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VERE OF OURS,

THE EIGHTH OR KING'S.

A Novel.

BY

JAMES GRANT,

AUTHOR OF 'THE ROMANCE OF WAR,' 'UNDER THE RED DRAGON,'
'ONE OF THE SIX HUNDRED,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



LONDON:

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 8 CATHERINE ST. STRAND.

1878.

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251. e. 961.

LONDON :
ROBSON AND SONS, PRINTERS, PANCRAS ROAD, N.W.

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VERE OF OURS,

THE EIGHTH OR KING'S.

CHAPTER I.

CUP-DAY AT GOODWOOD.

IT was a day of intense heat, when the stately trees of the spacious park, and the *façade* of the great ducal mansion, with its central mass and wings, seemed to quiver and vibrate in the clear and unclouded sunshine, and when even those who climbed the hill—or the eminence that is called so—found not a breath of air; when the Norman spire of Chichester Cathedral was barely discernible amid the golden haze, and the usually sparkling waters of the Solent were veiled in mist as they rolled away towards the Isle of Wight.

The Goodwood downs rose softly in sunshine, and rounded in shadow; but even in

the Goodwood grove there was no breeze to temper the summer glare; and people talked of sunstrokes, pith helmets, and puggarees, and hoisted umbrellas, as if they had been on the Maidan of Calcutta.

There was a brilliant and magnificent assemblage; already the lime-shaded lawn and the balcony of the grand stand were full; the royal standard, floating over Goodwood, seemed to hint that 'the Prince' was expected, especially as little Drayton station—which is always utilised in connection with the park and the yearly races—was gaily decorated.

In this season more than a hundred and fifty magnificent horses had arrived at Goodwood or in its neighbourhood, and now Cup-day had come, and after the winning and losing of that trophy the glories of the meeting usually wane; but with the races our story has less to do than with some of those who came to witness them.

All agreed that the assemblage in point of company was a brilliant one. The Hussars from Shorncliffe and elsewhere were there, in irreproachable drags magnificently horsed;

lords and ladies were as thick as buttercups in a meadow; there were plenty of 'roughs' on the lawn—but well-dressed ones, of course; and from the intrusion of such, the ducal or house party had to be warded within cords placed along the front of their benches.

The loveliest faces that England could produce, and those striking toilettes in which London excels, were seen on every hand, and all was glitter, gaiety, brilliance, and excitement long before the first horse had been led round the walk in the grove, ere its shining coat was girt with the tiny pink-lined saddle which your English jockey so affects, and ere the unpacking of hampers and the spreading of snowy table-cloths on the emerald sward beneath the umbrageous beeches suggested iced champagne and appetising pies and nicely-browned chickens, with their drumsticks done up in bows of white ribbon, Watteau feasting combined with Watteau flirtation and groups *al fresco*.

Ere long an outrider might be seen trotting up the roadway; then the leaders of a plain but royal carriage; and next the Prince and Princess, receiving the earnest and re-

spectful salutations of the brilliant assemblage; after which there was not much to be done by the uninterested but to watch the parade of the Cup-horses, and look down into the long and beautiful dell, a view of which is commanded from the grand stand.

Widely apart from the beauty and fashion, which were pleasant to observe and look upon, were the prominent greed, selfishness, and cunning in the ring as contrasted with the lawn; and as soon as the numbers went up came the offers to 'do something' upon such a horse, cries of 'Six to four on the field,' and the mingling voices of backers and book-makers.

On this ever changing and varying but most brilliant scene—one so different from any they had witnessed for many a day—Herbert Vere and Kyrle Desborough gazed with amusement, surprise, and interest, as they gently moved their horses round outside the lawn, where as many four-in-hands and other carriages as were ever seen at Goodwood were ranged in an orderly manner.

'So here we are in old England again,'

said Kyrle, laughing, after a pause, during which they had been looking around them in silence; 'and the same old game going on the same as ever. The young girls learning how to get husbands, and the old maids—as Salmagundi has it—how to do without them.'

So, after all the wild doings at Morant Bay and Mango Garden, they had been back ere the London season was quite over, back to town in time to 'do a bit' of the old life—to dawdle in Pall Mall clubs, to whirl in drawing-rooms, and dally in boudoirs and conservatories; to doing the Row again, and eating ices at Gunter's and *saumon à la Trafalgar*; to late hours in the smoking-room; to air that was no air at all—worse than Jamaica in the wet season; to too much champagne and too many pick-me-ups of various kinds; to Prince's, Lord's, Hurlingham, and Lillie Bridge. But nowhere did they see anything of the Templetons, and Vere, if he thought of it much at all, concluded that they were in the country or elsewhere, owing to the delicate state of health of Lady Derinzy; and on this day he and Kyrle had come over from Shorncliffe Camp, where their regiment

was quartered, to behold the gay doings at ducal Goodwood.

The mounts and general bearing of both men attracted some attention even there.

Vere rode a magnificent bright bay, with a star on its forehead, and a quivering skin like satin; but Desborough's horse was a handsome thoroughbred, jet black, some fifteen hands high, with a half wild, half frightened air in its restless eyes that told a tale of temper repressed by his rider's firm hand.

Scorched by the fierce glare of the tropical sun, and bronzed by the sea air during the long voyage home, the faces, necks, and ears of the two friends were in hue somewhat like those of Othello; and it admirably suited the naturally dark complexion and Spanish-like face of Kyrle Desborough, who really looked dangerously handsome.

'By Jove! how d'ye do?' lisped a passing horseman—Sir Ascot Softeigh, who, with his fair fly-away whiskers, china-blue eyes, and general languid air of insipidity, might have passed for the twin-brother rather than the brother guardsman of his friend Derinzy.

‘Vere and Desborough actually doing Goodwood! Home on leave from Jamaica?’

‘Leave! not at all, man,’ replied Kyrle curtly; ‘we are quartered at Shorncliffe. We could scarcely have claimed leave so soon from the West Indies.’

‘Thought you might have taken it, like Badminton of the 110th.’

‘Taken it! how? The 110th are at Aden.’

‘Yet Badminton is here in the ring’ (‘wing’ he pronounced it). ‘Good idea, his. He was sent on six months’ detachment to the isle of Perim in the Wed Sea, and by filling up all the returns six months in advance, took the P. and O. liner, and chancing it, spends four months of the time in town. Seen the Templetons since your return?’

‘No; odd, isn’t it?’ replied Desborough.

‘Not at all; nothing is odd nowadays. But they are here to-day.’

‘Here?’

‘Saw them quitting their carriage not ten minutes ago; so you may pick them up in the town, with Busby of the Hussars, Lawn-tennison of ours, and Jocelyn Derinzy of course—the inevitable Derinzy, after all.’

‘After *all?*’ repeated Vere inquiringly.

‘The marriage. What the deuce—don’t you know all about it? Yonder is the carriage—pink lining—with the viscountess and the little heir in it. But I forget; you were busy with that shindy about the black fellows. See you again, ta-ta;’ and laughing at some conceit of his own, Sir Ascot ambled away, saying ere he went, ‘The Honourable Maud is still in the market; she is stylish—’

‘I hate the word,’ said Kyrle.

‘So do I; but she has good points about her.’

‘Rather too many are visible now; she is becoming *passée* and angular.’

‘I do not wish to see these people, Kyrle,’ said Vere.

‘Which shows that even yet you cannot feign indifference. Now, Vere, your once goddess is on the lawn there amid all that brilliant throng, as large as life and twice as natural. So all you have to do is to get the weather-gauge of mamma, rub up your Byron, and whisper brokenly to Gertrude of cruel Fate, of the unforgotten past, and all that sort of thing, and make your innings and a fool of yourself at the same time.’

‘How that cynical tongue of yours runs on!’ said Vere angrily; ‘do you forget that she is married, Kyrle?’

But Kyrle did not reply; and he did not foresee ‘the fool’ he was yet to make of himself.

Being on horseback, and thus conspicuous, it was not long before the speakers caught the eye of one who seemed to see everything and every one, wherever she was—Maud Templeton, who was one of a group seated on rustic chairs languidly and breathlessly under the shadow of a magnificent beech.

‘There goes Lady ——,’ whispered her mother: ‘she is very much in love, they say, and no one is ever ridiculous enough to suppose that a happy frame of mind.’

Ere Maud could reply, if she meant to reply at all, to this sapient remark of Lady Templeton, the frigid air of uninterested languor, which when in public seemed to pervade all her actions, became suddenly dispelled, as our two horsemen, who were intently looking in an opposite direction, caught her eye.

‘O mamma, there is *that* Captain Vere

whom we met so much a year ago, and with him Captain Desborough!"

Lady Templeton coolly and curiously surveyed them through her glass, as if they had been a couple of Colorado beetles, and shrugged her shoulders.

'You use the pronoun as contemptuously as of old, Maud,' said Gertrude, maintaining an air of perfect equanimity with an effort; 'you forget that he has succeeded to one of the oldest baronetcies in England.'

'A baronet! so he is, true.'

'Sir Herbert Vere of Quincey Hall.'

'How much Jamaica has changed him! how well and *distingué* he looks!' exclaimed Lady Templeton, with more genuine warmth than was usually infused in her accents, but not her manner, which was as cold and calm as her face, which was smooth and lineless, but handsome as ever.

'He was always a gentleman and soldier in his bearing, mamma,' said Gertrude; 'the king himself can be no more.'

'Our kings, I hope, are gentlemen, and they were soldiers,' said Lady Templeton.

'That line ended at Agincourt.'

‘But you know, Gertrude, it takes three generations to make a gentleman,’ said Maud, who could never resist a sneer.

‘Perhaps,’ interposed Lady Templeton; ‘but one will do for a baronet, as the petty title goes nowadays, the reward of butchers and bakers of civic rank; and as for knights—’

Lady Templeton paused and fanned herself, as if she was unable to compute their minor value in the scale of society.

Though she had at first remained silent, Gertrude had early detected in the crowd Herbert Vere; there was no chance of her observation missing or mistaking his perfectly built figure, his piercing dark-gray eyes with their long and sometimes pensive lashes, his well-formed aquiline nose, fine mouth and handsome moustache, his face, like Desborough’s, as we have said, all embrowned by the Caribbean sun.

She had seen how Vere had been praised in orders, by the governor and captain-general, for his prompt conduct at Morant Bay, and how that high official had expressed his

'admiration for the steadiness and courage with which that officer had acted, the firmness and forbearance he had displayed, with other talents, on which his excellency would ever rely.'

She could remember how Maud and her mamma had sneered at this, all unaware that she was preserving the newspaper cutting in a secret recess of her desk; and it was with something of disgust she now heard them talking in most laudatory terms of that very event to Colonel Derinzy, who, on seeing that Kyrle Desborough and Herbert Vere were approaching, made an excuse of going into the ring, and hurriedly withdrew; for at that moment the friends dismounted, gave their nags to their grooms, and approached the party of Lady Templeton almost involuntarily, under pressure of the crowd.

Kyrle had parted with her and her daughters on the best terms; and if Vere had not exactly done so, the cause had been explained away by the letter of Toby Finch's sister. Anyway, he felt indifferent on the subject, and resolved to let Gertrude see that he was so.

But a kind of blindness seemed to come over her. She heard the voice of Vere—he was speaking to Lady Templeton—but the girl knew not what he said.

CHAPTER II.

VERE'S MISTAKE.

LADY TEMPLETON spoke to the two officers most suavely, and even was gracious enough to accord her hand.

'Captain Vere, I think. How do *you* do, Captain—I hope it is Colonel—Desborough?' said she.

'I am not so fortunate yet,' replied Kyrle.

'We heard so much about you all, and that terrible affair with the blacks, in Cuba, I think; or was it San Domingo?'

'Jamaica, mamma,' suggested Gertrude.

'Oh, yes; what am I thinking of? Jamaica. And you have recently returned?'

'As you see.'

'And you are quartered at Aldershot?'

'No; at Shorncliffe.'

'We are so glad to see you again,' said Gertrude. But though this was addressed to Kyrle, her eye fell on Vere, but fell without

effect. He felt himself a mere bowing acquaintance now, and barely made an effort to speak. 'A very different scene this from much you must have looked on lately.'

'Yes,' said Vere; 'and when I see around me the charming English complexions, I cannot but contrast them with the pallid and blanched faces I have left behind me.'

'Ah,' thought Gertrude, as she fanned herself, 'he is thinking of his Creole, no doubt.'

'And you have come back,' said Maud, with the old glitter in her eye, 'to take up the threads of your old life, Captain Desborough.'

'Were they golden, Miss Templeton?'

'Silken, I should say.'

'Surely you mean to settle now,' said Lady Templeton to Desborough, but taking in Vere with her glance, as she added, laughing, 'It is time the family jewels were taken out of the strong room at the bank and being reset, eh?'

'I might have settled in the West Indies, had I chosen,' said Kyrle. 'There was an heiress in the Blue Mountains who was disposed to view me favourably.'

'Indeed! I have heard the belles are

very languid there,' replied Maud. 'I suppose she spent her whole time in the carriage.'

'Oh, no; she paddled her own canoe, lived on sangaree and cocoa-nut, and her *modiste's* bills were—well, nothing to speak of.'

'So I can believe. It is a pity you did not bring her to England.'

'She'd have cut a good figure at Goodwood.'

This cool tone of banter did not suit Lady Templeton, who turned a little sharply to a servant, and desired him to bring her a larger fan and her eau-de-cologne out of the carriage-pocket.

Gertrude was all unchanged since Vere had seen her last, and it seemed but as yesterday since he had gazed upon her clearly-cut regular features, her eyes of violet blue, her brilliantly fair complexion, and dark-brown hair with all its natural ripples. Whatever he thought, or tried to feel, he could not meet her without some emotion; but he was careful to conceal it, and to harden himself by looking about for the nurse with the baby-heir of the house of Derinzy.

He thought he had never seen her looking more beautiful or more exquisitely dressed; but there was always a perfection in the costumes of Gertrude, that made her seem to have been—may we say it?—born in whatever she wore for the time, so carefully were colour and style selected for the carriage, horseback, or otherwise.

In her any attempt to excite interest, or hint by a glance, a tone, or a remark to their past secret relations, would have been an indelicacy from which her pride, which was great, naturally recoiled; and she felt certain that he feared being repelled,—so ready is a woman to impute anything but indifference in the man she loves, or who once loved her. But a remarkable *dénouement* was now at hand.

‘I do not see Lady Aldwinkle here,’ said he to Gertrude.

‘Yet she is here.’

‘She is well, I hope?’

‘Quite well, thanks.’

‘We heard of her marriage when at Up Park Camp; and—and I believe I have further to offer you my double congratulations, Lady Derinzy.’

Gertrude blushed crimson, and, sooth to say, so did Vere, without knowing why.

‘We saw your presentation at court announced,’ he added, with growing confusion.

‘I beg your pardon, Sir Herbert Vere,’ said Gertrude, growing very pale; ‘this is some mistake. I am at a loss to understand your meaning.’

Maud lay back in her rustic seat and laughed outright at the discomposure of all parties; but Lady Templeton said, with some hauteur of manner,

‘You mistake, Captain—I beg pardon, Sir Herbert Vere. The Lady Derinzy who was presented at court is the wife of Colonel Derinzy’s grandfather. The old viscount married, very unexpectedly, a young person whom he met at Homburg.’

‘Whew!’ thought Kyrle Desborough, and Vere certainly, too.

And this strange explanation of the mistake under which the two friends had been labouring came about thus unexpectedly, yet naturally, amid the blaze and gaiety of Goodwood. For a few seconds a total and awkward

silence fell upon all, and for an instant there stole into Vere's eyes an eager, passionate, earnest, and inquiring expression, as they sought those of Gertrude; but hers were turned away, and luckily, at that crisis, Sir Ayling Aldwinkle came forward, accompanied by Rosamund and followed by a valet with a velvet hassock from the carriage, whereon to repose his gouty feet.

Though startled on finding herself suddenly face to face with Kyrle Desborough, save for the rapidity with which her white bosom rose and fell, no one—not even Maud—could have detected the secret of *her* heart; and she came most opportunely now, by her gaiety, *espièglerie*, and still almost hoydenish manner (under which she sought to conceal her secret), to relieve the group from the little dilemma into which Vere's 'congratulations' had thrown it.

It was evident that Rosamund affected a fastness now that had not been a peculiarity of hers before. She had in her hands a tiny tome, bound in scarlet morocco and richly gilt, and redolent of perfume, which she called her 'betting-book,' and wherein she had

dozens of six-and-quarter gloves all duly noted with a jewelled pencil.

Her luxuriant golden hair, clustered in a plaited knot, was 'done' to perfection by the skilful hands of Parker, and a bit of bright-blue ribbon, like the old snood of the Scottish maidens, alone peeped forth from its shining masses.

Her dress was gray and scarlet, and her little gloves, of pearl-gray, were as perfect as the lovely hands they cased. She soon contrived to draw Kyrle Desborough a little way apart from the group and appropriate him to herself; they had so much to talk of, she thought.

She looked from time to time furtively, yet tenderly and earnestly, at the all-unconscious or indifferent Kyrle, who, while replying to all her prettily-worded, yet most vague, nothings about the regiment, the West Indies, Shorncliffe, and so forth, was—after having smoothed his thick black moustache, and adjusted his delicate gloves—intent on focussing his binocular, to have a look at the field.

He and Rosamund, in the most playful way, made several bets of boxes of gloves,

which, of course, he lost in the most pleasant way; and the bright-blue eyes and the jewelled pencil were busy together. But Herbert Vere approached Gertrude in no such fashion; and though lingering—he scarcely knew why—beside her, felt that their conversation was frigid and stilted in the extreme.

But she was watching with something of anxiety, as Maud did with much of annoyance, the joyous brightness of Rosamund, who, after one bitter smile, as she thought of the coloured photo which she had kissed and destroyed—the photo found among her repositories by Parker—abandoned herself to all the pleasure of her renewed acquaintance with the original thereof.

She utterly ignored the inquiring glances of Lady Templeton; and if she thought of Sir Ayling at all, it was certainly in connection with the mysterious 'Birdie.'

As a wife she knew that she had now greater liberty than even she possessed as Rosamund Templeton—even as the 'Fair Rosamund' of the Aldershot subs. She knew that she could now invite Desborough to her house, and go or drive where she pleased;

and vague, wild, perilous thoughts were already careering through her brain.

Her appropriation of Desborough to a certain extent compelled Vere to linger near Lady Templeton and the two elder sisters; and the whole situation, as well as its suddenness, perplexed and irritated him.

Derinzy did not come near them. To account for this was not difficult, Vere thought, as he remembered their last interview at Aldershot. But ere the day was over he received from Kyrle Desborough a complete and different explanation of the gallant colonel's studied absence—that, in short, his presence was not appreciated by Lady Templeton *now*.

