some dark foreboding, I waited till I saw him reach and pass the gap at the summit of the rise. There he turned in the saddle to wave his last adieu, and his beard, like a white cloud, floated on the morning sky.

CHAPTER XIV.

On the Saturday night, an excellent supper was ready: the Signor's own particular plate was at the head of the table, and by it gleamed, in a portly bottle, his favourite Rogliano. Little Harry, who could say anything he was told, and knew right well what was good, or at least what tasted good–that beloved child was allowed to stop up, that grandpapa might kiss him; this was a sovereign specific, believed in the nursery creed, to ensure sweet sleep for both.

That silver beard never kissed the chubby cheek again. All night we waited and wondered: Harry was sent to bed roaring; no grandpapa appeared. The olives rustled at midnight, and out I ran; the doors creaked afterwards, and I opened them, all in vain; the sound of hoofs came up the valley before the break of day; but no step or voice of man, no bark of his favourite mountain hound, no neigh of the jennet to her sleepy brother-horses.

All Sunday we remained in terrible uneasiness, trying to cheer each other with a hundred assurances that the dear old man must have turned aside to see an ancient friend living now at Prato. When Monday morning came, but brought no tidings of him, I set off, amid a shower of tears, to seek the beloved father. The old fusileer was left on guard, and I took two young and active men, well acquainted with the mountain passes. All well mounted, and well armed, we purposed to ride hard, and search the track quite up to the town of Corte. There, if indeed he had ever arrived, we should be sure to hear of him. But it proved unnecessary to go so far from home.

Along that dreary mountain road, often no more than a shepherd's walk difficult to descry, we found no token of any traveller either living or dead, until we came to the Ponte Leccia, where the main roads meet. Here our fears were doubled, and the last hope nearly quenched; for on asking at the shepherd's hut, where Signor Dezio meant to put up, we found that he had slept there on the Friday night, as he was returning from the town. The shepherd's wife, who had known him for years, assured us that he was in wonderful spirits and health, insisted upon her supping with them–which is contrary to Corsican usage–and boasted much of the great things he would do, and still more of his beautiful grandson. His goatskin wallet was full of sample tools, which were to astonish his English son, and he had a toy gun no bigger than the tail of a dog, with which he intended to teach the baby to shoot. Telling us all these little things, and showing us her presents, the poor woman cried at the thought of what must have happened to him. Right early on Saturday morning he set off, as impatient as a child, to see his beloved ones again, and exhibit all his treasures. For love of the Della Croce her husband had groomed the mare thoroughly, and she neighed merrily down the hill at thought of her stable friends. Moreover, the shepherd's wife told us that there had been in those parts no bandit worth the name, since the death of the great Teodoro, king of the mountains, whose baby still received tribute.

After resting our horses awhile, with heavy hearts we began to retrace our steps through that awful wilderness. Instead of keeping together, as we had done in the morning, we now rode in parallel lines, right and left of the desert track, wherever the ground permitted it. All this district is very barren and rugged, and the way winds up and down, often along the brink of crags, or through narrow mountain gorges. The desolation and loneliness grew more oppressive, as the shadows lengthened.

We had thoroughly searched two-thirds of the distance homeward, and had crossed some granite heights whence the sea was visible; the sun was low over Cape Bevellata, and the vapours from the marsh were crouching at the mountain's foot. Here as I rode to the left of my two companions, I heard the faint bay of a dog far down a deep ravine, that trended leftward from our course. Putting my jaded animal to his utmost speed, I made for the hollow which echoed the dismal sound–a feeble bark prolonged into a painful howl. Turning the corner sharply I scared two monstrous vultures, who were hovering over and craning at a dog. The dog so gaunt and starved, that at every bark the ribs seemed bursting the skin, still was fighting past despair with his loathsome enemies. He stood across the breast of the noble Signor Dezio. There lay that gallant cavalier, stark and rigid, with his eyes wide open, and his white beard tipped with crimson. There he lay upon his back, his kingly head against a rock, his left hand on his

clotted breast and glued thereto with blood; his right hand hung beside his chin whence it had slipped in death, and in it still securely grasped was a trinket newly made, containing a little sheaf of the baby's flossy hair tied with a black wisp of the mother's. The poor old man had dragged himself thither to die, and died with that keepsake on his lips. The fatal shot had been fired from above, and passed completely through his body. It pierced his lungs, and I believe that he felt little pain, but gasped his simple life away. Near him was his wallet, with the tools still in it; I think he had been playing with the toy gun when he received the wound; at any rate it lay separate from the rest, and at the old man's side.

Examining by the waning light, with icy awe upon me, the scene of this damned atrocity, I found that the hoary traveller must have dismounted here, to eat his frugal dinner. A horn cup and a crust of bread were on a rocky shelf, and a little spring welled down the dingle, with the mark of the dog's feet here and there. The craven foe had been sneaking along behind, and took advantage of the old man's position, as he sat upon a stone to make certain of him from the granite loophole. We found the very place where the murderer must have crouched, but the cliff-side kept no footprint. The victim's gun was gone, and so was the Spanish mare: no other robbery seemed to have been committed.

This glen led to a shorter but more difficult track towards home, which the Signor, in his impatience, must have resolved to try. Reverently we laid him on the freshest horse; while I with the faithful mountain dog on my saddle–for he was too exhausted to walk–rode on to break the melancholy news, and send assistance back.

To break bad news–the phrase is a failure, the attempt it implies a much worse one. Lily knew all in a moment, and in her delicate state she received so appalling a shock, that for a week she lay on the very threshold of death. At the end of that time, and three days after the old man's funeral–at which for his daughter's sake I allowed no wailings or voceros–a lively little girl was born, who seemed to be none the worse for her mother's bitter sufferings. Her innocent caresses, or some baby doings optimised by her mother–though even as a new-born babe she seemed a most loving creature–all those soft endearing ways, which I could not understand, did more to bring my Lily's spirit back than even my fond attentions.

But as yet, though able to walk again, and nurse her child, whom she would not commit to another, my wife remained in a fearfully sensitive and tremulous condition. The creak of a door, the sound of a foot, the rustle of the wind–and she, so brave and proud of yore, started like a cicale, and shook like a forest shadow. In everything she feared the ambush of that sleuth cold-blooded reptile, on whom alone, truly or not God knows, she charged the blood of her venerable father. But still she had the comfort of a husband's love, a husband even fonder

than when the flowers fell on his path; and still she had the joy of watching, with a mother's tender insight, the budding promise of two sweet infants. Infants I call them, why Master Harry was now a thorough chatterbox! With all this love around her, she by far the loveliest, the pride and glory of all, was sure to find her comfort soon upon the breast of time, even as small Lily found it in her own sweet bosom. Deeply and long we mourned that ancient Signor, chivalrous and true gentleman, counsellor of all things. Every day we missed him; but could talk of it more as time flowed on. Rogliano had no sparkle, Luri not the tint of old: never could I pour out either from his favourite flagon, without a thought of him who taught us the proper way to do it; who ought to be teaching us still, but was lying foully murdered in his lonely grave at St. Katharine's on the Cliff.

We had done our utmost to avenge him: soon as I could leave my wife, I had scoured all the neighbourhood. The Sbirri too had done their best, but discovered nothing. Brave fellows they are, when it comes to fighting, but very poor detectives. Only two things we heard that seemed at all significant. One of these was that a Spanish jennet, like the Signor's favourite "Marana," but dreadfully jaded and nearly starved, had been sold on the Friday after the murder, being the very day of the funeral, at the town of Porto Vecchio on the south-eastern coast. I sent my coxswain Petro, an intelligent and trusty Corsican, to follow up this clue; for I durst not leave my wife as yet. Petro discovered the man who had bought the mare, and re-purchased her from him, as I had directed: but the description of the first seller did not tally with my recollections of Lepardo. However, it proved to be the true Marana; and glad she was to get home once more.

The other report, that seemed to bear upon the bloody mystery, was that a swift felucca, flush-built and banked for triple sweeps, had been seen lying close in shore near point Girolata, during the early part of the week in which the Signor left home. And it was even said that two Maltese sailors, belonging to this felucca, had encamped on shore in a lonely place near Otta, and were likely to be found there still.

Lily being stronger now, I determined to follow this last clue myself; and so I put the little yacht into commission again, and manned her with Calvi men, for all my English crew had been dismissed long ago. Leaving my wife and children under the care of the old fusileer, away I sailed from St. Katharine's, intending to return in three days' time. All this coast I now knew thoroughly, and Otta was not far beyond the poor Signor's cave of alabaster. It is a wild and desert region, far away from any frequented road, and little visited except by outlaws.

We found no trace of any tent, no sign of any landing, and an aged fisherman, whom we met, declared that no felucca or vessel of any sort had lately been near the bay. I began to fear that, for some dark purpose, I had been beguiled from home, and despatched upon a fool's errand. The dreary coast was

still the home of solitude, the alabaster cave untouched since our pic-nic survey; the marks of which were undisturbed except by wind and weather. So I crowded sail, and hurried back to St. Katharine's, with a strange weight on my heart. To add to my vexation, a strong north wind set in, and smartly as our cutter sailed, we were forced to run off the land. When at last we made the cove, it was unsafe for the yacht to anchor, and so I was compelled to send her on to Calvi.

It was nearly midnight on the 2d of October, when Petro and myself plodded up the wooded hill on which the old tower stands. Weary and dispirited, though glowing every now and then with the thought of all my darlings, in vain I called myself a fool for fearing where no fear was. When we reached the brow of the hill, my vague alarm was doubled. The rude oil-lamps that marked the entrance, why were they unlighted? I had especially ordered that they should be kindled every night, and Lily had promised to see to it herself. No challenge from the watchman, no click of the musket hammer, even the vinea was not in its place. In vain we knocked and knocked at the old chesnut doors; no one answered, no one came to open. None of the loopholes showed a light; the house was dark and silent as the ivy. Wild with terror I ran to the little side-door, whence first my Lily met me. This too was locked, or fastened somehow; and only the echo of my knock was heard. Petro and I caught up a great bough of ilex, which myself had lopped last week, rushed at the door with the butt, and broke it in with one blow. Shrieking for Lily, Lily, I flew from room to room, tumbling over the furniture, blundering at the doorways. No voice of wife, no cry of child, no answer of domestic; all as silent as if ten fathoms under water.

Having dashed through every room, I turned to rush off to the hamlet, when my foot struck something–something soft and yielding; was it a sack or bolster? I stooped to feel it; it was Lily, laid out, stiff and cold Dead, my Lily dead! Oh, God can never mean it; would He let me love her so?

For all intents of actual life, for all that we are made for, for all the soul's loan of this world, I died that very moment; and yet a mad life burned within me, the flare of hope that will not die. How I forced her clenched hands open, bowed her rigid arms around me, threw myself upon her, breathed between her lips and listened, tore her simple dress asunder and laid my cheek upon her heart; feeling not a single throb, flooded her cold breast with tears, and lay insensible awhile. Then, as if awaking, felt that she was with me, but somehow not as usual; called her all our names of love, and believed we were in heaven. But there stood Petro with a light, sobbing, and how his beard shook!–What right had he in heaven? Would they let him in without shaving? I rose to order him out; when he restored my wits awhile by pointing with his finger.

"Look, look, Signor! She is not dead, I saw her eyelid tremble."

Wide she opened those glorious eyes, looked at me with no love in them,

shuddered, and closed them again.

Mad with rapture, I caught her up, sent Petro headlong lamp and all, and kissed her enough to kill her. She was not dead, my Lily, my pet of eternal ages. There she fell trembling, fluttering, nestling in my arms, her pale cheek on my breast, her white hand on my shoulder; then frightened at her nest shrunk back, and gazed with unutterable reproach, where love like the fallen lamp was flickering: then clung to me once more, as if she ought to hate, but could not yet help loving. She died the next morning. Clara, I can't tell you any more now.

CHAPTER XV.

Before my own and only love departed, she knew, thank God, she knew as well as I did, that I had never wronged her pure and true affection. But it was long before I learned what had so distressed her. Though she appeared quite sensible, and looked at me, every now and then, with the same reproachful harrowing gaze, it seemed to me ages, it must have been hours, before she could frame her thoughts in words. In an agony of suspense for her, for our children, for our love, I could hardly repress my impatience even at her debility. Many a time she opened her trembling lips, but the words died on them. At last I caught her meaning from a few broken sentences.

"How could he do it? How could he so betray her? And his own Lily that loved him so–no, she must not be Lily any more, she was only Fiordalisa Della Croce. How could he come and pretend to love her, and pretend to marry her, when all the while he had a young wife at home in England? Never would she have believed it but for the proofs, the proofs that hateful man had shown her. How could he shame his own love so, and his children, and the aged father–there was no hope for her but to die–to die and never see him more; and then perhaps he would be sorry, for he must care about her a little."

Then she burst into such a torrent of tears, and pressed both hands on her bounding heart, and grew white with terror. Then as the palpitation passed, she looked at me and knew me, and crept close to me, forgetting all the evil,–and seemed to sleep awhile. Of course I saw what it was; dazed as I was and wild at her sorrow and danger, I slowly perceived what it was. The serpent-like foe had been there, and had hissed in her ear what he thought to be true–that I had done her a dastard's wrong; had won her passionate maiden love, and defiled her by a

sham marriage, while my lawful wife was living.

When once I knew my supposed offence, it did not take long to explain the murderer's error, an error which had sprung from my own deceit. But my children, where are my children, Lily?

In her ecstatic joy, she could not think for the moment even of her children; but pressed me to her tumultuous heart, as if I were all she wanted. Then she began to revile herself, for daring to believe any ill of her noble husband.

"And even if it had been true, which you know it never could be, dear,–I must have forgiven you, sweetest darling, because you couldn't have helped it, you did love me so, didn't you?"

This sweet womanly logic, you, Clara, may comprehend–But where are the children, my Lily?

"Oh, in bed I suppose, dear: let me get up, we must go and kiss the darlings. When I first came in, I could not bear to go near them, poor pets; but now–Oh my heart, holy Madonna, my heart!"

She leaped up as if she were shot, and a choking sound rose in her throat.. Her fresh youth fought hard in the clutches of death. "Oh save me, my own husband, save me. Hold me tighter; I cannot die yet. So young and so happy with you. It is gone; but the next pang is death. Hold me so till it comes again. God bless you, my own for ever. You will find me in heaven, won't you? You can never forget your own Lily."

Her large eyes rested on mine, as they did when she first owned her love; and her soul seemed trying to spring into the breast of mine. Closer to me she clung, but with less and less of strength. Her smooth, clear cheek was on mine, her exhausted heart on my wild one. I felt its last throb, as the death-pang came, and she tried to kiss me to show that it was not violent. Frantic, I opened my lips, and received the last breath of hers.

The crush of its anguish her heart might have borne, but not the rebound of its joy.

Her body, the fairest the sun ever saw, was laid beside her father's in the little churchyard at St. Katharine's, with the toy baby on her breast; her soul, the most loving and playful that ever the angels visited, is still in attendance upon me, and mourns until mine rejoins it.

You have heard my greatest but not my only distress. For more than three months, my reason forsook me utterly. I recognised no one, not even myself, but sought high and low for my Lily. At night I used to wander forth and search among the olive-trees, where we so often roved: sometimes the form I knew so well would seem to flit before me, tempting me on from bole to bole, and stretching vain hands towards me. Then as I seemed to have overtaken and brought to bay her coyness, with a faint shriek she would vanish into hazy air. Probably I

owed these visions to capricious memory, gleaming upon old hexameters of the Eton clink. True from false I knew not, neither cared to know: everything I did seemed to be done in sleep, with all the world around me gone to sleep as well. One vague recollection I retain of going somewhere, to do something that made me creep with cold. This must have been the funeral of my lost one; when the Corsicans, as I am told, fled from my ghastly stare, and would only stand behind me. They are a superstitious race, and they feared the "evil eye."

All the time I was in this state, faithful Petro waited on me, and watched me like a father. He sent for his wife, old Marcantonia, who was famed for her knowledge of herbs and her power over the witches, who now beyond all doubt had gotten me in possession. Decoctions manifold she gave me at the turn of the moon, and hung me all over with amulets, till I rang like a peal of cracked bells. In spite of all these sovereign charms, Lepardo might at any time have murdered me, if he had thought me happy enough to deserve it. Perhaps he was in some other land, making sure of my children's lives.

Poor helpless darlings, all that was left me of my Lily, as yet I did not know that even they were taken. Petro told me afterwards that I had asked for them once or twice, in a vacant wondering manner, but had been quite content with some illusory answer.

It was my Lily, and no one else, who brought me back to conscious life. What I am about to tell may seem to you a feeble brain's chimera; and so it would appear to me, if related by another. But though my body was exhausted by unsleeping sorrow, under whose strain the mental chords had yielded, yet I assure you that what befell me did not flow from but swept aside both these enervations.

It is the Corsican's belief, that those whom he has deeply mourned, and desolately missed, are allowed to hover near him in the silent night. Then sometimes, when he is sleeping, they will touch his lids and say, "Weep no more, beloved one: in all, except thy sorrow, we are blessed as thou couldst wish." Or sometimes, if the parting be of still more tender sort, (as between two lovers, or a newly wedded couple) in the depth of darkness when the lone survivor cannot sleep for trouble, appears the lost one at the chamber door, holds it open, and calls softly; "Dearest, come; for I as well am lonely." Having thrice implored, it waves its cerements like an angel's wing, and awaits the answer. Answer not, if you wish to live; however the sweet voice thrills your heart, however that heart is breaking. But if you truly wish to die, and hope is quenched in memory; make answer to the well-known voice. Within three days you will be dead, and flit beside the invoking shadow.

Perhaps old Marcantonia had warned me of this appeal, and begged me to keep silence, which for my children's sake I was bound to do. All I know is that

one night towards the end of January, I lay awake as usual, thinking–if a mind distempered thus can think–of my own sweet Lily. All the evening I had sought her among the olive-trees, and at St. Katharine's Church, and even on the sad sea-shore by the moaning of the waves. Now the winter moon was high, and through the embrasured window, the far churchyard that held my wife, and the silver sea beyond it, glimmered like the curtain of another world. Sitting up in the widowed bed, with one hand on my aching forehead–for now I breathed perpetual headache–I called in question that old church of one gay wedding and two dark funerals. Was there any such church at all; was it not a dream of moonlight and the phantom love?

Even as I sat gazing now, so on many a moonlight night sat my Lily gazing with me, whispering of her father's grave, and looking for it in the shrouded distance. Her little hand used to quiver in mine, as she declared she had found it; and her dark eyes had so wondrous a gift of sight, that I never would dare to deny, though I could not quite believe it. Had she not in the happy days, when we roamed on the beach together, waiting for the yacht and pretending to seek shells, had she not then told me the stripes and colours of the sailors' caps, and even the names of the men on deck, when I could hardly see their figures?

Ah, could she tell my own name now, could she descry me from that shore which mocks the range of telescope, and the highest lens of thought; was she permitted one glimpse of him from whom in life she could hardly bear to withdraw those gentle eyes? Answer me, my own, in life and death my own one; tell me that you watch and love me, though it be but now and then, and not enough to break the by-laws of the disembodied world.

Calmly as I now repeat it, but in a low melodious tone, sweeter than any mortal's voice, a tone that dwelt I knew not where, like the sighing of the night-wind, came this answer to me:

"True love, for our children's sake, and mine who watch and love you still, quit this grief, the spirit's grave. All your sorrow still is mine, and would you vex your darling, when you cannot comfort her? Though you see me now no more, I am with you more than ever; I am your image and your shadow. At every sigh of yours, I shiver; your smiles are all my sunshine. Let me feel some sunshine, sweetest; you know how I used to love it, and as yet you have sent me none. I shall look for some to-morrow. Lo I, for ever yours, am smiling on you now."

And a golden light, richer than any sunbeam, rippled through the room. I knew the soft gleam like the sunset on a harvest-field. It was my Lily's smile. A glow of warmth was shed on me, and I fell at once into a deep and dreamless sleep. You, my child, who have never known such loss–pray God you never may–very likely you regard all this incident as a dream. Be it so: if it were a dream, Lily's angel brought it.

CHAPTER XVI.

The next day I was a different man. All my energy had returned, and all my reasoning power; but not, thank God, the rigour of my mind, the petty contempt of my fellow-men. Nothing is more hard to strip than that coat of flinty closeness formed upon Deucalion's offcast in the petrifying well of self. Though I have done my utmost, and prayed of late for help in doing it, never have I quite scaled off this accursed deposit. This it was that so estranged your warm nature, Clara; a nature essentially like your father's, but never allowed free scope. You could not tell the reason, children never can; but somehow it made you shiver to be in contact with me.

Petro and Marcantonia would have been astonished at my sudden change, but they had lately dosed me with some narcotic herb, procured, by a special expedition, from the Monte Rotondo, and esteemed a perfect Stregomastix; so of course the worthy pair expected my recovery. No longer did they attempt to conceal from me the truth as to my poor infants, who had been carried off on the day of my return. What I learned of the great calamity, which then befell me, was this.

Towards sunset, my dear wife, with her usual fondness, went forth to look for the little yacht returning from the gulf of Porto. Our darling Harry, then in his third year, was with her, and the young nurse from Muro. Lily sat upon the cliff, watching a sail far in the offing, probably our vessel. Then as she turned towards the tower, a man from the shrubbery stood before her, and called her by her maiden name. She knew her cousin Lepardo, and supposed that he was come to kill her. Nevertheless she asked him proudly how he dared to insult her so, in the presence of her child and servant. He answered that it was her name, and she was entitled to no other. Then he promised not to harm her, if she would send the maid away, for he had important things to speak of. And thereupon he laid before her documents and letters.

Meanwhile the tower was surrounded by his comrades; but they durst not enter, for the trusty fusileer kept the one approach up the steep hillside; and his grandson, a brave boy, stood at the loop-hole with him. The maid, however, with her little charge, was allowed to pass, and she joined the two other women in weak preparations for defence. The period of attack had been chosen skilfully. So simple and patriarchal is the Corsican mode of life, that very few servants are kept, even by men of the highest station; and those few are not servants in our sense of the word. It happened this night that the only two men employed upon the premises, beside the old fusileer, had been sent into the town for things

wherewith to welcome me.

However, the faithful gunner, with his eye along the barrels, kept the foe at bay, and seemed likely to keep them there, until the return of the men; while his sturdy grandson split his red cheeks at the warder's conch. But they little knew their enemy. Lepardo Della Croce was not to be baulked by an old man and a boy. At the narrow entrance a lady's dress came fluttering in the brisk north wind. Poor Lily tottered across the line of fire, her life she never thought of; what use to live after all that she had heard? Close behind her, and in the dusk invisible past her wind-tossed drapery, stole her scoundrel cousin; whom, like trees set in a row, or feather-edged boards seen lengthwise, a score of lithe and active sailors followed. No chance for the marksman; like tiles they overlapped one another, and poor Lily, upright in her outraged pride, covered the stooping graduated file. French and English, Moorish and Maltese, a motley band as ever swore, they burst into a hearty laugh at the old gunner's predicament, the moment they had passed his range. All within was at their mercy. True he kept the main gate still, and all the doors were barred; but gates and doors were lubber's holes for seamen such as they. Up the ivy they clambered, along the chesnut branches, or the mere coignes of the granite, and into the house they poured at every loop-hole and window. One thing must be said in their favour–they did very little mischief. They were kept thoroughly under command, and a wave of their captain's hand drove them anywhither. All he wanted was possession of my children, and of some valuable property which he claimed in right of his father.

Having secured both objects, he ordered his men to depart, allowing them only to carry what wine and provisions they found. But the three domestics, and the ancient sentinel and his boy, were bound hand and foot, and concealed in a cave on the beach, to prevent any stir in the neighbouring hamlet. Poor Lily was left where she fell, to recover or not, as might be. My own darling was not insulted or touched; the men were afraid, and Lepardo too proud to outrage one of his kin. Moreover, his word was pledged; and they say that he always keeps it. Soon after dark the robbers set sail, and slipped away down the coast, before that strong north wind which had so baffled me. But for me a letter was left, full of triumph and contumely. It was addressed to "Valentine Vaughan, the Englishman;" "Signor Valentine" was the title conferred on me by the fusileer, and adopted by the neighbourhood. To my surprise that letter was written in English, and English as good as a foreigner ever indites: I can repeat it word for word:–

"SIR,–I am reluctant to obtrude good counsel, but with the obtuseness of your nation you are prone to the undervaluing of others. It is my privilege to amend

this error, while meekly I revindicate my own neglected rights. From me you have stolen my bride and my good inheritance, and in a manner which the persons unversed in human nature would be inclined to characterise as dastardly and dissolute. Furthermore, you have rendered the heiress of the noblest house in Corsica a common Englishman's adulteress. If I had heard this on the day of your mocking marriage, not the poor victim but you, you, would have been my direction. Now I will punish you more gradually, and longer, as you deserve. Your unhappy adulteress knows the perfidy of your treachery, and your two poor bastards shall take refuge with me. The inquiry with respect to my drowning them to-night is dependent upon the stars. But if I shall spare them, as I may, because they cannot come between me and my property, I will teach them, when they are old enough, to despise and loathe your name. They shall know that in the stead of a father's love they have only had a vagabond's lust, and they shall know how you seduced and then slew their mother; for death, in my humble opinion, appears in her face to-night. Although she has betrayed me, I am regretful for her: but to you who have disgraced my name and plundered me, as a man of liberal and exalted views I grant a contemptuous forbearance; so long, that is to say, as you remain unhappy, which the wicked ought to be. Of one thing, however, I bid you to take admonishment. If I hear that you ever forget this episode of debauchery, and return to your English wife and property, no house, no castle that ever was edified, shall protect you from my dagger. Remember the one thing, as your proverb tells, I am slow and sure.

LEPARDO DELLA CROCE."

CHAPTER XVII.

Instead of enraging or maddening me, as the writer perhaps expected, this execrable letter did me a great deal of good. I determined to lower that insufferable arrogance; and brought all my thoughts to bear upon one definite object, the recovery of my darlings and the punishment of that murderer. I did not believe that he had destroyed them, or was likely to do so; for had not their mother's spirit referred to them as living?

Without delay, my yacht was prepared for a lengthened cruise; the tower committed to Marcantonia and the gray sentinel; and with Petro for my skipper, I

sailed on the following day. Alas, the three months now elapsed during my delirium, had they not like the sea itself closed across the track? All the neighbours knew was this, the felucca had passed Point Girolata, and had been seen in the early morning, standing away due south. All the villagers, and even the men from the mountain, thronged the shore as I embarked, and there invoked Madonna's blessing on poor Signor Valentine, so basely robbed of wife and children.

When we had rounded Girolata, we bore away due south, and in less than fifteen hours made the Sardinian shore in the gulf of Asinara. Here we coasted along the curve, inquiring at every likely place whether any such vessel had been sighted as that which we were seeking. But we could learn nothing of her until we were off the Gypsum Cape; where some fishermen told us, that at or about the time we spoke of, a swift felucca, built and manned exactly as we had described, glided by them and bore up for the town of Alghero. We too bore up for Alghero, and soon discovered that the roving vessel had undoubtedly been there: even Lepardo, the captain, was described by the keen Sardinians. But she had only lain to for a few hours, and cleared again for Cagliari. For Cagliari we made sail as hard as the sticks could carry, and arrived there on the fourth day from Cape Girolata.

The pirates, if such they were, had offered their vessel for sale at Cagliari; but, failing of a satisfactory price had sailed away again, and after much trouble I found out that their destination was Valetta. To Valetta also we followed, feeling like a new boy at school who is mystified by the experts–innocent of much Greek themselves–with a game which means in English, "send the fool on further."

When at length we reach the Maltese capital–where I was not sorry to hear once more my native tongue–we found the felucca snugly moored near the "Merchant's Yard," and being refitted as a pleasure-boat for a wealthy Englishman. This gentleman knew a good deal about ships, but not quite enough. Pleased with the graceful lines and clean run of the felucca, he had given nearly twice her value for her; as he soon perceived when the ship-carpenters set to work. He was in the vein to afford all possible information, being thoroughly furious with the condemnable pirates–as he called them, without the weakness of the composite verb–who had robbed him so shamefully of his money. He told me that my children had been ashore, and Harry was much admired and kissed in the Floriana. One thing the sailors did which would have surprised a man unacquainted with the Corsicans, or perhaps I should say the islanders of the Mediterranean. They decked my little babe with flowers and ribands, and bore her in procession to the church of St. John of Jerusalem; and there they had her baptized, for Lepardo had found out that she had never undergone the ceremony. I was anxious to see the record, but was not allowed to do so; therefore I do not know what the little darling's name is, if she be still alive: but they told me that the surname en-

tered was not Vaughan, but Della Croce. It was said that the sailors had become very fond of her, the little creature being very sweet-tempered and happy, and a pleasing novelty to them. Very likely they named her after their own felucca.

The crew being now dispersed, some to their homes, and some on board ships which had sailed, I was thrown completely off the scent. All I could learn, at a house which they had frequented, was that Lepardo, the commander, had long ago left the island. Whither, or in what ship, he had sailed, they could not or would not tell me: he had always plenty of money, they said, and he spent it like a prince. But Petro, who was a much better ferret than I, discovered, or seemed to have done so, that the kidnapper and murderer had taken passage for Naples. My heart fell when I heard it; almost as easily might I have tracked him in London. At Naples I had spent a month, and knew the lying ingenuity, the laziness in all but lies, of its swarming thousands. However, the little yacht was again put under way, and, after a tedious passage, we saw the Queen of cities. Here, as I expected, the pursuit was baffled.

I will not weary you with my wanderings, off more often than on the track, up and down the Mediterranean, and sometimes far inland. If I marked them on a map, however large the scale, you would have what children call a crinkly crankly puzzle, like Lancashire in Bradshaw. Once, indeed, I rested at the ancient tower, near my Lily's grave, which I always visited twice in every year. I have some vague idea, now in my old age, that though we Vaughans detest any display of feeling–except indeed at times when the heart is too big for the skin–we are in substance, without knowing it, a most romantic race. Whether we are that, or not, is matter of small moment; one thing is quite certain, we are strutted well and stable. We are not quick of reception, but we are most retentive. Never was there man of us who ever loved a woman and cast her off through weariness; never was there woman of our house who played the jilt, when once she had passed the pledge of love. And after all I have seen of the world, and through my dark misfortune few men have seen more, it is my set conclusion that strong tenacity is the foremost of all the virtues. My enemy has it, I freely own, and through all his wickedness it saves him from being contemptible.

For a time, as I said before, I paused from my continual search, and abode in the old gray tower. That search now appeared so hopeless, that I was half inclined to believe no better policy could be found than this. Some day or other the robber would surely return and lay claim to the lands of the Della Croce. At present he durst not do it, while under the ban of piracy and the suspicion of his uncle's murder. Moreover, I thought it my duty to see to the welfare of my children's property. Under the deed-poll of the old Signor, his friend at Prato and myself were trustees and guardians. But I could not live there long: it was too painful for me to sit alone in the desolate rooms where my children ought

to be toddling, or to wander through the shrubberies and among the untended flowers, every one of them whispering "Lily." Formerly I had admired and loved that peculiar stillness, that rich deep eloquent solitude, which mantles in bucolic gray the lawns and glades of Corsica. But when I so admired and loved, I was a happy man, a man who had affection near him, and could warm himself when he pleased. Now though I had no friends or friendship, neither cared for any, solitude struck me to the bones, because it seemed my destiny.