Vere had, Gertrude fancied, a wistful and even a sorrowful expression of eye. Was it born, jealousy suggested, of his great grief for the West Indian he had loved?—the girl on whose love she herself had thrust him, and of whose terrible fate she had heard the whole story from Toby Finch's sister, in whose hands, doubtless, it would lose nothing in the narrating.

'It is some time now since—since we last met, and you left—left Aldershot,' said she

confusedly, feeling a necessity for saying something, as, sooth to say, he was—perhaps unconsciously—rather taciturn.

‘And there have been many changes in that time, Miss Gertrude,’ he replied.

‘To you, I doubt not—a soldier’s life is always a stirring one; but not to *me*,’ was the rather pointed response, of which Vere began to suspect the drift—that she wished to amuse herself with him again; and he began to school himself to appear what he wished to be—indifferent. Yet when their eyes met, the quick flush or colour, which was one of Gertrude’s best attractions, rushed to her cheek, and enhanced her soft yet brilliant beauty. He could not but reflect that it was something to remember how he had covered such a face as hers with kisses on that evening by the stile.

Had he forgotten this? she was asking of herself. Was it all a delusion that he had even asked for her love passionately, and showered caresses on her lips and hair? Was it the dream of a fevered fancy? It almost seemed so, when they, who had been so much to each other for a brief space then, were now

conversing on the most common topics, and smiling feebly—well-bred smiles—at each other's remarks, amid the sunshine at glittering Goodwood.

On the memory of that meeting by the stile had Gertrude, heartless as he deemed her, lived for more than a year now; and she would have staked her existence for a mere repetition of it.

He was by her side again—Herbert Vere—after all that had been untoward between them. And this was the time—the meeting so often thought over in fancy, and conned over—the meeting for which she had been waiting and had watched, as she knew that he was in England—the papers had told her so, that ‘Captain Vere, of the Jamaica insurrection, was at Shorncliffe.’ She had heard of him being here and there; the meeting had seemed to approach and then to recede—to approach once more and to recede again. Now it had taken place, and nothing had come of it but carefully-guarded glances and the commonest platitudes.

Surely something more might have been evinced, even in such a place as Goodwood!

Yet such are the idiosyncrasies or contradictions of the human heart, that times there were when Gertrude had hoped she might *never* meet him again in this world, knowing as she did that, whatever he had a right or reason to suspect, her heart had never changed in the interval, whatever his might have done. She was acutely sensible of his presence now; every nerve in her delicate organisation thrilled at the sound of his voice while conversing casually, and to all appearance so calmly, with her mother and Maud or Sir Ayling Aldwinkle.

Poor Gertrude! she is but human, and has loved him dearly all this dreary bitter time.

More than once their eyes met with something of doubt and confusion in them, and not as Gertrude wished they should have done.

Only once did he make a slight reference to the past, and even then it was done awkwardly.

'It is strange that we should meet again—here especially.'

'No, there is nothing strange in it at all,' said she curtly.

‘To me it seems so.’

‘You forget that the world is but a small place after all, Sir Herbert,’ said she, laughing.

Sir Herbert! How oddly the new name sounded on her sweet lips!

‘Why do you think it strange?’ she asked, after one of those pauses that were perpetually occurring.

‘Life and death are so strangely intermingled.’

(‘Ah, by this sententious remark he must be thinking of the West Indian girl,’ thought Gertrude.)

‘Most true,’ she said.

‘And I have parted with many whom I can meet in this world no more.’

Gertrude was convinced now. This open regret, so she conceived it to be, piqued her pride; she assumed a frigid expression, and then turned, with somewhat loquacious gaiety, to Sir Ascot Softeigh, who was now leaning over her chair; on which Vere raised his hat and bade them adieu, to look for his groom; but not before he had received pressing invitations from Lady Templeton to Ringwood Hall, and even to Winklestoke, for the shoot-

ing-season—invitations to which he accorded a well-bred smile, as he knew they were accorded to the baronet of Quincey Hall rather than to Herbert Vere of the 'Eighth or King's.'

Gertrude felt Vere's gloved hand lightly touch hers, and heard his farewell in the usual ordinary commonplace terms; but she never could recall exactly what she said or what *he* said, for a strange giddiness came over her, with a fear lest her eyes or lips might reveal what she felt.

Invited by mamma to Ringwood Hall, and to Winklestone too: would he come to either?

Now she half hoped that he would not. *Now* that she had seen him, and that was all over, if anything ever existed, between him and that Creole girl (which she hoped not), her heart went back with yearning fondness to her former relations with Vere; thus she shivered at the idea of meeting him as a mere ordinary acquaintance in society. Surely that wild and passionate meeting by the stile, after the ball, made some tie between them; at least she loved to think so and to live on the memory of it.

Did he?

Vere she knew had been ever a free agent and the master of his own actions; from infancy she had never been for a moment the mistress of hers, but the slave of a system and of society, and she thought of the words of an able writer on this subject as most applicable to herself: 'You are tied down from birth; you never can have your freedom, no, not in the most innocent matters, since, when a child, you rode your pony, you were obliged to follow the formal roads with a guardian behind. They never let you gallop unrestrained over the wild downs, nor linger to muse sweetly alone in the hawthorn lanes. The social corset was laced tighter and tighter about you as you grew up; your mind was full of many questions, it was not wholly taken up with dress. Thoughts of life and its problems, crude ideas of the wonders of the stars and of the universe, floated dimly through it, and you longed for an explanation and a guide—a guide which instinct told you could only be found among the other sex. But intercourse with them was so restricted, confined entirely to unmeaning nothings—to

go further was pronounced unladylike; and you were taught that your sole object in this life was to obtain a satisfactory marriage settlement.'

And under a mother's system, training, and guidance, this had been the object inculcated upon her and her sisters, but against which system she and poor Rosamund had as yet striven in vain, and to it the latter had already become a victim.

Vere too had his own strange doubts and speculations. He had made one singular discovery—Gertrude was *not* married to Jocelyn Derinzy; all that idea had been a gigantic mistake. But then, and then, and then came the conviction that if she were not so, it was because that personage's grandparent had anticipated him in the matrimonial market; hence how much of Gertrude's freedom was owing to that event, to Lady Templeton, or to herself?

'Bah!' thought Vere; 'is it worth considering? As Kyrle says, they are all alike!'

Yet there had been a soft gentleness in the manner of Gertrude, with an earnest,

honest, and inquiring expression in her full fine eyes that haunted and pleased him.

‘So the fair Gertrude is still free; what a joke it is!’ said Kyrle, as he and Vere quitted Goodwood Park and turned their horses’ heads towards the nearest station for Shorncliffe. ‘But the gallant Colonel Derinzy will never be able to add her to his stud—to use a pet phrase of his own—if all that Bertie Lawn-tennison, of the 1st Life, tells me be true.’

‘Indeed! Why?’

‘It is a case of Sir Ascot Softeigh now, *vice* Jocelyn Derinzy dismissed the service of Mammon.’

‘Because of the old viscount’s marriage and the birth of an heir?’

‘Exactly. He has thirty thousand a year, you only twelve; she will go to the highest bidder.’

‘Be it so. I don’t mean to enter stakes for the race. Yet I have been invited to Ringwood Hall and to Winklestoke too.’

‘Are you going? I too have been invited to knock over the birds.’

‘To Winklestoke probably—it is not far from my own place, where the preserves were

all destroyed and poached to death in Sir Joseph's time — but to Ringwood Hall never!

‘Why?’

‘Because, sooth to say, Kyrle, I fear my own heart,’ replied Vere somewhat vehemently, ‘though I have schooled it to regard her with the indifference her weakness, her fickleness, and her selfish proneness to adopt her mother's views all deserve. The day will never come again, I hope, when I shall love Gertrude Templeton as I once did, with the wild unreasoning passion of a Romeo.’

Gertrude was fated to remember long that Cup-day at Goodwood.

And so too was Rosamund.

She had been listening again to that seductive voice, which was all the more so for being intoned unintentionally, so marvellous in its deep and musical modulation; the same clear voice that in more than one Indian battle had cried, ‘Come on, men—forward!’ when cannon belched shot and shell, and musketry rattled thick and fast, and which had now been whispering into the little shell-like ear so closely that its owner's heavy moustache

almost touched her, and caused every word to thrill into the girl's heart, while he was astonished to find the degree of intimacy they had attained before the time for parting came.

CHAPTER III.

THE PROGRESS OF EVENTS.

A VAGUE sense of mortification and disappointment, he scarcely knew at what, with some little contempt of himself for permitting Desborough to lure him among the Templetons, either by chance or otherwise, floated through the mind of Vere; and mentally he hoped again and again that he had not betrayed the least sentiment through the crust of indifference in which he had encased himself.

Contrasted with what she had been in the past time, Lady Templeton had been exceedingly gracious.

‘I am not a vain man,’ thought Vere, ‘never was, and I have no pride either in my new-fangled title or money; but, any way, I am not disposed to act the part of *pis aller* to Colonel Derinzy or to Sir Ascot either, if such is the little game of Gertrude and her mother.’

‘You stuck like a burr to the skirts of the Fair Rosamund to-day,’ said he.

‘You are wrong there, my boy,’ replied Kyrle; ‘the Fair Rosamund stuck to *me*.’

‘How ungallant of you to say so!’

‘Not at all; she is only a spoiled child, poor thing, to be humoured and petted to any amount. Besides, even with all her surroundings, her life must be a dull—at least, not a happy one. Until I saw that old man hobbling about her, I never was so impressed with that idea before.’

And Vere remarked that from that day Desborough’s generally caustic remarks upon Lady Aldwinkle and her marriage were uttered no more, save once.

Since that epoch it was evident that she had not subsided into the pleasant, or at all events comfortable, obscurity enjoyed by the mass of the married, after the bride ceases to be an object of interest as a wedded wife; for her own great beauty and extreme youth, as contrasted with the age and appearance of her husband, caused her still to be the source of much speculation that, despite the girl’s purity

and goodness of heart, was not always friendly; but such is the way of the world.

‘Rosamund is still charming as ever,’ observed Vere.

‘Yes,’ said Kyrle Desborough, ‘but no doubt as selfish and as worldly as all her set, and Heaven only gave her that innocence of manner, that happy *abandon*—what you will—like her soft blue eyes, by some strange mistake.’

‘Mistake! Not at all, Kyrle.’

‘Then why did she marry that horrid old fellow?’ he asked, with sudden emphasis.

‘Kyrle, surely you know as well as I do the awful power of studied and deliberate domestic nagging, pressure, and annoyance, as exemplified by Lady Templeton.’

‘Poor girl, poor girl!’ responded the other, and he seemed to become more thoughtful than Vere had ever seen him before. ‘Lady Templeton, in a rallying tone—a tone that suits her ill—gave me some pointed hints about “settling,” as she called it; but I could see that her eye wandered to *you*, Vere; and, in truth, matrimony is only suited for such fellows as Aldwinkle and you.’

‘Why us in particular? I don’t thank you much for the conjunction of names.’

‘Well, the requirements of the dear creatures are so astounding now, they can’t exist without a carriage, a pair of matched lazy brutes called footmen, with cauliflower heads, canes and calves; one lady’s maid at least, a bull-pup, or a mastiff like a Shetland pony, with a spike collar; and of course a stately mansion in Tyburnia. An ordinary fellow’s whole income won’t find them pin-money; and in sooth, a swell girl of the period is a perilous party to face, with her *châtelaine* and all its gimcrackery rattling by her side, a dog-whistle, mirror and comb, purse, corkscrew, and button-hook, tiny binocular, scent-bottle, and tablets. No woman shall ever add *me* to her many appendages.’

‘So all the time we were abroad we have been labouring under a mistake concerning *who* was Lady Derinzy.’

Desborough coughed dubiously.

‘Don’t misunderstand me,’ said Vere, with a shade of annoyance; ‘could I obtain Gertrude to-morrow, by simply raising this little finger—’

‘Handsome diamond that is you have upon it.’

‘Hang the diamond, Kyrle!’

‘Well?’

‘I would not do it—’

‘While there remained a possibility of her now preferring Sir Ascot, you would say. Quite right; it is only a matter of money. They are all alike. Lady Templeton’s ambition aims at coronets, but she would trample on strawberry-leaves, if it suited her game to do so.’

Next morning two formal invitations to Winklestoke for the 1st of September, St. Partridge’s day, reached the friends at Shorncliffe Camp, both pleasantly couched, but in the shaky and uncertain caligraphy of the old baronet, who informed Desborough that Lady Templeton was unable to come, but Lady Aldwinkle would be sole matron and hostess, in the duties of which she was endeavouring to prevail on Gertrude to assist her. Sir Ascot and some others were coming; the party would be small, but very jolly.

The invitation Desborough hastened to accept, and Vere, after some hesitation, felt it

might be churlish to decline. He had no desire to watch the operations of Sir Ascot; but he would endeavour to show Gertrude that he was now heart-whole; so acceptances were at once despatched.

‘The preserves at Winklestoke are famed all over the county, and the birds are in excellent order, I hear; but,’ said Vere hesitatingly, ‘if this invitation prove a trap—’

‘Baited by the fair Rosamund, with so tempting a bird as Gertrude?’

‘Bah! you shall see,’ replied Vere, who, as little as his bantering friend, foresaw the traps and pitfalls that lay before the latter.

In spite of himself and his assertions of indifference, Herbert Vere had secretly to admit to his own heart that he was far from quite feeling so, and that since he had seen and conversed with Gertrude again something of the old time was stealing over him, and the idea of Sir Ascot Softeigh inspired undoubted disgust and annoyance.

This might be weakness; ‘but weakness when a woman is concerned,’ says the novelist, ‘is pardonable in the man who loves (or has

loved) her; and firmness too often prognosticates an absence of affection.'

So after all that had passed—anger and mortification, sorrow and jealousy; the brief passion for Virginia, and that terrible episode at Mango Garden—could it be that he was about to venture as a mere acquaintance, a mere member of society, into that charmed circle again?

Vere pondered over this, with knitted brows, and questioned himself, as he sought the solitude of a battery overlooking the sea, and cast his eyes dreamily to where, in the short distance, only about two miles off, lay Folkestone in a hollow between two precipitous cliffs that are washed by the encroaching waves—waves that in the process of time have already swept away four of its churches and a convent. The pleasant watering-place, with its piers and all its gliding steamers, lay steeped in summer haze; and it seemed as but last week that he had been looking on Kingston Harbour, and the long stretch of the Palisades that guard it from the Caribbean Sea.

When we can do so, it is always wisest,

perhaps, to forget—to put away the past altogether; but many portions of the past would come to memory again and again; for, like all men of a lively imagination, he was somewhat of a day-dreamer.

‘Enough of this,’ thought he, turning away, and then quoted Sidney Dobell:

“ I have lingered by the past,
As by a deathbed, with unwonted love,
And such forgiveness as we bring to those
Who can offend no more.”

Pleased to see that the hitherto listless Rosamund was so full of life and so joyous, and interested in the intended shooting-party for the 1st of September, Sir Ayling had without delay dashed off the invitations to Vere, Desborough, and others, and all looked forward to a pleasant meeting on St. Partridge’s day; but Gertrude and Rosamund with anticipations that were somewhat dubious, and the half confidences of these two were strange.

So Rosamund had seen Kyrle Desborough at last; yet the cravings of her heart were not yet over. The man so uselessly loved, and apparently so utterly lost to her—he whom she had dreamt of more by day than in her sleep—

had been with her again, and was to be so once more, breathing the same air, moving in the same circle, as if he had never gone away, and was soon—in a few days now—to be actually under her own roof—a perilous situation.

It has been said that ‘there are corners in the nature of the simplest peasant girl to which the cleverest man alive could never find a key;’ and certainly there was a corner in the heart of Gertrude Templeton of which Vere, with all his real and fancied past knowledge of her, had not the least idea, though it contained a welling fount of love for himself. Nor could he have suspected it by the cold, quiet, subdued, and indifferent manner in which she received him and conversed with him on the merest commonplaces—studiously never being alone with him for a moment, even had he wished it—and gave more of her time, her attention, and with more animation, to tall Sir Ascot, the vapid Lawntennison, and others, when on the last evening of August he and Kyrle Desborough found themselves at the sumptuous dinner-table of Winklestoke, whither a four-wheeled dogcart had brought them, their bag-

gage, and guncases, from the nearest railway station.

The circumstance that Vere was now the possessor of a baronetcy and a fortune, with the memory of her mother's excessive suavity to him at Goodwood, had alarmed the innate pride of Gertrude; but when Rosamund said to him, with a peculiar smile, 'I have had some trouble in prevailing upon Gertrude to join us,' and Maud added, in a *sotto voce*, 'Even when Sir Ascot was to be one of the party,' Gertrude was secretly provoked and troubled lest the remark should reach the ear for which it was malevolently intended, for in some things the high-born Maud could be as churlish and pettish as a barmaid.

The memory of their past relations, the events that had intervened since that forgotten time, and the peculiarity of the whole situation, made Gertrude adopt a bearing or act a part she was far from feeling; and certainly her *rôle* was not calculated to make Vere—all doubtful as he was how Sir Ascot stood with her, and studiously indifferent as he strove to be—come forward in the character of a lover again.

Thus, when the gentlemen joined the ladies in the drawing-room, and music was resorted to, when Gertrude played or sang she studiously avoided her old songs or airs, though she knew well those which were, or were wont to be, his favourites.

Not so Rosamund. To draw Kyrle to her side she quite as studiously recurred to her old *répertoire*, and pressed him to say if he remembered this, that, or the other song; while Sophy Finch, with annoying pertinacity—annoying at least to Gertrude—asked Vere questions in quick succession about the West Indies, the alleged grace of the Creole ladies, if they were adepts at flirtation, and so forth.

Would Vere ever be more to her than a friend or acquaintance again? if not, would he come to her with only the ghost of a dead love? It did not seem probable, for he, inspired by his own secret thoughts, affected a gay *insouciance* of manner rather calculated to pique a girl so proud as Gertrude.

Even when she was thus questioning herself his eye would wander almost wonderingly towards her. She was before him again—the Gertrude he had loved so well: the Gertrude

of the ball at Ringwood Hall; of the meeting by the stile, when he had rained kisses on her face and hair till she bade him leave her for ever; the Gertrude of countless day-dreams, hopes, and wishes, and of that stony stare which, on that eventful morning, made his heart stand still.

Well, well, that was all past and over now.

Rosamund clung much to Vere, as a pleasant feature in her past life, as the friend of Kyrle Desborough, and as the once lover of her sister; she clung to him as a friend, with whom she might converse, laugh, and be free; for the love, which she believed he still bore Gertrude, made her deem their intercourse safe from any suspicion of there being flirtation in it.

The few days' shooting over, Vere intended to return to Shorncliffe; but this was by no means to be permitted, as Rosamund had pre-arranged a programme including a score of rides, drives, picnics, and garden-parties; and, more than all, she had contrived to include therein a visit to Quincey Hall, which was only some twelve miles distant, over the borders of the adjacent county.

It was pretty evident to any close observer—and Herbert Vere was one—that her mind was ill at ease. When silent, and her bright soft face was in repose, dejection was its chief expression. If noticed, she would start and plunge into conversation rapidly, spasmodically, almost vehemently, and with a gaiety that was too apparently all acting.

The time that had passed, short though it was, had alike altered and improved the figure of Rosamund. The latter had gained in roundness of outline, and her eyes had a depth—often a sad depth—of expression—a yearning look which they did not possess before; and now, when at times they met those of Kyrle Desborough, she was foolishly, dangerously tempted to lay bare to him the secrets of her girlish heart.

CHAPTER IV.

ST. PARTRIDGE'S DAY.

THE dawn of the first shooting-day came brightly and pleasantly in over all the shire around baronial Winklestoke; and some things but remotely connected with the sport, though 'trifles light as air,' which occurred ere that day was over gave Vere some food for reflection, surprise, and mistrust.

All unaware of the breech-loaders that were coming into action against them, the coveys of little brown birds were nestling quietly among the yellow stubble, the rich clover, the mangolds and turnips, which recent rains had refreshed and benefited. As yet the new-fangled idea of driving the birds with 'the kite' had been unthought of; and Sir Ayling and his brother sportsmen intended to shoot, as usual, behind pointers and setters, or to beat in line without them.

To hold St. Partridge's day, the male

guests at Winklestoke assembled betimes to a hasty breakfast in the grand old dining-hall, from the walls of which the Aldwinkles of past times, in quaint costumes, stared stonily or haughtily down from their oak frames, and from the mullioned windows of which could be seen the far extent of level English landscape, fragrant bean-fields, stubble, and still standing corn, interspersed with patches of heather and fern, where the red-legged birds were lurking.

Sir Ayling was the last to appear at table, where his guests did not wait his appearance to attack what the butler had provided. But, a beau always—an old one latterly, of course, with all his years—having a young wife, he found it more than ever necessary to sacrifice sundry half-hours daily to the personal graces; and now he appeared, like lispng Lawntennison and the youngest present, in an orthodox knickerbocker suit and gaiters, the former being of what is amusingly called in England a *plaid* suit—a plaid being a garment, and not a material.

Similarly attired for the sport were the two comrades of the Eighth, tall fair-haired

Sir Ascot Softeigh, little Lawntennison of the Household troops, and a few others—all hardy and healthy young fellows, in high spirits, with keen anticipations of the day, the hopes of which were discussed, together with the merits of certain dogs, double-barrels, game-bags, ammunition-pouches, silver flasks, and sandwich-cases.

Sir Ayling prated much of sport in the days when Murcott's 'hammerless,' Greener's breech, and chilled-shot cartridges were unknown; yet he was never wont to indulge in remote reminiscences when Lady Aldwinkle was present. But while assisting Kyrle Desborough to demolish the contents of a grouse-pie, with brandy and soda 'to steady his hand,' little Lawntennison whispered his intention of giving the baronet a pretty wide berth, as, though a good shooter, he was 'a deuced bad hitter, don't you know,' and apt to pot some luckless beater or too confiding guest.

On the terrace without were the keepers and beaters, with Sancho, Ponto, Don, and Co.; and at the gate stood a dog-cart, with fresh ammunition for the breech-loaders.

Lady Aldwinkle, with some of the ladies, was to join the sportsmen at the moat, a relic of antiquity on the estate, where a formidable luncheon would be provided under superintendence of the butler; and, anticipating the pleasures of this veritable picnic as one of the chief events of the day, the gentlemen shouldered their guns and set forth over the swelling uplands, where the soft breeze was sweeping, and the September morning was so charming, as Vere thought, after the West Indies. The sunlight seemed so yellow on the crisping foliage as it exhaled the silver mist from the grassy hollows, while the chirp of familiar birds came from hedgerows and copsewood.

The beaters and dogs went forward; a line of fire was adopted, and the banging of the breech-loaders began on every hand. Vere was a magnificent shot; so was Desborough. The worst present was undoubtedly their host, of whom the beaters had a nervous dread; and the veteran gamekeeper—who knew well his place, did his duty to his master, and never looked for ‘tips’ from his guests—did his best to cloak the mistakes of Sir Ayling,

who was always firing too soon or too late, knocking over another man's birds, and often vainly attempting to keep up with the younger sportsmen—an impossibility at his years; and, after expending a vast amount of ammunition uselessly on the atmosphere, he ceased firing, alleging that the wind had become strong—the birds had been blown out of range. He promised to turn up at the moat betimes; so the younger men went forward without him, making excellent sport; for thick and fast the brown coveys came whirring up from between the rows of beans and yellowing turnips, the greater globes of the mangold, the purple heather, and the whortle-berries; and the game-bags became filled to overflowing as hour followed hour in the pleasant and breezy sunshine.

Seeing that Vere was a good shot, who fired deliberately and never missed, the old gamekeeper kept chiefly by his side till they drew near the moat, when the last shots were fired.

‘There's a brace of black game, Sir Herbert,’ he exclaimed. ‘Cluck-cluck they go—you take the outer bird, sir.’

Desborough covered the other: bang went their barrels, and the birds came fluttering down.

'They *are* a-growing wildish,' said the keeper, 'and chances mustn't be thrown away. Watch, gentlemen—old Don is a-standing like a statty—creep up, Sir Ascot; there goes the bird—you've hit at an uncommon range. And now, gentlemen, by your leave we'll lay aside the guns; for this is the moat, and I see my lady cooming down the hill with the loonch.'

On a slight knoll, in the centre of a rich clover-field, rose the moat, a relic of the Saxon times. It was simply a circular earthen bank, some fifty yards in diameter, and marked the site of some ancient wooden dwelling. Without it, a circular ring of darker grasses, where rushes grew in wet seasons, showed where the veritable wet moat had been; within it, the turf was soft, close, and green as any within a fairy ring. And here Sir Ayling, who had long since preceded the party, awaited them; and as no ladies were present as yet, he candidly admitted that the damp morning air had given him some warning twitches of rheumatism.

The bags were emptied, the partridges, grouse, hares enumerated, and, exclusive of the latter, averaged some eighty brace to each gun, which Sir Ayling, though he had 'knocked over' but few, averred to be a poor half-day's sport, as he could remember that forty years before it was only deemed good average shooting for a sportsman with one muzzle-loader, which after every shot he recharged with his ramrod, to bag his fifty brace of birds between breakfast and dinner.

'And twenty years before that, I have heard it said,' he continued, but suddenly arrested his reminiscence, and started up with his little skipping step, as Lady Aldwinkle (preceding an open chariot, in which were her sisters and two other ladies), seated in a vehicle that was something between a phaeton and a dog-cart, came through the clover-field, tooling her pretty ponies to the place appointed, a little tiger seated behind, the reins grasped in her tiny gloved hands, as she flicked the glossy animals with her silver-handled whip, and looked so radiant in face and spirit, so full of animation and the glow of youth.

Coquettishly dressed, coquettish-looking and beautiful, with a brightness over all her face, she certainly formed an object of interest to the circle who gathered about her quite as much as the luncheon, brought by butler and servants to assuage the wants of the sportsmen, who announced themselves savagely hungry and fearfully thirsty as they espied the metallised necks of the champagne flasks in the ice-pails.

As a servant threw down the step of the chariot Vere passively permitted Sir Ascot to assist Gertrude to alight, and gave his hand to Sophy Finch, who was the last to leave her seat; yet Gertrude was radiant in beauty that morning, and it was her face still on which he had once gazed with voiceless yearning.

Would he ever do so again? To Gertrude it did not seem so, though a woman never can realise the conviction that she has quite lost all interest in the heart of a man who has once loved her.

Somehow now Rosamund became—from her position doubtless and the general 'breeze' she seemed to carry with her—the central

feature of the party; and Maud, so generally cold, calm, and unimpressionable, gave place to her as completely as did the gentler and more loving Gertrude. Now, as we have shown, Rosamund was mistress of that stately mansion, the great *façade* of which could be seen in the distance; of another in Portland Place; of lands and demesnes, of men-servants and maid-servants; and yet, in a hoydenish way, instead of sending the luncheon to the moat, she preferred joining the sportsmen with it, and sharing in the jollity of a repast *al fresco*.

But, save herself, none knew what a spur her life had received since that Cup-day at Goodwood. More carefully than ever were the always faultless toilettes made; more trouble than ever had Parker now with the golden hair of her mistress; frequent indeed were the consultations with the oval mirror framed in lace and pink ribbons, and the tall pier-glasses in the dressing-closet; and Parker, who remembered the photo of the dark and handsome officer she discoursed once upon, but never saw again, began to have some views of her own in the matter.

And so the gaiety of Rosamund's manner delighted Sir Ayling, who had never seen her thus since their marriage. She had a pretty little sentence, view of, or word on most social subjects, and could talk in the most attractive way in the world, giving petty topics an air of importance they failed to possess on the lips of another.

Her charm of manner won and fascinated the people about Winklestoke; the more so that she was good, generous, and hospitable to all, and won golden opinions from them. Yet it was apparent to them that her face, her figure, and her deportment were all too girlish for her position as the wife of a man who looked almost old enough to be her grandfather.

Thus, with her own pretty hands, she presented a foaming beaker of champagne to the old keeper; while cold chicken, ham, tongue, and grouse-pie, *pâtés*, and other dainties, were undergoing a rapid process of change, all laid on a snowy cloth, spread over the turf in the centre of the moat; and much light small talk became the order of the hour—small talk in which Gertrude strove wearily to join.

No true man ever forgets a woman he has once loved. It was impossible for Herbert Vere to regard Gertrude—the planet into whose orbit he had been lured again—without a tender interest; yet, deceived by her decided manner, he, acting under impulses that were perfectly natural, gave place to Sir Ascot on every occasion, and spoke but little with Gertrude. He had a general feeling of annoyance that he had come to Winklestoke at all; and she, with that pride or perversity which is—some allege, *we* do not—natural to woman, replied to him all the more coldly when he *did* address her.

Both were already playing a part, and feared to show the other their hands.

Vere's careless cordiality stung her; yet he must have been blind if he did not perceive that, though her voice and manner betokened indifference, her calm and beautiful eyes always lit up when he turned towards her, or addressed her.

Gertrude Templeton was not yet two-and-twenty; but at times she seemed to have left behind her every wish and hope of youth, as if she had been as old and heartless as her

mother, and, little as *he* knew it all, for the love of Herbert Vere, whose changed prospects—rank and fortune—seemed to her pride a barrier as fatal as his past had been, when judged of by the standard requisite at Ringwood Hall. Nor were the cold strange glances, the sneering and worldly remarks or maxims of Maud, without effect in keeping open this breach quite as much as the sometimes half-quizzical, half-commiserating tone assumed by Miss Sophy Finch, when talking to Vere—on her brother Toby's authority—of his varied experiences in the West Indies.

CHAPTER V.

'UNSTABLE AS WATER.'

'AND this is what I have vaguely looked to so long,—this meeting,' thought Gertrude many times; 'but to have it thus, at Winkle-stoke, was beyond my wildest aspirations. In my heart I always said he would return; he has returned, and we are all but side by side just now. He cared for me once, and did all that man could do to make me sure of it, till I thrust his heart from me, poor fellow! And now he is changed to me—so changed—and he can go on as he is doing with that Finch girl!'

She strove to thrust her thoughts aside, as she had once done Vere's heart, and turned to reply to the platitudes of Sir Ascot, but heard also the silly things with which Sophy Finch thought to attract Vere.

'Then you do believe in the truth of the axiom?' said Sophy, whose beauty, though

bright, was tender and soft, and the sunlight seemed to play among the amber glory of her hair, as she toyed coquettishly with a tiny bunch of grapes near her pretty pouting lips, and a smile in her half-closed eyes.

‘What axiom?’ asked Vere, as he knelt on the grass by her side, his handsome figure and limbs set off to perfection in his smart shooting-costume, of very light gray, which contrasted well with his sun-browned complexion.

‘That absence makes the heart grow fonder.’

‘Not always, Miss Finch.’

‘You soldiers must test the truth of it at times.’

‘Perhaps, but it all depends upon circumstances.’

‘And the strength of a man’s love.’

‘Unless it be a hopeless one.’

‘In which case, Sir Herbert?’

‘It soon dies, probably, especially amid new surroundings and change of scene.’

‘Change of love and love of change,’ continued Sophy, with one of her many unmeaning laughs, which now grated on the ear of

Gertrude, who fanned herself, and drew aside a little way lest she might hear more of this sort of thing; for Sophy Finch had talked so much to Vere about the Eighth, the West Indies, and her brother Toby's appreciation of the Creole girls, and the sleepy, dreamy, graceful Octoroons, that she had quite appropriated him, and had, so Gertrude thought, a provoking air of subdued triumph in having, as she conceived, captivated the handsome baronet, dear Toby's brother-officer; and the cold, watchful, and glittering eyes of Maud seemed to catch the same idea.

'You have made excellent sport, I see, Sir Herbert,' said Lady Aldwinkle, as her eyes ran over the birds arranged by braces on the sward close by, and addressing Vere, to mar, if possible, Miss Finch's game.

'Very fair indeed,' replied he; 'but I have been out of practice for some time past.'

'Surely,' said Miss Finch, 'you had some shooting in the West Indies.'

'Well, not at game precisely,' replied Vere, laughing.

‘Oh, yes, horrid; at that place, Mango Island, was it not?’ blundered Sophy, and Gertrude saw a shadow pass over Vere’s face.

‘These black game were the last birds killed,’ said Kyrle Desborough, to change the subject, and leading Rosamund to where they lay.

‘I have half a mind not to listen to you,’ Vere heard her reply.

‘In what have I offended?’ asked Kyrle, in a low tone of affected entreaty.

‘Cutting me this morning.’

‘This morning—you, Lady Aldwinkle?’

‘When you all left the Hall I was at my window, and waved my handkerchief. You alone were looking back, and should have seen me, if you did not.’

And as Kyrle made the requisite apologies and protestations, they moved to the other side of the moat, and Miss Finch renewed her conversation with Vere. When the latter turned towards their hostess again, she was teaching a frolicsome Maltese spaniel—a present brought her by Desborough in payment of some bet made at Goodwood—to beg for almond bis-

cuits; and in this pleasant task Vere was rather amused to see his tall brother-officer both earnest and attentive.

Rosamund next plucked a wild rose, and dropped it with a little childish cry of pain, which made Sir Ayling lift his eyes from a grouse pie that he was carving. A thorn had pierced her finger, and to have the point thereof extracted she held forth her pretty hand to Kyrle Desborough; and to the eyes of Herbert Vere this operation seemed to be quite as needlessly prolonged as the subsequent buttoning of a tight kid glove upon the same tiny member. But, indeed, a time came when the cavalier attentions of Kyrle, in the matters of glove-buttoning, bracelet-clasping, shawling, or assisting Rosamund to her saddle, seemed to be processes that were alike difficult and protracted; and from all of which Vere began to see that the renewed intimacy was making rapid progress.

Was Kyrle Desborough—Kyrle, the handsome cynic, whose story no man knew—the supposed misogynist or woman-hater, succumbing at last and to a married lady, or was it merely his vanity? But Kyrle was not a

vain man, that was flattered by the regard—‘fuss’ he would have called it—that he had created in the mind of a pretty girl, without knowing how or when to value it.

Vere was perplexed by the turn matters seemed to be taking, and was not sorry when the luncheon was over, the ladies had departed, and the gentlemen once more betook them to their guns, to make a little *détour* among the fields and shoot their way back to Winklestoke.

The protracted dinner there over, there ensued in the drawing-room the same playing of parts or display of false colours, the same little game of fencing and cross-purposes, on the part of some of our *dramatis personæ*, and Vere was pleased to find an infusion of a few strangers, including the Rev. Deogratias Guffin (and his four daughters), the portly vicar of the parish, ‘a priest,’ as he called himself, having intensely ritualistic tendencies, and certes with his narrow Roman collar and long-tailed surtout he rather looked it, save for his rubicund visage and somewhat rollicking expression of eye.

To escape Miss Finch, lest he should play

the part of indifference to rudeness, Vere took refuge with the daughters of the divine, while Maud and the former young lady idled together over the piano, and most of the sportsmen were clustered about the chair of Gertrude. Rosamund, seated on an ottoman in the recess of a window where none could get behind her, contrived to keep Desborough pretty closely on duty near herself, if duty he considered it; and, sooth to say, no fairer girl ever dazzled a man's sight than the lady of Winklestoke, as she sat there so full of *verve* and *esprit*, with the light of the gaselier shedding its flood upon her golden hair, her snowy skin and delicately-lidded eyes, that alternately sparkled or drooped as Kyrle conversed with her in that perilous way which no man knew better when and how to adopt than he.

Rosamund's heart was weak though passionate. 'Lead me not into temptation,' she prayed fervently, but sought it herself and deluded herself. She felt faithful but faint, and while protesting to herself that she only meant to kill time pleasantly, was perhaps letting her hopes and imagination stray to-

wards a love that terrified her. Thus amid the baronial and storied splendour of the great drawing-room that night, Herbert Vere saw some things and painfully suspected more, which old Sir Ayling, 'drowsily digestive' in his luxurious easy-chair, winking and blinking and half asleep after the unwonted labours of the past day, neither saw nor suspected.

That night in the smoking-room the lines or ground of the next day's sport and that of the following day were laid out, and the events of the morning — the hits, misses, and braces bagged—were all gone over with some zest, as if it had been a day's hunting.

Vere fully intended on the third day to take his departure, and Kyrle Desborough willingly enough consented to accompany him; but London was empty, so were the covers and preserves at Quincey Hall, which had been poached and destroyed in Sir Joseph's time, and to return to Shorncliffe before their leave expired would look eccentric. Moreover, Rosamund had plans of her own, as we have already said—entertainments and visits of many kinds, including those to a cathedral

and a rambling old ruined castle; hence to leave Winklestoke as yet seemed ungracious and impossible; so Vere remained, and Kyrle Desborough of course stayed also.

CHAPTER VI.

DRIFTING.

SEVERAL of the affairs projected by the now busy mind of Rosamund came off successfully and brilliantly in rapid succession; and poor Sir Ayling found himself suddenly involved in a whirlpool of more gaiety than he cared for at his years or quite expected to see again, especially in the country at Winklestoke.

Without reflecting that two 'real live baronets,' Vere and Sir Ascot, who formed a part of their circle, were quite ignored, Kyrle Desborough went in with the girl's humour in making him rather too apparently the lion of her entertainments. Who would not have done so? Married now, she was beyond his reach for ever, and, save as a laughing little partner at balls and croquet parties, he had never, as Rosamund knew, thought of her in the past times.