After striving for half a year to do my duty as a hermit Signor, I found myself, one dreary morning, fingering my pistols gloomily, and fitting a small bullet into my ear. My thumb caught in the guard of the Signor's locket, and jerked it up my waistcoat. It was the same which the poor old man had pressed to his dying lips. There was Lily's hair and Harry's, and a tiny wisp of down since added, belonging to baby–name unknown. Looking at them and seeing how Lily's bound them together and to me, I felt ashamed of my cowardly gloom, and resolved to quit myself like a man in my duty towards the three. I rode at once to Prato, and persuaded Count Gaffori to come and live at the tower. Like his old friend the Signor, he had only himself and his lovely daughter to think of; but unlike Signor Dezio he had lost nearly all his paternal property, through political troubles. Therefore it was for him no little comfort and advantage to be placed at the head of a household again, and restored to some worldly importance. Nevertheless, his sense of honour was so nice and exacting, that I thought I should never succeed in bringing him to my views; and indeed I must have failed but for his daughter's assistance. A very sweet elegant girl she was, and she had been a great friend of my Lily's. If I could ever have loved again, I should have loved that maiden: but the thing was impossible.

The old Count promised to come and settle at Veduta tower–which name, in light days, I had corrupted into "Vendetta"–and living there to assume the management of the estates, in trust for my lost infants, as soon as his arrangements could be made. I saw nothing that need have delayed him a day; however, he declared that he must have a month to get ready, and he was plainly a man whom nature meant not to be pushed. So I employed the interval in having my dear old "Lilyflower" overhauled at Marseilles, coppered, and thoroughly painted. I could not bear to alter our little love-boat, as my darling called it, even in outward appearance; but like our love she had laboured through many a tempest; unlike it, she needed repairs. However, I saved from the painter's brush our favourite quarter-deck bench, whereon through the moonlight watches my Lily seemed still to recline.

And so my life for some years wandered on, a worthless, unsettled, forlorn existence, only refreshed at intervals by return to the scenes of past happiness. If I had really wronged Lepardo Della Croce, he could hardly have wished for a

better revenge. But in truth I had never wronged him. Even if I had never come near his betrothed, it is quite certain she would not have accepted him. And he, by his own desertion, had left her free to choose.

Late in the autumn of 1812, when I had abandoned all hope of ever recovering my little ones, except by one of those eddies of Providence, which we men call accidents, and in which I place my confidence to this hour, at that season, I say, I landed at Gibraltar, being wind-bound in the straits. We were making for Lisbon, where I was to ship some English watches, guns, and fine cutlery for Ajaccio. What a loss of rank for the "Lilyflower," to turn her into a trading smack! Well, I could not see it so; and I am sure her late mistress, who with all her sweet romance was an excellent hand at a bargain, would have thought it far more below my dignity for me to sponge on our children. There was plenty of money in hand at Veduta tower; but having retired from stewardship, I did not feel myself justified in drawing upon my children. Therefore, and for the sake of the large acquaintance and great opportunities gained, I had renewed my connection with the firm of Green, Vowler, and Green. Somehow, I could not bear to revisit the shores of England; otherwise I am sure that with the knowledge I now possessed of the Mediterranean ports, and a house of such standing and enterprise to back me, I should quickly have made my fortune. My vessel, moreover, was much too small for the fruit-trade, even if I could have lowered her to an uncleanly freight; but she was just the craft for valuable goods in small compass. I knew the Corsican fondness for arms and first-rate cutlery; and the tools the poor Signor Dezio meant to astonish me with, certainly did astonish me by their wonderful badness. True, the material was good, but all the waters of the Restonica will not convert a hammer into a handsaw. Although hardware was not at all in his line of business, Peter Green most kindly undertook to send me a cargo of first-rate Sheffield and Birmingham goods, by a return fruit-schooner. These, consigned to his Lisbon agent, I could fetch away, as I pleased, or wanted them. Having arranged with a shrewd merchant of Ajaccio to take my goods wholesale, and save the dignity of all the Vogheni from haggling, I had already made six trips, and in spite of the most tyrannical douane perhaps in all the world, I as a Corsican, importing goods in a Corsican bottom, had cleared very nearly three hundred per cent. on my outlay. We were now on our seventh voyage, to reship the last of the second English consignment, when a violent gale from the west met us right in the teeth, and we were forced to bear up for the anchorage. A first-rate sea-boat the "Lilyflower" was, although she had been built for racing, and for two or three years had beaten all competitors, whenever there was wind enough for a cat to stand on the sheets. But one hot June day she got beaten in a floating match, when the lightest bung went fastest, and her prig of a "noble owner" sold her in disgust, and built a thing that drew as much water as a nautilus. In her he

was happily upset, and could hardly find a sheet of paper to hold on by. Knowing some little about yachts, from my pool and reach experiences, I bought the famous racing cutter at about a quarter her value; and even in these, her olden days, she could exhibit her taffrail to the smartest fruit-clipper–the name was then just invented–that ever raced for the Monument. Her register was fifty tons, but she carried eighty.

Landing at Gibraltar, I kept clear of my countrymen, not that I dislike them, but because–well I cannot tell why; and strolled away to the Spanish and Moorish quarters.

It was a windy evening, and in front of a low refreshment house some sailors and Spanish girls were dancing. A squabble arose among them; something I think it was about a young girl's dress. Knives were drawn, and two men were stabbed in less than the time I am speaking. I just saved the life of one, just saved it by half an inch. A fine-looking Spaniard lay under a Moor, who had tripped him up in their quick way. The point of the knife had flashed through the Spaniard's shirt and his flesh was cut, before the swing of my stick–upwards luckily–had jerked the Moor off his body. If I had struck downwards, or a millionth part of a second later, the blade would have stood in the heart. But I knew those fellows by this time. The Moor lay senseless from the quick upper-cut on his temples, and the knife was quivering where the impulse had failed it.

Now if Petro and I held deliberate choice–"proairesis" Oxford calls it–not to be turned into knife-sheaths, our only chance of developing into action that undeniable process of "nous," was to be found in the policy, vulgarly called "cut and run." At a shrill signal, from ship and from shore, the Moors came swarming silently and swiftly. Their yellow slippers and coffee-coloured legs seemed set upon springs by excitement. Some of the Spaniards stood bravely by us, and with their aid we hurried the wounded man into our boat, and pushed off just in time. Unlike the Corsican peasants, our pursuers carried no fire-arms, and before they could get any, we were at safe distance.

Having sent for an English surgeon, we kept the poor sailor on board the yacht, until he was quite out of danger. We Britons are not, as a general rule, an over-grateful race; we hate to be under an obligation, and too often illustrate the great philosopher's saying, that the doer feels more good will than the receiver of a kindness. Moreover, the Spaniards, in the neighbourhood of the Rock, could hardly be expected to love us, even if we were accustomed, which it is needless to say we are not, to treat them with decent courtesy. Therefore I was surprised at the deep and warm gratitude of this wounded man. A thing that enhanced his debt to me–for life, in my opinion, is very little to owe–was that he loved a young girl, the one over whom they had quarrelled, and he was about to marry her.

Discovering who I was, for he knew nothing of me at first, he saw that he could be of no little service to me. The only obstacle was a solemn oath; but from this, he believed, he could soon obtain release. With an Englishman's honest and honourable repugnance to any breach of faith, I was long reluctant to encourage this absolution. But the thought of my helpless children, robbed of their inheritance, and, still worse, of a father's love, and dependant on the caprice of a superstitious villain, this, and the recollection of my desolating wrongs, overpowered all scruples. And is it not a wiser course, and more truly Christian, to port the helm than to cross the bows of another man's religion, at any rate so long as it be Christian also, though frogged in a pensioner's coat?

Being duly absolved–for which he would not allow me to pay–the Spanish sailor told me all he knew. He had been Lepardo's mate, on many a smuggling run, and in many an act of piracy off the coast of Barbary. But he had never liked his captain, no one ever did; though all the crew admired him as the cleverest man in the world. After the felucca was sold and her crew dispersed, the mate had followed for a while the fortunes of Lepardo. He told me things about him which I knew not how to believe. However, I will not repeat them, because they do not seem to bear upon my story. The name of my little girl he could not remember, for he was not at the christening, and she was always called the baby. Being a good-natured man he took kindly to the children, and told me anecdotes of them which brought the tears to my eyes.

After two or three months spent at Naples, they all left suddenly for Palermo, on account, as the mate believed, of my unexpected arrival; and here he lost sight of his commander, for tired by this time of an idle life, and seeing no chance of any more roving adventures, he accepted a berth in a brig bound for the Piræus, and now after many shifts and changes was first mate of a fruit vessel sailing from Zante to London. The most important part to me of all his communication was that, on their previous voyage, they had carried to England Lepardo Della Croce and my two dear children. That murderer and kidnapper had taken the lead in some conspiracy against the government of the Two Sicilies, and through the treachery of an accomplice had been obliged to fly for his life. Disguising himself he contrived to reach Gibraltar, and took refuge on English ground. He was now very poor and in great distress, but still clung to the children, of whom he appeared to be fond, and who believed him to be their father. The "Duo Brachiones" touching there, as usual, for supplies, Lepardo met his old mate ashore; and begged for a passage to England. They took him to London, and there of course lost sight of him. He was greatly altered, the mate said, from the Lepardo of old. Morose and reserved he had always been; but now misfortune had covered him with a skin-deep philosophy. But his eyes contracted and sparkled as of yore, whenever my name was mentioned; and the mate knew

what his intention was, in case he should find me a happy man. The simple mate was still more surprised at the alteration in my children; as pretty a pair, he said, as ever he set eyes on. But they were kept most jealously from the notice of the crew, and even from their ancient friend's attentions; they were never allowed to be on the deck, except when the berths were being cleaned. They seemed to fear their reputed father, a great deal more than they loved him.

Upon hearing this last particular I seized the mate by the hand, and felt something rise in my throat: I was so delighted to learn that the pirate had not succeeded in carrying nature by boarding. The next day I left Petro to see to the hardware business–to which we were bound by charter–while I set sail in the "Duo Brachiones" for the arms of my darling little ones.

CHAPTER XVIII.

They put me in the very hammock where that murderer of all my happiness had slept, and no wonder that I could find no rest there. Soon as I knew the reason, I was allowed to change, and crept into the little berth where my innocent pets had lain in each other's arms. Here I slept much better than a king, for I even fancied that it smelt of Lily. If little Lily, as she shall be called, whatever the rogues have christened her, if my little beauty–for that I am sure she must be–ever comes to light, when I am in my grave, remember one thing, Clara, you will find her breath and general fragrance just as her mother's were. Such things are hereditary, especially among women.

After a long and stormy passage, and a fortnight spent in repairing at Bordeaux, we passed the familiar Essex marshes by night, and were off the Custom House by the last day of the year. When that tedious work was over–talk as we please of the douane, our own is as bad as most of them–feeling quite out of my latitude, and not a bit like an Englishman, I betook myself to a tavern near London Bridge. There everything seemed new, and I could not walk the streets without yawing into the wrong tide. But one old London custom held its ground with time. Papers a week and a fortnight old still strayed about in the coffee-room. Being told that the journals of that day were "in hand," as they always are, I took up a weekly paper of some ten days back to yawn over it till supper time. It was too late for me to think of disturbing Peter Green by a sudden arrival, and so I had ordered a bed at this hotel.

The weekly gazette in my hand was one of those which use the shears with diligence and method. Under the heading "Provincial News," I found the following paragraph:–

"SEASONABLE BENEVOLENCE.–We understand that in these times of severe and unmerited pressure upon the agricultural interest–the true back-bone of old England–the head of one of our most ancient and respected county families has announced his intention of remitting to all his tenantry no less than twenty per cent. upon their rentals. He has also bespoken a lavish and most princely repast–shall we say dinner–to be provided on Christmas eve for every man, woman, and child upon his large domain. When we announce that mine host of the Elephant is to be major domo, and our respected townsman George Jenkins, who purchased as our readers are aware the gold medal ox at Smithfield, is to cater for the occasion, need we say anything more? At the risk of gratuitous insult to the intelligence of the county, we must subjoin that the honoured gentleman to whom we allude is Henry Valentine Vaughan, Esquire, of Vaughan Park. Is not such a man, the representative of time-honoured sentiments, and who to a distinguished degree adds the experience of continental travel, is not such a man, we ask, a thousand times fitter to express in the Senate the opinions and wishes of this great county, than the scion, we had almost said spawn, of the Manchester mushrooms, whom a Castle that shall be nameless is attempting to foist on the county? We pause for a reply.–*Gloucester Argus*."

My dear brother's distinguished degree was that of B.A. after a narrow escape from pluck. Clara, don't look offended. Your father had very good abilities, but spent most of his Oxford time in pigeon matches at the Weirs, and expeditions to Bagley wood, which later in life he would have looked upon as felonious.

This paltry puff would never have been reprinted by a London journal of eminence and influence, but for the suggestion at the end, which happened just to hit the sentiments of the more exalted editor. Now this weekly paper was sure to circulate among refugees from the continent, by reason of its well-known antipathy towards them; and there happened to be in this very number a violent tirade against our Government for displaying what we delight to call the mighty Ægis of England. I saw the danger at once, and my heart turned sick within me. My gay and harmless brother in the midst of his Christmas rejoicings, and a stealthy murderer creeping perhaps at that very moment towards him.

But even if it were so, was there not some chance of Lepardo discovering his mistake, when in the neighbourhood where the Vaughans were so well

known? Yes, some chance there was, but very little. Bound upon such an errand he would not dare to show himself, or to make any inquiries, even if they seemed needful. And the mention by that cursed gossip of what he called "continental travel"–your father's wedding tour–would banish all doubt of identity, had any been entertained. Even supposing that cold-blooded fiend should meet my poor brother, face to face, in the open daylight, it was not likely that he would be undeceived. Lepardo and I had met only once, and then in hot encounter. My brother was like me in figure, in face, and in voice; and though I was somewhat taller and much darker of complexion, the former difference would not attract attention, unless we stood side by side; the latter would of course be attributed to the effects of climate. From the gamekeeper's evidence, I am now inclined to believe that Lepardo, while lurking in the lower coppice, among the holly bushes, must have cast his evil eyes on your poor father's face, and convinced himself that he beheld his enemy.

Flurried and frightened, I looked at the date of the paper. It was twelve days old. Possibly I might yet be in time, for most likely the murderer would set out on foot, according to Corsican practice, with the travel-stone bound on his knee. Even if he had travelled in modern fashion, he would probably lurk and lie in ambush about the house, enduring hunger and cold and privation, until his moment came. Could I leave for Gloucester that night? No, the last train would have started, before I could get to Paddington. So I resolved to go by the morning express, which would take me to Gloucester by middle day.

After a sleepless night, I was up betimes in the morning, and went through the form of breakfast while the cab was sent for. Presently a waiter came in with the morning papers, the papers of New Year's-day, 1843. What I saw and what my feelings were, you, my poor child, can too well imagine. That day I could not bear to go. It was cowardly of me, and perhaps unmanly; but I could not face your mother's grief and the desolate household. Therefore I persuaded myself that I had discharged my duty, by visiting all the London police stations, and leaving the best description I could give of Lepardo. The following day I left London, and arrived, as perhaps you remember, long after dark, and during a heavy fall of snow. There at the very threshold I began amiss with you, for I outraged your childish pride by mistaking you for the housekeeper's daughter. With a well-born child's high self-esteem, and making no allowance for the dim light, you believed it to be a sham intended to mortify you; and it poisoned your heart towards me. But you were wholly mistaken. My mind was full of your mother and of the terrible blow to her; to you, whom I had never seen, and scarcely even heard of, I never gave a thought; except the mistaken one that you were not old enough to be sensible of your loss. Little did I imagine what a fount of resolute will, and deep feeling, found a vent in the kicks and screams of the large-eyed minnikin,

that would not be ordered away.

You are entitled, Clara, to know all that I have done towards the discovery of your father's assassin, and all that I can tell to aid your own pursuit. The hair found in your mother's grasp was beyond a doubt Lepardo's; that laid upon your father's bosom was, of course, my Lily's. It was to show that her supposed seduction had been expiated. The one thing that most surprised me was that the murderer left no token, no symbol of himself. In a Vendetta murder they almost always do, as a mark of triumph and a gage to the victim's family. Hence I believed that Signor Dezio was not killed in Vendetta, but by his nephew for gain. How Lepardo got into the house I have no idea, or rather I had none, until you told me of the secret passage, and Mrs. Daldy's entrance. Till then I always thought that he had clambered up, as he did at Veduta tower. But unless there was a traitor in the household, he must have been there more than once, to have known so well your father's sleeping room.

It would have been waste of time for me to concern myself about the county police. That body of well-conducted navvies–Lepardo would have outwitted them, when he was five years old. Neither did I meddle with the coroner and his jury, but left them to their own devices and indigenous intellect. These displayed themselves in much puzzle-headed cross-questioning, sagacious looks, and nods, and winks of acute reservation. It was, as most often it is, a bulldog after a hare. Lepardo might safely have been in the midst of them, asked for a chair, and made suggestions. as "amicus curiæ."

But with the London police it was somewhat different. They showed some little acumen, but their fundamental error is this–they pride themselves on their intelligence. No man of any real depth ever does such a thing as this. He knows very well that whatever he is, there are half a million more so; that the age of exceptional intellects expired, at least in this country, with Mr. Edmund Burke, and is not likely to rise from the dead. Now we are all pretty much good useful clods on a level: education, like all good husbandry, tends to pulverisation; and if the collective produce is greater, let us be at once thankful and humble.

The London police, being proud of their intelligence, declared that there could be no doubt about their catching the criminal. They laughed at my belief that he might walk through the midst of them, while they would touch their hats to him, and beg him to look after his handkerchief. At one time, I think, they were really on his track, and I went to London, and stayed there, and did my best to help them. But they were all too late; Lepardo, if he it were, had left for Paris the week before. To Paris I followed, but found no trace of him there. Then I went on to Corsica, thinking it likely that he would return to his old piratical ways. Moreover, I wanted to see how my children's estates were managed, and to revisit St. Katharine's.

All was calm and peaceful. Lily's grave and her father's were blended in one rich herbage. There all the bloom of my life was drooping, like the yellow mountain-rose, whence if a single flower be plucked, all the other blossoms fall.

Count Gaffori received me kindly. His daughter was married and had two children, who played where Lily's boy and girl should by rights be playing. I could not bear it, and came away, having nothing now to care for. Wherever I went the world seemed much of a muchness to me; and to my own misfortunes the blood of my brother was added. I found the "Lilyflower" still under worthy Petro, and returned in her to England, and she still is mine. Petro would not come; he was too true a Corsican to leave the beloved island now his hair was grey. So I set him up at Calvi with a vessel of his own, and now and then I receive a letter from good Marcantonia. They have promised to watch for the reappearance of our fearful enemy; and Petro has sworn to shoot him, if ever he gets a chance.

After my return to England, I set to work with all my energy to improve this property. In this, if in nothing else, I have thoroughly succeeded. Much opposition I had to encounter; for the tenants regarded me as a mere interloper, and their hearts were with you and your mother. When I call them together to-morrow, as I intend to do, abandon all my right, title, and interest, and declare you their Signora, it is my firm belief that they will hardly think me worth cursing before they worship you. This old retainership is a thing to be proud and yet ashamed of. It is a folly that makes one glory in being a fool. Why, after you left for Devonshire (much, as you know, against my will), I could not ride out without being insulted, and even the boys called me "Jonathan Wild." But this was due, in some measure, to your father's gay geniality, and hearty good-will to all men, contrasted with my satiric and moody reserve. Neither were your youth, and sex, and helplessness, lost upon that chivalrous being–if he only knew his chivalry–the sturdy English yeoman.

Why did I let you go? Well, I believe it was one of the many mistakes of my life; but I had a number of reasons, though personal dislike of you was not, as you thought, one of them. No, my child, I have never disliked you; not even on the night when you came and denounced me, with the dagger in your hand. I must indeed have been worse than I am, if I could have nourished ill-will against a young thing, whom I had made an orphan. By some instinct, you knew from the first that the deed was mine, although I was not the doer. I would have loved you, if you would have let me, my heart yearned so over children. But of my reason for letting you go, the chiefest perhaps–setting aside that I could not stop you–was this consideration. For years I had longed, and craved in my heart of hearts, to tell your mother all, and obtain her gentle forgiveness. But any allusion–no matter how veiled and mantled–to the story of her loss threw her, as you know well, into a most peculiar state, wherein all the powers of mind and body seemed

to be quite suspended. With a man's usual roughness of prescription for the more delicate sex, I believed firmly that total change of living, and air, and place, and habits, would relax this wonderful closure, secure my forgiveness, and re-establish her health. The shock I received at her death was almost as terrible as when my brother died. When I stood beside you at her grave, I was come with the full intention of telling you all my story, and begging you to return with me, and live once more in your father's house. But your behaviour to me was so cold and contemptuous, that I forgot my crushing debt to you; and humiliation became, for the moment, impossible. I meant, however, to have written to you that evening, before you should leave the village; but (as you now are aware) that very evening, I was smitten helpless. Partially recovering, after months of illness, I was deeply distressed to find that you had left your good friends in Devonshire, and were gone, my informants could not say whither. Neither had I learned your whereabouts up to the time of my last illness, when I was making inquiries, of which your enemy reaped the benefit. For the rest, you know that I never meant to rob you of your inheritance, though bigoted nonsense enables me. To-morrow, please God, I will put it out of my power to do so. Mrs. Daldy's motive you have long since perceived. Failing my children, and the attainted Lepardo, her son is the heir to all the lands of the Della Croce. She has held me much in her power, by her knowledge of parts of my history. Henry's baptismal entry, as well as that of my marriage, was in the packet she stole. One word more, my darling–and from an old man, who has wandered and suffered much, you will not think it impertinent. Leave your revenge to God. In His way–which we call wonderful, because the steps are unseen–He will accomplish it for you, as righteousness demands. Any interference of ours is a worm-cast in His avenue. Though I am stricken and dying, He, if so pleases Him, will bring me my children before I die, that I may bless Him, and tell my Lily."

I fell upon the old man's neck–old he was, though not in years–and as I wept I kissed him. How could I have wronged him so, and how could I keep myself from loving one so long unhappy? If sorrow be the sponge of sin, his fault was wiped away.

CLARA VAUGHAN

BOOK V.

CHAPTER I.

At this time and place, I, Clara Vaughan, leap from the pillion of my Uncle's pensive mule, and am upon the curb-stone of my own strange life again. How I wandered with him through the olive groves of Corsica, how I wept for his loving Lily, that ancient Signor, and the stolen babes; and how, beyond the vomito of words, I loathed that fiend who had injured whom or what most I know not, unless it were his own soul, if he had any, and for God's sake I hope he had–all this, though I am too weak of language, will, perhaps, be understood.

To myself I would hardly confess the interest I could not discard in the pure and constant love of that impassioned pair; for what had I any longer to do with Pyramus and Thisbe? No more of love for me. You will not see me droop, and fret, and turn to a mossy green. No nonsense of that sort for me: I have a loop at either side entitled self-respect, which will keep my skirt from draggling. Neither will I rush into the opposite extreme, pronounce all love a bubble because my own has burst, take to low-necked dresses, and admire cats more than babies. No; I am only eighteen, not yet eighteen and a half; I have loved with all my heart, and a free true heart it is, albeit a hot and haughty one; if it be despised, outraged, and made nothing of, though I can never transfer, I will not turn it sour. The world is every whit as fair, children are quite as pretty, flowers have as rich a scent, and goodness as pure a charm, as if that silly maiden Clara had not leaped before she looked. And yet how I wish that I could only think so.

Before I go on with my tale, I must recur to one or two little matters, that everything may be as clear as it lies in my power to make it. For although I am but a "female," as Inspector Cutting observed, I am doing my best to make everything as clear as if told by a male.

In the first place then, when my Uncle had recovered from the exertion of telling his tale, I acquainted him with my discovery of the letters upon the bed-hangings. They confirmed his account of the fearful Vendetta usages, and explained the point which had been to him most mysterious.

Secondly, as to the anonymous letter which had led me first to London; like the detective policeman, he now attached but little importance to it. He had done his best, at the time, to trace the writer and follow the clue, if there were any. But he had met with no success. His reason for passing it on to me, was

that he hoped to create some diversion of my thought, some break in the clouds of my sorrow.

Next, to show the full meaning of Mrs. Daldy's manoeuvres. Through her connexion–which she had carefully cultivated, when it began to seem worth her while–with her husband's kindred near Genoa, she had learned some portions of my poor Uncle's history; for, as he himself observed, the islanders are much addicted to gossip, as indeed all islanders are, and continentals too for that matter, especially in hot climates. Now there is no lack of intercourse between the Balagna and Genoa. Of course our chastened hypocrite made the most of her knowledge in a hundred ways, and by her sham sympathy and pretended aid–for up to the time of his illness the desolate father still sought and sought–she even secured some little influence over her brother-in-law. How often is it so: though we know people to be false, we do not believe, when our hearts are concerned, that they are so false to us. Moreover, when she found him shattered in body and mind by paralysis, she commenced an active bombardment, pulling out the tompions from every gun of mock religion. But, as in her treatment of me, she displayed, in spite of all her experience and trials, a sad ignorance of unregenerate human nature. My Uncle was not the man, palsied or no, to be terrified by a Calvinist: and he knew too much of her early days, and certain doings at Baden, to identify her at present with the angel that stands in the sun. And this prison-eyed mole made another mistake. Not content with one good gallery, she must needs work two runs, side by side, in a very mealy soil. The result was of course that they ran into one, and she had to dig her way out. If she had worked, heart and soul, for my Uncle's money only, which he rightly regarded as his own, and at his own disposal, I believe she might have got most of it. At any rate, under the will which I caught her carrying off, she was to take half of the large sum which he had laid by; I mean if his children did not come to light, and prove their legitimacy. But twenty-five thousand pounds would be nothing to her dear son, who had inherited his father's extravagance, or to herself, who loved high play. Therefore, believing me out of the field, she began to plot for the Vaughan estate as well, and furthermore for the magnificent property in Corsica. Of the Vaughan estates she had no chance–albeit she had the impudence to propose a compromise with me–of Veduta tower she had some prospect, if the right heirs, the poor children, should never appear, or establish their claim, and if she could procure the outlawry of Lepardo.

Believing my Uncle to be dying by inches, she made a bold stroke for possession of the most important documents; and, but for Giudice and me, no doubt she would have succeeded. But she had dashed far out of her depth, and had little chance now of reaching the coveted land. I hope she felt that everything was ordered for her good.

Another point which seems to require some explanation, is the discovery by the assassin of the secret entrance, an access quite unknown to the family, the servants, or any other person, except, at a later time, Mrs. Daldy. The house, as I said before, was built upon the site and partly embodied the fabric of a still more ancient structure. Probably these narrow stairs, now enclosed in the basement of the eastern wall, had saved many a ripe priest from reeling, in the time of the Plantagenets. They led, I think, from the ancient chapel, long since destroyed, to the chaplain's room, and perhaps had been reopened secretly during the great rebellion, when the Vaughans were in hot trouble. Beatrice Vaughan, the cavalier's child, who was now supposed to begin her ghost walk at the eastern window, glided probably down this staircase, when, as the legend relates, she escaped mysteriously from the house, in her father's absence, roused the tenants, and surprised the Roundhead garrison in their beds. The house was soon retaken, and Beatrice, in her youthful beauty, given up to the brutal soldiers. She snapped a pistol at the Puritan officer, and flew like a bird along this corridor. At the end, while trying perhaps to draw the old oak slide–though nothing was said of this–she was caught by the gloating fanatics, and stabbed herself on the spot rather than yield to dishonour. The poor maiden's tomb is in the church, not far from the chancel arch, with some lines of quaint Latin upon it. Her lover, Sir William Desborough, slit that Puritan officer's nose and cut off both his ears. I wonder that he let him off so lightly; but perhaps it was all he was worth. Major Cecil Vaughan married again, and the direct line was re-established.

The chapel well, as it was called, dark and overhung with ivy, was a spring of limpid icy crystal, spanned by and forming a deep alcove in the ancient chapel wall, which, partly for its sake, and partly as a buttress for the east end of the house, had been left still standing. This old well had long time been disused, hiding, as it did, in a wild and neglected corner out of sight from the terrace walk; and the gardeners, who found the pump less troublesome, had condemned the water as too cold for their plants. The mouth, with its tangled veil of ivy and periwinkle, was also masked by a pile of the chapel ruins, now dignified with the name of a rockwork. Some steps of jagged stone led through the low black archway to the crouching water, which was so clear that it seemed to doubt which was itself and which was stone.

This peaceful, cold, unruffled well, formed the antechamber to the murderer's passage. For on the right-hand side, not to be seen in the darkness, and the sublustrous confusion, by any common eye, was a small niche and footing-place not a yard above the water. It needed some nerve and vigour to spring from the lowest stepping-stone sideways to this scarcely visible ledge. None, of the few whose eyes were good enough to espy it, would be tempted to hazard the leap, unless they knew or suspected that the facing would yield to the foot, that

it was in fact a small door purposely coloured and jointed like the slimy green of the masonry. In this well the murderer must have lurked; and he might have done so from one year's end to another. There with the craft of his devilish race–my Uncle may admire them, but not I–and with their wonderful powers of sight, he must have found this entrance, and rejoiced in his hellish heart.

As for Mrs. Daldy, she found it out at the other end, most likely. Unless my memory fails me, I spoke long ago of some boards which sounded hollow to the ring of my childish knuckles. These were in the skirting–if that be the proper name for it–under the centre of the great oriel window. The oak slides, when pressed from below, ran in a groove with but little noise, and without much force being used: but it required some strength to move them on the side of the corridor. It was the sound of these sliding boards which had first drawn Judy's notice: but as they were in deep shadow, I neither perceived the opening, nor gave him the opportunity. That woman would never have dreamed of the thing, if she had not surprised me one day when I was prying about there; she must have returned alone, and being, as we have seen, a superior cabinet-maker, discovered the secret which baffled me. As I did not want Judy to catch cold by watching there any longer, I had this horrible passage walled up at either end, and built across in the middle.