He had no idea of wronging her before the world, in thought or deed; yet if *he* was not

drifting, she was doing so rapidly and swiftly; and with all the old wild thoughts she had in her saddened heart, and which we have described already, what else could be expected of poor Rosamund *now*?

The secret confidences of a pretty girl are, as a general rule, rather pleasant burdens to hear; still more pleasant to some perhaps, if more perilous, are those of a young married woman, who should have no confidant save her husband: but Vere was rather surprised to hear Kyrle say laughingly in a low tone, when replying to some remark of Rosamund's,

'Oh, yes, Lady Aldwinkle, it is true that people may love and love again, and yet find they are mistaken, for the true passion may be yet to come.'

'It is but too true.'

'You so young, and yet think so?'

'Alas, yes!' said the girl, looking down.

'How sang old Bishop Atterbury of this idea?'

'I know not.'

Then bending over her so near that his dark moustache almost touched her shining tresses, Kyrle Desborough, with unusual *em-*

pressement, repeated the bishop's well-known verse,

“Fair Sylvia, cease to blame my youth
For having loved before ;
For men, till they have learned the truth,
Strange deities adore.”

And it is only when people learn the truth, as I trust Lady Aldwinkle has done, that they are happy.’

This sounded much more like mockery than love-making, under all the circumstances; but, raising her soft and now tearful eyes to Kyrle's handsome face, the girl, while her colour came and went, said almost reproachfully in a whisper,

‘Happy! Do you, Captain Desborough, think that *I* am happy?’

‘With all your brilliant surroundings, why should you not be so?’

‘Ah, but is any one ever quite happy?’

‘I should hope so; surely many are.’

‘Perhaps so,’ answered the girl drearily, wearily, and half absently toying with her beautiful bouquet, as memory flashed back to that night at Ringwood when he kissed her in the conservatory, and took away her glove.

‘Wealth, rank, and position surely must afford a certain degree of happiness,’ said Kyrle, almost in her ear.

‘To some—yes.’

‘To you?’

Rosamund shrugged her shoulders, and said,

‘Let us not talk of *that*, Captain Desborough.’

‘Why, Lady Aldwinkle?’

‘I can scarcely conceive any position in life free from some care, some canker, some worm in the bud, some secret misery or skeleton in the closet.’

He regarded her with deepening interest for a few seconds, and then said,

‘In one so—so—one such as you, these ideas are surely peculiar. What am I to think of you, Lady Aldwinkle?’

‘What you please!’ was the strangely pettish response of Rosamund, as she rose and joined Gertrude.

Vere began to ponder.

Was Kyrle Desborough beginning to make light of *his* secret, of having loved before?

Passages such as this, odd words over-

heard, glances seen, or speeches and glances checked at his approach, began to rouse in Herbert Vere those suspicions which, once roused, are difficult to lull, and made him feel strangely uncomfortable, both for Lady Aldwinkle and his friend; and yet he strove to pooh-pooh the growing situation, and hope there might be 'nothing in it' after all but a mere affair *pour passer le temps*.

Poor Rosamund had fondly and confidently believed that now she was wedded—most hopelessly so—she would be safe from any fancy, passing or otherwise; and that if thought became a sin, as the gentle wife of Robin Gray deemed it, like her she could stamp it out altogether; but she felt this resolution sorely shaken now, tottering, and fading out under the perilous influence of Kyrle Desborough's society; and the same lack of strength which made her the passive tool of her mother now rendered her incapable of resisting in this instance.

Though Kyrle had 'a front like Jove's, to threaten and command,' he had dark and winning Irish eyes that could melt in expression and tenderness when we do not believe

the rogue actually felt it, or did so from mere force of habit. In conversation he rarely or never failed, and it often seemed as if those unthought-of and unheeded trifles that come so glibly from an Irishman's tongue, and in the *abandon* of petty small talk, had most weight with his listeners—too generally fair ones; and so it was that while Rosamund listened and contrasted the lithe and manly figure of Kyrle with that of Sir Ayling Aldwinkle, and his handsome face, bronzed and darkly moustached, with the withered mask of her lord and master, which was undeniably aristocratic in contour (and aristocratic in imbecility), she felt herself, we fear, drifting.

‘What is the magic in this man that attracts me to him?’ the girl would at times ask of herself, while, interlacing her fairy fingers, she would fix her eyes upon vacancy; ‘I might have been happy in a quiet stupid way if I had never met him, and might be if I could forget him; and yet—yet there are some things one would be unwilling to forget completely. He has come again to give me a new interest in life—but an interest most dangerous. It is fatality!’

If pleasant, it was also torture to be so near him and yet so far from him—he so much to her, she so little to him; she, who loved him so in the past time, and did so still, all the more that her unsought wedded life was but a garish and perpetual funeral—yea, a living death.

A dangerous propinquity is always given by a residence in a country house, though Winklestoke was as big as a barrack, and their intimacy was fast becoming too playful, too confidential, too—it was difficult to define precisely what.

‘Can Kyrle be losing his head?’ thought Vere, ‘or his heart?’ suggested suspicion; and he longed to have him back at Shorncliffe, especially after he overheard Lawntennison of the Blues and another visitor jesting on the subject.

‘I say, Lawn, old fellow,’ asked the latter, ‘who the dickens is he?’

‘Oh, one of the Eighth or King’s.’

‘He and she seem on doocid good terms, don’t you know; he must be a cousin, a relation—a very old friend, at all events, to go the pace thus; wish it was my luck. Perhaps

she means no mischief; but it looks doocid like it.'

Remarks such as these were as gall and wormwood to a man of Herbert Vere's disposition, all the more as he had a kind of intuitive perception that Kyrle Desborough now, even in the limited circle at Winklestoke, contrived to keep a good deal out of his way.

Apart from all this, even when Desborough was absent with his gun, or otherwise occupied with her male guests, Rosamund spoke so much and so often of him that it soon became evident to Maud and Gertrude that he occupied too much of her thoughts, so true it is that 'out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.'

'Despite all mamma says and would urge,' said Maud, *apropos* of this matter, 'that Rosamund can *care* for her husband is most improbable.'

'That—that she may care for Captain Desborough—'

'Is most probable,' interrupted Maud coldly and steadily, while a startled expression came into the face of Gertrude on finding her own fears put into words.

‘O Maud, there may be nothing on her part but foolish vanity,’ she urged.

‘She was never vain.’

‘Childish giddiness, then?’

‘She was never giddy—girlish, almost hoydenish, perhaps.’

‘But perfectly innocent,’ continued the gentle Gertrude, anxious to plead for the sister whom she loved, and whom their mother had so pitilessly sacrificed to the exigencies of the time.

‘Anyway, this perilous friendship must be stopped.’

‘But she is her own mistress; mamma made her so.’

‘And the wife of Sir Ayling Aldwinkle,’ added Maud, cresting up her head.

‘Surely he can look to all this,’ said Gertrude, into whose eyes the tears were starting.

‘If the old fool does not, we must and shall!’

‘How hard and harsh you can be, Maud! With her youth, beauty, and impulsive nature, our poor Rosamund has been put in a trying position.’

‘Yet the world will deal roughly with her.’

‘The world deals hardly with all,’ said Gertrude.

‘The more reason, then, to dread its dictum.’

‘Leave me to deal with Rosamund in this matter, Maud. She will listen to that from me which from others she would deem intolerable.’

Rosamund had not done as men of the world, of the clubs, and as charitable ‘society’ never doubted she would do after her marriage—engaged in furious flirtations and intrigues. Against this she had a safeguard, that had, however, its own peculiar danger.

She had fallen in love, as some women do, in silence, in enthusiasm, and without demonstration, with Kyrle Desborough, long before her marriage had been spoken of—Desborough for whom, had he asked her, she would have faced poverty, pain—yea, death! It was a wild rash love to give, all the more so that he recked not of it; but to this abstract idea she had given herself away, handing over her heart and soul, as it were, to the keeping of another.

In separation and absence she had doubt-

less been getting over it, and in time it must have faded out and passed away; but now he had returned they were revolving in the same fatal orbit, and meeting each other again and again; so no good could come of it.

It was not yet too late to evade the precipice; and though Rosamund could not foresee the future, perhaps Kyrle Desborough was beginning to perceive how blind *he* had been.

Luckless Rosamund! 'It is a bitter thing for a woman,' says a female novelist, 'to be awakened to the consciousness that she loves a man, who has not merely never asked her to do so, but who possibly would not thank her for the gift; it is a bitter thing for a deep heart to feel that its waters have been stirred idly—that it has put forth its tendrils of affection to touch but empty air.'

On this matter we prefer to quote a lady. None, save Heaven and herself, knew how Rosamund loved Kyrle Desborough; and even now the girl could not know how far pique at old Sir Ayling, and rage at Fate or the world, might carry her.

When Gertrude, after lovingly twining her soft arms round her, and drawing the girl's

sweet face into her neck caressingly, spoke to her of all this, amazement—which certainly was feigned, much of shame that was real, like the little gust of anger that followed it—seemed to inspire Rosamund.

‘People—men like Lawntennison—already watch you and him, my darling; some whisper, some sneer—’

‘Let them watch and sneer, Gerty, if they dare!’

‘And some—the good-natured—are beginning to look laboriously unconscious—’

‘Of what?’ asked the girl impetuously.

‘This intimacy between you and Captain Desborough.’

‘He is only a friend—a visitor—like Vere and the rest.’

‘I hope so, Rosamund; but you have him too much about you.’

‘Too much! How, you dear, provoking Gerty?’

‘The whole affair looks too much like a flirtation.’

‘And what mamma would call “bad form.”’

‘Exactly.’

Rosamund laughed a little bitterly, and said,

‘It is difficult to say or know where friendly conversation ends and flirtation begins.’

‘Perhaps; but it is also difficult to know where open flirtation ends and secret love-making begins.’

‘Gerty, I do not flirt with him.’

‘I fear not,’ said Gertrude, sadly and severely.

‘I do not know the exact degree of my iniquity; but I know this—that—that—’

‘What, my darling?’

‘That I am very—very miserable!’

And, fairly breaking down, Rosamund clung to her sister, as she had never clung to Maud or her mother, and wept.

‘I fear I have become very wicked—in thought, at least,’ she sobbed, ‘and I often wish that—that Kyrle Desborough had never crossed my path again.’

‘So do I,’ added Gertrude, with fervour.

‘Don’t despise me for what I say, Gerty, but kiss me.’

‘My poor little Rosamund!’

‘He will go back to Shorncliffe in a few days, and then all will be over. Till then I cannot quite change my manner.’

‘Rosamund, have you no care for appearances?’

‘I don’t know,’ said the girl, sighing.

‘How?’

‘One gets tired of them in time, as of everything in this weary world.’

‘While in it we must control our actions and our impulses.’

‘Have you forgotten the episodes of “Birdie”?’

‘No, Rosamund, but I have hoped in my heart that you had done so.’

The girl smiled with something of angry scorn, which Gertrude was troubled to see, and again caressed her, on which Rosamund wept again; but her weepings were all as April showers—she could not keep up the flow: so variable as April itself, she was weeping one moment and laughing the next, with her sweet face hidden in the tender neck of Gertrude, who, having her own secret love, was disposed to be exceedingly pitiful with her child-like younger sister. Yet when the for-

mer left it was impossible for Rosamund not to ponder and think over her warnings; and she hoped in her heart that the perils which seemed to menace her—perils of her own seeking—would terminate with Desborough's visit.

A blush suffused her cheek, for her own conscience could not acquit her of the fact that a dangerous game was being played—a game in which any one might see that the victory could only lead to one fatal, fatal way. There had been words spoken in tones so low that none apart might hear; half vows uttered that should not have been; palpitations that were tender, while hand lingered in hand; hopes that were not the less daring for being laughingly expressed; fluttering fears that were born of propriety; and all the covert tremors that strew the path of every hidden love, but more than all of a love that should not be.

'Oh, yes; I must and shall forget all about it when he goes, thank Heaven!' she said half aloud, as if to assure herself by mere sounds; and then hastily tied on her hat and issued from the conservatory door to join Desbo-

rough, who was thoughtfully smoking his brier-root on the terrace before the house.

We have said that, among Rosamund's many plans and expeditions, was one to Quincy Hall, a scheme to which Vere laughingly and warmly acceded.

It was to take place on a day subsequent to the conversation just narrated, and for many reasons Gertrude most earnestly wished it to be over—all the more that she felt that to decline being one of the party might be somewhat marked.

CHAPTER VII.

THE HOME OF THE VERES.

GERTRUDE was intensely provoked with Rosamund for suggesting the expedition to Quincey Hall, which was only distant some twelve miles from Winklestoke.

To her it was preëminently distasteful, secretly circumstanced as she was, or rather had been, with Vere—loving him still in her heart, but believing that he too surely had ceased to care for her. Indeed Sophy Finch never omitted an occasion of assuring her, in the most friendly and jocose manner, on the authority of her brother Toby, how ‘terribly bewitched he had been with the Creole beauty.’ But apart from all, Gertrude shrank now, sensitively and proudly, more than ever from him, as his accession to rank and fortune roused all her pride of soul, lest even a smile might be misinterpreted; and most studiously she never, on any occasion, gave him the most slender

opportunity of being alone with her for a moment.

She longed intensely for the termination of his visit to Winklestoke, and angrily regretted that she had permitted herself to be swept there, at the same time, by the impulsive Rosamund. Yet with all this, there was in her mind a bewildering sense of the *presence* of Vere that rendered all she saw, heard, or did, dreamy, indistinct, and difficult to realise or be interested in.

Thus at first she had determined that she would not accompany the riding-party to Quincey Hall, and resolved to plead a headache and so forth when the time for departure came. But when she thought of Rosamund and her now dangerous friend, the dread of a probable fiasco compelled her to attend her volatile sister in the capacity of a watchful guardian.

Vere had written to the housekeeper and butler to have luncheon prepared for the party at the Hall, where he had only been once for a few days since his return to England; and early in the forenoon the whole party, to the number of a dozen (exclusive of Sir Ayling,

who pleaded an engagement), set forth on horseback, attended by two or three grooms; and a happy and merry party they seemed.

Vere assisted Gertrude to mount, and had for the first time in his palm the tiniest foot he had ever seen. He then gathered her reins, and put them in her hand; but did not, as she half expected or hoped, take his place by her side.

It was a genuine September morning, with bright sunshine, a cloudless blue sky, clear and tranquil, a haze of heat in the hollows, and insects buzzing in the air. Oblivious alike of Gertrude's warnings and wishes, and of her own tearful promises, Rosamund, in the highest spirits, led the van of the party with Desborough, whom she summoned to ride by her side. And a charming picture the girl made, in her dark-blue exquisitely-fitting habit, her little hat put coquettishly well forward, with her glorious golden hair coiled, as only Parker's hands could coil it, in masses behind; the reins firmly gathered in one tiny gauntleted hand, the other by her side with the switch, with which she never required to touch the satin skin of the beautiful animal

she rode—the perfection of a lady's pad, which knew so well the silvery voice and caressing hand of its rider. And Desborough, as he looked at her from time to time, thought what a credit such a wife as she would be to any man in the world.

We have hinted that Sophy Finch assumed a species of proprietary in Vere: thus she easily arranged that he should be her cavalier, while Gertrude and Maud fell alternately to the lot of Sir Ascot and Lawntennison, a lispng, *blasé*, and vapid young Englishman, whose sandy hair and freckled skin contrasted unfavourably with the handsome Desborough, who was an Irishman of the dark-eyed and black-haired type.

Inspired by the purity of the air, the beauty of the woodland roads they traversed, and the tone of happiness and pleasure pervading all the party, Gertrude forgot much of her annoyance; she forgot even the part she had set herself to act, and more than once looked smilingly back to Vere, who rode behind her; and as she did so her face, her contour, and her bearing on horseback all vividly brought back the memory of a time, a day

of joy and hope, when last he had seen her mounted, and been her escot to the Aldershot steeplechases—long, long ago it seemed now.

And when memory recalled all that, and how dear she was to him then, he felt his heart turn yearningly towards her, and he cantered up to her side; on which Sir Ascot dropped behind with Miss Finch. Yet it was only to remark, 'How fast the woods are yellowing now!'

In no way had there been the least approach to the 'old, old story,' though the hearts of both were full of its memory; and Lady Templeton little knew how much of *that* story had been told by the stile in the deep old lane that led to the rectory, on the eventful night subsequent to her ball at Ringwood Hall.

Gertrude and Vere had dropped apparently into their first friendly relations with each other, if such could possibly be. Vere had asked her to become his wife; yet it did not seem as if he would do so a second time. Was the link dropped, the tie broken? There could not have been a more embarrassing, yet, to the eyes of the uninitiated, friendly, inter-

course between them—a man and woman who had *loved* each other meeting daily as they now met, each deceived as to the secret thoughts of the other, and studiously ignoring the old tie, though something secret and subtle in eye or manner at times brought back the memory of it.

So both, misled, continued to play with fire, as it were, and to trifle with their own hearts, under the miserable mask of indifference; and it seemed but too probable that Herbert Vere would go back to Shorncliffe without making any attempt to take up the strands of the old story; and in her pride of heart Gertrude certainly never gave him a chance of doing so.

Yet Maud could see that in the eyes of Gertrude there was a lustreless languor, with a gravity on her eyebrows, an occasional raising of their slender dark lines, and too generally an apathetic indifference of bearing that betrayed the existence of a repining thought in her heart; and that thought was the memory of *what might have been*; and how, by becoming the exponent of their mother's selfish system and ambitious plans and wishes,

she had lost and thrust back upon himself the heart of the only man she had ever really loved.

But now that he had so pointedly brought his horse alongside of hers she remembered herself, and became cold and reserved. In truth she was not without some jealousy of Toby Finch's sister, who—as already stated—appropriated Vere to herself (all ignorant of any prior claim poor Gertrude might have), and had him ever by her side, chattering to him about the West Indies and the Caribs, the Maroons, Creoles, and Hindoos—for Sophy's ideas of geography were rather hazy; she played with him, sang at him, made bets with him, and made him do petty errands for her; for was he not Toby's brother-officer? and, as Maud said, she seemed quite to deem *her* brother-officer too; so Vere had to 'go in with it,' as she was a dashing, handsome, and wilful girl. He could not help it; but the aspect of affairs had widened the breach—if breach it could be called—between himself and Gertrude Templeton.

The riders were drawing near Quincey Hall now, and as they came down the slope of a

hill the bells began to jingle merrily in the square spire of the old Norman village church, and, softened by distance, the silvery peals came pleasantly to the ear.

‘Is this in honour of your arrival, Sir Herbert?’ asked Maud Templeton.

‘Of yours, rather—and the other ladies,’ replied Vere, bowing; ‘the old butler has doubtless arranged this.’

‘I have heard that these village bells are famous for their melody,’ said Gertrude.