Having thus made good my arrears, I am at liberty to proceed. When my Uncle had paused from his many sorrows, which he did with a mellow dignity not yet understood by me; and when I, in the fervour of youth, had offered much comfort kindly received, but far better let alone, I asked him for one thing only:–the most minute and accurate description he could give of that Lepardo Della Croce. His answer was as follows:–

"My dear, I have seen him once only, and that more than twenty years ago, and in an interview of some excitement"–I should think so indeed, when one tried to kill the other–"but I will describe him to the best of my recollection. He is rather a tall man, at least of about my own height, but more lightly built than myself. His hands and feet are remarkably small and elegant. His face is of the true Italian type, a keen oval with a straight nose, and plenty of width between the eyes, which are large and very dark. His forehead is not massive, but well-formed, and much whiter than the rest of his face. The expression of his countenance is that of shrewdness and versatility, with a quickness eager to save both you and himself from the trouble of completing your sentence. But all this is common enough. One thing I saw, or fancied, which is not quite so common. As I dealt him that blow with my fist, my eyes for one flash met his, and his leaped towards one another, as if he had a strong cast in them. Before that, and afterwards too, there was no appearance of any distortion: if there were any at that moment, it arose from the start of terror or fury jerking the muscles

awry. His voice is flexible and persuasive, and soft as a serpent-charmer's. I think he must be a most arrogant man; profoundly convinced of his own abilities, but seldom caring to vindicate them. Just the man to get on in the world, if he were only what is called respectable. Just the man to break a woman's heart, and crush the spirit of a meek and humble child. Ah, I would forgive him his sins against me, though not his wrongs towards you, if I could only learn that he had been kind to my children."

This description dwelt on my mind for days and days of thinking. It did not altogether apply to the man whom I had observed so closely at the meeting of the conspirators. That man was of middle height, and though his face was oval, there was scarcely the average width between the eyes. And he did not seem to me like an arrogant man, cold except when excited; but rather of a hasty, impassioned nature, sure to do its utmost in trifles. Could it be that I had watched and hated the wrong man? It might be so; and it was not unlikely that Mr. Cutting himself knew not which was the guilty one. Like most of the London policemen–my Uncle had taught me this–he was too proud of his sagacity to be in truth very sagacious. Experience he had, and all that; but he would not have done in Paris. The real depth, that goes below, and yet allows for the depth of another, must be in the nature, can rarely exist in a small one, and in a large one is seldom worked but for theoretical purposes. Therefore shallow men overreach in daily life, and fancy they have blinded those who know them thoroughly, and know themselves as well.

So far as my experience goes, large-natured men abhor cunning so much, that they fear to work the depth of their own intelligence, because it seems akin to it. So they are cheated every day, as a strong man yields to the push of a child; and the fools who cheat them chuckle in the idea that they have done it by fine sagacity, and without the victim's knowledge.

CHAPTER II.

At my earnest entreaty, the idea of assembling the tenants especially was allowed to drop, and I was to be inducted at the Midsummer dinner, which was very near at hand. A deed had been prepared by the London solicitors, reciting the facts and assuring all the estate to me, as my father's proper heiress. My Uncle also desired to settle upon me all the personal property, except a sum of 10,000*l.*, which he

would reserve for his children, to enable them, if ever they should be found, to establish their claims in Corsica: then if the son obtained his rights, his sister was to have the money with all expenditure made good by him. But I would not hear of it. It would have made me a rogue. By his skill and economy, my Uncle, during the nine years of his management, had saved more than 50,000*l.* from the proceeds of the estate. But he had added at least an equal amount to the value of the land, by carrying out most judiciously the improvements begun by my father; and the whole was now considered the best-managed estate in Gloucestershire.

Therefore, when he abandoned his legal right, in the most honourable manner, it would have been horribly shabby and unlike a Vaughan, to hold him accountable for the back rents. I begged him to leave the whole of it for the benefit of his poor children, requesting only, and unnecessarily, that the hypocrite might not have sixpence. Another thing I entreated, that he would prolong his guardianship, and stewardship, if his health allowed it, until I should be of age, that is to say, for two years and a half. Seeing how earnestly I desired it, he undertook to do so, though he made the promise with a melancholy smile, adding that he hoped his children would be found ere then, if he was to see them at all.

When the rent-dinner was over, and the glasses had been replaced, my Uncle, who had not been there as usual, led me into the great old hall. Feeble as he was, he entered with a grace and courtesy not always to be discovered in the mien of princes. The supper–as the farmers called it–had not begun till six o'clock; and now the evening sunshine glanced through the western window, and between the bunches of stoning grapes into the narrow doorway, stealing in from the Vinery with sandals of leafy pattern. The hall was decked with roses, no other flower but roses; yet who could want any other, when every known rose was there? Even the bright yellow blossoms of the Corsican rock-rose, a plant so sensitive that to steal one flower is to kill all the rest. From time out of mind, some feudal custom of tenure by the rose had been handed down in our family.

All the guests rose as we passed, which made me rather nervous, albeit I knew every one of them from my childhood up. Then my Uncle, leaning on me, spoke a few words from the step, plain and simple words without flourish or pretence. What he said was known long since, and had been thoroughly discussed in every house of the village. He finished by setting me in the black oak chair of state–which he had never used–and presenting me with a rose; then he turned round and proposed my health. When I took the rose, an exquisite crested moss, kissed it and placed it in my bosom, according to the usage, such a shout arose, such an English hurrah, that it must have echoed to the other bank of the distant Severn. At first I was quite frightened, then I burst into tears as I thought of him whose chair I sat in, whose memory still was echoing in that mighty shout. It was not only love of right, or sympathy with a helpless girl, that moved those

honest bosoms, but the remembrance of him who had been so pleasant to them, humble, kind and just, in one word, a gentleman.

But as they came up, one by one, and begged to take my hand, and wished me joy and long life with all their hearts, I found that I was right in one thing; I knew them better than my Uncle did. Instead of being rude or cold to him, as he expected, they almost overwhelmed him with praise and admiration. But all this I must not dwell on, for my story hurries hence, and its path is not through roses.

Annie Franks, who still was with us, and did not mean to go until she had finished all the Froissart novels, and such a dear good girl she was, that we hoped they would last for ever, Annie Franks brought me next day two letters of aspect strange to "good society." One I knew at a glance to be from Tossil's Barton, though the flourishes were amazing, and the lead-pencil lines rubbed out. The other, a work of far less ambition and industry, was an utter stranger; so of course I took it first. Nevertheless, I will treat of it last, because it opens the stormy era.

Dear Sally's gossip is not to be served up whole. Even if it were interesting to others as to me, my space permits no dalliance with farm-yards, no idyls of Timothy Badcock, nay, nor even the stern iambics of Ebenezer Dawe. Only to be just and clear, I may not slur it all. The direction was remarkable. The farmer was always afraid of not being duly explicit, for he believed that letters were delivered throughout England as in the parish of Trentisoe; where all, except those for the parson and Tossil's Barton farm, were set upside down in the window at Pewter Will's, the most public-house in the place. The idea was ingenious, and, I believe, original–having been suggested by the Queen's boy, whose head Mrs. Huxtable punched. It was that no one could read the name upside down, except the owner of the name and therefore of the letter. Sound or not, I cannot say, having had no experience; but there was this to be said for it, that no one would try the puzzle who did not expect a letter, unless indeed he were of precocious genius, and from that Trentisoe was quite safe.

Upon the present "papper-scrawl," after a long description of me, patronymical, local, and personal, the following injunctions and menaces were added, "Not be stuck tops I turve I on no account in no public house. She be in her own house now again, thank God and dang them as turned her out I say, so mind you carr it there. A deal of money there be in it, and no fear of Joe because he knows it, and there lives a man in Gloucestershire knows me well by the name of Thomas Henwood. Best look sharp I say. I be up to every one of you. John Huxtable his name, no mark this time. God save the queen."

So the farmer had actually learned to write, although as yet to a strictly limited extent. Of course he had not written any of the above except his name; but that was his, and did him credit, though it nearly described a circle.

After the warmest congratulations and returning the five-pound note, which I had sent for interest, with an indignant inquiry from father whether I took him for a Jew, and after several anecdotes and some histories of butter sold at Ilfracombe market, Sally proceeded thus:

"Now what do you think, Miss Clara dear? No you never would guess as long as you live–father are going to London town, and me, and Jack, and Beany Dawe. None of us have slept two grunts of a pig, ever since it were made up, only father, and he always sleep without turning. Now mind if I tell you all about it, you must not tell again, Miss Clara, because there is ever so much money upon it, and we do hear they have put it on some London paper and no business of theirs. Two great gentlefolks, the greatest of any about these parts, have been and made up a bet for my father to wrestle along with a great big chap as they calls the North Country champion. Seems as some great Northern lord was boasting in London one dinner-time, Speaker's dinner they called it because there were a deaf and dumb dinner next day, this here great lord was telling up as how Sam Richardson were the strongest man in the world. So our Sir Arthur spake up for Devonshire, and laid him a quart-pot full of sovereigns as he would find a better man in the West country. And so I don't know the rights of it, nor father nor mother either, but it was made up atwixt them that Farmer Huxtable, that's my father, Miss, should try this great North country chap at the time of the great Xabition–you never showed me the way to spell it, Miss, so I go by the light of nature, as you used to say, Miss–and should take best of three falls for 200*l.* a side. That will be 400*l.* for us, when father gets it, and all his expenses paid, and they say the other folk won't allow no kicking, so he must be a soft-shelled chap; but father feel no call to hurt him, if so be he can help it. Mother don't want father to go, but he say he be bound for the honour of old Devonshire, or maybe they will take a man not good enough to make a standard.

And please, Miss, when we brings home the money, I be to go to Miss Bowden's, in Boutport Street, and our Jack to be put to a day-school not more than six miles away, and then I hope he know himself, and look higher than that minx of a Tabby Badcock. What do you think, Miss Clara, you would never believe it I know, but only a week ago last Tuesday I come sudden round the corner, and catched her a kissing of our Jack in the shed there by the shoot. And after all you taught her, Miss! Jack he ran away, as red as mangawazzle, but that brazen slut, there she stand with her legs out, as innocent as a picture. Never a word I said, but with no more to do I put her head in the calves' stommick as we makes the cheese with, in a bucket handy. It would have done you good to see her Miss, she did cry so hard, and she smell of it for a week, and it cure our Jack, up to Sunday anyhow. Mother come out at the noise, but her see that she deserve it, and the runnet was no account, except for the pigs, because it were gone by. I

hope she know her manners now and her spear in life with her sheep's eyes, and not come trying to catch any of my family.

Well, Miss Clara please, father want mother to go; but no, say she, "with all they"–she ought to have said "them" Miss, now hadn't she ought?–"with all they young pigs, and the brown cow expecting every day, and Suke no head at all, and all the chillers and little Clara"–she call her "Clara" now, Miss,–"why farmer what be thinking of?" Then father rub the nose of him, you know the way he do it, Miss, and he say, "I must have some one. London be such a wicked place." Mother look up very sharp at that, and say quite peart, "take your daughter, farmer Huxtable, if you wants to be kept respectable." So I be to go Miss; and go I wouldn't without Jack and leave him along of that sly cat Tabby, and her got sweet again now; besides I want him to choose a knife I promised him, same as he saw to Coom one time, if he wouldn't let Tabby kiss him with seven blades and a corkscrew, and I'll give eighteen pence for it, that I will. And Beany Dawe must go to show us the way about, and see as they doesn't cheat us, because his father was once to London town, and told him a power about it.

If you please, Miss Clara, father be put in training as they call it in these parts, all the same as a horse. He run up and down Breakneck hill, with the best bed on his back, nine times every day, and he don't drink no cider, no nor beer, nor gin and water, and mother hardly know him, he be come so clear in the skin; but he say his hand shake still from the time I taught him to write, and please, Miss, what do you think of the way he is going to sign this? I can't get him to put his thumb right, no nor his middle finger, and he stick his elbow out every bit as bad as Tabby, and he say he like the pot-hooks over the fire best, but for all that I believe I shall make a scholard of him, particular when he give up wrestling, which he have sworn to do if he throw this Cumberland chap, and stick to his Bible and Prayer-book.

Please, Miss, not to be offended, but excuse us asking if you like to see the great wrestling. Father say no, it would not be fitty, and that be the worst of being a gentlefolk; but mother say what harm, and she be sure the farmer do it twice as well with you there, and you shall have the best seat in the place next to the two judges, and such a pretty handkerchief they sent down all spotted the same as a Guernsey cow, how the people in church did stare at me, and you shall have two of the best, Miss, but I am afraid it be making too bold; but you never see any wrestling, Miss, and I am sure you would enjoy it so. It take place in the copandhagen fields, next Saturday week. Do come, Miss Clara dear, it will do you so much good, and you see father, and me, and Jack, and Beany Dawe."

I need recount no more of poor Sally's soft persuasions. The other letter was of a different vein:–

"HONOURED Miss,–Balak and me after a deal of trouble and labouring night and day and throwing up our vacation has at last succeeded in finding you knows who. Personal interview will oblige, earliest inconvenience. No more at present not being safe on paper, from your most obedient servants and suitors

BALAAM AND BALAK–you knows who.–

Poscrip.–Balak says a sharp young lady quite sure to know what is right, but for fear of accidents please a little of the ready will oblige, large families both of us has and it do take a deal of beer more than our proper vacation no one would guess unless they was to try and bad beer too a deal of it. For self and partner.–BALAAM."

CHAPTER III.

When my Uncle saw that letter, he declared that he would go to London with me. No power on earth should prevent him. Not even his self-willed Clara. It was not revenge he wanted: even though it were for his innocent brother, whose wrongs he could not pardon. No, if the small-minded wretch who had spent his life in destroying a fellow-creature's, if that contemptible miscreant lay at his feet to-morrow, he would not plant foot upon him; but forgive him heartily, if he had the grace to desire it. But for his children,–for them he must go to London. Only let him see them once before he died. No torpid limbs for him. Who said he was old–and he only forty-seven?

One thing seemed rather strange to me. He longed, yearned I should say, to look upon his little Lily even more than on the child he knew, his son, his first-born Harry. "Why, Clara," he used to say, "she is nearly as old as you, and you are a full-grown girl. On the 21st of this month"–it was now July–"she will be eighteen; I can hardly believe it. I wonder what she is like. Most likely she takes after her lovely mother. No doubt of it, I should say. Don't you think so, Clara?"

"Of course, Uncle," I would reply, knowing nothing at all about it, "of course she does. How I should like to see her."

Perhaps fifty times a day, he would ask for my opinion, and I would deliver it firmly, perhaps in the very same words and without a shade of misgiving; and though of no value whatever, it seemed to comfort him every time. But the prolonged excitement, and the stress of imagination exerted on Lily junior, told upon him rapidly in his worn and weak condition. Longing for his company, as-

sistance, and advice, I waited from day to day, even at the risk of leaving Balaam and Balak without good beer. All this time, my imagination was busy with weak surmises, faint suspicions, and tangled recollections.

At last, I could delay no longer. Tuesday was the latest day I could consent to wait for, and on the Monday my Uncle was more nervous and weak than ever. It was too plain that he must not attempt the journey, and that the long suspense was impairing his feeble health. So for once I showed some decision–which seemed to have failed me of late–without telling him any more about it, I got everything ready, and appeared at his bedroom door, only to say "Good bye." Annie Franks, who was going with me, for a short visit to her father, hung back in some amazement, doubting whether she had any right to be there, and dragged off her legs by the coil of my strong will. My poor Uncle seemed quite taken aback; but as it could not be helped, he speedily made up his mind to it. "The carriage was at the door;" which announcement to English minds precludes all further argument.

"Good bye, Uncle dear," I cried, as cheerily as I could, "I shall be back by the end of the week and bring your Lily with me. Give me a good kiss for her, and now another for myself."

He was sitting up in the bed, with a Cashmere dressing-gown on, and poring over some relics of olden time.

"Good bye, my darling, and don't be long away. They have robbed me enough already."

After giving Judy the strictest orders, I hurried off in fear and hope, doubtful whether I ought to go. Annie lingered and gave him a kiss, for she was very fond of him. He whispered something about me, which I did not stop to hear, for I wanted to leave him in good spirits.

After a rapid journey, I saw dear Annie safe in the arms of her father and mother, and found Mrs. Shelfer at home, and in capital spirits, all the birds, &c. well, and no distress in the house. Charley was doing wonders, wonders, my good friend, sticking to his work, yes, yes, and not inside the public house for the best part of the week. Leastways so he said, and it would not do to contradict him. And she really did believe there were only three bills over-due!

My little rooms were snug and quiet, and the dust not more than half an inch thick. Mrs. Shelfer used to say that dusting furniture was the worst thing in the world to wear it out. According to her theory, the dust excluded the air, especially from the joints, and prevented the fly-blows coming. However, I made her come up and furbish, while I went out to post a letter for Messrs. Balaam and Balak, requesting them to visit me in the morning.

When things were set to rights a little, and air, which Mrs. Shelfer hated, flowed in from either balcony, I bought a fine crab and some Sally Lunns, and

begged for the pleasure of my landlady's company at tea. This she gladly gave me, for the little woman loved nothing better than sucking the hairy legs of a crab. But she was so overcome by the rumours of my wealth, that she even feared to eject the pieces in her ordinary manner, and the front rail of her chair was like the beam of a balance. Infinitely rather would I be poor myself, than have people ceremonious to me because I am not poor; and to tell the honest truth, I believe there is a vein of very low blood in me, which blushes at the sense of riches and position. Why should I have every luxury, that is if I choose to have it, while men and women of a thousand times my mind, and soul, and heart, spend their precious lives in earning the value of their coffins?

This thought has wearied many a mind of pure aerial flight, compared whereto my weak departures are but the hops of a flea; so I lose the imago, but catch the larva, upon the nettle, practice. Mrs. Shelfer is soon at ease; and we talk of the price of cat's meat, and how dear sausages are, and laugh–myself with sorrow–over the bygone days, when dripping played the role of butter, and Judy would not take a bone because he thought I wanted it.

Then we talk over the news. Miss Idols had been there, bless her sweet face, yes, ever so many times, to look for letters, or to hear tidings of me. But she was not one bit like herself. She never teased the poor little woman now; the poor little woman wished very much she would. Oh, I should hardly know her. She did not know which bird it was that had the wooden leg, and had forgotten the difference between a meal-worm and a lob. And she did not care which way she rubbed the ears of the marmoset. Mrs. Shelfer believed, but for the world it must not be told again, that Isola was deeply in love, unrequited love, perhaps one of the weteranarian gents. They did say they had some stuff as would lead a girl like a horse. But whatever it was, Mrs. Shelfer only knew that she could not get at the rights of it. Girls had grown so cunning now-a-days, what with the great supernatural exhibition, and the hats they had taken to wear flat on the tops of their heads, not at all what they used to be when she and Charley were young. Then a young woman was not afraid of showing what her neck was like; now she tucked it in cotton wool like a canary's egg. And what were they the better, sly minxes? She saw enough of it in the Square garden, and them showing their little sisters' legs for patterns of their own, oh fie!"

"Come, Mrs. Shelfer, no scandal, if you please. What news of your Uncle John?"

"Ah, Miss, you must ask the sharks, and the lobsters, and the big sea-serpent. They do say, down at Wapping, that the ship was cast away among the cannibal islands, and the people ate a policeman, and he upon his promotion. What a pity, what a pity! And his coat four and sixpence a yard, ready shrunk! But them natives is outrageous."

"Nonsense, Patty, I don't believe a word of it. Sailors are dreadful story-tellers, ever since the days of Sindbad. Has any one besides Miss Isola, Mrs. Elton, or any one, been here to ask for me?"

"No, Miss, Mr. Conrad never come after the day you served him so dreadful; and Miss Idols say he went back and spoiled 300*l.* worth of work; but that great lady with the red plush breeches, and the pink silk stockings, and the baker's shop in their hair, she been here twice last week, and left a letter for you. And Balaam been here several times, and Balak along of him; but I banged the door on them both, now I hear they be out of the business, and a nice young man set up who don't bother about the gun."

"Lady Cranberry's letter may lie there, and go back the next time Ann Maples comes. But the bailiffs I must see. If they come to-morrow, let them in immediately. And how are all my friends at the Mews?"

Her reply would fill a chapter, so I will not enter upon it, but go to bed and miss the sound of dear Judy's tail at the door. In the first course of my dreams, Mr. Shelfer passed on his bedward road, having politely taken his shoes off at the bottom of the stairs; in doing which he made at least three times the noise his shodden feet would have inflicted.

In the morning I took my old walk round the Square, and then sat down and tried to be patient until the bailiffs should come. Of course I did not mean to go to my darling Isola, nor even to let her know that I was so near at hand, although my heart was burning to see her sweet face again. I even kept away from the window, though I wanted to watch for the bailiffs, and strictly ordered Mrs. Shelfer not to tell her, if she should call, a word about my being there. However, it was all in vain. Mr. Shelfer went out after breakfast to his play-work in the Square, and the smell of his pipe invaded my little room. I think he must have left the front door open; at any rate I heard, all of a sudden, a quick patter of running feet, and such a crying and sobbing, and Mrs. Shelfer hurrying out to meet it.

"You can't, Miss, you can't indeed–not for a thousand pounds. The rooms are let, I tell you, and you can't go up. Oh dear, oh dear, whatever am I to do?"

"Patty, I *will* go up. I don't care who's there. My heart is breaking, and I *will* die on my darling's bed. If you stand there, I'll push you. Out of the way, I tell you." And up flew Idols, in a perfect mess of tears. What could I do but fly to meet her, and hug my only pet? What with her passion of grief, and sudden joy, at seeing me, she fainted away in my arms. I got her somehow to the sofa, and kissed her into her senses again. When she came to herself, and felt sure it was not a dream, she nestled into my bosom, as if I had been her husband, and stole long glances at me to see whether I was offended. Her pretty cloak lay on the floor, and her hat beneath the table. For a long time she sobbed and trembled

so that she could not say a word, while I kept on whispering such vain words as these:

"Never mind, my pet. There, you have cried enough. Tell your own dear Clara who has dared to vex you."

To see that sweet child's misery, I felt in such a rage, I could have boxed her enemy's ears. But I never thought that it was more than a child's vexation. At last, after drinking a tumblerful of water, and giving room to her palpitating heart, she contrived to tell me her trouble.

"Why, dear, you know my pappy–pappy I used to call him–he is not my papa at all, he says himself he is not; and that is not the worst of it, for I could do well enough without him, he is always so dreadfully cross, and doesn't care for me one bit. I could do without him very well, if I had a proper papa, or if my father was dead and had loved me before he died; but now I have no father at all, and never had any in the world; I am only an outcast, an abandoned– Oh, Clara, will you promise to forgive me, and love me all the same?"

"To be sure I will, my dearest. I am sure, you have done no harm. And even if you have been led astray–"

She looked at me with quick pride flashing through her abasement, and she took her arm off my shoulder.

"No, you have quite mistaken me. Do you think I would sit here and kiss you, if I were a wicked girl? But who am I to be indignant at anything now? He told me–are you sure the door is shut?–he told me, with a sneer, that I was a base-born child, and he used a worse word than that."

She fell away from me, her cheeks all crimson with shame, and her long eyelashes drooping heavily on them. I caught her to my heart: poor wronged one, was she a whit less pure? I seemed to love her the better, for her great misfortune. Of course, I had guessed it long ago, from what her brother told me.

"And who is your father, my pretty? Any father must be a fool who would not be proud of you."

"Oh, Clara, the worst of it is that I have not the least idea. But from something that hard man said, I believe he was an Englishman. I think I could have got everything from him, he was so beside himself; but when he told me that dreadful thing, and said that my father had lied to my mother and ruined her, I felt so sick that I could not speak, till he turned me out of the house, and struck me as I went."

"What?"

"Yes, he turned me out of the house, and gave me the blow of disgrace, and said I should never look on his face again. He had won his revenge–I cannot tell what he meant, for I never harmed him–and now I might follow my mother, and take to–I can't repeat it, but it was worse than death. No fear of my starving, he

said, with this poor face of mine. And so I was going to Conny, dear Conny; I think he knew it all long ago, but could not bear to tell me. And I sat on some steps in a lonely place, for I did not know how to walk, and I prayed to see you and die: then old Cora came after me, and even she was crying, and she gave me all her money, and a morsel of the true cross, and told me to come here first, for Conny was out of town, and she would come to see me at dark; and perhaps the Professor would take me back when his rage was over. Do you think I would ever go? And after what he told me to do!"

Such depth of loathing and scorn in those gentle violet eyes, and her playful face for the moment so haughtily wild and implacable–Clara Vaughan, in her stately rancour, seemed an iceberg by a volcano.

I saw that it was the moment for learning all that she knew; and the time for scruples was past.

"Isola, tell me all you have heard, about this dastard bully?"

"I know very little; he has taken good care of that. I only know that he did most horrible things to unfortunate cats and dogs. It made me shudder to touch him at one time. But he gave that up I believe. But there is some dark and fearful mystery, which my brother has found out; that is if he be my brother. How can I tell even that? Whatever the discovery was, it made such a change in him, that he cared for nothing afterwards, until he saw you, Clara. I am not very sharp, you know, though I have learned so much, that perhaps you think I am."

"My darling, I never thought such a thing for a moment."

"Oh, I am very glad. At any rate I like to talk as if I was clever. And some people say I am. But, clever or stupid, I am almost certain that Conny found out only half the secret; and then on the day when he came of age, that man told him the rest, either for his own purposes, or holy Madonna knows why."

"When was your brother of age?"

"Last Christmas Eve. Don't you remember what I told you at the school of design that day?"

"And when is your birthday, Isola?"

"I am sure I don't know, but somewhere about Midsummer. They never told Conny when his was, but he knew it somehow. Come, he is clever now, Clara, though you don't think I am. Isn't he now? Tell the truth."

"I am thinking of far more important matters than your rude brother's ability. Whence did you come to England and when?"

This was quite a shot in the dark. But I had long suspected that they were of Southern race.

"I am sure I don't know. I was quite a child at the time, and the subject has been interdicted; but I think we came from Italy, and at least ten years ago."

"And your brother speaks Italian more readily than English. Can you tell

me anything more?"

"Nothing. Only I know that old Cora is a Corsican: she boasts of it every night, when she comes to see me in bed, although she has been forbidden. But what does she care–she asks–for this dirty little English island? And she sits by my bed, and sings droning songs, which I hardly understand; but she says they are beautiful nannas."

How my heart was beating, at every simple sentence. None of this had I heard before, because she durst not tell it.

"Any other questions, Donna?" She was recovering her spirits, as girls always do by talking. "Why, my darling, you ought to have a wig. You beat all the senior sophists."

"Yes. Now come and kiss me. Kiss me for a pledge that you will never leave me. I am rich again now: you can't tell how rich I am, and nothing to do with my money, and nobody likely to share it. If you were my own sister, I could not love you more; and most likely I should not love you a quarter as much. And my Uncle longs to see you so. You shall come and live with me, and we'll be two old maids together. Now promise, darling, promise. Kiss me, and seal the bargain."

"Clara, I would rather be your servant than the queen of the world. Only promise first that you will never scold me. I cannot bear being scolded. I never used to be; and it will turn all my hair gray."

"I will promise never to scold you, unless you run away."

She swept back her beautiful hair, threw her arms round my neck, looked in my eyes with a well-spring of love, and kissed me. Oh, traitorous Clara, it was not the kiss–deeply as I loved her–but the evidence I wanted. I knew that with her ardent nature she would breathe her soul upon me. The exquisite fragrance of her breath was like the wind stealing over violets. I had noticed it often before. My last weak doubt was scattered; yet I played with her and myself, one sweet moment longer.

"Darling, what scent do you use? What is it you wash your teeth with?"

"Nothing but water, Clara; what makes you ask in that way?"

"And the perfume in your hair–what is it? Oh, you little Rimmel!"

"Nothing at all, Donna. I never use anything scented. Not even Eau de Cologne. I hate all the stuff they sell."

"How very odd! Why, I could have declared that your lips and your hair were sprinkled with extract of violets."

"Oh, now I know what you mean. I never perceive it myself, but numbers of people have fancied that I use artificial perfume. But that man–oh, what shall I call him? And only this morning I called him 'pappy'–he always accounts for everything, you know; and he said it was hered–herod–I can't say it now, the long English word, but I could at college–no matter, it means something in the

family. My mother, he said, was so well known to possess it, that she had an Italian name among the servants for it; though her real name was quite a different flower. Clara, why do you look at me so? And what are you crying for?"

"Because, my own darling dear, I have not loved you for nothing. You are my own flesh and blood. You are my own cousin, I tell you, my dear Uncle's daughter; and your name is Lily Vaughan."

She drew her arms from me, and leaped up from the sofa; she was so amazed and frightened. She looked at me most sadly, believing that I was mad; then she fainted again, and fell back into my arms.

When I had brought her round, and propped her up with a pillow–for cushions were very scarce–the strain of the mind being over, my brain began to whirl so that I could neither think nor act. For a long time I could not have enough of kissing and hugging Idols. I played with her hair, as if I had been her lover; and then patted and caressed her, as if she had been my baby. And had I no thought of another, who ought to be doing all this to me? Yes, I fear that it lay in the depth of my heart, stronger than maid's love of maiden, or even than my delight at the joy coming to my Uncle.

Then I hated myself for my selfishness, and caught up my Lily and rubbed her, and made her understand things. I flung a decanter of water over both her and myself, which saved us from hysterics.

Poor little thing! She was not like me. Strong Passion was a stranger to her, and she fell before his blow. I had fought with him so long, that I met him like a prize-fighter, and countered at every stroke. Up ran Mrs. Shelfer, in the height and crest of the wave, when backwards or forwards, crying or laughing, hung on a puff of wind. She came with a commonplace motive; she thought we were playing at cricket with her beloved sticks. Her arrival made a diversion, though it had no other effect, for I walked the little thing out, and locked the door behind her.

Then I got my darling new cousin into my arms, and kissed her, and marched her about the room, and made her show her Vaughan instep. Excuse the petty nonsense–what women are quite free from it?–but for many generations our feet have been arched and pointed: of course it does not matter; still I was glad that hers were of the true Vaughan pattern. Then, as she so hated all the stuffs they sell, I showered over her an entire bottle of the very best Eau de Cologne. It was a bit of bullying; but all girls of high spirit are bullies. And it made her eyes water so dreadfully, that she cried as hard as I did.

CHAPTER IV.

It must be owned that my evidence at present was very shadowy. Yet to myself I seemed slow of hand for not having grasped it before. To the mind there was nothing conclusive, to the heart all was irresistible. I have not set down a quarter of the thoughts that now dawned upon me; and it would be waste of time to recount them, when actual proof is forthcoming. And poor Idols gave me small chance of thinking clearly, in the turbulent flood of her questions.

"And are you quite sure, quite certain, Clara darling, that I have a lawful father, one who is not ashamed of me, and was not ashamed of my mother! And why did he never come for me? And do you think he will love me? And is dear Conrad my own brother? I don't seem to understand half that you have told me."

At length I knelt down, and thanked God–rather late in the day, I must own–for His wonderful guidance to me. While doing so, and remembering, as I always did then, my mother–revealed in sudden light I saw the justice of God's Providence. Long as I had groped and groped, with red revenge my leading star, no breath of love or mercy cheering the abrupt steps of a fatalist, so long had He vouchsafed to send me check and warning, more than guidance. By loss of wealth and dearest friends, by blindness and desertion, and the crushing blow to maiden's pride when her heart is flung back in her face, by sad hours of watching and weeping over the bed of sickness, by the history of another's wrongs–worse than my own, and yet forgiven–by all these means, and perhaps no less by the growth of the mind, and wider views of life, the spirit, once so indomitable, had learned to bow to its Maker. Stooping thus it saw the path, which stiff-necked pride could not descry.

Not first and sole, as it would have been two years since, but side by side with softer thoughts, came the strong belief that now God had revealed to me the man who slew my father. And what humiliation to all my boasted destiny! I had grasped the hand that did the deed, smiled to the eyes that glared upon it, laughed at the sallies of the mind that shaped it. Enough of this; ere it go too hard with Christian feeling. My bosom heaves, my throat swells, and my eyes flash as of old.

Before I had time to resolve what next to do (for Isola would not let me think), we had another interruption. That girl had a most ill-regulated and illogical mind. And the fault was fundamental. If the lovely senior sophist had ever got her degree, and worn the gown of a Maiden of Arts, it could only have come by favour, after the manner of kissing. Her enthymems were quick enough, and a great deal too quick I believe; but as for their reduction or eduction into

syllogisms–we might as well expect her to make a telescope out of her boot-tags. And now at once she expected, and would not give me room for a word, that I should minutely detail in two sentences, with marginal annotations, and foot-notes, queries, conjectures, and various readings, all incorporated into the text, everything that had ever, anywhere, or by any means, befallen her "genuine father." Not being Thucydidean enough to omit the key-word in the sentence, and mash ten thoughts into one verb, I could not meet the emergency; and my dear cousin lost her patience, which was always a very small parcel.

"At any rate, Clara, tell me one thing clearly. Are you quite certain that Conny and I are not–not–"

"Not base-born," I said–why be mawkish in Oscan-English, when Saxon is to be had?–"No, my darling, you are as lawful as I, your cousin Clara. We Vaughans are a passionate race, but we never make wrecks of women, and scoundrels of ourselves. That we leave for Corsicans, and people brought up to lies."

The sneer was most unjust, and dreadfully unkind, but far too natural for me, so long pent in, to resist it. I saw that I had grieved my pet, so I begged her pardon, and reviled myself, till all was right again. Then suddenly she leaped up and cried, with her hand upon her bounding heart–every look and gesture must have been like her mother's.

"Let me go now, Clara. What am I thinking of? Let me start at once. And you say my own father is very ill. He will die without seeing me. On with your things, while I run to the cab-stand. I have money enough for both."

She wrenched at the door-handle in her hurry, forgetting that I had locked it; rich colour leaped into her cheeks, and her features and form seemed to dance, like a flickering flame, with excitement. No wonder her mother had loved, and been loved, with such power of passion.

"Idols, take it easily, or I won't let you go at all. I rather fancy, we must have some evidence, before my Uncle owns a little chit picked up in London. He is a clever and cautious man, and will expect something more convincing than your beautiful eyes and sweet breath. Do you expect, you impetuous jumper, that he will know you by instinct?"

Poor little thing, how her face fell, and how the roses faded out of it! That look of hers went to my heart; but I knew what the mother had died of, and feared lest her image and picture should perish in the same manner. So I said again:

"Did you suppose, my dear, that your father would know you by instinct?"

"Well, perhaps I did, Clara; if I thought about it at all. I am sure I should know him so."

At this moment, two heavy knocks, like a postman's, but not so quick, sounded through the house. I knew what they meant, one was Balaam, the other was Balak. Isola clung to me, and turned pale; she thought it was some one

pursuing her. I told her hastily whom I expected, and sent her to Mrs. Shelfer's room. My heart beat high, when with many a scrape and bow, the worthy but not ornamental pair sidled heavily into the room.

To my greetings they answered me never a word; but Balaam stood solemnly at the end of the little table, and beckoned to his partner to fasten the door. This being done with some pantomime, which meant "By your leave, if you please, Miss," the two men, who looked none the leaner for their arduous exertions, stood side by side before me. Tired of this nonsense I exclaimed impatiently,

"Be quick, if you please; what is it you have found out?"

Balaam winked at Balak, and receiving a ponderous nod, began to digest it leisurely.

"Have you brought me to London for nothing? What do you mean by all this mummery? I shall ring the bell in a moment, and have you both shown out."

Balaam's tongue revolved in his mouth, but burst not the bonds of speech, and he tried to look straight at both windows,–till my hand was on the bell-pull.

"Balak, I told you so. Lor, how much better it be for you to take my advice, than for me to take yourn! Balak said, Miss, as we come along, the young lady would be sure to know what was right, and turn up handsome afore she asked us nothing. Now, says I, that ain't the carakter of my experience, the women most always wants–"

"Here, quick, how much do you want, before I know what you have to tell?"

Here a long interchange of signals took place, and even whispering behind a hat.

"Well, Miss, I say ten, and that quite enough till you has time to judge. But Balak say nothing under twenty, considering all the beer, and some of it country brewers'–"

"Your advice is better than Balak's; I agree with you on that point; and I will take it in preference. Here are ten pounds." He looked rather taken aback, but could not well get out of it. Balak smiled grimly at him.

"If what you tell me proves really valuable, I will give you a cheque for another ninety ere long, and the residue hereafter: but not another farthing, if you keep me in this suspense. Do I look likely to cheat people of your class?"

"No, Miss, we hopes not; nor of any other class, I dare say. Still there be so many rogues in the world–"

"You have taken my money; speak on."

What they told me at wearisome length, and with puzzling divergence, and quantities of self-praise, need not occupy many lines. They had traced the Jellycorses, as they called Della Croce, from Somers Town to Lisson Grove, where they stayed but a very short time, Lepardo Della Croce, under some fictitious

name, giving lessons in French, Spanish, and Italian, at schools in Portland Town and St. John's Wood. But he only seemed to play with his work, though he never broke any engagement to which he really pledged himself. He was always reserved and silent, accepted no invitations, and gathered his real subsistence by night at chess-clubs and billiard-rooms, where his skill was unequalled. His only friends were Italian refugees, his only diversion the vivisection of animals. It must have been about this time that he saw the newspaper paragraph, and did what he did to me. Then he changed his name again, and lived awhile in Kensington; he had been in London years before, and seemed to know it well. Here a nobleman, whom he had taught some new device at billiards, took him up and introduced him to a higher class of pupils, and obtained him some back-door palace appointment. He dubbed himself "Professor," and started as Dr. Ross. But still he missed the excitement and change of his once adventurous life, and several times he broke loose, and left his household, for weeks and months together. Then the two lovely children, whom all admired but none were allowed to notice, were attended wherever they went, by a dark-browed Italian woman. Suddenly they all left Kensington, and went to live at Ball's Pond; the reason being some threatened exposure of the Professor's cat-skinning propensities. His love of vivisection had become the master-passion, and he would gratify it at all hazards. There is to some natures a strange fascination in the horrible cruelties perpetrated under the name of science. Through its influence he even relaxed his strict reserve a little, and formed the acquaintance of a gentleman connected with the college at Camden Town; to which suburb after a while he removed, because he found it impossible to pursue his inhuman researches under his own roof comfortably. Here, by means of his new ally, who could not help admiring his infinitely superior skill, he was appointed lecturer at several schools for young ladies, where smatterings of science were dealt in. And now he was highly respected by people who did not know him, and idolised by young ladies too clever to care for pet parsons. Of course he became conceited; for his nature was but a shallow one, and his cunning, though sharp and poisonous, had no solid barb at the end. So he sneered, and grimaced, and sniggered, and before an ignorant audience made learned men stammer and stutter, amazed at his bold assumptions, and too honest and large of mind to suspect them, at short notice.

But the skill of his hands was genuine, and his power of sight most wonderful. I have since been told–though I do not believe it possible–that he once withdrew and bottled nearly half the lungs of a dog, tubercular after distemper, while the poor sufferer still gasped on, and tried to lick his face. Oh that I were a man! How can I hear such things and not swear? All animals, except one, hated him by instinct. The only one, not sagacious enough to know him, was his fellowman. Men, or at any rate women, thought him a handsome, lively, playful, and

brilliant being. And yet, upon the honour of a lady I declare–let those who know nothing of honour despise it as an after-thought–that when he first entered my room, in his graceful and elegant way, there ran through me such a shudder as first turns the leaves towards autumn, such a chill of the spinal marrow as makes the aura of epilepsy.

Darling Judy hated him from every bristle of his body, not only through instinct, but for certain excellent reasons. The monster's most intimate friend was a gallant Polish patriot, who had sacrificed all for his country, and lived here in dignified poverty. This gentleman and his wife could only afford one luxury; and that, by denying themselves many a little comfort. They had the finest dog in London, one who had saved his master's life from the squat-nosed sons of the Czar. This glorious fellow, of Maltese family, was the father of my Giudice–whom in his puppy days the Polish exile gave to Conrad and pretty girl Isola. Slowski, now an ancient dog, had a wen behind his shoulder, which grew and grew until the Professor could scarcely keep his hands from it. But he knew that any operation, in so severe a case, was nearly sure to kill a dog so old and weather-beaten. The owner too knew this, and would not have it meddled with. Lepardo Della Croce swore at last that he would taste no food until he had traced the roots of that wen. Judy, then a pretty pup, gambolled into the room and saw his poor papa–but I will not describe what a dog cannot even bear to think of. Poor Slowski died that night, and the Pole knocked down the surviving brute, who shot him next day upon Hampstead Heath. However, the gentleman slowly recovered; but during his illness the frenzied wife overstepped the bounds of honour–according to their ideas; she took advantage of Cora, in the absence of Lepardo, and learned some of his previous crimes, by practising on the poor woman's superstition. Then she found, through the firm of Green, Vowler, and Green, that my Uncle was still alive, traced out the history of the atrocious deed, and wrote the letter which had brought me to London. Soon afterwards, when her husband recovered, she was sorry for what she had done, and opened her lips on the subject no more; at least in this country, which they soon forsook for America.

In this brief epitome, I have told, for the purpose of saving trouble, a great deal more than I learned at the time, a great deal more than Balaam and Balak would have found out in a twelvemonth. But it makes no difference: for my conclusions and actions were just the same as they would have been, if I had known all the above. "And so you see, Miss"–was Balaam's peroration–"we have had a downy cove to deal with, for all his furious temper. Lor now, I never believe any Bobby would have discovered him; but we has ways, Miss, what with the carpets and the sofys, and always knowing the best pump at the bar, gentlemen of our profession has ways that no Peeler would ever dream of. And now, Miss,

the ink is on the table, and both of us wishes you joy–didn't you say so, Balak?– if you only think we has earned that cheque for 90*l.*, and the rest, please God, when the gentleman feel Jack Ketch."

"You shall have the money soon, if not now. For I believe you have deserved it. But I must trouble you first to write down briefly what you have told me, and to sign it in full. It is not for myself. I remember every word. It is for the satisfaction of a gentleman who cannot see you."

Balaam and Balak looked very blank, and declared it would take them a week to write out half they had told me. This objection I soon removed, by offering to make an abstract of it, which I could do from memory, and then let them read and sign it. By this time they were both afflicted with thirst, which I sent them away to quench, while I drew up a rough deposition. But first I called darling Idols, and told her that now I had evidence which would satisfy even a sceptical father.

"And surely, my pet, you yourself must have something; some relic, or token, to help us."

"No, cousin Clara, I can't think of anything, except this little charm, which has been round my neck for years, and which I have shown you before: but I fear it is not uncommon. He took it away from me once, but I managed to steal it back again."

The charm was a piece of chalcedony, ground into some resemblance which I could not recognise then, and very highly polished. She said it had been her brother Conrad's, and he had given it to her; hearing which I ceased to examine it.

Presently the bailiffs returned, in very high spirits indeed, and ready to sign almost anything. But I took good care to inform them that, however hard they had laboured, I had made the discovery before them; which they said was permiscuous, and not to be thought nothing of. All the forms being quickly despatched, I found a few minutes to think what was next to be done.

It is too late in my journey for dalliance and embarrassment with the heavy luggage of motives, and the bandboxes of reflections, when we are past the last station, and flying to our terminus: enough that I resolved to take poor little Isola home at once to the house at Vaughan St. Mary, and the arms of her longing father, that he might see her before he died. I hoped he might live for years, but I feared he might die to-morrow; so hangs over every one's mind that fatal third stroke of paralysis. Her own entreaties and coaxing told much upon my resolution; if none could resist her when happy, who could withstand her distress? So Balaam and Balak were ordered most strictly to watch that demon's abode, and at any risk give him in charge if he made attempt at departure. To ensure due vigilance, I reclaimed the 90*l.** cheque, and gave one payable three days af-

terwards. They grumbled and did not like it; but in the course of all my rough usage, I had learned one great maxim–Never trust, beyond the length of a cork, any man who is slave to the bottle.

CHAPTER V.

Eager as Isola was to see her true father at last, she pressed me strongly to call at her brother's lodgings on our way to Paddington, and take him with us if possible; or at any rate learn where he was, and how long he would be absent. But I refused to do anything of the kind. Though not half so proud as of old, I could not quite stoop to that. "You know, dear," she continued, "Conny will think it unfair of me to get such a start of him with the real good Papa; and it would be so much nicer to have him there to help. And I am terribly frightened, though of course you can't understand it."

"Isola, no more nonsense. For your sake, and my poor Uncle's, I would do anything honest and proper: but neither can I travel with your brother Conrad, nor can I go near his lodgings. I am not quite reduced to that, however I am trampled on."

"But, darling, they need not see you. And you know he has made some wonderful mistake."

Of course I knew it, and told myself so fifty times in a minute; but it was a likely thing that I would tell his sister so.

"He has, indeed, a very grave mistake, if he ever thinks I will forgive him. No mistake ever made by man can be pleaded for what he has done. Even if he believed, by some excess of absurdity, that my father had murdered his, instead of his murdering mine (which was much nearer the mark), would even that justify his rudeness, low rudeness, and personal violence to a lady? What he did I never told you; and he, I should hope, was too much ashamed to speak of it: why he actually pushed me; thrust me, Clara Vaughan, away from him, till I almost fell on the floor!"

"Oh, Donna, how your eyes flash! And you call me excitable! Let me put your hair back. There now, give me a kiss. I am so sorry for Conny. He loves you with all his heart, and you look as if you could kill him. But no doubt the new good papa will put every thing to rights."

"Will he indeed? Let us go and see."

We got to Paddington just in time to catch the two o'clock train, having telegraphed first to my Uncle that I was coming to take his advice, before doing anything more. This was true, so far as it went, and as much of the truth as I then dared to administer. This message was sent, not for the sake of finding the carriage at Gloucester, but in order to break the suddenness of our arrival. Through all my joy I dreaded what was to come, and knew not how to manage it. Idols talked fast enough all the way down the line. As yet she had seen scarcely anything of our quiet, rich English scenery; and although the Great Western exhibits it rather flatly, some parts there are, below Swindon, which fill the mind with content. But our minds could not be so filled, being full of excitement already. Near Stroud poor Idols was in the greatest ecstasy, and expected me to know the owner of every pretty meadow.

But after we entered my Uncle's carriage–or mine, I suppose, it should now be called–dear Isola fell away into the deepest silence. She stored her wonder inwardly, nor showed the sweet depths of her eyes, until she sprang out at the foot of the old stone steps, trodden by so many hundreds of her ancestors. Then she looked up at the long gray house, with the dusk of July around it, and bats of three varieties flitting about the gables; and I saw beneath her dark eye-lashes the tremulous light of a tear.

After leading my sweet new cousin–whom everybody stared at, and who feared to look at the pavement–to my own snug quarters, I left her there under kind Mrs. Fletcher's charge, and ran to my Uncle's favourite room. Already my breath was short, and my heart up and down with excitement, and I had but the presence of mind to know that I was sure to make a mistake of it. I saw a great change in him, even since the Monday; but he was the first to speak.

"My dear child, kiss me again. You are nearly as tall as I am, since my upright ways have departed. From the moment you went away, I have done nothing but miss you, every hour and every minute; and last night I slept never a single wink. Let us give it up, my darling. God has sent you to me to make up for both daughter and son."

"Well, Uncle, that's all very fine, but I doubt it strongly." I was forced to be flippant a little, for fear of breaking down. "It is my firm belief that proud Clara will still have to wash at the pump."

He knew what I meant; it was an old tale, in our neighbourhood, of a nobleman's second wife who would not allow her step-children even the use of a yellow basin.

"What! do you mean to say"–and he began to tremble exceedingly–"that you have found any trace, any clue even, to my poor darlings?"

"Yes, thank God, I have. Oh, Uncle, I am so glad!" And I threw myself into his arms: his head fell heavily on my shoulder, and I felt that I had been too

sudden. He could not speak, but fetched one long sob. I parted his white hair, and looked at him as if in surprise at his hastiness.

"Dear Uncle, we must not be certain yet. I mean that I have found something, or fancy I have found something, which–which–I mean if properly followed up–may lead in time–but you know how sanguine I am."

"Clara, you are playing with me. It is a mistake to do so. I cannot bear it, child. But the sudden shock I can bear. Let me know all at once. Are they alive or dead?"

"Alive, I think, dear Uncle; and I hope to find them soon, if you will calmly advise me."

"You have found them. No more fencing. I know it by your eyes. All the truth this moment, unless you wish to kill me."

He stood up as if to seize me, for I had withdrawn from his grasp, but his poor legs would not carry him; so I was obliged to seize him instead. He fell sideways on a chair, and vainly tried to speak; but his eyes never faltered from mine.

"Dearest Uncle, I tell you the truth. Of course I cannot be certain yet, and it won't do to make a mistake; and so I want more evidence."

"I want no more. Only let me see them." He spoke very slowly, and the muscles of his face twitched at every word.

"Now, keep your mind calm and clear, to help me, my dear Uncle; for I know not what to do. Have you anything, any tokens at all, of their beloved mother?"

My object was to divert his mind, for I saw the approach of coma, and now trembled more than he did.

With a feeble smile at the folly of my question, after such a love as his, he answered in great exhaustion,

"Take the key from my neck. You know the large black box in–in–"

Here his chin fell on his breast, and he could not lift the key, but his eyes still shone with intelligence, and followed me everywhere. Ribbon and all I took the key, and rang the bell for Jane, the most careful and kind of nurses. I ordered her, in a whisper, to give my Uncle a glass of very strong brandy and water, if she could get him to swallow it; and away I ran upstairs, hoping to relieve him. Then suddenly it struck me that I had no right to open that box, without the presence of a competent witness. I knew at once what box it was, from the constant anxiety my poor Uncle had shown about it. Who had such right to be my witness as his darling daughter? So back I flew to my own rooms, and dragged the bewildered Isola down the broad corridor. The poor little thing was frightened so that she could hardly breathe. I had no especial object in opening that old box, at that particular moment, much as I had often longed to know what its contents were. My presence of mind was lost, and all I could think of was, that I might find

something there to break that awful suspension of life, so likely to end in death.

The box was in a panelled closet by the head of my Uncle's bed. When I handed Idols the light to hold, she took it as if in a dream; her cheeks were as white and transparent as the wax, and she held the candle so that a hot flake splashed on my neck. The lock of the long box turned most easily, and the hinges moved without creaking: most likely it had been pored over every day, for many years. The lid was arched and hollow, with straps of faded web inside it.

In beautiful order, so fair that I hardly dared to touch them, lay the clothes and trinkets, the letters and little relics, the gloves and pocket-handkerchiefs, the fairy slippers, the wedding-dress, the coquettish veil, and saucy hat of the dead. I am not over sensitive, thank God, or I should not be living now; but the sight of those things upset me more than any distress of my own. The small parcels of silver paper, screwed at the end and pinned in the middle, the pins put stupidly as men always put them, the light gay dresses made for some sweet figure, folded with such care, and yet quite out of the plaits, and labelled with the dates when last the dear one wore them, even a withered fern-wreath and a sprig of shrivelled myrtle–I could not thrust my commonplace hands into these holy treasures; if I could I should never deserve to be myself so remembered. But one thing struck me, as thoughts profane always strike us crookedly; if the poor lady could have been wept to life again, how much better would she have found all her things arranged, than she had ever kept them! That is to say if she resembled her wondering and crying daughter, who knelt down and wanted to kiss every article in the box. Her little white hands were as busy as mice among them; and long-drawn sobs were tumbled with interjections.

"Now, my dearest Idols, you must not disturb these things. Your father will be so vexed."

Would he though?–said I to myself–not if he knew whose hand it was that did it. She paid no attention to me.

"Now just put back that silver knife, with the bit of peach-skin upon it: and leave the stone as it was."

To my surprise she began to suck the stone, which her mother perhaps had sucked, eighteen years ago. Inside the paper was written, "Knife and peach-stone found in my Lily's pocket. The stone was meant for me to set. I will plant it, when I have found her children. E.V., January, 1834."

"Now, you foolish child, you are really too bad." And with that I gave her a little push. In her heedless way, she fell almost into the box, and her light form lay amongst her mother's dresses. A sudden thought flashed across me.

"Isola, off with that nasty dark frock!"

"Nasty, indeed, Clara! Why you said this morning how very pretty it was."

"What has that to do with it? Pull it off, or I'll tear it. Now, out with the

other arm."

In a moment or two, I had all her beauty gleaming in white before me; and carefully taking from the box a frock of pale blue silk, I lifted it over her head, and drew her dimpled arms through the sleeves; then I fixed it in front with the turquoise buttons, and buckled the slender zone. Her blue eyes looked on in amazement, like violets at a snow-storm. Then I led her to the mirror, and proud as we both had always been of her beauty, the same thought struck us now. I saw it in the mirror, by the toss of her pointed chin and the coy bend of her neck: she saw it there as clearly, by the flash of my tear-bright eyes. Neither of us had ever seen that loveliest of all girls look half so lovely before. The glow of pride and beauty's glory mantled in her cheeks; and her eyes were softly beaming down the avenue of lashes, from clearest depths of azure. I never saw such eyes as she had, among all our English beauties. Some perhaps are as fine of colour, and as liquid, though not so lustrous: but the exquisite arch of the upper lid, and the rich short fringe of the lower, cast a tremulous light and shade, which dull Anglo-Saxons feel not. Like moonbeams playing through a mantled bridge.

The dress fitted her exactly. It had been made for a slender, buoyant figure, as graceful and pure as a snow-wreath, yet full of warm motion and richness. Indeed, I must confess, that, although correct enough for the time and clime of the owner, it showed too much of the lifting snow for our conceptions of maid-enhood: so I drew a gauzy scarf–perhaps a true *fazoletto*–over the velvet slope of the shoulders, and imprisoned it in the valley. This being nicely arranged, I hung her chalcedony charm from her neck, and fastened it to her waist-band. Then I caught up her clustering hair, nearly as thick and long as my own, after the Corsican fashion, snooded it close in ripples with a pink and white-striped mandile, and told her to love herself in the glass, while I ran off to the hot-house for a truss of Stephanotis. This, with a glossy sprig of Gardenia leaves to back it, I fastened cleverly into the clear mandile, on the curve of her elegant head, and my darling was complete. Then I kissed her sweet lips, and admired her, more than she admired herself.

"Clara, it does not matter how much trouble you take; you can't make me look a quarter so well as you do."

"Not quite so tall, my darling, nor anything like so naughty; but a thousand times more lovely."

"Well, I wish I could think so. I am always longing to change with you."

"Don't talk nonsense, my pretty; if I were a man I should die for you. Now I glory in you as a Vaughan. Come along."

I led her through the gallery and to the door of her father's room, before she had time to think. She did not know but what I was taking her back to my own rooms, along another passage. At the sick man's door I left her, while I went

in to see how much might be safely ventured.

My Uncle was leaning back in his deep reclining chair, with his weak eyes fixed most eagerly on the door. In vain he strove to hide his disappointment, and to look at me with gratitude. The wandering mind too plainly hoped for something dearer than a brother's child.

Dismissing Jane through the other room, that she might not encounter Isola, I sat down to examine him. The brandy and water had rallied his vital power, but made him hot and feverish. He kissed my hand to atone for some sharp and impatient expressions, and I saw that the moment was favourable.

"Uncle dear, what will you say to me? I have brought you another new visitor, the loveliest girl in London. You know her well by name. You have often longed to see my sweet darling Isola. And she wants to see you so much. Only you must promise me one thing honourably. Be gay and sprightly with her; she is timid in this old house."

"My dear, I can't see her to-night. You don't mean that of course. Give her my best apologies. You say she is very sweet-tempered; I am sure she will excuse me."

"If she would, I will not. Nor would you excuse her, if you knew whom she resembles."

"What do you mean? Have you locked my box again?"

"Yes, and here is the key. I found a portrait of a lady"–I had not shown this to my cousin–"very like beautiful Isola."

He began to tremble again, so I thought the quicker the better. Placing the lamp-shade so that a dim light fell on the door, I ran out to fetch his daughter.

"Now, don't be a baby, Isola. Remember how ill he is. Keep as much in the shadow as possible; and if he should guess who you are, pretend not to care a bit for him."

"I will try my very best, Clara. But I don't think I can do that."

She shook so much that I was obliged to support her, as she had supported me that evening when first we met. Stiffly I brought her in, and began to introduce her, holding her back all the time.

"Uncle Edgar, this is my dearest friend, of whom you have heard so often, Miss Isola"–Ross I could not say. "Why, Uncle–why, Idols, darling–"

It was all in vain; I might as well have spared my devices. From the moment she crossed the threshold, his eyes had been leaping towards her. The paralysed man bounded forward, as if with galvanic life. His daughter met him as wildly. "My Lily, my Lily," was all he could sob, "my own Lily come from the grave!" With a father's strength he clasped her, and her dark locks were showered with silver. As for tears–but I left them together when I had seen both safe on the sofa.

CHAPTER VI.

To our surprise and delight, the genuine Papa, instead of being worse the next day, looked more like himself than he had done at any time since the fever. But in spite of added importance, and the sense of parental dignity, he sat hand in hand with his beautiful daughter by the hour together, playing with her cheeks and hair, as little girls do with dollies. And all the time he was talking to her about her darling mother, and made her answer him in Italian, and made her kiss him every other minute; and found out a thousand times, as a novelty every time, that she was the very image and model of her mother, and yet he was not sure that her smile was quite so sweet; then to make up for depreciation he needs must kiss her again, and say, yes, he thought it was, though it was quite impossible for any other to be so–and thus they went on, till I thought there never would be an end of it; albeit I did my utmost to keep away from them both.

Knowing that I was in their way, and feeling rather out of spirits, I went my old accustomed round of places, sacred in my memory to a certain father and mother of my own. How long I wept at their simple graves, how I knelt to their God and mine, thanking Him from my desolate heart for the light now shed upon me, and how I prayed that they might both be looking down on me now and craving heavenly guidance for me through the peril yet to come–these, and the rest of my doings there, cannot well be told except to the ears of orphans. The clouds of an overcast existence seemed to be opening rapidly, and though they could never disclose my sun and moon again, some happiness it was to know even how those had set. And more than all, the foul aspersion upon my father's memory, which all the while I scorned it so, had lain heavily on my thoughts, this was now proved liar's spittle, and my sweet darling father had offended not even a villain. A thousand times I implored his pardon for the splash having ever descended upon the hem of my garment, though shaken off straight-way with loathing.

In the midst of my dreamy thoughts, and while I sat between the two low headstones, upon the very spot where I hope my own head may lie, the tremulous beauty of the Golden Thuja, which I had planted there, was pushed aside too carelessly, and something far more beautiful planted itself in front. It was my cousin Lily. I have been strictly forbidden ever to call her "Isola," or even "Idols," again, as savouring of the evil one. Lily Vaughan was beaming with young delight and happiness: the fresh west country air, sweet from the tropic gulf-stream, had crowned the April of her cheeks with a June of roses.

"Oh, Donna, I am so glad I have found you at last. What makes you run

away from me and my Papa? I have lost my way all over the world. What a lovely world it is, Donna!"

"Don't call me that name here. Do you not see where you stand?"

She glanced at the headstones engraved with initials and dates, and at once understood it all. For a long time she was silent, a long time I mean for her; and her soft eyes glistened at once with awe and pity. At last, she crept close to me, looked at the ground, and whispered with a deep sigh:

"How you must hate me, Clara."

"Hate you, my darling! What for?"

"Oh, because I have got such a dear Papa, and you have none at all. And much worse than that, because–because–oh, I don't know how to tell you."

"Tell me all you mean. Let there be no misunderstanding between us."

"Because my mother and my father seem somehow to have killed–though I am sure they would rather have killed themselves–your poor papa and mamma." And she leaned on my mother's headstone, and sobbed till I feared for her heart.

I put my arm around her waist, drew her towards me, and sat on my father's grave, with his niece upon my lap.

"Dearest, I could not be the child of those who sleep beneath us, if it were in my nature now to feel as you imagine. Years ago, I might have done so; though I hope not even then. Orphan as I am and helpless, already I perceive that I have not lived for nothing. My father, I believe, my mother, I am sure, would have laid down life with pleasure to see me led from wayward childhood even to what I am. Oh, Lily, you can't think how they loved me." And at the tender memory, came tears, the voice of silence.

Lily said not a word, but gathered and plaited a wreath of flowers, wherewith, as in a nuptial tie, she bound the white headstones together–anything so as not to disturb me just then. Even that trifle, a graceful idea born of her Southern origin, even that for the moment touched me deeply. Times there are when our souls seem to have taken hot baths in the springs of memory, and every pore of them is open.

"Darling Lily, come–how proud they would have been of you–come and kiss me in this presence, and promise that, whatever happens, none shall ever thrust cold hands between your heart and mine. That we will bear, and trust, and love; nor, if a shadow steals between us, blink it till the substance follows, but be frank and open–the very breath of friendship–and when doubt begins to grow, for the devil is sure to sow it, have it plucked away at once, each by the other's hand. Kiss me, dear; your weakness is that you are not so outspoken as I am. Never let me vex you, without knowing it."

The innocent creature kissed me, and promised solemnly.

"Oh, Clara," she cried, "how on earth did you find it out? Sometimes you

have vexed me dreadfully, for you don't care much what you say; but I always thought it was my fault, and I never told you of it. But it never made me love you a single bit the less."

"Yes, it did for the moment, though you may soon have forgiven it. But a love which is always undergoing forgiveness, is like glass steeped in water, you may cut it in two with a pair of common scissors."

"Well, I should like to see the scissors that would cut me away from you. I'll have a great piece off your hair, Clara, if you talk such nonsense. Now come; my father wants you."

"Have you told him?"

"Yes, everything about dear Conny and you; and he says you are a noble girl, but uncommonly thick-headed about your own concerns, though as quick as lightning for others. Now, I won't have you look so pale; let us run and get some colour. See, I'll get first to that tree."

"Will you indeed?" I won the race by a yard, and was glad that the exercise made excuse for the quick rise of my bosom. After all that had happened, I would not have her imagine that I still cared for her brother. Like a girl all over, she said not another word, determined that I should begin it.

"Let us walk faster, Lily, if my Uncle wishes to see me."