‘They were brought from the Low Countries by Sir Horace Vere of Tilbury, and for many a generation since then have rung in and out the epochs of the Veres.’

‘Epochs?’ said Gertrude.

‘Their births, their deaths, and—their marriages.’

Gertrude changed colour, and slightly checked her horse; on which Vere added laughingly,

‘They have few pleasant associations for me. I would rather hear the jolly brass drums of the Eighth. But there is the old house in view at last, and and to it I bid you all heartily welcome.’

Situated amid the sweetly sylvan and romantic scenery peculiar to the upper portion of the Thames, which there flows through valleys bounded by low hills clothed with beech-woods, and finely studded by many noble mansions, the old Hall stood near the river, and was approached by an avenue from the Reading road. It wound in and out for more than half a mile among clumps of stately forest trees, the gnarled trunks of which were in many instances covered by masses of ivy and other parasites.

The mansion, some portions of which were very old, had undergone many alterations, and all these had been carried out with more taste and skill than are often to be met with in such cases; for one portion of the building was so ancient that it afforded accommodation to several peers who attended the Parliament at Reading in 1452, and the most modern addition had been made by the late Sir Joseph.

And with the dark old walls of the manor-house encrusted with coats armorial, and massed with ivy and luxuriant Virginia creeper, turning now yellow, russet, and red, the garden contrasted well with its long

straight terraced walks, the smoothly mown lawn, its quaintly carved sun-dial, whence a broad flight of stately steps descended to the margin of the river.

Before the *porte-cochère* was a magnificent gray granite fountain, in the basin of which the wax-like cups and dark-green leaves of the water-lilies floated, and from the centre of which a bronze triton spouted high in air a clear jet of water from a conch; and all around were grand old trees, gnarled, vast, and umbrageous—trees that win ‘man’s reverence by force of contrast with his own ephemeral existence;’ trees that had been in full leaf when King Henry built Reading Abbey, and long, long before Laud had been spelling through his hornbook in the neighbouring grammar-school.

The Veres had held Quincey Hall in an unbroken line ever since it fell to the lot of an ancestor in the early wars of the Roses, on the attainder of the De Quinceys, and it was and is still one of those splendid and perfectly-kept old places which in Britain, but more especially in England, attest the family *tenacity* of the ancient landholders.

When or by whom the oaks around it were planted none could tell; but the glades and the views from the windows were the same that the monks in Reading Abbey, the nuns in the ruined priory on the hill, and the mailed lords who dwelt in the old Hall had beheld from generation unto generation.

The old white-haired butler appeared with many other servants at the *porte-cochère*, as the party reined up, and warmly echoed the welcome of Vere, who assisted Sophy Finch—for Gertrude had withdrawn from his side—to alight.

Vere might have been pardoned an emotion of vanity in doing the honours of such a place, even temporarily, as he was thankful to do, in a species of scramble or picnic, under the matronage of the volatile Rosamund.

There were the library, the chapel, the dining-hall, and the gallery, lined with portraits of the Veres 'since time out of mind,' as the old butler had it, with a sly hope that Sir Herbert was not to be the last of the line; and as the old fellow made this pointed speech his eye actually wandered inquiringly over the ladies to settle on Maud, and in whatever

Vere did or said he and other old servants detected some fancied resemblance to that departed 'rip,' Sir Joseph, and with his own memories of that gouty, fractious, and bibulous old tyrant our hero felt far from flattered.

With the Templetons for his guests, Vere could not help momentarily recalling the bitterness of that time at Aldershot, when the cold-blooded letter of the lawyers came with tidings of that cruel codicil which swept all away from him; and how he had connected that event with the strange meeting and parting he had with Gertrude. And now he was lord of all, and *she* was his guest—his guest, and nothing more.

Even as these thoughts occurred to him she was keeping close by the side of Sir Ascot, who with glass in eye was gazing idly along the picture-gallery; and Vere could not know by intuition, though he might have suspected it, that the fact of her being his guest, amid these sudden and brilliant surroundings, made Gertrude in her pride of heart and haughtiness of spirit more cold to him and more open to any attention Sir Ascot might pay her.

Vere gave his arm to laughing Lady Aldwinkle, and led her towards the dining-hall, as the gong in the vestibule had announced the luncheon, which had put the housekeeper, cooks, butler, and gardener, with the luscious produce of his hothouses, on their mettle to prepare, and which was partaken of jollily and merrily, in oblivion of those whose faces looked down upon it, the Veres of the past—portraits of that brave Cavalier time ‘when the manhood of men was heightened by a graceful dignity of costume, and womanhood was made more lovely by a majestic appropriateness of robes and draperies.’

CHAPTER VIII.

A REVELATION.

THE protracted repast over, the little party separated; the gentlemen retiring to the smoking-room, for the invariable 'weed,' while the ladies idled in the drawing-room and the conservatory which opened off it; and it chanced that Vere in passing through the latter, to order from the gardener some special fruit for Sir Ayling Aldwinkle, heard his own name mentioned by Gertrude to Rosamund. The sisters were seated on the other side of a great flower-stand, and were conversing in a low tone; but the words that reached his ear compelled Vere to pause, and without intending to act the part of eavesdropper, they rooted him to the spot.

'Yes, Rosamund,' said Gertrude, in reply to some remark of her sister, 'it is most true of Vere and me, and that writer says truly who asserts, that in the whole catalogue of

human suffering there is no feeling so agonising as the conviction that the heart of one we love is utterly estranged from us.'

'It is so strange to see you here, dear Gerty, a visitor, when you might have been mistress. The house is stately; even mamma, with all her grasping vanity, could desire nothing more. The gardens there, though the season is autumn, are a blaze of colour, the perfection of ribbon bordering; the lawn smooth as a billiard-table; and how beautiful are all the grand old trees!'

'But I *hate* them all!' said Gertrude emphatically.

'Hate them—why?' asked Rosamund, with surprise.

'Because when he has all this I cannot show now that I love him as I loved him in the past time, when he had only his commission, or little more.'

'Poor Gerty! mamma has taken the bloom from my life; oh, let her not take it from yours!'

Then, after a little pause, Gertrude said, in a low voice full of sweetness and pathos,

'As I loved him long ago—for it does seem

long ago—when mamma's ambitious schemes, with Derinzy's wretched duplicity, nearly broke my heart, so do I love him still; but he is totally indifferent—cold and changed; for doubtless he has ceased to believe in me. What else could I expect? Besides, on that day at Goodwood it was evident to more than me that mamma was making such a dead set at him—conduct so different from her bearing when he was at Aldershot—that every one saw her game. It was most humiliating to me, and has made me assume a cold and distant reserve that is as far from real, as my desire to encourage the attentions of such an empty fellow as Sir Ascot Softeigh. But let us say no more of this.'

And then the sisters began to talk of other things.

Vere could scarcely believe his ears; his heart beat like lightning; he made a step forward, as if to join the sisters, and say he scarcely knew what; but as rapidly changed his purpose, and with his mind in a strange tumult of thought he softly quitted the place.

The revelation made so innocently and unconsciously by Gertrude Templeton filled

his soul with a great and sudden glow of joy. She loved him still, and had never ceased to do so—her own lips had assured him of it; and that by the force of circumstances, past and present, she, more than even himself, had been acting a part she did not feel.

He would pain and test her no more; and he marvelled, but for what he had heard by chance, how long this singular game of apparent indifference would have been played, and how, or in what fashion, it would have ended.

In his present mood he was disinclined to rejoin his friends in the smoking-room, where much foolish laughter and horsey talk were being indulged in. His thoughts fled back to the past time, when love for her seemed so hopeless and yet so alluring, and he longed to take her to his heart and assure her that he loved her still.

But in what fashion was he to broach the subject? To let her know the admissions he had overheard would cover her with confusion; and to address her now, on the strength of his rank and money, might actually, with a girl so proud and reserved, insure a refusal, cost

her what it might, especially if she suspected him of having any fancy for the coquettish sister of Toby Finch.

Of two facts he was certain: that Gertrude loved him, and that he had no rival. He walked forth into the grounds and strove to think coherently, while voices and laughter came from the open windows of the smoking-room, and he could hear the tones of Sophy Finch as she sang at the piano, doing her best thereby to lure the gentlemen from 'their den.'

'To linger after what I have heard were to play the fool,' thought Vere; 'surely I can with ease go back to the point where we left off—where we parted in such sorrow—to the dear old story I told her long ago. But little more than a year has passed since then, and already she deems it long ago. My poor Gertrude! How have I been deceiving myself and you! Why did not Rosamund undeceive me? But foolish Rosamund has been too full of her own affairs.'

He longed to cast aside the mask; to take Gertrude's hands caressingly within his own, and to see her look at him again with the old

confidence and affection he had last seen in her eyes, in the conservatory at Ringwood Hall, and when they parted in the lane.

After the admissions he had overheard and the pathos of her accents it was impossible to doubt the purity of her love for him; and neither could he doubt that his changed circumstances would render his suit most acceptable to her ambitious mother.

Brief though Vere's promenade necessarily was, years of thought were crowded into it; but as he turned round the terrace in front of the house, he came suddenly upon Gertrude and Rosamund. They had issued from the long flowery aisles of the conservatory, and were now standing on the summit of the flight of steps that led down to the river, and at the foot of which a pleasure boat was moored. Each sister wore still, of course, her riding-habit, with the skirt thrown over one arm, and Gertrude had loosely tied over her brown hair a laced handkerchief; but the sheeny coils of Rosamund's hair were uncovered and glittered in the sunshine.

How aristocratic and highly-bred the two girls looked, thought Vere, and so in unison

with the stately old hall and the balustraded terrace, where the peacocks were strutting to and fro, and the demi-lions, the crest of the Veres, in grotesque old carving, surmounted every pedestal.

‘We are admiring the lovely view,’ said Rosamund, as Vere threw away his cigar and joined them; and, sooth to say, the landscape was charming in its sylvan beauty. The river made a sweep round the reach on which the old hall stands, and flowed away in its majesty between sloping meadows divided by hedges and belts of timber, dotted by distant village churches half hidden in the dim haze.

Close by were great oak-trees pencilled, as it were, against the sky, and long drooping ashes that almost swept the slow current of the river, but now, deeply tinged with the golden, russet, and brown hues of autumn, rendered deeper in the rays of the declining sun.

‘If I unmoor the boat and take you to the bend of the stream,’ said Vere, ‘you will have one of the finest views on old Father Thames.’

‘I wonder who Mother Thames was!’ said

Rosamund; 'but thanks. Captain Desborough waits me to play him something in the drawing-room. Take Gerty; she has a keener appreciation of fine effects than I.'

Then, with one of her silvery little laughs, Rosamund tripped back to the house, through the conservatory, ere Gertrude could speak.

'Do you care to go, Miss Gertrude?' asked Vere, descending the steps and presenting his hand.

They were now together alone, almost for the first time, and there was a tenderness in the tone and manner of Vere that stirred a chord in the girl's heart and caused her to colour deeply. To decline would barely be polite; was he not at least her host at present? The temptation, perhaps, was strong; she forgot, we fear, all about the interests of Rosamund just then, and gave her hand to Vere, who felt its touch go straight to his heart; and as he handed her into the boat, and seated her in the stern, something undefinable came into his eye and voice at variance with the elaborate politeness and coldly-dignified bearing he had practised of late, and Gertrude felt her colour come and go in spite of her-

self. Yet as he cast off the painter and shipped a pair of sculls, he was only talking in the most matter-of-fact way—of how many a time and oft he had fished there in boyhood with Sir Joseph and his dead cousins, and where the dace were to be found in the sunny shallows; the deep still pools where the barbel grubbed in the clay; and the old tree-roots half bedded in the stream, where the silvery-hued chub watched for stray flies; and so forth; and as the boat floated slowly on, chiefly with the current, Gertrude became more reassured, and spoke of the beauty of the scene, the foliage skirting the opal-tinted Thames and the emerald-green eminence, where the old mansion towered, with its walls reddened and its oriels ablaze in the light of the declining sun.

Vere, pausing, let his sculls rest idly in the rowlocks, and, as the boat floated dreamily on, he gazed at Gertrude, who lifted her eyes to his from the ripples, amid which the water-lilies were floating within the grasp of her pretty hand.

She now perceived that his clear dark eyes were bent upon hers with an earnest, deep,

and searching and yet most tender gaze, as if he was striving to read the lovely face that had first shed a glory on his life. Gertrude met that gaze, for a moment, with an honest, pure, and unshrinking expression; and then tears started into her eyes, as her heart heaved painfully, and she turned away, with something of tenderness, something of reproach, much of a deep blush and a species of smile, that died away together when he addressed her.

‘Gertrude’—his voice became very tender, and he paused, while she grew pale, but, encouraged by what he had so recently heard, he continued—‘do you remember that evening when we met and parted, in the green lane, before my departure from England?’

‘I could never forget it, as I thought you had done.’

‘Gertrude!’ said Vere, surprised that she should adopt a tone of taunt to him. ‘You remember it, then?’ he urged.

‘With sorrow,’ she replied, in agitation, and with difficulty repressing her tears.

‘And must remember how you forbade me to hope?’

‘I—I was not then the mistress of my own actions.’

‘But you surely are so now?’

‘Not more now than then.’

‘But you do love me still; your own admissions made to Rosamund not many minutes ago assured me of it. I overheard them, my darling,’ continued Vere impetuously, and stooping towards her.

Mingled shame and pride dispelled the colour that pleasure would have brought to her cheek, and her face filled with confusion and perplexity as she strove for a moment to remember *what* she had admitted to Rosamund, and how much he might have heard.

‘Gertrude,’ he added, taking her hands in his (a bank of trees concealed them from the windows of the hall), ‘let us understand each other at last, and throw aside the veil of doubt and mistrust that has hung between us. Let us forget that new position and sudden fortune, which I only value as the means to win you to me, and strive to think of each other as on that night of bitterness, when we separated without hope.’

‘Herbert!’

'Herbert' on her lips again; but poor Gertrude had, as she spoke, a painful spasm in her delicate throat, compelling her to pause, for love was writhing with pride for the mastery in her breast, and the former conquered.

'I ask you to forgive me, Herbert, for my share in our painful farewell; it was enforced by my mother. Ah, you know not, and never can know, all I have suffered! And to ask your forgiveness, too, for that affront, born of—of—all that Sophy Finch wrote so fully to her brother. An explanation which— which—'

'You knew would reach me?'

'Yes.'

Gertrude was weeping freely now, and he pressed her passive hands to his lips, and said,

'Till that day at Goodwood I had been labouring for months under a fatal mistake.'

'Fatal—how?'

'We—that is, Desborough and I—regarded you as a wedded wife—the wife of Derinzy.'

'A fatal mistake indeed,' said Gertrude,

with a smile, for she thought, in her ignorance of the dates, it might explain much that Sophy Finch had told her, and she would rather not have heard; for, doubtless, partly in the love of gossip, partly in rivalry, and perhaps in mischief, that young lady had done much to sow the seeds of mistrust. And now, as Vere once more drew the girl to his breast, all his heart seemed to go forth to her as of old, but with more of hope and happiness than in the past time at Ringwood and Aldershot; and again and again, in terms and phrases broken and incoherent, he assured her that as he loved her then he loved her now, and a joyous rapture spread over her bright little face as she listened to him.

Then she told him, in words difficult to render here, so low was her hesitating tone and so broken her sentences, that the love she had for him had grown and strengthened till it became an absorbing passion, which neither separation, doubt, nor distance could destroy; and yet, she added, in tones more broken still, and with a hot blush on her delicate cheek, she would have made all these admissions to Herbert Vere of the Eighth only, rather than

to the owner of Quincey Hall. But could the owner thereof fail to believe her? Ah, no, &c. And so the boat drifted onward, sometimes broadside to the stream, sometimes stern on, and getting foul of the willowed isles and the roots of projecting trees, till the September sun was throwing the shadows of everything far across the landscape, and, remembering their twelve miles' ride to Winklestoke, they were compelled to return, and in doing so attempt to conceal from such sharp and watchful eyes as those of Maud the consciousness that possessed them.

And though Sophy Finch found herself somewhat studiously ignored by 'Toby's brother-officer,' it was a happy party that cantered back to Winklestoke by the woodland roads in the twilight; for the sun had now set, the shadows had melted out in murky obscurity, the air had become chill, and a red golden glow lingered at 'the gates of the west.'

CHAPTER IX.

HOW KYRLE DESBOROUGH WAS 'SNUBBED.'

IN sweet mutual confidence, and in the mutual comparison and confession of past regrets, sorrows, thoughts, and wishes, and in the brilliant anticipation of a bright and seemingly endless future, the last few days of Vere's visit to Winklestoke glided deliciously away, after that auspicious row upon the river—days when more than ever he was learning the amount of good sense, together with gentle sensibility, that existed in the mind and heart of Gertrude Templeton; happy, happy days, when both were maturing the pleasant, but rather romantic, idea—an old one—that with every human soul is created *another*, for whose companionship through life it is destined, and that from the unfortunate separation, or the never meeting, of these two souls, all the love miseries of the world have arisen.

Rosamund, warm and impulsive Rosamund, congratulated Vere in her own fashion, by clasping his hands within her own and kissing him on both cheeks. Sir Ayling was also warm and most kind, but old-fashionedly dignified. Maud wrote to mamma at once, to tell her of the state of affairs and of the more formal communication she was ere long to receive; and that good lady at once remembered a newspaper announcement of the proving of the late baronet's last will, and the sums named therein; after which she studied and compared Vere's pedigree, as given by Sir Bernard and Debrett.

Kyrle Desborough, the usually frank and generous soldier, for reasons which may be more obvious to the reader than they were precisely at that time to Vere, was less enthusiastic; but the latter supposed that was due to his old constitutional cynicism, his doubts about women, and the strange opinions he had been wont to ventilate in past times.

The only person—unfortunately, as the event proved—who was left in the dark as to the progress of affairs was Sir Ascot Softeigh, who hovered about Gertrude as usual when-

ever opportunity served, which was but seldom now, as he was somewhat puzzled to find.

‘My poor Herbert!’ said Gertrude one day, as she leant on his arm with her white fingers interlaced thereon, and looked smilingly up in his face; ‘and so Rosamund tells me that it was quite evident, though I saw it not, that you had a jealousy of Sir Ascot?’

‘It certainly assisted me in the game of indifference we were playing to hear the club rumours on one hand, and on the other to see him so often about you, and you sometimes leaning on *his* arm and smiling up at him; while, as if in corroboration of the rumours, he adopted the airs—in his own languid way—of a privileged dangler, and as such was, I have no doubt, invited here.’

‘Mamma suspected, but Sir Ayling knew not, that you loved me once.’

‘And love you still, darling. You must never speak in the past tense.’

‘Well, we can laugh at all our troubles now, dearest Herbert,’ said Gertrude, as she pouted her lovely lip invitingly upward.