"No, there is plenty of time. It will do him good to sleep a little."

"Oh, then it is nothing important. I rather feared that it might be."

"Don't be at all afraid, darling. He wants to show you how nicely he made the Chalcedony Spalla that used to be round my neck. He made it for my mother, in remembrance of something."

"Oh, nothing more than that. I thought you spoke of something–at least you seemed to imply–"

"Nothing that you need blush about, nor stammer either, proud Donna. You know you proved to me yesterday, when we were in the cab, that you did not care for Conny any more than you did for a flake of London soot, which happened to come in at the window, and fall upon your glove. And you were kind enough to compare him to that individual smut."

"Oh, Judy, Judy," I cried, as the dog came bounding to meet us–"darling Judy, you love Clara, if nobody else has sense enough."

And half an hour ago, Lily and I in dramatic language, vowed eternal affection!

"Oh, Clara, darling Clara, don't you know that I was in fun? I thought you were so clever. And now to see you sobbing over that great muff of a dog! Judy, I hate you, get out of the way"–the judicious would not stir–"take your great hulking paws from cousin Clara's neck. There then, make the most of that! Oh, I have hurt my hand so, and he is only wagging his tail. But I am so delighted,

my own pet, that you love poor Conny still."

"And pray, who said I did?"

"Nobody, only me. All dear Papa said was this, that there was a great mistake, and he soon perceived what it was; and I asked him to take my opinion about it, because I was a senior sophist. And he pretended not to know what a senior sophist was. And I told him it was my degree, not from that man, you know, but fairly earned at the College; though they did have the impudence to say that the Professors were going to pluck me, until I gave them a smile."

"True enough, no doubt. But I know all that long ago. What more did my Uncle say?"

"That he would tell you his opinion, but he would rather not talk about it to me. And he could not bear me to go out, for fear I should be stolen again. And I do believe he has had me watched all the way. Here I come, Pappy; large as life you see, and three times as natural."

"Yes, my own treasure, three times as natural to me, as my life has been without you. But wheel me indoors, young maidens. No other man in the world has such a pair of horses. I want to talk to Clara, in my own room alone. Lily, go to Mrs. Fletcher, I can't have you roving about so." Lily obeyed him instantly.

"Wait one minute, Uncle dear; I want to go and fetch something."

I ran to my own rooms, and found the deed of gift, which had not been returned to the lawyers. This I took to his study and placed it in his hands.

"What is the matter, Clara? Have you turned conveyancer, and detected some informality?"

"No, dearest Uncle. But I want you to cancel this. I cannot allow you so to rob your children."

I will not say what he called me in his surprise and delight. It seemed to me quite uncalled for; I had only done what my conscience told me was just. But as for accepting my offer–he would not hear of it twice. "Darling, it would be wrong. It would be downright robbery; and no plea whatever for it, on the score of paternal duty. You are the proper heir, the child of the elder son, the true representative of our ancient family. All the rest is a quibble and quirk, of which, even without your countless benefits, I never intended to take advantage. And my children are, by the mother's side, of a family older even than ours–so far as that nonsense goes–and are heirs to wealth compared to which–if it only be rightly worked–these Vaughan estates are nothing. All I ask you is to do a thing which I am sure you would do without asking–to assist them, if what I have left them is spent before they prove their claims. Here is a letter to Count Gaffori; that excellent man is still alive; and here are the certificates, and my own brief deposition, which I have begged a neighbouring magistrate to come to-day and attest; here is my Lily's Spalla, and perhaps other relics are in my

son's possession. Lastly, here are two more letters, one to my old friend Peter Green, who has now much influence in that part of Corsica, the other to James McGregor, once my messmate at Lincoln's Inn, now an acute and rising Counsel, and a leading authority upon municipal law. Take all these, my darling, if you will so far oblige me; for I fear my lovely daughter–isn't she lovely, Clara?"

"The loveliest girl in all the world; and what is far more important, the sweetest, and the best."

"Yes, if you had searched the kingdom, you could not have brought me such another love. But ah! you should have seen her mother! However, I fear the sweet pet is a little careless and random, as her father used to be. At any rate, I prefer entrusting this great budget to your brave and honest hands; at least until my son comes here to claim it. The deposition you shall have, when attested."

"But, Uncle, surely you had better keep it all yourself. No fear of Mrs. Daldy now."

"No, my darling; but these things must not be buried with me."

There was something in his eyes which made me start with terror. But he smiled so sweetly that my terror fled.

"And now, my child, about yourself. Though you have found me another daughter, I look upon you as the eldest; and I venture to speak to you, as a father would. Is it as my Lily tells me? Is it true–God grant it may be–that you love my son, my Lily's son, Henry Conrad? Why don't you answer me, darling? Tell the truth like a real Vaughan. Surely you are not ashamed of him." And he laid his hand on my head. My tears fell fast; and my heart was in a tempest.

"Yes, Uncle," at last I answered, frightened for his suspense, and looking him full in the face, "Yes, Uncle, I do–I mean at least I did–love him very much at one time."

"With all your heart, as we Vaughans love; with all your heart, poor darling?"

"Yes, Uncle," I sobbed, in bitter humiliation; "none of my heart is left me."

"Thank God! what blest news for his mother! My Harry is the happiest fellow alive."

"But, Uncle, he does not think so, he–he–doesn't perceive his blessedness." A flash of my old self-irony came even through my anguish.

"Oh, I have heard all that. But surely you know the absurd mistake he made."

"Indeed, I cannot guess it. Is it my place to do that?"

"Of course it is; when you are in the light, and he is all in the dark. Whom did that kidnapper believe himself to have murdered?"

"You, Uncle, of course."

"And whose child then does he suppose you to be; if he heard of your ex-

istence, as he is sure to have done?"

"Merciful God, I see it all! And how bitterly I have wronged him, my own noble Conrad!"

My poor weak Uncle had to manage me, all by himself, in my terrible hysterics. Frightened as he was, for he never before had to deal in that way with a nature resembling mine, he would not even ring for help, lest I should betray my secret to other ears than his own. When at last I came to myself, he kissed me tenderly, and said:

"My poor dear child, remember–when you may be glad to think of it–that whether I see my noble boy or not, I shall die now in perfect happiness. Noble he must be, or Clara could not love him. It would have been the pet scheme of my heart, if I could have had a voice in it. And here it is done without me! How often have I longed and yearned that he could only see you, as you waited day and night by my pestilential bed, that he could only know the tale of your troubles and devotion. At my death, the generation so visited from heaven expires; and you three darlings start anew, with all things in your favour. Now mind that the good old Signor's directions are complied with, and that Harry, if he lives here, abandons the Corsican property to his sister Lily. Promise me this, my Clara."

"Of course I will, dear Uncle–I mean, so far as my influence goes. And he will then be bound to do so under the deed-poll, if I understood you aright. But perhaps he has quite forgotten me now."

"Of course he thinks himself bound to avoid you. But I have written to set him right, and to bring him as soon as possible. And now about–about that horrible–"

"Ah, yes. If I had the right, I would even let him go. My feeling has changed from fierce hatred to utter contempt. And surely his vengeance is satisfied now."

"No, Clara. It will flame more wildly than ever the moment he learns his mistake, and my final triumph over him. Has he any idea where our Lily is?"

"As yet, he can have none. If old Cora went to Albert Street last evening, she would learn nothing from Mrs. Shelfer, I took care of that, except that Lily had been there, and was gone again. The old woman does not speak English enough to attempt to cross-examine. She loves poor Lily, I know, but will be satisfied with the belief that the child had gone to her brother's. And as for that monster, even if he relents, he will be too proud to inquire."

"What had my poor child done, that the brute turned her out, and struck her?"

"Nothing, I believe, beyond defending her brother Conrad, as she always did. I suppose I may call him 'Conrad,' Uncle?"

"Yes, my dear, it is his true name, chosen by his mother. Where are you going so hastily?"

"To London at once. For your sake, Uncle dear, I must not think of sparing him. I must have him in custody to-night. I would have avoided it, if I could for a thousand reasons; but there is no alternative."

"Yes there is. In two days I shall be beyond his reach. Don't ask me what I mean. To-day is Thursday. Promise only to let him go free till Saturday."

"I will. But I must go to London. I cannot rest quiet here."

My Uncle's face brightened beautifully. And he took my hand in his.

"I know what you mean, my darling. You intend to discover my Harry, for fear of any mishap. I will let you go, dear; though the house seems empty without you, its truthful and graceful mistress. But you must not go alone. It is not right for a beautiful girl, however self-possessed and dignified, especially one of your station, to rove about unattended."

"Only one man ever insulted me, Uncle, I mean in a serious way, and he never did it again."

"It does not matter. The example is bad, and all men are not gentlemen. Mrs. Fletcher shall go with you, and our pretty Lily keep house. But I have an especial reason, and a most powerful one, for wishing that you should be here. Don't go till to-morrow, my darling; I am so well to-day, and I must see you once at your own table, with my daughter and me for your guests."

"Oh, Uncle, I hope so a thousand times. I will stop till the morning, if you have set your heart upon it."

"I have indeed. You may go in the morning by the first train, and be back to-morrow night. Will you promise?"

Though I could not understand his motive, and he was pleased to conceal it, I promised all he asked. Then I told him all the story of Conrad and the accident, how he saved my mother's life and mine, with the courage and skill of a true-born mountaineer. My Uncle was moved to tears, not only at the gallantry of his son, but also by the joy of discovering that all the obligations lay not upon one side. I also wept at finding that Lily had never heard of it. Conrad's lofty nature scorned to narrate its own achievements. When, after that adventure, he discovered who we were, he avoided us because he believed that his father had slain mine. It was not till a later date, when he became of age–as the Corsicans reckon manhood[#]–that Lepardo Della Croce told him all he knew of his history, dwelt on the foul shame wrought to the Della Croce by his bigamist father, and tried in vain to force on him the awful oath of Vendetta. The youth had too much English blood in his heart to accept the black inheritance. Thenceforth he could not bear the sight of the man who had killed, as they both supposed, his father, although, in his wrath for his mother's wrongs and his own, he would not resent the deed. What marvel then that he spurned me, and was maddened with himself, at finding that he, the illegitimate, was in love with me, his legitimate

sister? But now, we are only half-cousins, and nature has never misled us.

[#] *i.e.* the age of twenty.

All that evening, my Uncle was in the most glorious spirits, and I am not sure that Lily and I were very far behind him. He played us all sorts of boyish tricks, and we made reprisals with girlish ones, till Lily's joyous laughter rang halfway clown the corridor. I had dressed her with especial care, and she did look such a love! But it was all too sudden, and far too sweet to last. My Uncle indeed seemed quite beside himself, more gladsome than nature allows us to be with impunity. Then the vein dried all of a sudden, and the mind flowed the opposite way. He made his beautiful daughter, who, though not much of a sophist, had a soul that thrilled to music, he made her play the soft Corsican airs, that seem to weep as they breathe, and which she had learned from old Cora. He knew them all; how well he knew them, his face turned from the light betrayed. The depth of melodious sadness, the touch of some nervine chord, which knew not its own existence, and starts to be known and appreciated, as might an unconscious poet, and more than all the trembling spread of the feelers of the heart, these are the proofs of nature's presence in music or in poetry.

Then he begged me to play some of the sweet and simple melodies of Wales. These he declared, and I had already perceived it, these were born of the self-same spirit, though not so highly intensified, as the Corsican romances.

Finally, he told us many a moving tale of his Lily; tales a man is loth to tell to those with whom he expects to live. How she was loved, and how she seemed to love everybody, and pretty answers she made to those who praised her beauty, and more than words or kisses, the loving things she did, the elegance of self-denial, and the innocence of merit.

That night, that memorable night, we stayed up more than two hours over his proper time for going to bed. He seemed so sad to part, that I could not bear to hurry him. One thing he told me which I was glad to hear.

"Clara, darling, I have taken a liberty with your house. This afternoon, I wrote by the London post, for Annie Franks to come back again to-morrow, if she will, as an especial favour to me."

I was rather surprised; but answered him warmly, and in all truth:

"Dear Uncle, you know that I love her; and I cannot see too much of the few whom I really love."

Then, as I was to start at six o'clock in the morning, he wished me "Good bye," in a solemn manner, which seemed to me quite uncalled for. He drew my

young face to his own, so marked by sorrow and illness, looked into my eyes as if I were to remember something, then held me in his trembling embrace, and kissed me long and fondly.

"God in heaven bless you, darling, for all you have done to me and mine."

"*Mine*, you should say, dear Uncle. I count them now my own."

His daughter took him away, with her white arms thrown around him. For now she slept in the closet next to his room, where I had so long been quartered.

CHAPTER VII.

In the early morning, I was off for London, taking Mrs. Fletcher with me, much against my will, because she seemed to cumber me both in thought and action. Between the door and the avenue, I looked from the open carriage–I hate to be shut up in summer–at the dear old house. Lily had got up to breakfast with me, in spite of my prohibition; and she was going with us as far as the lodge, to have a nice walk back. To my great surprise I saw my poor Uncle, standing at his open window, wrapped in a dressing-gown. He kissed his hand and waved me his last farewell. I leaped on the seat to reply, and then scolded him with my glove. Half in play and half in sorrow, he mocked my lively gestures, and the morning breeze lifted his silver hair, as he wafted me the last kiss. I told Lily to scold him well, with my very best love, and she asked me in the most ladylike manner, if I saw any green in her eye. The girl had picked up a great deal of slang among the fair collegians. Mrs. Fletcher looked sadly shocked; so I said, to reassure her: "You know, Mrs. Fletcher, we must make allowances for young ladies who come from college."

"To be sure, Miss Vaughan, to be sure we must," she replied with her most sagacious air: and at Gloucester she whispered to the coachman, "John, the villain that stole Miss Lily sent her to Oxford, in a young gentleman's clothes, and she took a very high degree: but don't say a word about it." "Not by any means, ma'am," answered John, with a grin. Nevertheless, it found its way over the house, and the result was that all the girls came to Lily about their sweethearts.

I mention this trifling incident only to show how little I thought that I then saw the last of my Uncle.

At Paddington we met Annie Franks taking her ticket for Gloucester, and looking most bright and blooming, with a grand pocket in her cloak, made to

hold a three-volumed novel. I had only time for a few words with her, in which I commended my Uncle to her especial attention, as she had ten times my cousin's experience. Then I went with her to the down-platform, and saw her get into the carriage, and gave her the last of my sandwiches, while a cruel guard made her turn out her new pocket, insisting that she must have a little dog concealed there. I laughed at the poor little dear, as crimson with mortification she showed before all the gentlemen the triple fluted bulk, and the guard read out, more in amazement than rudeness, "Sir Ingomar of the Red Hand; or, The Knight of St. Valentine, and the Paynim Lady." The gentlemen were gentlemen, and tried very hard not to smile; but the way the guard scratched his head was a great deal too much for them. "Dog's ears, anyhow," cried he, trying to escape with a joke. I drew her out of the carriage, with tears in her soft gray eyes, and put her into another, where Sir Ingomar was unknown, and might spur on at pleasure. Then the smiles returned to her shy and innocent face, and she put her head to the window, and whispered gently to me:

"Any strawberries left, dear?"

"I should think so, Annie. The best of them all, the British Queens, are just coming in. And such a crop of grapes!"

Annie's conception of perfect bliss was to sit upon a shady bank, "the breeze just fanning her delicate cheek," with a cabbage-leaf full of strawberries by her, and a cut-and-thrust novel upon her lap. Off she went with a lovely smile, foreseeing all these delights.

From Paddington we drove straightway to the lodgings of Conrad Vaughan. As we jolted along the New-road, which always has more holes in it than any other street in London, I lost my wits in a tumult of thick tempestuous thought. What would Conny say to see me, me the haughty Clara, coming all impatiently even in quest of him? Would it not have been far better, far more like an English maiden, to wait, and wait, and wear the soul out, rather than to run the risk of mis-interpretation? True, it was for his father's sake, to save him from deadly peril, and to make his happiness complete; but might not all have been done by messenger, as well as by me in person? So at least might fancy those who did not know our enemy. Worst of all, and cloudiest thought, that filled the eyes every time it came,–would he love me still? Would not the strong revulsion, that must have torn him in two, when he dashed his hand on his forehead, and forgot even man's forbearance, would not, must not this have snapped all the delicate roots of love? I could not tell. Of man's heart I know nothing; but I felt that with me, a woman, such a horrible thing would create only longing to make amends.

"Mrs. Fletcher, how is my hair?"

"Lovely, my pretty child"–she always called me so from habit when no one else was present–"you look your very best; and I'd like to see them that could–

talk to me of Lilies indeed, when our Miss Clara–"

"No smuts on my nose, Mrs. Fletcher, I hope? I never feel sure, in London. You don't know London, you see."

"No, my pretty, as clean as a whistle, and as clear as the voice of a May-bird, every atom of you. There's no such complexion nowhere out of Gloshire or in it: and its all along of the brimstone and treacle I give you, when you was small. Talk to me of Lilies–why I see three great butter spots, as big as the point of a needle, and I know by the make of her boot that her little toe turn over; and what's more than that–"

"Mrs. Fletcher, I won't hear a word of it. As to her little toe, I can most solemnly declare that you are wrong altogether; for I have seen her naked foot, and a lovelier one never was–"

"Take yours out of the way, Miss. But–"

"But– here we are; and you have made my cheeks quite red! I shall be ashamed to be seen."

However, it did not matter; for there was no one there to see me. Conrad was gone to Paris; he had quitted London quite suddenly, and there was a letter left for his sister, which the girl forgot to post, till she thought it was too late. And he said very likely he should go on to Italy; and they were not to keep the rooms, if they had a chance of letting them, only to put away the things he had left, in the cupboard. So I took the letter, directed "Miss Isola Ross," but I did not dare to open it, much as I longed to do so. Having enclosed it in a new envelope, and posted it in the nearest letter-box, with a heavy heart I re-entered the cab, and went on to Mrs. Shelfer's.

Mrs. Shelfer was of course surprised to see me so soon again. Nevertheless she was all kindness and hospitality, as usual. The residue of her little debt had been long ago released, and now I paid full rent, for I could easily afford it. In answer to my eager inquiries as to what had occurred since Wednesday, the little woman said shortly:

"Nothing at all, Miss, of any account, I thank you. Only Charley threw double size, three times running, and won–"

"I don't mean that, Mrs. Shelfer; I mean, what has happened for me?"

"Nothing, Miss Vaughan; no, nothing to concern a great lady like you: only such a queer lot come, and they seemed to be friends of yours. They ain't gone from here more than half an hour ago."

"Tell me all about them."

"They come and ringed the bell, as modest as could be; and when I went to the door, says they, 'If you please, where be Miss Clara, ma'am?' 'Miss Clara!' says I, 'a set of dressed up trollops like you, come and ask for Miss Clara! She'd Miss Clara you, pretty quick time, I doubt, if she was only here.' 'Us humbly

hopes no offence, ma'am,' says the great big man, the biggest man as ever I see without paying, 'only us has come up from the country, ma'am.' 'Up from the country!' says I, 'needn't tell me that, my good giant; any fool can see that. And if you take my advice, you'll clap your hat on, and go down again, and thank God for it.' You see, Miss, he had got his hat off, and he standing out of doors, on the shady side of the street! So what I said seemed to stop him altogether, and he looked as if he wanted to think about it; and I was just a slapping the door in their faces, when the other man, the queerest guy I ever see, a hanging in his clothes like a skiver in a dish-clout, he look full in my face as grave as a heretic parson, and stretch out his skinny arm, and keep time with one foot, while he say or sing,

"'Ma'am, us be here now in this Lunnon town,
And it bain't likely as we be going down,
Till us see every mortal thing as there be for to see,
And take all the change out in a thorough-going spree.'

Then the big man laugh and clap him on the back; and the little one wink both

his eyes, and look to see what I think of it. Then when he see me laugh, he make me such a coorous bow, that what with his–what do they call the plaister, Miss?"

"Diachylon, perhaps you mean, Mrs. Shelfer?"

"Ah, that's the word. What with his strange diaculum, and his dancing altitude, I declare I was a most a going to invite them in: but I recollects, no, no: If Charley gets along of such Reginalds as these, I may stand at the bed-room door and whistle for a week. There's nothing Charley loves so much as a downright Reginald."

Poor simple-minded woman; how little she perceived that she of all the number was by far the most original! And, like most of those who are truly so, she would have taken the imputation as an outrageous insult. Only the sham original glories in being thought queer.

"Well, Mrs. Shelfer, I want to hear the end of it."

"Just what I say, Miss. Yes, yes, no time to spare, and the pudding boiling. So I says, quite sharp, 'What name, my good sir, and will you leave a message? Miss Vaughan is out of town.' 'Wull,' says he, just as I tell you, Miss, 'ony plase you say, ma'am, as Jan Uxtable, and Beany Dawe, and the two beggest of the chillers has doed theirselves the honour of coming to lave their dooty.' Then the little girl look up and she flash her ribbons and say, 'Mr. Huxtable, if you please, ma'am, and Mr. Ebenezer Dawe, and Miss Huxtable, and Master John, has called.' 'Hadn't you better write it down, Miss?' says I, as innocent as possible. 'Do you

suppose I can't then?' says she, with such a spitting out of her eyes, and she swinging a new parry sole. 'Just give me a sheet of papper, if you keep such a thing in the house.' 'Plase to excuse the little wanch, ma'am,' says the big man, quite humble, 'us can't hardly make head nor tail of her, since her come to this here Lunnon. If I had only knowed it I'd have had her mother along of me, that I would ees fai, and the coo be her own midwaife. But ony plase you say Jan Uxtable come if they count it dacent hereaway. Threescore acres and five, ma'am, without reckon the Cleeve, and no man have a call, to my mind, to christen himself "Mister" on less than a hundred acres, in Lunnon or out of it.' 'Very well, sir,' I says, for I took to the big man somehow, 'I will deliver your message. Miss Vaughan only went from here of middle day on Wednesday.' 'And tell her please, if she do come back,' says spirity Miss Parrysole, with the tears in her great blue eyes, 'that Sally Huxtable leave her very best love and duty, and hope so much Miss Clara will come to see the great wrestling to-morrow, twelve o'clock, and be early. And they be betting now two to one on the other man, ma'am. But he have no chance, no more than Tim Badcock with father.' 'I be much afeared, ma'am,' says the deep-voiced man, as soft as any bell, 'I be afeared our Sally will be begger by a lanyard nor ever her daddy or her mammy was. But likely it be all for the best.' And with that all four of them crooked their legs to me most polite, and went on round the corner; and after them went a score of boys, that seemed to follow them everywhere. The boys knew all about it, and so did I at last, that it was the great champion wrestling, that is to be to-morrow. Charley have been mad about it going on now two months. And can you please to tell him, Miss, which way to lay his money?"

"To be sure, I can. Let him take every offer of two to one against the Devonshire champion; and if he loses I will make it good to him, upon condition that he gives you everything he wins. Now please to let me have a cup of strong tea."

Having thus got rid of my most talkative friend, and Mrs. Fletcher having started off to buy something, I had time to think a little.

It was nearly two o'clock on the Friday afternoon. Nothing more could be done at present towards recovering Conrad, for he had not even left at his lodgings any Continental address. Possibly his place of sojourn might be revealed in the letter to his sister, posted by my hand: but it was far more likely that he himself knew not, at the time of writing, where he should find quarters. I must have been beside myself with worry and disappointment, when I dropped that letter into Her Majesty's box; for if I returned, as had been arranged, by the express at five o'clock, several hours would be saved in the delivery of its tidings. And, as yet, I little dreamed where I should be at five P.M.

In that little room, whose walls were more relieved than decorated by cer-

tain daubs of mine, which even in my narrowest straits I could not bear to part with, because an indulgent critic had found merit in them–a discovery requiring much acumen–here I now sat, gazing fondly, dreaming hazily, yearning strongly for the days gone by, yet only three months old, when I had not a crust or dress till I earned it by my labour. How that pinch enlarged my heart, God only knows, not I. Ah, then I was a happy girl, though I never guessed it. How proudly I walked down the Square, with my black straw bonnet on–which Idols called the Dowdy,–and my dark plaid shawl around me, the plainest of the plain, yet not prepared to confess myself so quotidian as my dress. Who could tell, in those happy days, who might come, or round what corner, and who could say whether of the twain would look the more accidental? And then the doubt–shall I look or not, better perhaps be intent on the fire-plug, and make him come round again?

But now. Ah me, they have heaped up riches for me, and who shall come to enjoy them?

Just as I was warming to this subject, gushing along in a fine vein of that compassion which alone of soft emotions we find it no duty to wrestle with, I mean of course self-pity–in came Mrs. Fletcher, suddenly, and in anger.

"Well, Miss Clara," she exclaimed, throwing down her parcel, "so this is London, is it?"

"To be sure, Mrs. Fletcher. What objection have you to make to it?"

"No objection, Miss, only this, that if ever I seen a set of countrified folk, the Londoners are them. Why the commonest of our kitchen-maids would be ashamed to talk so broad, and to dress so contemptuous. And here I went half a mile to buy boots, real London-made; and trees all along by the side of the road, and pots on the shelves of the windows. I never, if Gloucester don't look much more like a town."

As Mrs. Fletcher did not tell a story with the Herodotean vivacity of Tim Badcock, I will render her facts in my own unpretending version, premising only that she had taken the farmer and Sally for specimens of the true Cockney; a bit of saltatory reasoning of which she has not heard (and perhaps never will hear) the last. While then the worthy housekeeper was driving a slow but shrewd bargain, in a smart shop by the Broadway, taking the boots to the sunshine, to pick clever holes in the stitching, she observed a diminutive boy, of the genuine shoe-black order, encamping in a bight or back-eddy of pavement, just at the side of the door. This little fellow was uniformed, or rather multi-coloured, in gold, and red, and green. His cap was scarlet, and edged with gold twist; his tunic red, and his apron of very bright green baize. On his cap, and on one shoulder, appeared his number, 32, in figures of brass, an inch and a half in length. Strapped on his back he carried an oblong block of wood, like a great club-foot, and nearly as large as himself. This he deposited, with elaborate fuss, on the curb of the

inner pavement, which terraced some inches above the true thoroughfare. A blacking-jar hung at one end of his block; from a drawer below he pulled out three well-worn brushes, and began to hiss and to work away, in double quick time, with both hands, at some boot projected towards him on the delicate foot of fancy. As he grew warm at his work, with one sharp eye all the while looking out for a genial passenger, there slowly came straggling towards him a bevy quite fresh from Arcadia. First, in treble importance walked, impressively rolling and leering around, Hermes, Pan, and the owl of Pallas, combined in one Ebenezer Dawe. His eyes, never too co-operative, roved away upon either side, in quest of intelligence, which they received with a blink that meant, "Pooh, don't I know it?" With occasional jerks of his lank right arm, he was dragging along, like a saw through a knot, the sturdy, tight-buttoned, and close-pronged form of our little Jack. Jack was arrayed in a black wide-awake, with blue ribbons, and a bran-new suit of broad-furrowed corduroy, made of nights by his mother and Suke, and turned out with countless pockets, each having three broad buttons, to foil the London thieves. In one of these pockets, the trouser one I do believe, in spite of all Sally had taught him, he was now chinking, to the creak of the corduroys, his last-abiding halfpence, and lagging heavily on the poet's arm, he cast fond glances at a pile of glorious peg-tops. Sticking her toes into little Jack's heels, to kick anybody that dared to steal him, came my little Sally, all fire, and wonder, and self-assertion, towing her mighty father along, like a grasshopper leading an ox. At times she strove to drag him towards the finery of the windows, and paid very little heed to his placid protestations. "Walk fitty, my dear; walk as you ought to do, my dear. Oh fai! oh fai! Whatever wull they Lunnoners think of Davonsheer, if they zees you agooin on laike this here? There, dang that Beany Dawe; blest if I baint a toornin Poüt too. Coomth of larnin to wraite, I reckon." The farmer's pockets were crammed with circulars, handbills, and puffs of every description, which he received from all who offered, and was saving them all for his wife.

"Clean your boots, my gentleman," cried a little shrill voice; "clean both your boots for a halfpenny. Never say die, Sir; polish 'em bright till the cat at home won't know them. Three-fardings-worth of blacking, and a penny in skill and labour, and all for the laughable sum of one half-penny. Pure satisfaction guaranteed, or the whole of the money returned. Up with your foot, my gentleman!"

The farmer pulled up suddenly, for fear of walking over him, as the boy, despising Beany Dawe, had dashed in between Jack and Sally, and danced before Mr. Huxtable. His brushes were whisking about, like bumble-bees roughly disturbed, and already menaced the drab of the Sunday fustian gaiters.

"Zober now," cried the farmer, who could not believe that he was addressed,

having never dreamed, in his most ambitious moments (if any such he had), of ever being called a gentleman, "zober now, wull'e. Where bee'st gooin to, thou little hosebird; be they your Lunnon-town manners? Lat alo-un, I zay; lat alo-un now, wull 'e?"–as the boy got more and more tentative–"Heart alaive, cant e zee, they be my Zunday gaiters? Oh, if my missus wor here! And 'e bain't more nor naine year old! Wull, wull, where ever do 'e goo to schoüll?"

"Hinstitooshun 66. No children or females admitted. Up with your foot, old bloke! Do the young uns and tootor half-price. Just two minutes to spare, till the Dook of Cambridge's turn. Great Exhibition polish, and all to encourage the fine arts."

The good farmer was lost beyond hope, in the multitude of subjects pressed all of a pulp on his slow understanding; nevertheless, he had presence of mind to feel first for his watch and his money, and then for the best pocket-handkerchief stitched into the crown of his hat; meanwhile the boy got hold of one foot, and began to turn up his gaiters. Then Sally and little Jack rushed to the rescue, and Jack punched the boy in the face, while Beany Dawe looked on with a grin of broad experience. But in spite of all aid, the farmer began to collapse before his mosquito enemy; when luckily three giant Life-guards (for a crowd was now collected) opened their mouths, like the ends of a monkey-fur muff, in a round and loud guffaw, with a very coarse sneer at poor Sally. The farmer looked at them in much amazement; then his perplexity went like a cloud, and his face shone with something to do, as he gave Sally his hat to hold. Till now all the mockers had been too small for him anyhow to fall foul of. Ere the echo of laughter was over, the three dandy Lifeguards lay on their backs in the mud, with their striped legs erect in the air, like the rods of a railway surveyor. The crowd fell back headlong, as if from a plunging horse, then laughed at the fallen and with the conqueror. Even the boy was humility multiplied into servility.

"Wutt be up to, arl on 'e?" asked the farmer, replacing his hat; "cas'n none on 'e lat a pacible chap alo-un? And wutt will they chillers think as coom here to get example? Why, Beany, if us had knowed this, us would have brought Bill constable with us, ees fai. Now 'e don't know nothing about it"–he remonstrated with the admiring multitude–"one o' them dree worn't throw handsome laike, ony dree pins, I tull 'e. But us'll do it over again, if he claimeth it. Can't do nothing vitty, zin I laved my missus at home. But her wadn't coom, God knows." These last two remarks were addressed to himself, but the crowd had full benefit of them. "Worn't 'e axing of lave, two or dree minutes agone, little chap with the brisk there, to tend my butts, and tuk it amost wiout axing? Us be bound laike to stap here now till us zees if them 'lisher men feels up for any moor plai. Do as 'e plase, little chap, zoon as Sally hath toorned my best gaiters up, if her bain't too grand in Lunnon."

With bright ribbons fluttering and finery flapping about her, poor Sally knelt down in a moment to work at the muddy fustian: but her father would not allow it, he had only wished to try her; so he caught her up with one hand, and kissed her, and I think, from what Mrs. Fletcher said, he must have given her sixpence at least.

It is needless to say that, although the boy worked with both hands in the most conscientious manner, the farmer's boots defied him. Neats'-foot oil, and tallow, and beeswax held their own against Day and Martin. "Coom, little chap," said Mr. Huxtable, kindly, "thee hast dooed thy very best, but our Zuke will have the laugh of thee. Tache thee perhaps it wull to be zoberer next taime, and not be quite so peart to do a dale more nor thee can do. But thee hast used more ink than ai wud over two copies. Here be a groat for the Exhibition polish."

In this little episode, as will be manifest, Sally has helped me more than Mrs. Fletcher. But now, to return to my narrative.

Almost directly after the housekeeper left me, Patty came trotting in with a large white breakfast-cup full of most powerful tea. I cannot help thinking that the little woman put some brandy in it, or allowed Mrs. Fletcher, who trusted much in that cordial, to do so; but they stoutly deny the charge, and declare that there was only a pinch of gunpowder. Whatever it was, being parched with thirst, I swallowed without tasting it, and the effect upon my jaded brain was immediate and amazing. All self-pity was gone; and self-admiration, and haughty courage succeeded. Was I, Clara Vaughan, who had groped and grubbed for years to find the hole of a blasting snake, and had now got my hand upon it, was I to start back and turn pale at his hiss, and say, "God speed you and polish your skin. Give me your slough for a keepsake?" Would I not rather seize the incarnate devil, trample his spine, and make his tongue sputter in dust? In a moment my cloak and hat were on again; I scarcely looked at the glass, but felt the hot flush on my cheeks, as I lightly skipped down the stairs, and silently left the house. What to do next I knew not, nor asked, but flew headlong before the impulse, to lift and confront–as is my nature–the danger that lay before me. As I glided along, I was conscious of one thing, the people in the street turned in surprise to watch me. As if by instinct, I hurried straight to Lucas Street, my courage mounting higher and higher as I neared the accursed threshold. Balaam and Balak stood at the bar of a tavern which commanded a view of the street, but were much too busy with beer to see me passing so swiftly. Loudly I rang the bell of No. 37; the figures were bright on the door, and looking narrowly, I perceived the old No. 19, more by the lines than the colour.

Old Cora came as usual; but started at seeing me, and turned as pale as death.

"Is your master within?" I could not use his false name.

"Yes, Meesa, but you not see him now."

"Dare you to disobey Our Lady's heart?" And I held my gordit before her. She cowered with one knee on the mat and kissed it; then led me into the presence of Lepardo Della Croce.

CHAPTER VIII.

It was a dark and gloomy room, with three high, narrow windows. Cora departed hastily, frightened at what she had done. In a recess at the farther end, before a chest of black bog-oak, sat the man I sought. The crowning moment of my life was come. All rehearsals went for nothing: the strongest feeling of my heart was scorn, cold, unfathomable scorn. To show myself well, I took off my hat, and advanced in my haughtiest manner.

As he turned his head, I saw that his mood was blacker than the oak before him. Some dark memorials perhaps were there; hastily and heavily he flung down the lid, as I walked with even steps towards him.

"Ah! Miss Valence! The young lady that paints. I feared that you were lost to London; for now-a-days the pursuit of the fine arts requires either genius, or fashion, at any rate the latter most, to be at all remunerative. May I show you the way to the drawing-room? I have not often the honour of receiving visitors here. But I think you know how entirely I am the slave of young ladies, Miss Valence." And he held out his delicate hand.

"Lepardo Della Croce, my name is not Valence. I am Clara Vaughan, the only child of him whom in his sleep you murdered."

He turned not pale, but livid. His jaunty nonsense was gone in a moment. He quailed from my dark eyes, and fell upon a chair. For one minute there he crouched, and dared not meet my gaze; every fibre of his flesh was quivering. It was not shame that cowed him, but the prostration of amazement.

Suddenly he leaped upright, and met me eye to eye. Then I saw that his pupils turned towards each other, as my uncle had described. I neither spoke, nor allowed my gaze to falter. Every nerve and cord of my frame was tense, and rigid, and rooted. To him I must have seemed the embodiment of revenge.

At last he spoke, very slowly, and in words that trembled.

"You have no right to judge me by your English notions. You do not understand me."

"I judge you not at all. God shall judge and smite you. In cold blood you murdered a man who never wronged you."

"What!" he burst forth in a blaze of triumph, "no wrong to steal my lovely bride, and my noble inheritance, to debauch the purest blood of Corsica by a prostitute wedding; no wrong to strike me senseless! Even your nation of policemen would call this rather initiative."

"The man you stole upon in his sleep had never seen or heard of you, had never been in Corsica."

"What?" His teeth struck together like fire-tongs badly jointed, and he could not part them.

"It is true. I regret to inform you that you must go to hell for nothing. You could not even murder the right man."

"Tell me."

"Like a coward as you are, you crawled, and lurked, and lied; you spent what little mind you have in securing a baby's blow, you crouched among old clothes and bed-ticks, and behind the housemaid's flask; and you went away exulting in your bloody soul, over what? the wrong man's murder."

"Can it be?"

"Not only this, but you enriched and brought into high position the man you meant to kill. He became the lord of his half-brother's lands, and now is wealthy and happy, and the children you stole will help him to laugh at your Vendetta."

"Wait a little."

"Cats and small dogs you can carve alive, when a woman has strapped them down for you, and the poor things are trying to lick you. But as for midnight murder, however sound your victims sleep, you have not nerve enough. You quake and quiver so that you know not a dark man from a fair. Clever, don't you think? Particularly for a Professor."

I saw that my contempt was curling round him like a knout; so I gave him a little more of it.

"Of course we could not expect you to meet your foe like a man. Even were you a worthy sample of your sneaking race, you never could do that. Too wholesome memory of the English blow between your quailing eyes. I am pleased to see you fumbling clumsily for your dagger. Who knows but what you are fool enough even to have some self-respect?"

A black tint darted beneath his skin, as if his heart were a cuttle-fish. Had I taken my eyes from him, he would have stabbed me. He fell back against the oak chest. My madness grew with my triumph.

"No. You dare not do it, because I am not asleep. Come, I will give you every chance, Lepardo Della Croce. If you are brave enough to shoot a white-

haired man at dinner, surely you have the courage to stab a young girl on the sofa. Here I lie. I will not move. And I defy you to do it."

Quietly I lay and watched him; but as if he were scarcely worth it. He could not take his eyes from mine. He was like a rat before a snake. And all the while, his hand was working on the cross haft of a poniard.

"What more can I do to encourage you? Would you like the curtain to skulk behind?"

And I threw the window-hangings over the foot of the sofa, but so that I held him still in view. Calm as I was, I must have been mad to play with my life so contemptuously. Presently I rose, put back my hair and turned away, as in weariness.

"I fear your appetite is cloyed with the writhings of cats and dogs. Or has murder no relish for you, unless it be in cold blood? But there, I am tired of you: you have so little variety. We will send you back to Corsica, and write 'Rimbecco' on you."

He sprang at me madly, gnashing his teeth, and whirling his stiletto. I faced him just in time, with both hands by my side. Had I raised them, or shown the least sign of fear, my life would have followed my father's then and there.

"Yes," I said, while he paused, with the weapon not a yard from me, "a spirited attempt, considering what you are. But waste of time and trouble. However, I have hit the word which seems to suit your views. Allow me to repeat the agreeable term, 'Rimbecco.'"

I saw in his eyes the flash which shows the momentum given, but his arm fell powerless. He looked even humbly at me.

"Clara Vaughan–"

"Be kind enough to address me properly."

"Miss Vaughan, you must have some powerful reason for wishing to be rid of life." He tried to look piercingly at me.

"You are quite mistaken. It is nothing more than contempt of an abject coward and murderer."

"To you I will make no attempt to justify myself. You could not understand me. Your ways of thought are wholly different."

"I beg leave to hope so. Don't come near me, if you please."

"If I have injured you in ignorance, I will do my best to make amends. What course do you propose?"

"To let you go free, in pity for your abject nature and cowardice. We scorn you too much for anything else."

This seemed to amaze him more than all before. It was plain that he could not believe me. A long silence ensued. Looking at the wily wretch, I began unwittingly to compare, or rather to contrast his noble victim with him. I thought

of the deep affliction and misery wrought by his despicable revenge. I thought of his brutal cruelty to the poor creatures God has given us; and a rancour like his own began to move in my troubled heart. It had been there all the while, no doubt, but a larger pressure had stilled it. Watching me intently, he saw the change in my countenance, and as cold disdain grew flushed with anger, my power over him departed. But he did not let me perceive it. I am sure that I might have gone whither and when I pleased, and he would have feared to follow me, if I had only regarded him to the end with no other emotion than scorn.

"Am I to understand," he said at last, "that you intend to do nothing to me?"

"It is not worth our while to hang you. For such a crime any other punishment would be an outrage and a jest. You slew a good and a gentle man; one as brave as you are cowardly. By the same blow you destroyed his wife, who lingered for a few years, pining till she died. Both of these were dear to God. He will avenge them in His good time. Only one thing we shall insist on, that you leave this country immediately, and under a solemn oath never to return to it. One good point you have, I am told–fidelity to your word."

"And if I refuse, what then?"

"Then you die a murderer's death. We have evidence you little dream of."

He had now recovered his presence of mind, and his scoffing manner; and all his plan was formed.

"What a brave young lady you are to come here all alone, and entertaining so low an opinion of the poor Professor."

"The very reason why I scorned precautions." A deep gleam shot through the darkness of his eyes.

"You must indeed despise me, to come here without telling any one!"

"Of course. But I did not mean to come, till my father's spirit led me."

With a shudder he glanced all round the room. Lily was not mistaken when she called him superstitious. Then he tried to sneer it off.

"And did the good Papa, dear to God, undertake to escort you back?" Seeing that I disdained to answer, he continued thus: "You have displayed much graceful and highly-becoming scorn. I, in turn, will exhibit some little contempt of you. You were pleased to say, if my memory serves me, that you had some wonderful evidence. I will furnish you with more, and perhaps what you little dream of. Approach, and examine this box."

He raised the lid of the oaken chest, and propped it with a staple. Quite thrown off my guard for the moment, I began to devour the contents with my eyes. Not many things were in it; but all of them were remarkable. To me they looked like theatrical properties, or materials for disguise. Some of them were faded and tarnished; some were set with a silver cross. My gaze was rivetted on a pair of boots, fixed in a ledge with horse-shoe bays; on the sole of one

I perceived a cross of metal inlaid; I drew nearer to see it more closely, when something fell over my head. All down me, and round me, and twisted behind in a tight *tourniquet*, before I could guess what it was. I am not weak, for a girl; but I could no more lift my arms than a swathed mummy can. Neither could I kick, although as a child I had been famous for that accomplishment; if I lifted either foot, I must tumble head-foremost into the box, which was large enough for me to live in. Scream I could, and did, in spite of all my valour, not only from fright, but from pain, for my chest was dreadfully tightened; but before I could scream more than twice, a cloth was passed over my mouth, and knotted behind my neck. So there I stood, a helpless prisoner, in the recess at the end of the oaken ark. A low laugh thrilled in my ears, but the hand on my spine relaxed not; I turned my neck by a violent effort and met the demon's eyes.

"Very pretty you look, young lady, very pretty indeed. I must have a kiss before I have done with you, in spite of all indignation. There is a dress resembling this among the Tartar tribes. Did I hurt your proud, straight nose? If so, accept most humble apologies. I would not injure it for the world; it does express so much scorn. Take care, my child, your eyelashes are coming through the worsted."

Yes. Ignoble confession! I, for whose disdain the world had been too small, was prisoned and helpless in an "anti-macassar," like a fly in a paper cage-trap. The sofa, on which I had lain so grandly defying my enemy, was covered with a stout worsted net, long and very strong: this he had doubled end to end, and flung over my haughty head. I have not patience to recount his paltry, bantering jeers. Contempt is a tool I am used to grasp by the handle only. Be it enough to say that, without releasing me, he rang the bell for Cora, whose greedy eyes glistened when she saw my gordit loose from my bosom, and tangled in the net. Her master allowed her to disengage, and, for the time at least, appropriate it. In return for this, she was, at his pleasure, to stab me if he should order it. By his directions, she tied my ankles together, while he lashed my arms anew, and tightened the muffler over my bleeding lips. I closed my eyes, and prayed; then I made up my mind to die, as many a Vaughan had done, at the hands of a brutal enemy. My last thought was of Conrad, and then my senses forsook me.

CHAPTER IX.

I have a faint recollection of feeling myself swung, and jolted down a number of stairs, and of a cold breeze striking on my face. And doubtless they carried me down; for the room in which I had found my enemy was two floors above the cellarage. When I came to myself, I had no idea where in the world I was. The air was heavy with a most powerful and oppressive smell, a reek and taint as of death and corruption. It made me faint, and I think I must have gone off again. Lifting my head at last, I began to look languidly around. The table, or working-bench, on which I lay, was near the centre of a long and narrow room, gloomy and cold, even in the dog-days, floored with moss-green stone, and far below the ground-level. Those flag-stones, I suppose, were bedded immediately upon the tough blue London clay, that most unconquerable stratum, sullen, damp, and barren. I could only see two windows in the long low room, both upon the same side, horizontally fixed, and several feet from the floor. Heavy iron bars, perpendicularly set, crossed them at narrow intervals, as if it had been the condemned cell in a prison. One of these windows was already darkened with a truss of straw, and sacks over it, placed outside the glass; as is done in Corsica, during Vendetta siege. The technical term is "inceppar le fenestre." Through the other window (which looked up a slide or scoop of brickwork, like a malt-shovel, to the flabby garden behind the house), I saw an arm, the colour and shape of an American herring, very active with a hammer.

I knew that arm at once. Sticking out at the joints, like the spurs of a pear-tree, welted and wired with muscle between them, like the drumstick of a turkey, but flat as if plaited of hide, no friend of mine could claim it, except the Corsican Cora. Deliberately she drove the nails, like a gardener training a tree, paying undue attention to her skinny knuckles; then she lifted the sacks, stooped down and looked in, grimly reconnoitring me. By the slanting light I saw what a horrible place I lay in. Around and under me, on the furrowed timber, were dull plum-coloured blotches, where the slowly trickling blood of many an unlucky dog and cat had curdled; even if there were not any shed from nobler veins. Reaching in a back-handed way towards the jagged margin, I grasped a cold hard cylinder. It was an iron hold-fast, like, but larger than the instrument to be seen in every carpenter's bench, which works in a collared hole, and has a claw for clutching. Under it, no doubt, many a poor live victim had quivered and sobbed in vain. At my head were two square slides, fitted with straps of stout unyielding web. Near them was a rasped iron plane working along a metal bed or groove, with a solid T piece, and a winch to adjust it.

As with morbid observation I surveyed these fiendish devices, and many others which I cannot stop to tell of, I who love almost every creature made by our own Maker, especially those to whom we are lent as Gods, my flesh, I say, began to creep, and my blood to curdle, as if the dissecting knife were already in my

diaphragm. Surely those who in full manhood torture His innocent creatures–poor things that cannot plead or weep, but worship the foot that kicks them–surely these, if any, we may without presumption say that He who made will judge. Four brief lines by a modern poet, too well known for me to quote them, express a grand and simple truth, seldom denied, more seldom felt.

But here am I, laid out in this fearful place, perhaps myself a subject for vivisection. No, I am not strapped; even my feet are free. Off the grouted and grimy table I roll with all possible speed, the table where even strong Judy must have lain still as a skeleton. Of skeletons there were plenty ranged around the walls, and other hideous things which I cannot bear to think of. One was a monstrous crocodile, with scales like a shed fir-cone, all reflexed and dry, and ringent lips of leather, and teeth that seemed to look the wrong way, like a daisy-rake over-worked. Another was some pulled-out beast, that never could hit his own joints again–plesiosauri, deinosauri, marsupials, proboscidians–I am sure I cannot tell, having never been at college. I only know that at every one of them I shuddered, and shrugged my shoulders, and wished that he smelled rather nicer. Then there were numbers of things always going up and down, in stuff like clarified syrup, according to the change of temperature, just as leeches do in a pickle-bottle. Snakes as well, and other reptiles streaked like sticks of peppermint, and centipedes, and Rio wrigglers, called I think La Croya. It was enough in that vault-like room, which felt like the scooping of an August iceberg; it was more than enough to strike a chill to the marrow, as of one who sleeps in a bed newly brought from the cellar. But the worst and most horrible thing of all was the core and nucleus of the smell that might be felt, the half-dissected body of a porpoise, leaning on a dozen stout cross-poles. It was enough to make the blood of a dog run cold.

Overpowered by sights and smells, and the fear of mingling with them, I huddled away in a corner, and tried in vain to take my eyes from the only sign of life yet left, the motion of Cora's club-like arm. The poor old woman enjoyed my interest in her work, and when she had finished, she made me a mock salaam, and kissed the pixie's heart. Then, with a grin, she dropped the rough hangings, and left me in ghastly twilight.

As the sacks fell over the window-frame, I lost all presence of mind, all honest indignation, everything but a coward horror, and the shrinking of life from death. With all the strength of my chest and throat, I cast forth, as a cannon discharges, one long, volleyed, agonising shriek. As it rang among the skeletons, and rattled their tissue-less joints, a small square grating in the upper panel of the heavy door swung back, and in the opening appeared the face of Lepardo Della Croce. He lifted his hat with a pleasant air, and addressed me with a smile,

"Ah! now, this I call a pity, a great pity, indeed, Miss Vaughan; but that I

always fear the imputation of pedantry, I should call it a bathos. You can hardly be aware that since you made that dreadful noise, you have fallen in my opinion from a Porcia, or an Arria, to a common maid Marian. Fie, fie, it is too disappointing. It saps one's candid faith in the nobility of human nature. But, as I can no longer appeal to your courage or spirit, I must, it appears, address myself to your reason; if, as I am fain to hope, your nerves have not impaired it. Be assured, then, once for all, that it is a vulgar error to exert your sweet voice in so high a key. My little dissecting theatre, though not so perfect as I could wish, particularly in ventilation, is nevertheless so secured from erroneous plebeian sympathy, that all the cats in London might squall away their fabulous nine lives without affecting the tea and muffins of the excellent old ladies who live on either side of us. That noble tabby, on the third shelf right, was a household god at No. 39, until he had the honour of attracting my attention. Breathe not a word about him, if you ever come out. Twice a day, I sent to inquire, with my kindest compliments, whether poor Miss Jenkinson had recovered her darling cat. Meanwhile, by inanition scientifically graduated, I succeeded in absorbing his adipose deposit, and found him one of the kindest subjects I have had the pleasure of manipulating. Be not alarmed, Miss Vaughan; I have no intention of starving you; neither, if you behave with courtesy, will I even dissect you. I only mention these little facts to convince you of our pleasing retirement. The ceiling of your room is six feet below the level of the street, the walls are three feet thick and felted, and the bricks set all as headers, which makes a great difference in conducting power. The windows, as perhaps you have already observed, are secluded from vulgar eyes, and command a very partial view of our own little Eden. Moreover, if by exerting your nobly-developed chest, to an extent which for your sake I affectionately deprecate, you even succeeded at last in producing an undulation–do you remember my lecture upon the conflicting theories of sound?–or a vibration in the tympanum of a neighbour, I fear you would be regarded–it shocks me greatly to think of it–as a cat of rare vocal power, unduly agitated by my feeble pursuit of science. Therefore, let me conclude my friendly counsel in the language of all your theatres–ah! you have no drama now in this country, such poverty of invention–but in the words, which I regret to say, appear from six to a dozen times in every British trugody, Miss Vaughan, 'Be calm.'"

Through all this brutal sneering, I stood resolutely with my back turned to him. Perhaps he thought that I would stoop to supplication. I could have bitten my tongue off for that contemptible shriek; it was such a triumph to him.

"Ah! sulky, I fear; young lady sulky with the poor Professor, who tries to develop her mind. Fie, fie, very small and ungrateful, and not half so grand a study as the attitude of contempt. What a pity poor Conrad was not present an hour ago! How he might have enriched his little book of schemata. Several most

magnificent poses. But I fear the poor fellow has taken his last chip. A sad thing, was it not? Why, how you start, Miss Vaughan! Oh, you can show your face at last! And how pale! Well, if eyes could only kill–"

"What is it–I mean be good enough just to go away."

"To be sure I will. I have a little matter on hand which must not be delayed; to leave my carte de visite upon the right man, this time. I cannot sufficiently thank you for your invaluable information. Is that snug little entrance practicable still? Very hospitable people they used to be at Vaughan Park. Fare you well, young lady; I will not keep you in any unnecessary suspense. After my return, I shall arrange for your release; if it can be made compatible with my safety. You will have plenty of food, and much time for meditation. Let your thoughts of me be liberal and kindly. I never injure any one, when I can avoid it. I only regret that the air you breathe will impair, for the while, your roses. But what an opportunity of analysing the gases! Carbonic acid predominant. Do you gratify me by bearing in mind a lecture, at which you were very attentive, on Malaria and Miasma?"

Taunting to the last, and sneering even at himself, as men of the blackest dye of wickedness are very apt to do, he closed the grating carefully, and I heard the ring of the metal cross on the rough stone steps. He had the boots of vengeance on; his errand was stealthy and cold-blooded murder; me, who had never harmed him, he was abandoning perhaps to death, certainly to madness–and yet to his own ideas, all he was doing was right.

Frantic at the horrors around me, and still more so at those impending through my own rash folly, I tore and scratched at the solid door, and flung myself against it, till my nails were broken, and my fingers bleeding, and all my body palpitating with impotent mad fury. In weariness at last and shame at this wild outburst, I sat upon the floor, for I could not touch the operator's stool, and tried to collect my thoughts. Was there any possibility of saving my poor Uncle? It must now be nearly four o'clock on the Friday afternoon, or at least I so computed it. The beautiful watch given me by my Uncle had stopped through my reckless violence, and the breaking of the glass. The hands, as I could barely perceive, stood at a quarter to four. The express-train, by which Mrs. Fletcher and I were to have returned, would leave Paddington at five P.M. and reach Gloucester soon after eight. Lepardo Della Croce would catch it easily, and perhaps would accomplish his foul design that night. My only hope of preventing him lay in his own tenacity of usage. From my Uncle's account, I knew, that on their cursed Vendetta enterprises, a certain pilgrimage on foot is, in many families, regarded as a matter of honour. This usage owes its origin perhaps to some faint trace of mercy, some wish to afford the evil passions one more chance of relenting to the milder reflections of weariness, and the influence of the air. Be that as it may, I

believed that the custom was hereditary in the Della Croce family; and if so, the enemy would finish his journey on foot, quitting the train some distance on this side of Gloucester. Therefore if I could contrive to escape in the course of the night, I might yet be in time.

All the rest of the daylight, such as it was, I spent in examining, inch by inch, every part of the loathsome chamber, which was now my dungeon. By this time all my patience, habitual more than natural, had returned, and all my really inborn determination and hope. Surely I had been every bit as badly off before, and had struggled through quite as hopeless a difficulty. If arduous courage and tough perseverance were of any avail, those four walls should not hold me, though they might be three feet thick. So stopping both my nostrils with cotton-wool from a specimen (for the smell was most insufferable), and pinning up my dress, I set to work in earnest. First, I examined the windows: there was nothing to hope from them; I could never loosen a bar, and even if I could, I should only escape from one prison to another, for the garden behind the house was surrounded with high dead walls. Fireplace there was none; the door had already baffled me; could I dig through the party wall, and into the adjoining house? Most likely it was all a falsehood and boast about the thickness, intended perhaps to discourage me from attempting the easiest way. And in so damp a place, the mortar probably would be soft.

So, after searching and groping, ever so long, to find, if possible, one loose brick to begin with, I drew from my pocket a knife, of which I was very proud, "because my father had given it me; and I looked at it wistfully in the dusk, because I feared so to break it. Nothing but the thought that life itself was at stake would ever have induced me to use that beloved knife for work so very unsuitable.

It was a knife of strong but by no means elegant make, shorter in the handle, and squarer in the joints, than the rising generation of knives. Very likely Sheffield of the present day would laugh at it; but like most who laugh, it could not produce the fellow. My father himself had owned it for nearly thirty years, and had treated it with the high respect which an honest knife deserves. From this due regard his daughter had not derogated, and the knife was now as good as when it left the maker's hand. It had never been honed in utter ignorance of proper plane and angle, as nearly all knives are, and by none so often as the professional knife-grinder. I never dared to meddle with it, except on a very mild razor-strap; and all it was allowed to do was to mend my pens–I, Clara Vaughan, hate steel paper-stabbers–and sometimes to cut my pencils.

Now, this true and worshipful knife was to cut bricks and mortar! In my natural affection for it, I hesitated and trembled, and knowing what was to come it closed upon my fingers. Oh, ruthless Atta Nævia! trusty knife, fall to!

Meanwhile old Cora showed at the heavy grating her countenance demiss; to all my eager adjurations, promises, and prayers, she answered not a word, but grimly smiled, like an ancient bird, beyond the reach of chaff. She handed me in a pint of milk, and a loaf of the variety termed in London a "twopenny brick." A red herring on the toasting-fork, dripping with its own unction, was hastily shown, and then withdrawn, and the gordit appeared in its stead; which being done, the experienced dame winked, and regarded me deeply. This meant, "Surrender your legal right in Our Lady's heart, without which I shall have no luck, and I will give you this beautiful fish, hard-roed, and done to a nicety." Ah no, sweet Cora, a good red herring is not to be despised; but who could eat in a reeking hole like this? Once I went, for Judy's sake, being rash and light of step, into the back premises of a highly respectable butcher. Woe is me, what I saw and smelt there was Muscat grapes compared to this.

When Cora had departed, after handing me in a pillow and a blanket of the true work-house texture, and crossing herself with a strange expression, meaning, as I interpreted, "Now keep alive if possible till breakfast time, young woman," I sat me down upon the floor at one end of the room, and began my labours. First. I put on a pair of tan-leather gloves; for small as my vanity is, I do not like my hands to look altogether like a hodman's. Then I removed a strip of the felt with which the wall was covered. It was nearly dark, but I could easily feel the joints between the bricks. The mortar was not very good, but my work was rendered doubly difficult by the bricks being all set cross-wise to the line of the wall; this, I suppose, is what he meant when he described them as "headers." By reason of this arrangement, I had to dig and dig for hours, before I could loosen a single brick; and working all in the dark as I was, I feared every moment to break the stick-blade of my knife. The fingers of my gloves were very soon worn away, and even the palm where the heel of the knife was chafing; nor was it long before my skin was full of weals, and raspy, like the knobs I have seen inside the legs of a horse. At last, to my wonderful delight, one brick began to tremble. In another half-hour, I eased it out most carefully, kissed my trusty blade, now worn almost to a skewer, and with stiff and aching muscles, and the trophy brick upon my lap, fell off into as sound a sleep as ever I was blest with.

CHAPTER X.

When I awoke, the summer dawn was stealing faintly through the barricaded windows. Oh! how I longed for one draught of air, even as London imports it! My head was burning and my eyes distended from the tainted stuff around me, and my hands, and arms, and even shoulders were stiff from over exertion. Languidly regarding the brick I had worked so hard for, and commiserating much the plight of my tender hands, I felt inclined to give it up, till I thought of all at stake. My poor Uncle in deadly peril through my desperate folly; Conrad too, as that murderer implied, in a critical position. My own life also–it might be a week before the monster returned; and I felt sure that I could not live more than three days in that corruption. The oppression was so horrible, especially when I stood up, that I resolved at all hazards to break one of the windows. I had tried to do so the night before, but they were beyond my reach, and I had no stick, for I durst not touch the poles that propped the unlucky porpoise. Now, I had a good missile, and after two or three vain attempts from the closeness of the bars, I hurled the brick-bat through the glass; and, as it raised the sacks a little, I obtained more light, as well as a breath of air. The taint upon the glass, the reek of the deadly gases, even cleared away for a short distance round the fracture.

Cora was fast asleep no doubt, and the crash of the glass did not disturb her; so I fell to again, and worked very hard till breakfast time. If I could only get out by noon, in time for the two o'clock train! When I expected my jailor, I hid away under the porpoise the seven bricks I had removed since daylight–for I could work much faster as the aperture increased–and then I fastened my blanket over the hole. After drinking the milk with some relish–eat I could not in that pestilential den–I returned to my labour, and prepared to attack the second course in the thickness of the wall. By this time I had contrived, with the help of a brick, to extract the hold-fast from the bench, which I could not do the night before; and very useful I found it, both as a hammer and lever. So with rising hopes, I resumed.

Oh, cruel disappointment! The second course was bedded in cement harder than the bricks themselves. Most likely they had formed the outside of the wall, until Lepardo added the nine-inch lining of headers. I was utterly dismayed; and now my beloved knife, which had stood like a hero-martyr all its grinding indignities, broke off short at the haft, and left me helpless and hopeless. And I was getting on so well, and so proud of all I had done. There was nothing for it but a storm of crying. It served me right for ill-treating my dear father's knife so shockingly.

I cried for at least a quarter of an hour, before it occurred to me what a great baby I was. Then, with the tears in my swollen eyes, and sobs that made my net-pressed bosom sore, I began to grope and peer again along the sides of my prison. There was more light now than had hitherto entered, since Cora dropped

the curtain. This was partly owing to the position of the sun, and partly to the interposition of the brick. Just opposite that window, on a shelf where lay an old Penguin looking very bilious, I spied the corner of a little box, half covered with tow and moth-eaten feathers. Snatching it eagerly, I found it to be a match-box. But alas, how light! With trembling fingers I pulled it open, for it was one of those that slide. There were three, and only three, fine stout lucifer matches, with the precious blue still on them. But even if they should prove dry enough to kindle, what good would they be to me?

"All the good in the world," said hope, looking towards the door, "if you had shown sense enough, Clara, to fall to at that door, before your knife was broken, you might have cut through it by this time. Now you can't, that is certain; but why shouldn't you burn it down?"

At any rate, I would try; that is, if my matches would only strike fire. I had felt last night a piece of candle on the floor near the crocodile. This I soon laid hands upon; and now for operations. No fear of old Cora smelling the smoke, for she spent all the forenoon, as I knew well, in a little chapel she had established quite at the top of the house; and this being the festival of St. Bottle-imp, she would be twice as devout as usual. As for suffocating myself, that I must take the chance of. Much better to die of curling wood smoke than of these crawling odours.