‘We have been, as Shakespeare says, “true lovers run into strange capers.”’

Amid this renewal of love and indulgence in a sweet mutual confidence, that had been so completely shattered, Gertrude had sensitively too much good taste, even in jest, to make the least hint of her rival in the Antilles, if rival she had—an idea which the girl's heart repelled.

It was a subject to be ignored, avoided, and forgotten. But the troubles of Gertrude were not yet over, for ere Vere could either visit Ringwood Hall or write to Lady Templeton with a confidence he did not possess when in his two-roomed hut at Aldershot, there came to pass a very unforeseen catastrophe.

In their mutual preoccupation Gertrude and Vere failed to observe how much now Kyrle Desborough and Rosamund were together, till even Sir Ayling began to remark it, and that his visitor now made various excuses from going forth with his gun as the others did.

This is a portion of our narrative which we have much reluctance in recording; but as it holds an important part therein, and other events turn upon it, we are compelled to refer to it.

Mistress of princely Winklestoke and wife of a wealthy baronet though she was, it never occurred to Rosamund that she was to be looked up to, esteemed—or, as it is commonly called, respected—she preferred to be *loved*; and loved she certainly was, for none spoke of her but in a caressing way. Yet a time of change was coming.

Desborough and she were ever together now, on some pretext, all over the place; in the vineries, pineries, stables, and kennels; in the labyrinth—for there was one at Winklestoke which beat even that at Hampton Court; and then there was also the home farm.

Was Kyrle crazed, thought Vere, when he began to think of it at all, and was *she*, that they could take an interest in skittish colts, in pigs black and sleek, in ducks and geese and dorkings; in the rickyard and fold-yard, with kine knee-deep among straw and litter?—all of which were as little in Kyrle's way as hers, but were objects which afforded a pretence.

Had Kyrle become affected by that loose morality which is now said to pervade

nearly the whole upper stratum of English society?

So once more, when amid the sunny joy that filled her own heart some little episode suddenly recalled her former conversation with Rosamund, Gertrude, in her most winning manner, again assumed the part of mistress, and began to express her growing dislike of Desborough.

Rosamund protested, first laughingly, and then tearfully and vehemently, that it all meant nothing; her actions were open, innocent, and patent to all, so were his; and that, if Gerty wished it, she would give 'Kyrle' a hint seriously on the subject—she called him Kyrle occasionally, when Sir Ayling was not present—and give him 'a decided snub;' and her hint and snub took the form that might have been expected.

She chose her time, when all were promenading in pairs or groups on the lawn after luncheon, to draw him away with her into the shrubberies; and in reply to some remark he made that was rather pointed she said, but without the least severity of tone,

'Are you not aware, Captain Desborough,

how unwise, how dangerous and wrong it is for you to look at me and speak to me as you now do?’

‘Dangerous and wrong?’ repeated Kyrle, with a perplexed and amazed air, while twirling his black moustache.

‘Yes,’ said Rosamund.

‘But why, or how?’

‘We, or you, are drifting you don’t know where.’

She spoke of him, but thought of herself.

‘Has this been hinted to you?’ he asked gravely.

‘Yes.’

‘By whom?’ he inquired, almost angrily.

‘I shall not tell you.’

‘Was it Sir Ayling?’ he asked, taking her hand in his, which she did not withdraw.

‘It was *not*; but I have begun to reflect—to think,’ she continued, as tears started into her downcast eyes, ‘that you ought not, and must not, say the desperate things that you have been saying to me. Your society, Captain Desborough, has shed a golden ray over a not very joyous life; but—but the time

is coming—nay, has come, when we must be mere friends—or part for ever!’

Kyrle listened to her in a species of angry silence, while an expression of sorrow replaced the smile on his face, and they walked slowly forward without speaking; and as friends were close by he relinquished, with reluctance, the pretty hand he had held caressing, all heedless that a marriage-hoop was on it.

She could not deny to herself, in her heart of hearts, that hitherto she had looked forward, with a species of exciting and guilty pleasure, to her rides and rambles with Desborough.

Very perilous for the impulsive girl was this companionship, though as yet no dire transgression in word or thought, far less in act, had startled her soul to a sense of the whirlpool that might drag her down. There was, apart from the secret love she had borne him, a charm in Desborough’s society, which she could not and cared not to relinquish, but with reluctance and sorrow. But a time came when he was so forgetful of all the world that he addressed her as no man has a right to address the wife of his host or friend;

and, singularly enough, the time chosen was that in which she had resolved to 'snub' him, but found herself lured, or impelled, into making an admission from which she might recede, but could never revoke.

She recalled the scene in the conservatory, and the passionate letter she had written on the night he marched from Aldershot, and which she destroyed; but now, in broken accents and with quivering lip, she told him, under the influence of the most imploring and tender questioning, the tenor of its perilous contents—her wild love for himself, and her black despair at the marriage about to be forced upon her.

'Poor girl, poor darling!' he whispered; 'why did you not send it to me? But it would have been too late; we were at sea next day.'

'Too late, or not,' said she, weeping bitterly the tears he longed, but dared not, to kiss away, 'my soul shrank from it then.'

As Desborough gazed now passionately on Rosamund, there came into her soft face a beseeching, clinging, and unprotected expression of distress, mingled with shame and con-

fusion. He now pitied her from his soul, and would have taken her tenderly in his arms, but she recoiled a pace or two.

‘Good Heavens!’ thought he, ‘what a fool I have been! how blind! How one might live and love and lead a creature like this all round the world with him! However, I must leave this, and at once, for her sake, if not for my own.’

Desborough’s thoughts almost took the form of words; but, though he made the resolution, it began and ended there.

‘And you married?’ he asked softly, after a pause.

‘As you know, in despair.’

He sighed.

‘It was a species of relief from the domestic tyranny and monetary necessities of mamma; and after it was all—all over, I thought I should find a kind of stagnant peace combined with—’

‘Happiness?’

‘How can *you* say so?’

‘Time will reconcile you.’

‘It will neither reconcile me nor avenge me!’ said the girl impetuously. ‘You, Kyrle,

can see how miserable—with all its luxury and splendour—is the life from which you might have saved me.'

'I?'

'You—you surely loved me when at Aldershot?' asked Rosamund, growing very pale.

'I was foolish enough—' stammered Kyrle, fairly taken aback by the question, as he recalled how perpetually he had played with and made a mere jest of her.

'Foolish enough—to what?' asked Rosamund sharply, putting up her parasol to shade her face.

'To hope that *you* might love me; but there was Lady Templeton,' he added, feeling that somehow he did not shine.

'I know—I know,' said Rosamund bitterly; 'but I wish for some one to love me. I would that I were your younger sister, Kyrle. But here comes Sir Ayling and Maud; let us join them.'

And with faces composed and made up for the occasion they met those who approached, and it was evident the old baronet looked both blankly and darkly; but whether

Maud had been suggesting anything to him it was impossible to say.

And while such avowals had been made and passionate speeches uttered, to any casual observer the two seemed simply to have been admiring the shrubs and flower borders.

Kyrle Desborough was flattered, puzzled, and perhaps alarmed by the crisis that had come. He sympathised with the poor little golden-haired victim, and was sensible of the terrible power he had over her for good or for evil; but this sympathy was blended with a dangerous love that allured him on one hand, while, as a man of honour, he shrank from what his own thoughts suggested on the other; but many a man of honour is weak enough when a pretty woman, who tells him that she loves him, is concerned; and Rosamund, on her part, began to blush for the result of the interview, and on the first occasion wept over it as the true fear of her sex took possession of her—the fear that she had—as she undoubtedly *had*—taken the initiative, and encouraged the changed bearing of Kyrle Desborough towards herself.

But in public his bearing was now altered

too; he escorted her no more in private rambles or promenades in the garden or grounds; he no longer chose her as a partner at croquet or lawn-tennis; he permitted others to turn the leaves of her music and accompany her in duets, to sit by her side or hover about her. He spent more of his time with a gun in the preserves, in the billiard-room, or even in listening to the querulous babble of Sir Ayling, whom he had learned intensely to dislike, and who, old as he was, remarked a change in Desborough which he could not define, and half feared that 'something had been up' between the captain and his impulsive little wife.

A sense of honour and humanity, of religion and generosity, told the heart of Kyrle Desborough that he ought to flee the temptation—to shun the presence of Rosamund, and take his instant departure from Winklestoke, on any pretence; but so weak may a strong man's resolution become, that he, the once-soured misogynist, had become helplessly besotted by a love of the very girl of whom he had so frequently made a jest.

'I am so glad, pet, to see by the altered

bearing of Captain Desborough—altered so much for the better—that you have taken my advice,’ said Gertrude to Rosamund.

‘Your advice?’ queried the latter dreamily.

‘Yes; and made him know his place, which I hope he will keep till he goes. Vere I know must resent his late manner to you; but men are loth to assume the part of monitors to each other, and admonition is too often resentfully taken. But how came this change about?’

‘I spoke to him on the subject.’

‘Spoke to him—remonstrated? Surely that was not a wise or proper course to take!’

‘I took it, however, Gerty,’ was the quibbling reply.

‘And the result?’

‘Is what you see; he does not come near me now.’

‘That in itself may become too remarkable. But *what* did you say?’ asked Gertrude softly, and with genuine anxiety.

‘Don’t ask me, Gerty,’ replied her sister a little sullenly, and then added, with a sigh, ‘Ah, me! all marriages are *not* made in heaven—the old saw is false.’

‘What does this mean?’

‘Where was *mine* made? You do not answer; shall I tell you?’

‘Yes.’

‘In Ringwood Hall,’ said Rosamund, with a bitter little laugh.

‘Do not adopt this tone, for Heaven’s sake,’ said Gertrude, with alarm and anxiety, as she lifted up Rosamund’s face and kissed it, just as she was wont to do when she was a child, and yet there was but two years of difference between the sisters. ‘Consider, dearest Rosamund, consider, evil alone can come of this spirit if adopted and encouraged.’

‘Then, if evil come, let it lie at mamma’s door,’ replied Rosamund, with growing bitterness. ‘My marriage, wherever it was made, was a bargain between Sir Ayling and her. I was sold to him, like a horse at Tattersall’s or anywhere else. But that woman to whom he so often sends money—I once saw his cheque-book—maddens me, Gerty—“Birdie,” at the Rhododendrons, Bayswater, that is the creature’s address—maddens me; and yet I do not love him!’

The truth was, perhaps, that Rosamund was endeavouring to nurse an emotion of indignation against Sir Ayling as an apology for her own wandering thoughts; but sliding from a chair to her sister's feet on the carpet, she drew an arm of Gertrude round her neck, and caressed the soft white hand that lay upon her tear-wetted cheek.

'I dress—I receive—I am civil—polite to all,' she urged half hysterically; 'what right has he to expect more of me?'

'That for the future and for ever you will avoid Captain Desborough,' said Gertrude gravely.

'Why did he bring him here?'

'By some fatal chance, mistake, I cannot explain. But it showed that he was without the least suspicion, and placed implicit confidence in you.'

'Oh, what an odious subject this is, and how humiliating!'

'Humiliating indeed,' said Gertrude, unable to restrain her tears. 'O Rosamund, I never thought to have to admonish you on such a subject as this.'

'I am very bad, naughty, horrible, I sup-

pose; but I won't be worse, darling Gerty, I promise you; I won't be worse than I am. Only don't let Maud attack me on the subject; her sneers would drive me wild. Kiss me again, Gerty.'

'My poor innocent lamb!' said the other caressingly.

'I am *not* innocent!' exclaimed Rosamund bitterly and impetuously. 'I know my own thoughts, and they are wicked in spite of me; yes, wicked, Gerty. My self-respect is gone; I do not quite despise myself, but I fear that in time others may come to despise me. O Kyrle! Kyrle!'

This incoherent speech was arrested by a passionate burst of weeping which terrified Gertrude, who lifted her eyes upward and said,

'In three days, thank God, he will be gone, never more to enter Winklestoke, if I can prevent it.'

But Gertrude little foresaw what was to happen in that brief space of time, and how terrible a cloud was to overshadow her own brief gleam of sunshine.

CHAPTER X.

SUSPICION.

SOMEWHAT relieved by this outburst and by her confession, though very much ashamed of both, even before her favourite sister, Rosamund strove to take heart and to reflect, with a species of sullen and desperate composure, that when the temptation was removed from her, by the departure of Desborough, she would forget—but that was perhaps not easy—the episode of ‘Birdie,’ and strive to do her duty as the wife of old Sir Ayling, who up to this time had doated—how wearily to herself the girl alone knew—on her.

Yes, yes, she would be faithful in thought as well as word and deed, and, however difficult the task, would strive to honour and obey. Alas, she could not love him with the love of which she felt capable elsewhere.

But in some fashion she hoped, by her

conduct and bearing, to make amends for what she withheld from him; and even while she repined in her heart, she resolved never again to let its beating quicken as her eyes met those of Desborough, or as his hand touched hers. During the remainder of his visit, and whenever or wherever they might meet again in society, she would avoid him, and adopt the mere friendly tone and bearing he had assumed of late.

But all these wise resolutions had been adopted too recently; for the eyes of Sir Ayling had become suddenly opened, and at a garden-party, on the very day after the visit to Quincey Hall, he had overheard a wicked old colonel say in a low voice to some one,

‘There goes that fellow Desborough of the Eighth, whispering into Lady Aldwinkle’s pretty ear discourses as artful as any the serpent ever whispered to Eve.’

‘Yes,’ drawled the other, a fox-hunting squire with a fast reputation; ‘married folks are always the last, don’t you know, to hear the little tarradiddles which affect them most and are current among their doocid good-

natured friends in society. But how old Aldwinkle is hoodwinked—'

He failed to catch the last words, as the laughing speakers detected his vicinity, and moved hastily away; but the scales fell from his eyes. A hundred things, which he had deemed mere hoydenish girlish folly, and had even laughed at, now came to memory in new colours, and with gigantic proportions; and hence it was that on that very morning, when he caught Rosamund replacing the rose in her bosom by one that had fallen off Desborough's lapel—replacing it with a fond dreamy smile on her face—that he banged to the room-door as he withdrew, much to her surprise, as that movement has always a world of angry meaning in it.

So when the bearing of the two suddenly changed to a bearing of distance and indifference, and he saw that there were times when Kyrle noticed Lady Aldwinkle just as much as he did the Maltese pug that nestled at her feet, he thought how 'still waters run deep,' and his suddenly excited jealousy waxed deeper, and he would rather almost have seen the former flighty manner resumed.

Many of his own old experiences of stolen moments, of acts and words assumed and done to hoodwink unsuspecting Benedicks, came torturingly back to memory now, opening up whole mines of jealous thoughts. The game that he had played with others then, might by others be played with him now. He knew too much of what he had done, and this very knowledge bore its crop of brambles now; he suddenly found himself hung on tenter-hooks, and had a horrible fear, not of what was actually happening then, but of what *might* come to pass ere long.

He remembered how he used to laugh at, mock, and revile the very jealousy he was wont to excite in others, in the days when he cared not to believe in the immaculate virtue of any woman, and believed that with time and opportunity he might wile an empress from her throne.

He was seated in a luxurious easy-chair in his library, full of these angry, fierce, and bitter thoughts—thoughts that were all the more agonising to a man of his age, and that made this said soft springy seat like Damien's bed of steel—when Rosamund, fresh from the

recent exciting interview with Gertrude, and after bathing her eyes, crept coyly to his side, with her mind full of good intentions.

He eyed her gloomily, but, as usual, put an arm round her; and then it occurred to his suspicious mind that, with all her outward air of wifely duty, inwardly she shrank from the embrace of that encircling arm and the pressure of the long white diaphanous hand.

‘You have had tears in your eyes,’ said he sharply; ‘tears about what?’

‘Tears of pleasure, Sir Ayling—think of the happiness of Gertrude. Look, dearest, there she goes with Vere across the lawn; how happy they must be, talking of themselves and their own plans!’

They were, at that precise moment, talking of *her*, and her too probable peril.

‘He leaves us soon; shall we,’ she said hesitatingly, ‘ere they go, give him and Captain Desborough—’

‘D—n Captain Desborough!’ interrupted Sir Ayling, withdrawing his hand, and starting as if the sound of the name had stung him. ‘We have had enough of this sort of thing! Do you suppose, madam, that I am going to

permit this man to be the hero of all our entertainments, the central figure of our circle, to hang about you as he has done for some time past, and to cause your name to be associated with his own obscure one?’

Startled at first by this sudden and coarse outbreak, which in tone, temper, and diction was all so unlike the usually calm, cold, unimpressionable, and aristocratic character of her husband, Rosamund shrank back; and then an expression of the deepest pain and humiliation crossed her soft fair face, less at the actual words than their general import and *all* they implied.

After a pause the old man took the girl’s tremulous white hand in his, and said, but coldly,

‘I believe you, Lady Aldwinkle—’

‘Do call me Rosamund,’ she exclaimed.

‘Well, I believe you to be all that a virtuous wife should be, even as I hope I am an affectionate and honourable husband.’

Rosamund thought of ‘Birdie,’ but only asked,

‘What do you mean, Sir Ayling?’

‘Simply this: that I am neither old enough

to be a doating donkey nor young enough to be vain and uxorious, and I am not in any way, I hope, a fool. I, with others, overheard a conversation—there was nothing covert about it—between you and this Captain Desborough the other evening. I thought it peculiar at the time; but I can see its full significance *now*.’

‘A conversation!’ said Rosamund, growing very pale, and striving to recall it, but in vain; ‘on what subject?’

‘A very singular one for any lady to discuss; and I can’t think how you permitted yourself to get upon it with such a person.’

‘And what was it?’

‘The length that a married woman—a modest one, let us hope—might let her esteem—ha, ha, madam, it was called *esteem*—go for a man who was not her husband.’

Rosamund now coloured deeply. She did remember the conversation in question; but there had been nothing covert about it; it had been carried on laughingly, in a gay, certainly rather French kind of way; but the recurrence to it now, with the tone of Sir Ayling and the cold gleam in his eyes, made

her feel sick, piqued, angry at heart, and resentful too.

‘Now leave me, Rosamund, and these matters shall be recurred to no more.’

And opening the library door, the tall thin old gentleman bowed her out as deferentially as if she were a stranger; but coming, as it did, immediately after the earnest warnings of her sister, this interview with Sir Ayling completely crushed and half terrified Rosamund.

CHAPTER XI.

THE HOLLY HEDGE.

CHARMED with the great sisterly love of Gertrude, which had much of a mother's care in it, Vere—whose intercession she had actually condescended with much confusion and hesitation to seek in the interest of Rosamund—sought, after sunset, a lonely part of the spacious and magnificent garden, to think over what he should say on the subject; he was full of honest and genuine indignation at Kyrle—all the more when the anxious and loving face, the tearful eyes, and tremulous tones of Gertrude were remembered.