To give the wood, which was hard and solid, every inclination to burn, I channeled it first in a fan from the bottom with my little pen-blade. Then I cut off the lower half of my precious candle, and smeared the tallow in the shallow grooves I had made. This being done, I broke, with as little noise as possible, some other panes of glass, to admit the air to my fire, procured all the wool and tow that I could reach, and a pile of paper, and steeped them, though it sickened me to do it, in the rank oil from some of the specimens.

All this being ready at hand, I prepared, with a beating heart, to try the matches, on which the whole depended. I had taken the precaution of slipping them just inside my frock, hoping that the warmth of my body might serve to dry them a little. The first, as I rubbed it on the sandpaper, flashed for a moment, but did not kindle; the second just kindled with a sputter, but did not ignite its stick: the third–I was so nervous that I durst not attempt it then; but trembled as I looked at it. I would not even breathe for fear of damping the phosphorus. Perhaps three lives depended on the behaviour of that match. In desperation at last I struck boldly! a broad blue flame leaped upon the air, and in a moment my candle was lighted. In the hollow of my hand I carried it round the room, to search for anything likely to be of service to me. Oh! grand discovery–behind a great tabby cat, I found a bottle containing nearly a pint of naphtha, used, I suppose, for singeing some of the hair off. Now I need not fear, but what I could

burn the door down; the only thing to fear was that I should burn myself as well, used the naphtha very cautiously, keeping most of it as a last resource.

Then commending the result to God, I set my candle carefully at the foot of the door, just below the spot where all my little grooves converged. At once the flame ran up them, the naphtha kindling angrily with a spatter and a hiss. The blue light showed in livid ghastliness all the horrors of the chamber. The naphtha was burnt in a moment, it seemed to go off like gunpowder; from a prudent distance I threw more upon it, and soon I had the delight of seeing a steady flame established. The lumps of tallow were burning now, and the wood began to smoulder. Several times I thought that I must be choked by the smoke, till it went in a cloud to the windows, and streamed away under the sacks.

As the fire grew and grew, and required no more feeding, I lay on my face, to get all the air possible, at the further end of the room, where my loose mortar was scattered. I could feel my heart thumping heavily on the pavement, and my breath was shorter and shorter, as much from fear as from smoke. If once I became insensible, or even if I retained my senses but failed to extinguish the fire, nothing more would ever be known or heard of Clara Vaughan; there would be nothing even to hold an inquest upon. I must burn ignobly, in the fat of that dreadful porpoise, and with the crocodile, and all those grinning beasts, so awful in the firelight, making faces at me! Surely it must be time, high time to put it out; that is to say if I could. Once let the flame gather head on the other side of the door, and with my scanty means I never could hope to quench it.

At last, I became so frightened, that I hardly let it burn long enough. It was flaring beautifully, and licking deeper and deeper (with ductile wreathing tongues and jets like a pushing crocus), the channels prepared to tempt it; and now the black wood was reddened, and a strong heat was given out, and the blazes began to roar; when I cast on the centre suddenly my doubled blanket, and propped it there with the pillow. After a few vain efforts, the flames, deprived of air, expired in gray smoke; then I removed the scorched blanket, and let the smouldering proceed.

The charring went on nicely for perhaps a quarter of an hour, and the smell made me think of bonfires and roast potatoes; and I gouged away with the claw of the holdfast, until I saw that, by a vigorous onset, a large piece might be detached; so I stepped back and ran at it with a mighty kick, and with a shower of dust and sparks, a great triangle flew out before my "military heel."

At the risk of setting myself on fire, though gathered in the smallest possible compass for a girl rather full in the chest, I squeezed through the hole in the door, and met face to face old Cora.

She could not speak, but fell back upon the steps, and rolled in fits of terror. I thought her black eyes would have leaped from their sockets; they came out like

hat-pegs japanned. Pressed as I was for time, I could not leave her so. I ran up to the pump-trough for water, and put out the fire first, and then poor Cora's hysterics.

I cannot repeat her exclamations, to our ears they are so impious; but the mildest of them were these, as rendered weakly into English.

"Holy Madonna, most sacred mother, take back your blessed heart. Take it back, for the sake of the God that loved you, take it back, and trample on the wicked stomach of her who dared to steal it. You have come through the fires of hell to fetch it, mother of the beloved one, lo I hold it out to you."

I gladly received my poor gordit, and left the old lady, as there was now no danger, to recover her wits at leisure; for I had not a moment to spare.

As I entered Mrs. Shelfer's door, the church clock at the top of the Square was striking twelve. By the two o'clock train I must go, or I might as well have stopped in my dungeon. Though the smoke had purified me a little, I still felt conscious of a nasty clinging smell; but it would have surprised me, if there had been time, when the little woman cried,

"Lor bless my soul, Miss Vaughan, where ever have you been? Why, Mr. Chumps the butcher–"

"The bath in one moment, and all the water in the house. And as I throw my things out, burn them in the garden."

In twenty minutes I was reclad from head to foot, and as sweet as any girl in Gloucestershire; my eyes were bright with energy, and my dripping hair in billows, like a rapid under the pine-trees. I had no time to tell Mrs. Shelfer, who was off her legs with excitement, one word of what had happened, or what I was going to do; but flung on myself another hat and cloak, then her old bonnet and little green shawl on her, dragged her out of the house, and locked the door behind us; for Mrs. Fletcher, after waiting and wondering long about me, was gone to consult Ann Maples. If Mrs. Shelfer's best bonnet was twenty-two years old, her second-best must have been forty-four; at any rate it appeared coeval with herself.

Patty trotted along at my side, wondering what would come next. Her thin little lips were working, and her face was like a kaleidoscope of expressions; but whenever I glanced toward her, she cast her eyes up, with a scared weird look, as if she was watching a ghost through a skylight, and trudged still faster, and muttered, "Yes, yes, Miss Vaughan. Quite right, my good friend; not a moment to lose."

"And pray, Mrs. Shelfer, where do you suppose we are going?"

"Oh, I knows well enough "–with her eyes like corks drawn by distance–"I knowed it all the time. Yes, yes. Let me alone for that. Patty Shelfer wasn't born yesterday. Why only Tuesday was a week–"

"If you guess right, I will tell you."

"Why going to Charley, Miss Vaughan, to be sure. Going for Charley's opinion. And very wise of you too; and what a most every one does; particular when he have money. But how you knowed he were there–"

"Where?"

"At the great wrestling match to be sure. And he wanted to take me; a thing he ain't offered to do fifteen year next oyster-day. No, no, says I, with Miss Vaughan away, and most likely among them resurrectioners–"

Here she cast at me a glance, like a flash of lightning, to see if the hit had told. In a moment I understood all that I had not cared to ask about; why she trembled and shrunk from my hand, why she feared to look at me, and fixed her eyes away so. She believed that I had been burked, and that what she saw walking beside was my spirit come to claim burial. I could not stop to disprove it, any more than I could stop to laugh.

"And his grandfather were a sexton, Miss; and our Charley himself a first-rate hand at the spade."

"Mrs. Shelfer, we are close to the place. Now, listen to what I say. It is not your husband I want, but Farmer Huxtable, whom you saw at the door. Nothing but a question of life and death would bring me among this rabble. No doubt there are many respectable men, but it is no place for a lady. The farmer himself knows that, and has never dared to ask me; though his wife and daughter, in ignorance, have. It is half-past twelve exactly; in a quarter of an hour at the utmost, I must speak to, and what is more, carry off the Devonshire competitor. Your husband is here, and on the Committee, you told me. I expect you to manage it. Go in at once and find him. Stop, here is plenty of money."

In her supreme astonishment, she even dared to look at me. But she feared to take the money, although her eyes glistened at it, for I offered more gold than silver.

"Come back to me at once; I shall not move from here. Mind, if the farmer loses the match through me, I will pay all, and give the money for another."

For once the little woman obeyed me, without discussion. She pushed through a canvass door into the vast marquee, or whatever it ought to be called, and was admitted readily on giving her husband's name. I hung back, but with a sense of the urgency of my case, which turned my shame into pride. Many eyes were on me already of loungers and outsiders. In two or three minutes poor Patty came back, bringing Mr. Shelfer himself, who ever since his ducking had shown me the rose and pink of respect. He even went the length now of removing his pipe from his mouth.

"Very sorry indeed, Miss Vaughan, very sorry, you know. But we darrn't interrupt the men now. Our lives wouldn't be worth it, and they'd kill both the

umpires and the referee too you know. Why it's fall for fall, only think of that, Miss Vaughan, it's fall for fall!" And the perspiration stood upon his forehead, and he wanted to run back.

"What do you mean?" In spite of my hurry, I felt deeply interested. How could I help it, loving the farmer so?

"Why, the Great Northern won the first throw by a bit of foul play, a foul stroke altogether, and no back at all, say I, and my eyes is pretty good; however, the umpires give it, and you should see John Huxtable's face, the colour of a scythe-stone; he knew it was unfair you know. And you should see him go in again for the second fall. 'I could ha dooed it,' I hear him say, 'I could ha dooed it aisy, only I wudn't try Abraham, and I wun't nother if can help it now.' None of us knows what he mean, but in he go again, Miss, and three times he throw Sam Richardson clean over his shoulder, and one as fair a back as ever was in sawdust. But the umpires wouldn't give it, till just now he turn him over straight for'ard, just the same as a sod in a spade, and they couldn't get out of that. And now they be just in for the finishing bout, and if you want him, your only way is to come. May be, he'll try Abraham, when he see you. Ah they've catched."

A shout inside proclaimed some crisis; Mr. Shelfer, in his excitement, actually pulled me in without knowing it. Once there, I could not go back; and the scene was a grand and thrilling one.

In the centre of a roped arena, hedged by countless faces, all rigid, flushed, and straining with suspense, stood two mighty forms; the strongest men in England and perhaps in all the world. A loose sack, or jerkin, of the toughest canvass, thrown back clear of the throat, half-sleeved, and open in front, showed the bole of the pollard neck, the solid brawn of the chest, and the cords of the outstretched arm. Stout fustian breeches, belted at waist, and strapped at knee, cased their vast limbs so exactly, yet so easily, that every curve was thew, and every wrinkle sinew. Thin white stockings, flaked with sawdust and looking rather wet, rolled and stood out, like the loops of a mace, with the rampant muscles of the huge calf, and the bulge of the broad foreleg.

As the shout proclaimed, they had caught or clutched; a thing which is done with much fencing and feinting, each foining to get the best grasp. Where I went, or what happened to me, I never noticed at all, so absorbed at once I became in this rare and noble probation of glorious strength, trained skill, and emulous manhood.

Round and round the ring they went, as in musical measure, holding each other at arms' length, pacing warily and in distance, skilfully poised to throw the weight for either attack or defence. Each with his left hand clutched the jerkin of the other, between the neck and shoulder, each kept his right arm lightly bent, and the palm like a butterfly quivering. Neither dared to move his eyes from the

pupils of the other; for though they were not built alike, each knew the strength of his fellow. The Northern Champion was at least three inches taller than the Son of Devon, quite as broad in the shoulders and large of limb, but not so thick-set and close-jointed, not quite so stanch in the loins and quarters. But he was longer in the reach, and made the most of that advantage. On his breast he bore the mark of a hug as hard as a bear's; and his face, though a fine and manly one, looked rather savage and spiteful.

The farmer was smiling pleasantly, an honest but anxious smile. For the first time he had met with a man of almost his own power; and on a turn of the heel depended at least four hundred pounds, and what was more than four million to him, the fame of the county that nursed him. Above them hung the champion's belt, not of the west or north, but of England and of the world.

Suddenly, ere I could see how they did it, they had closed in the crowning struggle. Breast to breast, and thigh to thigh, they tugged, and strained, and panted. Nothing though I knew of the matter, I saw that the North-man had won the best hold, and as his huge arms enwrapped my friend, a tremble went through my own frame. The men of the North and their backers saw it, and a loud hurrah pealed forth; deep silence ensued, and every eye was intent. Though giant arms were round him and Titan legs inlocked, never a foot he budged. John Huxtable stood like a buttress. He tried not to throw the other; placed as he was, he durst not; but he made up his mind to stand, and stand he did with a vengeance. In vain the giant jerked and twisted, levered, heaved, and laboured, till his very eyeballs strained; all the result was ropes and bunches in the wide-spread Devonshire calves, and a tightening of the clench that threatened to crush the Northern ribs. As well might a coiling snake expect to uproot an oak.

As this exertion of grand stability lasted and outlasted, shouts arose and rang alike from friend and foe, from north, and west, and east; even I could not help clapping my feeble hands. But the trial was nearly over. The assailant's strength was ebbing; I could hear him gasp for breath under the fearful pressure. By great address he had won that hold, and made sure of victory from it, it had never failed before; but to use a Devonshire word, the farmer was too "stuggy." Now, the latter watched his time, and his motive power waxed as the other's waned. At length he lifted him bodily off his legs, and cast him flat on his back. A flat and perfectly level cast, as ever pancake crackled at. Thunders of applause broke forth, and scarcely could I keep quiet.

With amazement the farmer espied me as he was bowing on all sides, and amid the tumult and uproar that shook the canvass like a lark's wing, he ran across the ring full speed. Then he stopped short, remembering his laboured and unpresentable plight, and he would have blushed, if he had not been as red as fire already. None of such nonsense for me. I called him by name, took his hand,

and with all my heart congratulated.

"But, farmer, I want you immediately, on a matter of life and death." Beany Dawe and the children came, but I only stopped to kiss Sally, and motioned them all away. "If you remember your promise to me, get ready for a journey in a moment, and run all the way to my lodgings. We must leave London, at two o'clock, to save my Uncle's life."

Mr. Huxtable looked astounded, and his understanding, unlike his legs, for the moment was carried away. Meanwhile up came Sally again, caught hold of my hand, and silently implored for some little notice, if only of her costume, violet, indigo, blue, green, yellow, orange and red. I could only kiss her again.

"Oh do come, farmer Huxtable, do come at once, I entreat you; or I must go alone and helpless."

"That you shan't, my dearie, dang Jan Uxtable for a girt lout."

"Please, sir, I am sent to tell you that the umpires gives it no fall, and you must play again."

The man looked abased by his errand; even he knew better. In my hurry I had paid no attention to the ominous hissing and hooting around a knot of men on the benches at the end.

The farmer's face I shall never forget; as he slowly gathered the truth, it became majestic with honest indignation. A strong man's wrath at deceit and foul play sat upon it, like a king on his throne.

"For the chillers–" he stammered at last–"ony for the poor chiller's sake–else I'd never stand it, danged if I wud, Miss Clara; it make a man feel like a rogue and a cheat himself."

Then, with all the power of his mighty voice he shouted, so that every fold of the canvass shook, and every heart thrilled fearfully:

"Men of Lunnon, if men you be, no chap can have fair play with you. It be all along of your swindling bets about things you don't know nothing of. You offered me five hunder pound, afore ever here I come, to sell my back to the Northman. A good honest man he be, and the best cross-buttock as ever I met with; but a set of rogues and cowards that's what you be; and no sport can live with you. As for your danged belt, I wun't have it, no tino, it wud be a disgrace to the family; it shan't never go along side the Devonshire and Cornwall leather. But I'll throw your man over again, and any six of you to once as plases."

Then, thorough gentleman as he was, he apologized to me for his honest anger, and for having drawn all eyes upon me, as there I stood at his side.

"But never fear about the time, Miss Clara, I won't kape you two minutes. I'll give him Abraham's staylace this time. They have a drove me to it, as us hasn't a moment to spare."

Proudly he stepped into the ring again, and again the North Country giant,

looking rather ashamed, confronted him. No fencing or feinting this time; but the Devonshire wrestler, appealing thus to the public,

"Now look here, Lunnoners, wull e, and zee if this here be a back," rushed straight at his antagonist, grappled him in some peculiar manner, seemed to get round his back, and then spun him up over his own left shoulder, in such a way that he twirled in the air and came down dead on his spine. Dead indeed he appeared to be, and a dozen surgeons came forward, in the midst of a horrible silence, and some were preparing to bleed him, when the farmer moved them aside; he knew that the poor man was only stunned by concussion of the spine. Awhile he knelt over him sadly, with the tears in his own brave eyes:

"I wudn't have doed it, lad; indade and indade I wudn't, ony they forced me to it; and you didn't say nought agin them. It be all fair enough, but it do hoort so tarble. That there trick was invented by a better man nor I be, and it be karled 'Abraham Cann's staylace.' I'll show e how to do it, if ever us mates again. Now tak the belt, man, tak it–" he leaped up, and tore it down, with very little respect, "I resigns it over to you; zimth they arl wants you to have it and you be a better man nor deserves it. And I'll never wrastle no more; Jan Uxtable's time be over. Give us your hond, old chap. We two never mate again, unless you comes down our wai, and us han't got a man to bate e, now I be off the play. There be dacent zider and bakkon to Tossil's Barton Farm. Give us your hond like a man, there be no ill will atween us, for this here little skumdoover." Perhaps he meant skirmish and manoeuvre, all in one. Sam Richardson, slowly recovering, put out his great hand, all white and clammy, and John Huxtable took it tenderly, amid such uproarious cheering, that I expected the tent on our heads. Even Shelfer's sharp eyes had a drop of moisture in them. As for Beany Dawe, he flung to the winds all dithyrambic gravity, and chanted and danced incoherently, Cassandra and Chorus in one; while Sally Huxtable blotted all her rainbow in heavy drops.

Hundreds of pipes were smashed, even the Stoic Shelfer's, in the rush to get at the farmer; but he parted the crowd right and left, as I might part willow-sprays, and came at once to me. Whether by his aid, or by the sympathies of the multitude, I am sure I cannot tell, but I found myself in a cab, with Sally at my side, and Mrs. Shelfer on the box, and the farmer's face at the window.

"Twenty minutes, Miss, I'll be there, raddy to go where you plases. It bain't quite one o'clock yet. I must put myself dacent like, avore I can go with you, Miss; and git the money for the sake of them poor chiller, if so be they Lunnoners be honest enough to pai. Jan Uxtable never come to Lunnon town no more."

With thousands of people hurraing, we set off full gallop for Albert Street.

CHAPTER XI.

At the door we found Mrs. Fletcher just returned from Lady Cranberry's, and eager to say a great deal which could not now be listened to. Having proved the speed of our horse, I begged the cabman to wait for a quarter of an hour, and then take us to Paddington at any fare he pleased, so long as he drove full gallop. This suited his views very nicely, and knowing Mr. Shelfer, as every one in London does–so at least I am forced to believe–he fain would have kept me ten minutes of the fifteen, to tell of Charley's knowingness, how he had kept it all dark as could be, you see, Miss, and had won three hundred and twenty-five pounds, without reckoning the odd money, Miss–

"Reckon it then, Mr. Cabman," and I ran upstairs full speed, after telling Mrs. Shelfer the sum, lest she should be cheated.

In five minutes I was ready, and came out of my bedroom into the sitting-room, with my hat in one hand, and a little bag in the other; and there, instead of Mrs. Fletcher, I found, whom?–Conrad!

Very pale and ill he looked, so unlike himself that I was shocked, and instead of leaping to him, fell upon a chair. He mistook me, and approached very slowly, but with his dear old smile: how my heart beat, how I longed to be in his arms; but they looked too weak to hold me.

"Oh, Miss Vaughan, I know everything. Will you ever forgive me?"

"Never, my own darling, while you call me that. Forgive you indeed! Can I ever forgive myself, for the evil I have thought of you? How very ill you look! Come and let me kiss you well."

But instead of my doing that, he had to do it for me; for I was quite beaten at last, and fainted away in his arms. By this folly five minutes were lost; and I had so much to say to him, and more to think of than twenty such heads could hold. But he seemed to think that it must be all right, so long as he had me there.

"Oh, Conny," I said through my tears at last, "my own pet Conny, come with me. Your father is in such danger."

"Life of my heart, I will follow you by the very next train. This one I cannot go by."

I could wait for no explanation, and he seemed inclined to give none. Perhaps this was the reason that he spent all the time in kissing me; which, much as I enjoyed it, would have done quite as well at leisure. Be that as it may, there was no time to talk about it; he said it did his lips good, and I believe it did, they were so pale at first, and now so fine a red. Suddenly in the midst of it, a great voice was heard from the passage:

"Why now, what ever be us to do with the chillers?"

Out I ran, with my hair down as usual, and a great flush in my cheeks, but I did not let any one see me.

"Leave them here, to be sure, leave them here, Mr. Huxtable. They shall have my rooms; and in all London they would not find such a hostess as Mrs. Shelfer."

There was no time to consider it. The throat of hurry is large, and gulps almost any suggestion. Away we went full gallop; the farmer was on the box,–how the driver found room I can't say,–Mrs. Fletcher and I inside, all consulting her watch every minute. Across the Regent's Park, scattering the tame wild ducks, past Marylebone Church, and the Yorkshire Stingo, and Edgware Road–we saved it by just two minutes. Although I had taken his ticket, the farmer would not come with us, but went in a second-class carriage.

"They blue featherbeds trimmed with pig's tails, is too good for the likes of I, Miss Clara; and I should be afeared all the wai that the Missus was rating of me for my leg-room. I paid parlour price coming up, and went in the kitchen waggons, because it zim'd only fair, as I takes such a dale of room."

I knew that none ever could turn him from what he considered just, and therefore allowed him to ride where he pleased. But a dozen times I thought we should have lost him on the way; for at every station, where the train stopped, he made a point of coming to our window, which he had marked with a piece of chalk, and "humbly axing our pardon, but was we all right and no fire? He couldn't think what they wanted, not he, with tempting God Almighty fast." Not fast enough for me, I told him every time; whereupon he put on his hat with a sigh, and said he supposed I was born to it. And yet all the time he seemed to consider that he was protecting me somehow, and once he called me his dearie, to the great surprise of the other passengers, and the horror of Mrs. Fletcher; seeing which he repented hastily, and "Miss Vaughan'd" me three times in a sentence, with a hot flush on his forehead. At Swindon, where we changed carriages, he pulled out very mysteriously from an inner breast-pocket a little sack tied with whipcord, and in which, I do believe, the simple soul had deposited all his hard-earned prize-money. Then he led us to the counter, proud to show that he had been there before, and earnestly begged for the honour of treating us to a drop of somewhat. His countenance fell so on my refusal, that I was fain to cancel it, and to drink at his expense a glass of iced sherry and water; while Mrs. Fletcher, with much persuasion and simpering, and for the sake of her poor inside, that had been so long her enemy, ventured on a "wee wee thimbleful of Cognac." The farmer himself, much abashed at the splendour around him, which he told me, in a whisper, beat Pewter Will's out and out, and even the "Fortescue Arms," would not call for anything, until I insisted upon it; being hard pressed he asked at last,

hoping no offence of the lady, for a pint of second cider. The young woman turned up her nose, but I soon made her turn it down again, and fetch him, as the nearest thing, a bottle of sparkling perry.

As always happens, when one is in a great hurry, the train was an hour behind its time, and the setting sun was casting gold upon the old cathedral–to my mind one of the lightest and grandest buildings in England, though the farmer prefers that squat and heavy Norman thing at Exeter–when we glided smoothly and swiftly into the Gloucester Station. I fully intended to have sent an electric message from London, not for the sake of the carriage, which mattered nothing, but to warn my dear uncle; at Paddington, however, we found no time to do it, and so stupid I was that I never once thought of telegraphing from Swindon. To make up by over alacrity, in a case of far less importance, I went to the office at Gloucester, and sent this message to Tiverton, then the nearest Station to Exmoor–"Farmer has won, and got the money. Clara Vaughan to Mrs. Huxtable." The amazement of the farmer, I cannot stop to describe.

No time was lost by doing this, for I had ordered a pair of horses, and they were being put to. Then, stimulating the driver, we dashed off for Vaughan St. Mary. Anxious as I was, and wretched at the thought of what we might find, so exhausted was my frame by the thaumatrope of the last six-and-thirty hours, that I fell fast asleep, and woke not until we came to the lodge. Old Whitehead came out, hat in hand, and whispered something into Mrs. Fletcher's ear. That good old lady had been worrying me dreadfully about her jams, for the weather was so hot, she was sure all the fruit would be over, &c., none of which could I listen to now. As Whitehead spoke, I saw through my half-open lashes that she started violently; but she would not tell me what it was, and I did not want to intrude on secrets that might be between them. The farmer also diverted attention by calling from the box, as we wound into the avenue, "Dear heart alaive; this bate all the sojers as ever I see, Miss Clara, or even the melisher to Coom. Why, arl thiccy treeses must a growed so a puppose, just over again one another, and arl of a bigness too. Wull, wull! Coachman, was ever you to Davonsheer?"

I do believe those men of Devon see nothing they admire, without thinking at once of their county.

At the front door, the butler met us, which surprised me rather, as being below his dignity. He was a trusty old servant, who had been under Thomas Henwood, and had come back to his place since the general turn-out of the household. Now he looked very grave and sad, and instead of leading me on, drew me aside in the hall. It was getting dark, and the fire in the west was dying. Great plumes of asparagus–shame it was to cut them–waved under the ancient mantel-piece.

"Bad news it is, Miss Clara"–they all seemed to call me that–"very bad news indeed, Miss. But I hope you was prepared for it."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, haven't you heard about poor master's death?"

"Dead, my dear uncle dead! Do you mean to say"–I could not finish the sentence.

"No, Miss, only to-day, and not as you thinks; no fit at all, nor paralyatic stroke. He went off quiet as a lamb, as near as could be three o'clock. He was very poorly before; but he had a deal to do, and would not give in on no account. He was sitting by himself in the study after breakfast, and at last he rang the bell, and told them to send me up. When I went in, he was bolt upright in his chair, with a beautiful smile on his face, but so pale, white I ought to say, Miss, and so weak he could hardly move. 'John,' he says, 'Yes, Sir,' says I; 'John,' he says again, 'you are a most respectable man, and I can trust you with anything in the world, John. Take this letter for Miss Vaughan, and put it with your own hands into her own, directly the moment she comes back. I am rather uneasy about the poor girl,' he says, as it were to himself. 'Which Miss Vaughan, Sir?' says I. 'Your mistress, John. Can't you see what is written on it? And now help me upstairs; and if ever I spoke to you harshly, John Hoxton, I ask your pardon for it. You will find as I haven't forgotten you.' And with that I helped him upstairs, Miss, and I had almost to carry him; and then he says, 'Help me to bed, John. I would like to die in my bed, and it will save some trouble. And let me look out of the window; what a lovely day it is, it reminds me quite of the South. So I set him up in the bed, Miss, handy altogether, and beautiful, and he could see two larks on the lawn, and he asked me what they was. Then he says, 'Thank you, John, you have done it wonderful well, and I hope they won't speak evil of me round this place, after I am gone. I have tried to do my duty, John, as between man and man: though I would be softer with them, if I had my time over again. Now send my daughter to me, though I wish I had seen my son, John. But I ought to be very thankful, and what's more, I am. All of you likes Miss Lily, unless they tell me stories, John.' 'Sir,' says I, 'we wusships her, though not like our own Miss Vaughan.'"

Ah, John Hoxton, did you say that to him, I wonder, or interpolate, *ex post facto*?

"So he looked very pleased at that, Miss, and he says again, 'John, let all that love her know that she is the living image of her mother. Now go and send her quickly; but John, take care not to frighten my little darling.' So I went and found Miss Lily got along with the Shetland pony and giving it bits of clover, and I sent her up and Jane too, for I was dreadfully frightened, and you away, Miss, at the time. And what come afterwards I can't tell, only no luncheon went up, and there was orders not to ring the bell for the servants' dinner; and I heard poor Miss Lily crying terrible all along the corridor, and I did hear say that his

last words was, and he trying to raise his arms toward the window, 'Blessed be God, I can see my own Lily,' but she warn't that side of the bed, Miss; so he must have made some mistake."

"No. He meant her mother. Where is my cousin now?"

"In your own room, Miss, lying down, they tell me. She did take on so awful, Jane thought she would have died. But at last she brought her round a little, and persuaded her to lie down. She calls for you, Miss, every time she comes to herself."

I went straightway to the poor little dear, without even stopping to read the letter placed in my hands. The room in which she lay was dark; for Jane, who was watching in my little parlour, whispered to me that the poor child could not bear the lamp-light, her eyes were so weak and sore.

At first Lily did not know me; and it went to my heart, after all my own great sorrows, to hear the sad low moaning. She lay on my own little bed, with her pale face turned to the wall, her thick hair all over her shoulders, and both hands pressed to her heart. Annie Franks had been many times to ask for her, but Lily would not let her come in. Bending over I laid my cheek on Lily's, and softly whispered her name. At last she knew me, and took my hand, and turned her sweet lips to kiss me. Then she sobbed and cried most bitterly; but I saw that it did her good. By and by she said, with her fingers among my hair:

"Oh, Clara, isn't it hard to find him at last, and love him so, and only for three days, and then, and then–"

"And then, my pet, to let him go where his heart has been nearly twenty years. Would you be so selfish as to rob your mother of him? And to go so happy. I am sure he has. Come with me and see."

"Oh no, oh no. I cannot." And her lovely young form trembled, at the thought of visiting death.

"Yes, you can, if you only try, and I am sure that he would wish it. That you and I should kneel hand in hand and bless him, as others shall kneel some day by us. What, Lily afraid of her father! Then I have no fear of my Uncle."

God knows that I spoke so, not from harshness, only in the hope to do her good.

"If you really think he would wish it, dear–"

"Yes. It is a duty I owe him. He would be disappointed in me, if I failed."

"Oh, how he longed to see you once more, dear Clara, But he felt that you were safe, and he said you would come to see him, though he could not see you. He talked of you quite to the last; you and darling Conny."

"Conny will be here to-night."

"No! Oh I am so glad!" and a bright flash of joy shone forth from the eyes that were red with weeping. Something cold pushed quietly in between us, and

then gave a sniff and a sigh. It was darling Judy's nose. He had learned in the lower regions, where he always dwelled in my absence, that Miss Clara was come home; and knowing my name as well as his own, he had set off at once in quest of me. After offering me his best love and respects, with the tip of his tongue, as he always did, he looked from one to the other of us, with his eyebrows raised in surprise, and the deepest sorrow and sympathy in his beautiful soft-brown pupils. I declare it made us cry more than ever.

"Oh, Clara," sobbed Lily at length, "he did howl so last night. Do you think he could have known it?"

His eyes dropped, as she was telling me. They always did, when he thought he had been a bad dog.

"Now go down, Judy; good little Judy, go to Mrs. Fletcher. A great friend of mine is with her."

Away he trotted obediently, and his tail recovered its flourish before he had got to the corner.

"Now, darling, let us go there," said the poor child, trembling again. "I would go anywhere with you."

Hand in hand we walked into my Uncle's chamber. Young as I was, and still thoughtless in many ways, twice before now had I gazed on the solemn face of death; but never, not even in my mother's holy countenance, saw I such perfect peace and bliss as dwelt in and seemed to smile from my dearest Uncle's lineaments. The life, in youth puffed here and there by every captious breeze of pride, in its prime becalmed awhile on the halycon deep of love, then tempest-tossed through the lonely dark, and shattered of late by blows from God, that life whose flaw of misanthropy and waste of high abilities had been redeemed, ennobled even, by a pure and perfect love–now it had bidden farewell to all below the clouds, calmly, happily, best of all–in faith.

We knelt beside the bed and prayed–Lily as a Catholic, Clara as a Protestant–that we, and all we loved, might have so blest an end. Then we both sat peacefully, with a happy awe upon us, in the dark recess behind the velvet curtains. Two wax candles were burning on the table towards the door, and by their light the face we loved, looked not wan, but glorious, as with a silver glory.

Clasping each the other's waist, and kissing away each other's tranquil tears, how long we sat there I know not, neither what high fluttering thoughts, thoughts or angels, which be they–stealthily a door was opened, not the door of heaven, not even the main door of the room we sat in, but a narrow side-door. Through it crept, with crawling caution, he whom most of all men I now despised and pitied. Lily did not hear his entrance, neither did she see him; but my eyes and ears were keen from many a call of danger. Stunned for a while by the heavy blow, that met me on my return, I had forgotten all about him; I mean, at least, all

about his present design. I had indeed told the farmer, for it was only fair to do so, my object in bringing him down; and how I relied on his wonderful strength and courage, having then no other to help me; but since I got home, and heard the sad tidings, it seemed a mere thing for contempt. Not even Lepardo Della Croce could catch a departed spirit. So, and in the landslip of the mind, sapped by its own, and sliding swiftly into another's sorrow, I had not even ordered that the house should be watched at all; I had not even posted Giudice, who had a vendetta of his own, anywhere on guard.

With a stiletto still concealed, all but the handle on which the light fell, he approached the bed, wriggling along and crouching, as a cat or leopard would. Then he rose and stood upright at the side of the bed, not our side but the other, and glared upon his intended victim's face. I pushed Lily back behind the curtain as if with the weight of my bosom, while I watched the whole. Never in all my tempestuous life, of all the horrible things I have seen, and heard, and shuddered at, saw I anything so awful, so utterly beyond not only description, but conception, as that disdainful, arrogant face, when the truth burst on him. Not the body only, but the mind and soul–if God had cursed him with one–were smitten back all of a lump, as if he had leaped from a train at full speed into a firing cannon's mouth. Before he had time to recover, I advanced and faced him. All dressed in white I was, with my black hair below my waist, for I had thrown off my travelling frock, and taken what first came to hand. They tell me I look best in white, it shows my hair and eyes so.

He believed that it was a spirit, the Vendetta spirit of the other side; and he cowered from me. I was the first to speak. "Lepardo Della Croce, it is the rebuke of heaven. Dust upon ashes; such is man's revenge. I have nursed, but scorn it now. Go in peace, and pray the Almighty that He be not like you. Stop; I will show you forth. You have a vindictive foe here, who would tear you to atoms."

I led the way, trembling at every corner lest we should meet Giudice; for I knew he would not obey me, if he once caught sight of this hated one. After standing silently, unable to take his eyes from the placid face of the dead, Lepardo began to follow me, walking as if in a dream. Meeting none, I led him forth along the corridor, down the end staircase, and out on the eastern terrace. There I waved him off, and pointed to the dark refuge of the shrubbery, beyond the mineral spring. The moonlight slept upon the black water narrowly threading the grass. Over our heads drooped the ivy, the creeper of oblivion. The murderer turned and looked at me; hitherto he had glided along with his head down, as in bewilderment. Oh that he had said one word of sorrow or repentance! He spoke not at all; but shuddered, as the ivy rustled above us. His face was pale as the moonlight. Did he see in me something higher than the spirit of Vendetta?

I pointed again to the trees, and urged him away from the house. He had

two strong enemies there; a minute might make all the difference. Breaking as if from a spell, he waved his Italian cap, and his lithe strong figure was lost among the Portugal laurels. For a minute I stood there, wondering; then slowly went round the house-corner, and gazed at the grey stone mullions of the room which had been my father's.

I was still in the anguish of doubt and misgiving–what right had an ignorant girl like me to play judge and jury, or more, to absolve and release a crime against all humanity?–when a mighty form stood beside me, and Giudice, all bristle and fire, dashed forth from the door in the gable. With command and entreaty I called him, but he heard me not, neither looked at me; but scoured the ground like a shadow, quartering it as a pointer does, only he carried his nose down.

"Dang my slow bones," said the farmer, "but I'll have him yet, Miss. I seed him go, I'll soon find him."

"No, no. I won't have him stopped. He shall go free, and repent."

"By your lave, Miss, it can't be. A man as have done what he have, us has no right to play buff with. Never before did I go again your will, Miss; but axing your pardon, I must now. Look, the girt dog know better."

As the dog found the track and gave tongue, the farmer rushed from me and followed him, dashing headlong into the shrubbery, after leaping the mineral spring, at the very spot where the footprints had been. Judy and Farmer Huxtable were fast friends already; for that dog always made up his mind in a moment on the question of like and dislike.

For a time I was so horror-struck, that no power of motion was left. I knew that the farmer was quite unarmed, he carried not even a stick. Even with the great dog to help him, what could he do against fire-arms, which Lepardo was sure to have? What should I say to his wife and children, what should I say to myself, if John Huxtable fell a victim to that wily and desperate criminal?

Resolved to be present, if possible, I rushed down the narrow path which led to the little park-gate, where probably they would pass. I was right: they had passed, and flung it wide open. Breathless I looked around, for hence several tracks diverged. No living thing could I see or hear, but the beating of my heart, which seemed to be in my throat, and the hooting of an owl from the hollow elm at the corner. I flung myself down on the dewy grass, and strained my eyes in vain; until by some silver birch-trees on which the moonlight was glancing, I saw first a gliding figure that looked like a deer in the distance, then a tall man running rapidly. Away I made by a short cut for the "Witches' grave," as the end of the lake was called, for I knew that the path they were on led thither. Quite out of breath I was, for I had run more than half a mile, when I came full upon a scene, which would have robbed me of breath if I had any. At the end of a little dingle, under a willow-tree, and within a few feet of the water, stood Lepardo

Della Croce, brought to bay at last. A few yards from him, Giudice was struggling furiously to escape the farmer's grasp; perhaps no other hand in England could have held him. His eyes kindled in the moonlight, like the red stars of a rocket, and a deep roar of baffled rage came from the surge of his chest, as he champed his monstrous fangs, and volleyed all the spring of his loins. The farmer leaned backward to hold him, and stayed himself by a tree-stump.

"Sharp now, surrender, wull e, man. In the name of of the Quane and the Lord Chafe Justice, and the High Shariff of Devon, I tell e surrender–dang this here dog–surrender, and I 'ont hoort e; and I 'ont let the girt dog."

Lepardo answered calmly, in a voice that made my blood cold:

"Do you value your life? If so, stand out of my way. I have death here for you, and five other dogs."

I saw the barrel of a large revolver, with a stream of light upon it. He held it steadily as a tobacco-pipe. I am glad he owned some courage. For my life, I could not stir. All the breath in my body was gone.

"Dear heart alaive. Thiccy man must be a fule," said the farmer quite contemplatively. "Don't e know who I be? Do e reckon they peppermint twistesses can hurt Jan Uxtable? I seed ever so many in a smarl shop window to Lunnon. Surrender now wull e, thou shalt have fair traial to Hexeter, as a Davonshire man have took e, and a dale more nor e desarves. Sharp now: I be afeared of the girt dog getting loose. Dang you dog. Ston up a bit." And the farmer approached him coolly, trailing the dog along; as if what the murderer held in his hand was a stick of Spanish liquorice.

"Fool, if you pass that stump, your great carcase shall lie on it."

"Fire away," said the farmer, "I knowed you was a coward, and I be glad it be so. Now mind, if so be you shuts, I lets the dog go, honour braight, because e dunno what fair play be. But if e harken to rason, I'll give e one chance more. I'll tie up the dog with my braces to thiccy tree–allers wear cart rope I does–and I'll tak e Quane's prisoner, with my left hond, and t'other never out of my breeches pocket; look e, zee, laike thiccy."

And the farmer buried his right hand in his capacious trowsery. The Corsican seemed astonished.

"Fool-hardy clown, worthy son of a bull-headed country, stop at the stump–then, take that."

Out blazed the pistol with a loud ring, and I saw that the farmer was struck. He let go the dog, and leaped up; his right hand fell on Lepardo's temple, and seemed to crush the skull in,–another shot at the same instant and down fell the farmer heavily. "Great God," I screamed, and leaped forward. But Giudice was loose to avenge him, though I could swear that it was on a corpse. Corpse or living body, over and over it rolled, with the dog's fangs in its throat. I heard

a gurgle, a tearing, and grinding, and then a loud splash in the water. The dog, and the murderer, both of man and dog, sunk in the lake together. Twenty feet out from the shore rose above water one moment, drawn ghastly white in the moonbeams, the last view seen till the judgment-day of the face of Lepardo Della Croce.

Almost drowned himself–for he would not release his father's murderer, while a gasp was in him–staggered at last to the shore my noble and true dog Giudice. He fell down awhile, to recover his breath, then shook himself gratefully, tottered to me, where I knelt at the farmer's side, and wagged his tail for approval. The water from his chest and stomach dripped on the farmer's upturned face, and for a moment revived him.

"No belt, no tino lad, I 'ont tak' it. Zimth laike a ticket for chating. I dunno as I'd tak' the mony, if it warn't for the poor chillers, naine chillers now, and anither a-coomin. Mustn't drink no more beer, but Beany shall have his'n." And his head fell back on my lap, and I felt sure that he was dead. How I screamed and shrieked, till I lay beside him, with Judy licking my face, none can tell but the gamekeepers, who had heard the shots, and came hurrying.

Of this lower end of the lake they happened to be most jealous; for a brood of pintail ducks, very rare I believe in England, had been hatched here this summer, and no one was allowed to go near them. Poor Judy kept all the men aloof, till I was able to speak to him. Then I perceived that he as well was bleeding, wounded perhaps by the poniard as he leaped on his enemy's breast. It had entered just under the shoulder, and narrowly missed the heart.

They took us at once towards the house, carrying the farmer and Judy on the wooden floodgates of the stream called the "Witches' brook," which here fell into the lake. As we entered the avenue, being obliged to take the broad way, though much further round, we heard a carriage coming. It was the one I had sent for Conrad, with a hurried note to break the sad news of his father's death. He had been detained in London by a challenge he found from Lepardo; which was of course a stratagem to keep him out of the way. How delighted I was to see his calm brave face again, as he leaped down, and took my tottering form in his arms. In a minute he understood everything, and knew what was best to be done. He would not allow them to place the poor farmer in the carriage, as they foolishly wanted to do; but laid the rude litter down, examined the wounds by the lamplight, and bound them up most cleverly with the appliances of the moment.

"Oh, Conrad, will he die?"

"No, my darling, I hope not; but he must if they had let him bleed so much longer."

"I never heard that you were a surgeon, Conny."

"Could I call myself a sculptor, without having studied anatomy? My dearest one, how you tremble! Go home in the carriage, and give directions for us. A room downstairs, with a wide doorway, and plenty of air. I will stay with them, and see that they bear him gently. Poor Judy may go with you."

Thus Conrad saw for the first time the hearth and home of his ancestors, with his father lying dead there, and his avenger carried helpless. But I met him at the door. Did that comfort you just a little, my darling?

CHAPTER XII.

The lake was dragged that night, and all the following day, in spite of the gamekeeper's strong remonstrance for the sake of the tender pintails. But nothing whatever was found, except the Italian cap. The "Witches' grave," invisible I am glad to say from the house, is more than forty feet deep, when the water is at its lowest. Three or four years afterwards young William Hiatt caught a monstrous pike in the lake, and sent him, with our permission, to be stuffed at Gloucester. Like the famous fish of Samos, this pike had swallowed a ring, which was sent to Conrad by the Gloucester gun-maker. It was Lepardo's seal-ring, the cross of the family engraved on a bloodstone, with L.D.C. below it.

Whether the midnight stabber died by the blow of an English fist, or suffered vivisection through a dog's vendetta–an institution more excusable and dignified than man's–is known to Him, and Him alone, who holds the scales of retribution, and laughs in scorn as well as wrath at our attempts to swing them. For are we not therein ourselves; and how shall the best and strongest of us carry the thing he is carried in? Right glad I am, and ever shall be, that I moved not in the awful scene, which closed my father's tragedy.

Through Conrad's skill and presence of mind, the dear farmer's life was saved. We sent to Gloucester immediately for the cleverest surgeon there; and he owned that he could not have fixed the ligatures better, though he did what Conny durst not attempt, he extracted the murderer's bullet. It was the first shot that did all the mischief, being aimed deliberately at the large and tender heart. Thanks to the waving of the willow-tree, for Lepardo was a known marksman, it had missed by about two inches. The second shot, fired quite close and wildly, had grooved the left temple, and stricken the farmer senseless.

For six weeks now our dear friend, whose patience amazed all but me, was

kept from his Devonshire home. To London I sent at once for the two children and Mr. Dawe, and would have sent to Devon as well, for kind and good Mrs. Huxtable, but her husband would not hear of it. By Ann Maples, who had left Lady Cranberry "shockingly," on hearing from Mrs. Fletcher that I would take her again, he sent to his wife "kind love and best duty, and for goodness' sake, stop at home now. No call to make a fule of yourself, and the farm go to rack and ruin. There be fuss enough 'bout I already, and never I brag no more, when a pill like thiccy upsot me. But Miss Clara, God bless her bootiful eyes, she nurse me, just as if she wor my own darter, with the apron on as you give her. And you should see the kitchen, Honor, you loves a kitchen so; they be a bilin and roastin arl day, and they be vorced to swape the chimbley three times in a vortnight"–the rest of this glorious message, about three pages long, I am "vorced" to suppress; I only hope Ann Maples remembered a quarter of it.

But his wonderful Miss Clara did not nurse him long. Hearing from the surgeon that all the danger was over by the end of the following week–so strong was the constitution–Conrad, Lily, and I set sail for Corsica on our melancholy errand. In that letter, which seemed to come to me from the grave, my poor Uncle after expressing his joy and deep gratitude at so happy a close to his life, continued thus:–

"Yes, my dear child, the close of my wasted and weary life. You may be surprised and perplexed at what I am about to tell you; but you are not one of those low-minded ones, who condemn as superstition all beyond their philosophy. The very night after you brought me my new Lily, a sweet thing just like her mother, I lay for some hours awake, broad awake as I am now. I was thinking of my two Lilies, the lovely and loving creatures. I was not in the least excited, but calm, reflective, and happy. Soon after the clock struck two, at the time when our life burns lowest, I heard a soft voice, sweet as the music of heaven, call me by name three times. Of course I knew whose it was: too often that voice had murmured upon my bosom, for me not to know it now. Not rashly, but with a mind long since resolved, I answered: 'Sweetest mine'–her own artless and young endearment–'Sweetest mine, no longer will I keep you lonely.' No answer came in words; but the light, the golden light of my own love's smile, as I had seen it in Corsica, when she came from the grave to comfort me. And now, as after that visit, I fell into deep and perfect rest, such rest as comes but rarely until the sleep of all. No wonder you and Lily thought me so strong next day. In the morning I knew and rejoiced in my quick departure. This cold obstruction was to be cast aside, this palsied frame to release the winged soul. On the third day I was to find and dwell with my Lily for ever. So on the first day I enjoyed the harmless pleasures of life, and could not bear you to leave me, because that would have turned them to pain. The second day I got through all the business that still

remained, refreshing its dryness often with my sweet child's society. On this, the third, I write to you, and am, through the grace of God, as calm and content, nay more content than if I were going to bed.

"Beloved daughters both, and my dear son as well, I implore you not to grieve painfully for me. Too well I know the weight of excessive sorrow, and how it oppresses the lost one, even more than the loser. Since the parting is so brief, the reunion so eternal, why make the interval long and dreary by counting every footstep?

Alas, it is easy to talk and think so, but very hard to feel it. Time demands his walk with sorrow, and will not have his arm dispensed with. Then think of my happiness, darlings, and how your own will increase it.

Only one more request, which after Ciceronian sentiments–which Cicero could not practise–you are all too young not to wonder at. If you, my three children, can manage it, without any heavy expense, or much trouble to yourselves, it is my last wish as regards the body, that it should lie by the side of my wife's. The name of the little church, St. Katharine's on the Cliff, can scarcely have escaped my Clara's excellent memory. Lily lies beside her father, in the right-hand corner towards the sea. Each of them has a cross of the Signor's alabaster, made from my own design. Lily's is enough for me: put my name with hers."

Not only did we look upon his last fond wish as sacred, but we accomplished it in the manner that was likely to please him most. We put his own "Lilyflower," the little love-boat as they called it, into commission again, engaged a good captain and crew, and taking old Cora with us, set sail from Gloucester for the Mediterranean. Poor Cora was now all devotion to Conrad and Lily, ever since she had found that they were lawful blood and direct heirs of the Della Croce. The more recent part of the family story she had known only from her master's version, and had set little store by the children as bearing the stamp of disgrace; though she could not help loving sweet Lily. Now, by her evidence, coupled with my dear Uncle's deposition, his relics, and documents, and my own testimony, confirmed by Balaam and Balak, we established very easily the birth and the claims of my Uncle Edgar's children; and the old Count Gaffori, most venerable of signors, would have kept us a month at least to go through all his accounts. He was entreated to retain his position as the guardian of our Lily.

So far as our recent sorrow permitted enjoyment of scenery, we were all enchanted with the Balagna. At the funeral of "Signor Valentine," whose name was still remembered and loved, nearly all the commune was present; and many a dignified matron shed tears, who had smiled as a graceful girl, and strown flowers, at his wedding. They were burning with curiosity to see our beautiful Lily, for the tender tale had moved them, as Southern natures are moved; and many of them had loved and gloried in her mother.

But in spite of all this desire, not a prying glance fell on her, as she bowed in the hooded robe, and wept to the mournful vocero. Foremost of all stood old Petro and Marcantonia, who had found out and kissed with sobs of delight their beloved master's daughter. For my part, I loved the Corsicans; there is something so noble and simple about the men, so graceful, warm-hearted, and lady-like in the women; and in a very short time I could understand more than half they said. The black Vendetta, they told me, was dying out among them, and in a few years would be but a wonder of the past. God in His mercy grant it.

There must have been something surely in my Uncle Edgar's nature, which won the Southern hearts, as my father won British affections. Such things I cannot explain, or account for. I only know and feel them.

We were all back at Vaughan St. Mary before the end of August, and found the farmer, the two chillers, and Beany Dawe as happy as if they were born and reared there. Old Cora was left at Veduta Tower; and having obtained Mr. Dawe's permission I presented her once and for all with the whole treasure of the gordit. She intends, however, to bequeath it to me in her will. Soon afterwards Conrad gave her a more substantial blessing; for he sold the things left in Lucas Street, under letters of administration, as being the next of kin. All the proceeds he handed over to Cora, except one-tenth, which he presented to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. As many of the specimens, iguanodon, and other monsters, fetched prices as hard to explain away as themselves, poor Cora was amply provided for: all which of course she attributed to the holy Madonna's heart. And now at last I understood how 19, Grove Street had become No. 37, Lucas Street. The change of number I have already explained; the change of name was on this wise:–The builder, a rising man, who had bought the old part of the street, and built thereto the new one, had a son, a fine undergraduate, better skilled in the boats than in the books of Oxford. Reading hard one day, after his third pluck, this young man discovered that lucus was the Latin for grove. He smote his hand on his forehead, and a great idea presented itself. Had there not been both nymphs and philosophers of the grove? The street that was his inheritance should be distinguished by nomenclature from the thousand groves of London, wherein the nightingale pipeth not, neither–but I am getting poetical, and don't understand the Gradus. Enough, that he wrote at once and earnestly to his father, forgetting the vivid description, which was now growing stale, of his pluck–a result secured, as the Winchester gentlemen tell me, by learning too solid to carry–but begging that his Oxford career might at least be commemorated in and by the street that paid his bills there. "Lucus" he wrote plainly enough, and in very large letters, but the father read it "Lucks." No, said the mother, she was sure Alexander never meant such a low thing as that, it was "Lucas" of course; why the Lucases were her own cousins, and Rosa such a nice girl, she saw how it was,

that she did, and Alexander might have done worse. And so it was painted most bravely "Lucas Street," and the builder wasn't going to make a fool of himself, when Alexander protested.

When John Huxtable set off for home, just in time to see to his harvest, which is always late round Exmoor, I kissed him–ay, Conny, you saw it–and thrust, during his amazement, something far down into his mighty pocket, which something he was not upon any account to look at until he got home. It was a deed, prepared by our solicitors, presenting him with the fee simple of Tossil's Barton farm. True, I was not of age, but I signed it as if I had been, and Conny and I again signed it, when we paid our first visit there. Perhaps, in strict law, it binds not my interest even now; but if ever any one claiming "by, from, through, under, or in trust for" me, forgets the Vaughan honour and dares to dream of that farm, I'll be at him as sure as a ghost; and I trust before that time comes, the farmer will have sound title by immemorial years of possession. He is now a prosperous man; and has never found it necessary to give up his beer, as he threatened Young John, who is just like his father, cleaves fast to Tabby Badcock, now a blooming maiden; but my Sally has more than balanced that imminent loss of caste, by fixing the eyes and transfixing the heart of George Tamlin, the son of our principal tenant, and himself of Devonshire origin. The young lady comes to and fro every six weeks, and is to be married from our house, when her father considers her "zober enough." Beany Dawe, who does not like work, still lives at Tossil's Barton, and is in receipt of a pension of sixpence a day from Government, as a bard at last appreciated.

As for me, Clara Vaughan, on the very day after that which released me from my teens (counting forward, as we do, till we count receding years), to wit on the 31st of December, 1851, I did not change my name, but wrote it in the old church register, half an inch below a better and firmer hand. There was no fuss or frippery; no four clergymen and ten bridesmaids simpering at one another. Our good vicar represented the one class, dear Lily and Annie Franks the other. My godfather, newly disclosed for the purpose, gave me away very gracefully, and young Peter Green helped Conrad. Lily Vaughan looked so exquisite, so deliciously lovely, that nobody in the whole world–Now Conny, hold your tongue, I never fish for compliments, don't degrade yourself so for a kiss, of course I know all my perfections, but how can I care about them, when you say they belong to you?–Lily Vaughan, I say once more, was such a sunrise of loveliness, that young Peter Green, just new from his Oxford honours, collapsed, and fell over the railings, and wedged his head in the "piscina," or whatever those nice young gentlemen, who see the duty of wearing strait waistcoats, are pleased to denominate it.

Ah, Little Distaff Lane, most unconnubial title, ah firm of Green, Vowler,

and Green, your Hercules holds the distaff, and holds it, alas, in his heart! From that shock he never recovered, until we had at Vaughan Park a really merry wedding; and I, ah me, I could not dance just then, but I showered roses upon them, for the shadow of death was past. Old Mr. Green,–nay, nay, not fifty yet, by our Lady,–Mr. Peter Green the elder, came down here for the occasion, and I hardly ever took such a fancy to any man before. He seemed to know almost everything, not by the skin, as Dr. Ross seemed to hold things, but by the marrow and fibrine of their alimentary part. And withal such a perfect gentleman: he kept in the horns of his knowledge, instead of exalting them, and making us wish for hay on them, while tossed in headlong ignorance.

Scant as I am of space, I must tell how he behaved, when his son revealed his attachment.

"Is it a lady, Peter?" "I should rather think she is, father." "Do you love her with all your heart?" "Of course I do, every bit. I am tough, but I know I shall die, unless–" "That will do, my son. You have my full consent, and your mother's is sure to follow. Most likely you got it beforehand. You young fellows are so deep. Let me kiss your forehead, my boy, although I am not dramatic."

Having behaved so nobly, for this boy was his only hope, he deserved to find, as he did, that if he had searched the world he could not have hit upon any other so desirable for his son, as the daughter of his old friend. The only mistake he has made is that he so adores her, he cannot bear her to be in Corsica; though the trade they conduct is worth at least fifty thousand a year. When Lily fell in love, I told her that it was because she had an eye for the olives; and olives enough the darling has, I trow, and olive branches too. The eldest is called Clara. "Clara Green!" I don't like the sound altogether; but the substance is something beautiful, and the freshest of all Spring verdure. Nevertheless, my Clara is an inch larger round the calf, and I think her eyelashes are longer. Her hair weighs more, that is certain. We compare them very often; for they live only half the year at Veduta Tower. In the summer heats they are here, and the children between them, my own every bit as bad, leave dear Annie Elton (Annie Franks of old), uncommonly few British Queens. It is all Mr. Shelfer's fault. What is the use of a gardener, if he allows dessert all the day long?

Every autumn we go to Corsica to help at the olive harvest, and rarely we enjoy it. The Old Veduta Tower is like a nest in the ivy, chirruping with young voices; and the happy sleep of the two who loved so well is dreaming, if dream it can or care to do, of the fairest flowers in Europe, scattered there by little soft hands. Conny is wild every time about the Rogliano and Luri; and if Peter Green listens to him–which every one does, except me–he will introduce, very slowly of course, those fine-bodied yet aerial wines to the noble British public, that loves not even intoxication, unless it be adulterated.

Oh, queer Mrs. Shelfer, oh Balaam and Balak, shall I pretermit your annals? The two Sheriff's officers, having secured their reward, set up therewith a public-house called the "Posse-Comitatus," which soon became the head quarters of all who are agents or patients in the machinery of levying. As at such times all people drink and pay more than double, the public-house has already a Queensbench-ful of good-will.

Poor Mrs. Shelfer and Charley did not invest the 325*l.* altogether judiciously: at least, it went mainly to purchase "eternal gratitude," whose time does not begin to run till the purchaser's is over. But Patty, I am glad to say, has still that 30*l.* a year of her own, left to her in the funds by good and grateful Miss Minto. "Can't touch it, my good friend, not the Queen, the Lord Mayor, and all the royal family. Government give their bond for it, on parchment made of their skins, and the ink come out of their gall." Be this as it may, what is much more to the purpose is that Mr. Shelfer cannot touch it. And now I have pride in announcing, for I never expected such glory, that all the cats and birds, squirrels, mice, and monkeys, live, like the happy family, in our northern lodge, where Patty is most useful and happy as the Queen of the poultry. In a word, they keep the gate, not of their enemies, but of old and grateful friends. I expected to see at least a leading article in the "Times," when Mr. Shelfer left the metropolis; but they let him go very easily for the sake of the discount market. They gave him only two-and-twenty dinners; but when he first came to Vaughan Park, how he wanted country air! Now he attends to the wall-trees, and the avenue, and I hope finds harmony there. At any rate, he never breaks it by any undue exertion. Nevertheless, his very long pipe is of some account with the green fly, which has been very bad on our peaches, ever since they repealed the corn laws. Mr. Shelfer, accordingly, is compelled to spend half his time in smoking them. "Wonderful nice they do taste, Miss Clara; you'd be quite surprised, you know. Wonderful good, Miss, and werry high-flavoured you know, when they begins to fry."

"Come, come, Mr. Shelfer, I fear you cultivate them for their flavour. There are ten times as many of them, I see, as of peaches on the trees. And you charge me every week five shillings for tobacco."

"To be sure, Miss Clara. Shows a fine constitooshun, you know. And dreadful hard work it is to have to smoke so much, you know. And then the sun will come on the wall, and only a quart of beer allowed all the afternoon. And sometimes they makes me go for it myself, you know! Indeed they does, Miss, they has such cheek here in Gloucestershire!"

Patty brought all her sticks of course, in spite of the twenty-five bills of sale, which by this time had grown upon them. One whole roomful was packed in the duplicate inventories. The law on this subject she contemplated from a

peculiar point of view.

"Lor, Miss, I never grudges 'em. They do cost a bit at the time; but see how safe they makes them. If it wasn't for them I should be frightened out of my wits of thieves, down here where the trees and all the green grocery is, worse than the Regency Park. Bless me, I never should have gone out of doors, Miss, if you hadn't pulled me. And to see the flowers here all a-growing with their heads up as bootiful as a bonnet. Pray, my good friend, is that what they was made for, if I may be so bold?"

"No, Patty, not for bonnets. They were made for the bees and the butterflies, and for us to enjoy them, while they enjoy themselves."

"Well, I never. Pray, Miss, did I tell you Uncle John's come home, and they only ate a piece of his shoulder for they found his belt was tenderer; and he put the glazing on it the same as they wears on their hats, and three cork pins to hold it, and he find it werry convenient, it save so much rheumatism: and he'll be here next week to convict the man that made his wife swallow the tea-pot. Dear, dear, what things they does do in the country. Not a bit like Christians. And so, Miss Clara, the old man won't drop off after all; and Uncle John a-coming, how nice it would have been."

The old man was poor Whitehead, whose lodge Mrs. Shelfer coveted, as it was larger and livelier than her own.

"No, Mrs. Shelfer, I think he will get over it. Surely you would not wish to hurry him."

"To be sure, my good friend; no, no: let him have his time, I say. But he would have had it long ago, if he had any reason in him. What good can he do now, holding on with his eyebrows? Please God to let him go in peace; and so much happier for us all."

When Uncle John appeared, he scolded me for my want of intelligence on the night when I was blinded. Of the four men in that room, the one whom I had noticed least was the very one whom he had meant me especially to observe. At least, so he said; but I fully believed, and did not scruple to tell him, that he had discovered little beyond the information and description given at the time by Mr. Edgar Vaughan. These he had disinterred from the archives of Bow Street and Whitehall, and was then trying to apply them. However, I forgave him freely; inasmuch as, but for my blindness, even blind love would have known me as an objectionable being.

And now I come to a real grievance. When there is another Miss Clara–such a beauty! I can't tell you–and a little Harry, for whose sake this tale is told–why will every one on these premises, even the under-gardener's boy, persist in calling me "Miss Clara?" It makes me stamp sometimes, and such a bad example that is for my children. Dear me, if either of my ducklings were to carry on as

I did at their age, I would cut down immediately the largest birch-tree on the property, and order a hogshead of salt. But, to return to that contumely–is it to be suspected that I was more forcible and pronounced, in the days of my trial and misery, than now when I am the happiest of all the young mothers of England? "Come, Conny, tell the truth now, don't I keep you in order?"

"My own delight, I should think you did. I am nearly as much afraid of you as I am of little Clary. Clary ride on Judy now, and Harry on pup Sampiero, and come and see papa go chip, chip, chip?"

"No, Clary stop and see mamma go scratch, scratch, scratch, like Cooky at the pie-crust. Clary love mamma to-day, and papa to-morrow."

And the lovely dear jumps on the stool, to pull the top of my pen. Harry pops out from under the table, and prepares himself for onset. My husband comes and lifts my hair, and throws his arm around me. It is all up now with writing.

"Darlings, I love all three of you, to-day, to-morrow, and for ever. Only don't pull me to pieces."

THE END.

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