He had two other matters to think of amid the smoke of the indispensable cigar, as he threw himself upon a rustic bench in a snug corner, screened by one of the dense and lofty holly hedges, which, like leafy walls, intersected the garden at regular distances, and these were, writing to his solicitors at

Gray's Inn, Messrs. Wolfe, Fox, & Graball, concerning his engagement with the late Lord Templeton's daughter, and the monetary eventualities it involved, and also whether he should write to or visit—he preferred the former—Lady Templeton on the subject, as he never for a moment doubted having her full and warm consent *now*.

Amid the three subjects in hand he fell into a somewhat deep reverie for him, and other ideas mingled with them. Chance had thrown him into close association with Virginia Bellingham. Chance—yes, it is the old story—and a new inspiration filled the heart that Gertrude had seemingly thrust back upon itself; but *now* Vere thought with tenderness and enthusiasm, while every pulse quickened and fibre thrilled at the delicious conviction, that he had learned how great was the difference between a first and all-absorbing love such as his for Gertrude, and the passing passion—for such he deemed it—he had for poor Virginia Bellingham, considering, not incorrectly, that love and passion may be *two*.

Why was it that at that time, with the speed of light and thought, his memory

flashed back to the glorious summer beauty of that once happy abode in the Antilles, embosomed among a thousand luscious fruits and brilliant flowers; to the bright and pale but pensive face he had seen, and the alluring voice he had heard there—the voice that, save in dreams, would come to his ears no more; and to that awful episode in the wild cane-brake and by the cliff that overhangs the sea?

Was it to punish him for letting his thoughts so wander, or to nerve him for what he was now to hear, that chance did all this?

On the other side of the thick holly hedge two persons were slowly promenading to and fro, and pausing ever and anon. Through the thick leafy wall not a vestige of their figures could be seen, though their voices could be distinctly—alas, too distinctly—heard, and they were those of Gertrude Templeton and the vapid Sir Ascot Softeigh.

‘Oh, that happened long ago, as you may remember,’ the latter was saying; ‘the pleasures of memory—’

‘Are not equal to those of hope,’ interrupted Gertrude, with a silvery laugh.

‘True—aw—aw—so. I don’t care for ever thinking of anything that happened long ago. You refused me that little request then—’

‘It was only a dance, I think.’

‘Well, you won’t give me now that rose from your breast?’

‘I have not said so; did you ask it? why should I refuse it? There.’

‘Thanks—oh, so much!’

‘Don’t kiss it so ere you put it in your lapel.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it is simply absurd; and how foolish to beg a rose from me, more especially if you knew all!’

‘Don’t I know all?’ asked Sir Ascot, in a low and lisping voice, which he meant to be tender.

‘No; not yet, but you shall in time.’

‘I am all impatience.’

‘It is and was no engagement, Sir Ascot; be assured that of such folly I am certainly free.’

‘Thank Heaven! I am so glad to hear you say so—and one, aw—aw—full of such pure joy. But come now, you certainly encouraged the poor fellow?’

‘I did not,’ replied Gertrude emphatically, while Vere rose in bewilderment and strove softly to retire, but his feet seemed to have taken root in the gravelled walk; ‘how dare you say so?’

‘Pardon me.’

‘He would come here on leave.’

‘After you?’

‘After me? I suppose so. I can no more help his admiration than yours.’

‘Come now, that is too bad, really; for I knew that Lady Templeton—’

‘Whatever mamma may have thought or intended, or may yet think or intend—’

‘Well?’

‘You quite mistake the whole situation; and *his* attachment to another girl, beneath him every way in rank, and at a distance from here—’

(‘Poor Virginia in her island home—her watery grave!’ thought Vere, as the speakers moved away a few paces. ‘Enough!’ he muttered; ‘we know each other now. O my God, all I have ever loved!’)

‘I have then hopes, Miss Gertrude?’ said Sir Ascot, as they turned back.

‘I have not said so.’

‘But he—that other—’

‘Has eventually none, whatever he thinks,’ said Gertrude, laughing, yet with annoyance in her tone.

(‘None! and she dares to laugh at me thus, and with *him!*’ thought Vere, who felt stunned by all this new and terrible revelation.)

‘None, say you?’

‘I repeat that Colonel Derinzy never had.’

These *seven* words were unheard by Vere, who slipped away softly, and left the garden, luckily unseen, as his unsteady steps resembled those of a blind or intoxicated man, for the awful conviction came suddenly upon him that all was over now for ever.

From Gertrude’s own lips he had learned that she had been fooling him; that she was playing fast and loose with her engagement, indifferent whether she were free or not from it, and encouraging hope in the man to whom she confided all this—Sir Ascot Softeigh—the man whose attentions to her had been so remarked, he had heard on various hands,

encouraged by her mother as Derinzy had been till the viscount's marriage with 'that young person at Homburg.'

Gertrude was faithless, false, hollow-hearted; and the resumed dream of Vere's life had utterly faded out!

'This is the second time I have been compelled to overhear what was not, *apparently*, intended for my ear, and I thank Heaven that I have done so. By a terrible but fortunate chance her true character stands revealed now. And now to quit this accursed Winklestoke, and at once!'

Black sorrow, rage, and mortification filled his heart. It was dusk ere this sad revelation was made to him; and as he hurried towards the stabling, the windows of which were becoming radiant with lights now, he stumbled suddenly upon Kyrle Desborough.

'Just in time, old fellow,' said the other cheerily; 'there goes the dressing-bell for dinner, and I want to speak to you about that awful hub of my Lady Aldwinkle.'

This was the first time Vere had ever heard Desborough adopt a style so bad; but it ceased to excite his surprise then.

‘How—why?’ he asked mechanically.

‘He has been singularly and elaborately cold, though polite, to me to-day. Old age has its privileges, and I suppose a gust of jealousy is one of them.’

This was also the first time that Desborough—a well-bred man—had ever indulged in such a sneer, and he could have bitten off his tongue next moment for doing so; but Vere, too full of his own bitterness, heard him as though he heard him not, and hastened away to conceal his face, which was all a-quiver with absolute mental pain.

His first thought and chief horror was the knowledge and necessity that he must meet Gertrude at dinner, and take—as he had lately done—his place by her side; but he was spared that trial, as she did not appear. Maud apologised for her absence, saying that she had that ailment so convenient for ladies—a headache, which was indeed the case. She had undergone much ‘worry’ concerning Rosamund and Kyrle Desborough, and dreaded to witness the probable bearing of Sir Ayling to one or both at dinner; but in these points she was mistaken, as the baronet was a scru-

pulously well-bred man, and though he had taken fire, none could have detected the slightest change in his manner to his now unwelcome guest. The latter felt and knew there was a change, and began to consider the day and hour of his departure.

Rosamund looked, as usual, beautiful and radiant; yet she was thinking again and again, amid the courtesies of the splendid dinner-table, how hard it was to dress and look like other people, and, like them, to talk on indifferent things, when searching and watchful eyes were upon her, and while her heart was a prey to a love she trembled to acknowledge even to herself, to secret agitations and fears, she knew not of what!

Kyrle's eyes were upon her as usual, and she was under all their influence, while affecting to eat and respond to the mild platitudes of the Reverend Deogratias Guffin, the Rector of Winklestoke. In her own actions she was free now so far as her mother was concerned; occasionally half desperate and indifferent as to what her husband thought. So, with regard to Kyrle Desborough, she was somewhat given to blend dreamily and confusedly

the unwedded past with the present in her mind.

He, we have stated, had been much of a misogynist; he had been disappointed in early life—how, not one of the mess ever knew; but, like many men, though he could be severe enough upon the supposed goodness and virtue of women for whom he cared nothing, or whom he had ceased to care for, the case became very different in that of Rosamund Aldwinkle, wherein his heart, pride, or whatever it was, became too fatally concerned.

The repast that evening was marked by singular constraint, against which Rosamund bore up in vain. Though politely attentive to all, Desborough, like his host, was somewhat silent. To Vere the whole dinner seemed an unreal dream, a phantasmagoria that might evaporate like a dissolving view; and certainly in the accurately attired young baronet, with the faultless collar, cuffs, shirt-front, and diamond studs, and with his apparent calm and easy *insouciance* of manner, none could have recognised the pale and agitated and utterly wretched fellow he seemed to himself but a short time before in his dressing-closet.

To him Sir Ascot talked incessantly, and he seemed in high spirits. He had won a 'pot of money' on a favourite horse; but Vere, who had not the key to this, attributed his hilarity to a very different cause.

During the dessert a tiny note from Gertrude was presented to him by the butler on a silver salver. He paled more for a moment at the sight of her handwriting, but quietly put it in his pocket, to peruse at a future time.

The moment he could leave the table without attracting attention he did so, and hastening to his rooms ordered his valet to 'pack his traps' and follow him on the morrow to Shorncliffe. He hastily changed his clothes for others to travel in, and while doing so, in the tumult of his thoughts, forgot to read the note of Gertrude.

When he remembered to do so it was searched for in vain and could nowhere be found, and he was certain that he had not dropped it.

'No matter,' he muttered through his clenched teeth; 'now to be off like a bird.'

He dashed off a hasty note of farewell,

thanks, and excuses to Sir Ayling Aldwinkle, another to Desborough, and quitting the house unseen, walked quickly by the nearest path to the quiet little station of Winklestoke.

CHAPTER XII.

SHORNCLIFFE CAMP.

As if to suit or soothe the impatience of his then mood of mind, the train came rushing into the station just as he reached it. He procured a compartment for himself, and stretched at full length on the softly-cushioned seat strove to think, to ponder, whether he had been rash or taken a wrong step, while his temples throbbed and his brain seemed on fire. But a few minutes ago he had been seated at that splendidly-appointed and glittering dinner, and now he was coursing at the rate of forty miles an hour through the blurred and darkened landscape in the gloom of a starless September night, and he felt like one in a dream.

Of what value now seemed his ancestral baronetcy, the storied splendour of Quincey Hall, and his thousands per annum—for all things are comparative, and Sir Ascot's fortune was double what his was? Now the posses-

sion of these good things, by removing the only insurmountable barrier to their marriage—insurmountable at least in the eyes of Lady Templeton—was rendered valueless and nugatory by the faithlessness and inconstancy of Gertrude herself; by her cool and calculating knavery of heart, for such he deemed it, in giving this secret preference to a wealthier man.

How long did she mean to continue this game of duplicity, and in what fashion did she mean to undeceive him? He was much happier when he was a simple subaltern of the Eighth, when far away in Central India, and knew not that there was such a creature as Gertrude Templeton in the world. Well, who could tell? he might be jolly and happy again; and he laughed, but what a joyless laugh it was! Then he thought in this fashion:

‘I have been a dolt, a fool, the tool and the plaything of all these people, else why was Lady Templeton so warm to me at Goodwood, though so arctic to me when I saw her before; and why did Sir Ayling invite me to his house, but to throw me in *her* way again? Why did Rosamund, so oddly, under all the

then circumstances, plan that visit to the old hall, but to bring about all that came to pass? Purposely these two practised actresses spoke as they did that I should overhear and be duped into the snare! Kyrle, ass as he seems to be making of himself now, was right in his estimate of the whole heartless and selfish set. Be the club rumours what they may, true or false, I shall not enter stakes with a yahoo like Sir Ascot, but hedge at once. Fool that I was not to remember all Kyrle's past advice! *His* advice! Bah, is not poor Kyrle making a worse fool of himself? That pair are sure to come to grief ere long. Well, I shall laugh at the mischief, perhaps,' thought he as the train sped on. 'Why does Nature teach such charming duplicity to women—young girls even? By Jove, they are subtle as serpents, inscrutable as enigmas, things no fellow can understand! Only watch a pretty one, with her softly-lidded and long-lashed eyes cast down, listening to some doating and deluded fool, while conning over his words and cunningly communing with her own thoughts and appraising his value. Well, I have crossed the *pons asinorum*.'

While thinking these bitter things, it never occurred to Vere how oddly he and Kyrle Desborough had precisely changed places, so far as opinions went.

‘She never cared for me at any time, and now has striven by a coquetry which I knew not she possessed, and a feigned regard, to lure me to her feet and test her power; while the man she really loves—if she is capable of loving at all—is, of course, that solemn puppy, Sir Ascot. Well, I have only my own folly, my own honest simplicity, to blame for it all—unless—unless—’

He paused. Could it be that he had overdone, or been too real at first in his apparent indifference? He remembered now that when he first went to Winklestoke, Sir Ayling, who was not in the secret of the past, had laughingly told him that Sir Ascot had been long so devoted to Gertrude, and that in walking or riding, &c., she seemed ever to prefer his society, it was evident the affair must take a matrimonial turn.

With the elaborate ingenuity of self-torture he recalled, in every form of exaggeration, her cool—for it did seem cool now, and

yet it was not—announcement to him at the stile in the lane that his love, blind and passionate though it was, could only be deemed desperate and hopeless; he recalled again her too ready adoption of his supposed intrigue with the keeper's daughter, and her direct cut of him on the morning of his departure, and then the perfect equanimity with which she met him at Goodwood; and now, after the maturest consideration, he believed that he was but the victim of a tricky double-dealing damsel, trained to match-making by her mother, and desirous only of having more than one beau 'to her string,' or a richer man than himself.

And for hours of the night these angry and bitter thoughts agitated him, long after Charing Cross had been left behind and the myriad lights of London had faded in darkness and distance, as the swift train sped on and on, by the green woods and chalky banks of Chislehurst, pleasant Sevenoaks (where the seven great trees are no more), gay Tunbridge with all its villas, Staplehurst on its wooded acclivity; and then the train glided, snorting and clanking, amid the flashing of many co-

loured lamps, the clang of bells, and stir and bustle into the junction at Ashford; and he reached the camp at Shorncliffe just as the drums began to beat *reveille*; and as he heard the well-known sound echoing amid the streets of huts, days instead of hours seemed to have elapsed since he left Winklestoke, and he began to hope that he should again slide into the tenor of his old life.

Meanwhile, at Winklestoke his absence was not discovered till the party met at breakfast, some hours after he had taken possession of his hut in the regimental lines.

‘Gone—why?’ asked Desborough, who found the valet packing Vere’s things, and was the first to be informed of his departure; ‘what the devil is up now?’

‘Don’t know, sir; but my master seemed very much put out about something,’ replied the servant.

‘He says nothing of that in this note to me;’ and in his perplexity Kyrle beat the ashes out of his carefully-coloured meerschäum on his high brass military heel, but with such vehemence as to endanger the

existence of the former cherished object of art.

When the event was announced to her, Gertrude felt her heart die within her, and she remained silent amid the many expressions of regret and still more of surprise expressed by all.

Gone so suddenly, so discourteously, and without a word or note or message to her, verbal or otherwise, in explanation or in reply to her missive, which the butler had to assure her again and again he had punctually delivered. It appeared to her by turns startling, terrifying, bewildering, and humiliating, especially when she caught the cold eyes of Maud fixed scrutinisingly upon her.

She knew or suspected that he had, just as dusk closed in, seen her with Sir Ascot; but what of that? She little knew what he had overheard, or, rather, half heard. A secret torrent of hot tears, angry tears too, failed to relieve her, because they were unavailing.

‘May he not have gone over to Quincey Hall?’ suggested Sophy Finch, who, for her own private reasons, felt a deep interest in the movements of ‘Toby’s brother-officer.’

‘Oh, no, certainly not,’ said Sir Ascot, who had few ideas to offer on any subject; ‘the shooting is bad, he told me, unless—aw, aw—he cared for wabbits.’

‘Besides, the man would never leave us to shoot alone,’ said Sir Ayling rather haughtily, as he tossed Vere’s brief note into the fire behind him.

‘What can it all mean?’ asked Lawntennison, eyeing all in succession through his glass.

‘Mean—why, that there’s a woman in the case—a bit of muslin—what else?’ whispered Sir Ascot.

Low though he spoke, the annoying suggestion reached the quick ear of Gertrude, but without effect; and little did she suspect that she herself was the woman implicated.

Rosamund summoned the valet, and questioned him closely as to whether his master had recently received any telegrams or letters. But neither had come for him; Sir Herbert had simply gone away, leaving orders for him to follow to Shorncliffe.

It was altogether most mysterious and unaccountable.

With emotions of amazement, perplexity,

sorrow, and then growing indignation, Gertrude waited in daily expectation of some letter to explain the reason of this sudden departure, the strange silence of Vere, and the wholly unaccountable situation of their affairs; but days, weeks, and months passed on, and no letter came.

She might have written personally to demand the explanation to which she deemed herself entitled, but was withheld by the information she received through Sophy Finch that at the camp 'he was well, and seemed jolly as ever.'

After a time that young lady returned home. Gertrude saw and heard nothing of Kyrle Desborough; so the *Army List* alone informed her that Vere was still with the Eighth or King's, vegetating and no doubt shivering on the bleak heights of Shorncliffe.

What or *who* could have come between them—between them after all? Had any unsisterly malevolence on the part of Maud? But, oh, no, mischievous as she knew her sister to be, she could not adopt that idea. Sophy Finch, then? But she could not think that either.

Any way, she could not, and would not, write in her naturally angry pride of heart; so the bitter anxious time stole slowly past, and she returned to Ringwood Hall.

Lady Templeton heard of the sudden turn matters had taken with more genuine concern than she ever displayed before; but angry pride precluded her from moving in the affair, and more than once Maud said,

‘Such a tiresome couple you are—at sixes and sevens again! Well, mamma cannot be to blame in this matter; then *who* is?’

‘Not I, be assured,’ replied poor Gertrude, drowned in tears.

Her thoughts, unlike those of Vere, were more full of sorrow than of anger. He had a basis for the latter; she had no clue whatever; and these thoughts he nursed in his wretched hut at bleak Shorncliffe, for there the camp accommodation is, if possible, worse than at Aldershot.

Kyrle Desborough did not return immediately to head-quarters; he procured an extension of leave, and on pretext of having some cub-hunting in September had betaken himself, with his horses, Vere did not know

precisely where, but he shrewdly suspected to some rural hotel not a hundred miles distant from Winklestoke.

He did not know what was going on in that quarter, and he scarcely cared to know. He did not attempt to interfere or offer advice, so far as in him lay. Yet he ought to have remembered Rosamund's unloved wedded fate on one hand and Kyrle's great temptation on the other; and that 'a man requires to be something more than stoical to push away the fair head that uninvited is laid upon his shoulder, to disengage his hand from the soft clinging clasp of feminine fingers, and reminding their owner to be a little less free with him, run the risk of being called a brute and a bear, amid tears of disappointment, for his pains.'

'Such shuttlecocks we are in the hands of Destiny!' he would think, when he got rid of Toby Finch, Clive, Prior, and others, and had his hut to himself; 'befooled and degraded! Thank Heaven, I did not commit myself by writing to that cold-blooded old woman at Ringwood Hall! Why did Gertrude write me that note, when she might naturally have

expected to see me next morning? Into whose hands has it fallen? What was in it—what its purport? She must have felt that she had something to say—something to explain, to put a colour upon.'

Questions like these were ever hovering in his mind, and as to whether he should write and tell her all he knew about it. Was it not the duty of a gentleman to do so? But he would be certain to run out into bitter reproaches, which would be useless and absurd now, especially if the note was—as he always shrewdly suspected—one cancelling her lately-made engagement with him, that she might marry a man more suited to her mother's heart; for Sir Ascot had twenty thousand per annum, and expectations of more.

Bah! every word he had heard beyond that holly hedge had been burned into his heart as if with letters of fire.

Some men—especially with such ample means at their command—would have plunged into the maddest dissipation under all the circumstances; but not so Vere of Ours.

He stuck to his regimental duties and the interior economy of his company, even to the

neglect of others, which he ought to have attended in his new capacity of country gentleman, at least so said the good folks of Blankshire.

He had never been before in such a state of genuine disgust with things in general. He did not go near Quincey Hall, for he felt that it was the scene of his latest weakness and folly; he did not write to Kyrle Desborough, because he had no desire *then* to know his precise whereabouts, and because he was disappointed with his old friend and favourite comrade; so he stuck to his sword and buff belt, and never omitted a duty, however trivial, till an illness, ending in fever, came upon him, and left him in the hands of Dr. Capsicum.

Whether Kyrle varied his cub-hunting with other sport more attractive; whether *they* met by chance or as opportunity offered; whether they corresponded by letter only, during this time, he never knew, and could only hope that they did not.

Any way, the cub-hunting seemed to last long that season, and anon came fox-hunting in due time; but a rumour—a very vague

one—reached Sir Ayling that Desborough was residing in the vicinity of Winklestoke, and as luckily about that time Parliament met, he took his entire household to Portland Place, though, of course, fashionables do not usually return to town till Easter.

It might be coincidence, but, on the following day, Kyrle Desborough was seen mounted on his favourite hunter in the Row.

CHAPTER XIII.

DEEPER AND DEEPER.

INTO the months subsequent to the shooting-party at Winklestoke, the visit to Quincey Hall and all that came of it, to Gertrude it seemed that there had been crowded a century of trouble, vexation, and sorrow; and bitterly she now repented that she had permitted herself to accede to Rosamund's invitation, as her presence had been no protection to the latter, and her advice, as a monitress, of no value.

Could it be that any unpleasant story or rumour in connection with Kyrle Desborough and Rosamund had influenced Vere—a sensitive man, as she knew—in his extraordinary bearing to herself?

A hot and painful blush dyed the poor girl's delicate face at such a cruel suspicion, till she remembered that the flirtation was then but in its infancy.

By chance a knowledge of Vere's illness

reached her, and added much of genuine sorrow to her perplexity. Still she did not connect it in any way with the idea of herself. The doctors, it would seem, averred that the seeds of the fever had been sown, or caught, by exposure during the military operations incident to the late affairs in the West Indies.

Maidenly pride and the rules of society precluded her from writing in the matter, and she had no one to write for her. The little lord, her brother, was still at Eton, and she had no desire—for obvious reasons—to put herself in communication with Kyrle Desborough, whom she saw in the parks and elsewhere at intervals.

When she first heard of his illness—an exaggerated account of course, as it came from Sophy Finch—much of her indignation died away in her gentle heart, and she longed intensely for sure tidings. More than that, she longed that her position and general surroundings would permit her to be a sister of charity or something of that kind, that she might nurse him, and, it might be, worm his secret from him, herself disguised, her face veiled and hidden perhaps, for she had read

and heard of such things; but how was she to conceal her voice?

All unknowing that such nursing might not be in the lines at Shorncliffe Camp, she loved to let her mind dwell on this idea, and out of it to weave many a tender and romantic episode, for which *he* would not then have given her credit, until the utter unseemliness and inconsistency of such a measure forced itself upon her sadly at last.

And then she laughed a little bitter laugh, all unsuited to lips so sweet and tender, when she thought of what Lady Templeton—cold, passive, and unimpressionable—would think of such wild loving dreams; for wild indeed they were when judged from the standpoint of the noble dowager at Ringwood Hall.

So the London season, as usual, stole rapidly on, and when driving in the Park with Rosamund, Gertrude always watched with a species of dread for the appearance of Desborough among the riders who went cantering to and fro amidst the jingle of a thousand bridles, and for the bright smiling start of her sister when she saw him.

At half-past six the Row was, as usual,

fairly full, though not so crowded as before luncheon, and the Ring of course was far from empty; and there in the hot summer afternoon—the evening of the working world—when the air was still and drowsy, the bees still droning from flower to flower, and the birds chirping, as it were, sleepily in the trees, when Ring and Row were gay with the wealthy and idle, when half the celebrities of London, members of both Houses, judges, plutocrats, Government officials, and guardsmen were gliding in and out on horseback, to them and to the dense knot of critical equestrians usually gathered at the entrance of the Row, one of the leading attractions of the famous lounge was the advent of Lady Aldwinkle, who was deemed as lovely a woman—or girl rather—as any in London.

A little buzz always greeted the appearance of her well-appointed barouche, with its wigged coachman, and powdered footmen who stood like statues; the silver harness glistening, the leather shining, the proud horses full fleshed and spirited.

Such 'turns-out' were there by the score; but it was the soft fair face of the golden-

haired girl, who reclined back among the soft cushions, as contrasted with the thin, long, but aristocratic visage of her lord and master, that caused a murmur as the carriage rolled slowly and noiselessly on its well-oiled wheels; and who that saw her thus, or anywhere else, in the lap of ease, wealth, and luxury, would have thought that—like too many others there perhaps—she had a canker in her heart, ‘a worm i’ the bud,’ and that there was but one face for her in all that mighty throng, and that not the face of her husband?

Desborough had ‘sent in his papers,’ as the phrase is; he was out of the famous old ‘Eighth or King’s,’ and was a wealthy idler about town now; and as he was moving in ‘her set’ again, more than ever did Rosamund repine at the thought of the man to whom her remorseless mother had tied her. Yet poor Sir Ayling, in his attempts to be youthful, and to be able to attend his young wife watchfully in public, at the Opera, balls, Drawing-rooms, and garden-parties, felt himself somewhat of a slave; for in most of these places his bugbear, his Frankenstein, his Old Man of the Sea, Kyrle Desborough, was sure

to appear also, with his handsome well set-up and soldierly figure, his perfect toilet, and easy indifferent air.

Yet though in such public places the bearing of the latter and Lady Aldwinkle was perfectly circumspect, almost distant, to each other, there were many, and Sir Ayling among them, who did not believe in it; for the world is desperately wicked, and the old baronet knew what an excellent actor he had himself been in times past.

‘Kyrle, Kyrle!’ often thought the girl. ‘Oh, never more can come those happy times—for, with all their doubts, they were happy times—when it was no guilt to see, to hear, to dance and ride with him, and the days went by in dreams that he would love me—the dear old days at Ringwood Hall and Aldershot!’

And in her repining she thought, foolishly perhaps, that the diamonds of the Aldwinkles, the equipages and state by which she was surrounded, and to which she had always been accustomed, were all as nothing when compared with a humble home to be shared with Kyrle Desborough. How *couleur de rose* all life would then be!

Much of this was, no doubt, sophistry; but the chances of Society or of Fate, which you will, did their worst for the luckless girl in thrusting her, even amidst the vast world of London, constantly into association with the only man she ever loved, and loved but too well.

Poor little Rosamund! At what part of the bridge of Mirza was her pitfall? At what point in the perilous career she was now pursuing was the fatal step from which there would be no retrogression? When would she pass the fatal Rubicon that rolled between right and wrong, error and virtue?

Alas, for the devil's old game, opportunities! Certes, they were not wanting. There were the Horticultural fêtes, where the band of the Blues discoursed sweet music amid shady bowers and recesses; the sundry garden-parties, and water-parties on the lovely river that rippled in azure and gold between green willowed isles and stately woodlands; the perilous encounters in hushed and half-lit conservatories that opened off ballrooms; the crushes on staircases, and so forth;—all had their perils and chances, leading to a companionship—friendship it was *not*—that had

not existed in the innocent past time she regretted.

To Rosamund, the occasional kindnesses of her husband—few and far between now—came to her as a species of reproach; while attempts to return them sat ill upon her, and seemed to her only as a greater treachery of the heart.

Sir Ayling half deemed, but most delusively, that his ancient and aristocratic name would serve as an ægis; but he began to suffer from the pangs of a suspicion that nothing would allay—pangs keener than might have stirred the heart or roused the hatred of a younger man; and despite his perfect breeding, ill-temper began to show itself at last.

‘Do not attempt to deceive me, madam,’ said he sternly on one occasion, when he had caught Kyrle shawling her with unusual solicitude; ‘your affected innocence is to me as disgusting as the fawning manner with which you would seek to flatter and delude me. Hah! I have not forgotten the past!’

‘The past, Sir Ayling?’ exclaimed Rosamund, drawing herself proudly up, for as yet she had committed no irretrievable error.

‘Yes, the past—the circumstances of our marriage, and the wiles of your match-making mother, with your steady aversion to me; your reluctance, which no love, no assiduity or kindness, seemed capable of conquering. What a deluded man I have been!’

From that moment Rosamund’s domestic peace was gone. He had, in these vague words, declared war against her, and in the solitude of her own room she wept bitterly. Sir Ayling was vulgarly jealous at last, if we may use the phrase. He now took to scanning the ‘agony column’ of the *Times*, and there often saw mysterious and enigmatical advertisements that he racked his invention to unravel, and set his soul on fire, till Rosamund was terrified to see how invariably, when the morning papers—after being duly aired and cut by his valet—were laid before Sir Ayling, he turned greedily to *that* portion of the daily journal, and scanned it with a sardonic grin on his mouth, and his gold spectacles on his long, thin, aristocratic nose.

But Sir Ayling was wrong in that instance. Neither Rosamund nor Desborough would have dreamed of resorting to that mode of

correspondence when so many others were open to them; and it was not until one fatal night, at a ball, that the growing mischief took any very tangible form.

Rosamund and Kyrle Desborough were not quite aware that microscopic eyes were upon them, that mischievous little whispers were already in circulation among 'kind' friends in Tyburnia and Belgravia; but of course the last to hear of such things were the persons most affected by them, and those who had an interest in their honour and fate; and though men are reluctant to move in such matters, Desborough was taken to task on the subject by Vere, whom some rumours had reached at Shorncliffe and given him much pain, though there had been an unaccountable coolness between him and his old friend of late.

They met suddenly at the porch of the Senior.

'Hallo, Kyrle!'

'Vere, my boy—how goes it?'

And with the natural impulse of two frank fellows, who loved each other well, and had often shared the same hut and tent or bunga-

low, they warmly shook hands, and for a moment Vere forgot his annoyance at his friend's alleged intrigue.

‘Been in town long, Vere?’

‘Only for two days.’

‘Seen the Templetons?’ asked Kyrle, after a pause.

‘No—and don’t mean to see them,’ was the curt reply. ‘I should rather have made that inquiry of *you*.’

Kyrle actually coloured, and then said,

‘What was that row about?’

‘Row? I don’t understand, Kyrle.’

‘That made you bolt from Winklestoke so unceremoniously.’

‘I would rather not speak about it—just now, at least,’ replied Vere, colouring in turn.

‘Ah, well, are you in town for long?’

‘I go back to-night to Shorncliffe.’

‘Awful hole!’

There was a little pause, during which the two friends eyed each other, and Vere said,

‘Think what you may, Kyrle, I am not “doing” the blighted being at Shorncliffe any more than I did anywhere else.’

‘Happy thought! I am glad to hear it.’

‘There is something else you may not be so glad to hear—that you have been too pointedly “going the pace,” as the whole mess-table say, with a certain lady in town.’

‘Stuff! You and all the mess know that I always fought shy of women—showed the white feather regularly.’

‘Once you did, my boy, but now you play with fire. Kyrle, be wary—Kyrle, be warned,’ urged Vere earnestly.

But Kyrle only laughed, scraped a match on one of the porch pillars, lit a cigar, and began to smoke vigorously.

‘Your conduct is bewildering to me and all your best friends,’ urged Vere again.

‘What possible interest can any one have in the matter? And now that I think of it again, yours has rather bewildered me. However, I don’t pretend to know precisely to what you refer,’ said Kyrle a little doggedly; ‘but this I know, that by your sudden and unaccountable retreat that night you left the field open to Sir Ascot, and since then he has been making his innings, I have no doubt.’

‘Neither have I; and he is welcome to do so,’ replied Vere through his clenched

teeth; 'and, after all, I don't think it matters much under the present circumstances.'

'To what do you allude?'

'Gertrude's engagement to Sir Ascot, and her forthcoming marriage when the season ends.'

'May I ask who told you all this?' inquired Kyrle, with surprise.

'Toby Finch, when on guard the other day.'

'And what, or who, may be the astute Toby's authority for this little arrangement?'

'His sister.'

'How kind of *her*! Why, it is all "gup," as we used to say in India—gossip, if at all. He certainly dangles about her—nothing more, so far as I know.'

'And so far as I care to know,' said Vere bitterly.

'I should certainly have heard all about it first.'

'From whom—Lady Aldwinkle?'

'Well—perhaps.'

'You seem to be quite *en famille* with them all.'

'Not so much as you might be if you chose, Vere.'

‘Well, ta-ta. I have to be at the Horse Guards in ten minutes, and here is a hansom.’

So they shook hands and parted, not to meet again till face to face in the midst of a great catastrophe.

Vere had spoken lightly, almost scornfully, to Desborough of Gertrude’s alleged engagement to Sir Ascot; and now he knew not how to receive the flat contradiction of the intelligence, whether with pleasure or indifference. The former he might, the latter he could never feel.

She was nothing to him now—less than she had been at one time during his sojourn in Jamaica; for had he not heard her repudiate her engagement with himself, and to that man, too? He knew not what to think now, as the cab bowled past Charing Cross; and certainly his chance meeting with Kyrle caused him to make somewhat of a muddle of his business at the Horse Guards, as H.R.H. the F.M. commanding was not slow in informing him.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BALL.

WE have referred to a ball as the occasion on which a breach was openly made between Sir Ayling and Rosamund.

She and Gertrude—her sisters were on a visit to her—arrayed in all their glory—and splendid indeed the girls looked when they left their rooms, radiant with youth, beauty, and gems, each with a light shawl over her snowy shoulders—met in the drawing-room to await the more mature Maud, who took longer in dressing, or ‘making up,’ as she would have termed it in any one else; and Gertrude began to improve the occasion by one of her little lectures, under which Rosamund began to writhe impatiently now.

‘If Desborough is there to-night you will avoid him, of course?’

‘Avoid—do you think I mean to *follow* him?’ asked Rosamund petulantly, fanning herself as she stood under the gaselier, the

light of which shone down on her, flushing her golden hair, her exquisite, yet unsatisfied, face, and her richly-laced ball-dress.

‘Do not dance with him more than once, even if at all; for people will talk, and are talking, I fear, of you both.’

‘Let them talk.’

‘Dearest, dearest, don’t say so!’

‘I *do*, Gerty,’ replied Rosamund, becoming defiant; ‘what would you have me to say?’

‘I would have you to remember that you are the wife of Sir Ayling Aldwinkle.’

‘I am not likely to forget that unpleasant fact,’ said Rosamund, tapping the floor with her tiny foot, and taking a side glance at herself in the mirror above the fireplace; ‘but he outrages me by his correspondence with—you know whom I mean.’

‘But you must not outrage yourself and the memory of your father.’

‘True,’ said the girl sadly. ‘Oh, had poor papa lived, I should not have been to-night the victim that I am, and the subject of so many weary lectures. But who *can* the woman be that trifles with a man of his years?’

‘Painful as your position is, *I* cannot re-

monstrate with Captain Desborough for so selfishly compromising you, and I have no longer the influence of Vere to ask,' added Gertrude, whose white bosom heaved painfully. 'Would to Heaven,' she added, after a pause, 'that you had never discovered this secret!'

'What secret?—that Kyrle Desborough loves me?' she asked, with heightened colour.

'Can you quietly talk of such a thing?' said Gertrude, in a low voice, but with a startled expression; 'are you fallen so low? But he dare not—he dare not!'

'What then?' asked Rosamund, with that defiant air which was certainly new in her.

'Of this woman's existence.'

'Oh, as for that, I have seen her often enough since that awful day in St. George's Church.'

'Sir Ayling's errors, past or present, are no excuse for you.'

'Have no fear of me to-night, whoever may be there, Gerty; and have no fear of Kyrle Desborough—he is a gentleman.'

'O my darling, I am full of anxiety for you.'

There was a time when Rosamund would, at words like these, have thrown her white arms round her sister's neck, and kissed her; on this occasion she made no reply, but leant back in an easy-chair, and fanned herself slowly while gazing into the embers with that far-away look in her sweet face which people always wear when their thoughts are in the clouds, and Sir Ayling suddenly entered, with his hat in his hand.

‘So, so, Lady Aldwinkle,’ said he, seeing that she was in full dress, ‘you are still resolved on going to this ball?’

‘Of course—I accepted,’ replied Rosamund, looking up with an air of annoyance, for he never used her Christian name when he was in a bad humour.

‘Ah, and mean to go, though I shall be detained at the House till an hour too late for’ (‘me,’ he was about to say, but paused) ‘anything but to escort you home.’

‘Surely, Sir Ayling, Maud and Gertrude are going, as you see,’ said she, opening and shutting her fan impatiently.

‘Any one else that you know?’ he asked calmly.

‘Of course, ever so many.’

‘Is—is *that* man going?’

‘That man—who, Sir Ayling?’ asked Rosamund, with an ominous swelling in her white slender throat.

‘Captain Desborough.’

‘How should I know—or care?’ she replied, blushing alike at the question and the falsehood of her speech, while Gertrude stood by with a pained expression on her beautiful face. ‘Quit the House early if you can, and you shall see,’ she added, shrugging her snowy shoulders, and burying her pretty nose in her bouquet.

‘I cannot promise; the sitting will be a late one, and my support is promised. If he should be, you will not dance with him, of course?’

‘Of course not, if you do not wish it. But wherein lies the harm?—we have been old friends; but I shall certainly do as you desire.’

‘I thank you,’ said he, kissing her on the forehead; and with a bow—grave rather than pleasant—to Gertrude, he withdrew, just as Maud with her long train swept into the room,

and the carriage was announced. Rosamund clenched her small and delicately-gloved hands tightly, and with an effort restrained her tears.

Gentle and girlish though she was, the innate pride of Rosamund resented the new tone of dictation and system of tutelage that Sir Ayling adopted towards her, and but for her own secret sense of error she might have resented both angrily and haughtily; but as it was she acquiesced quietly, and hoped to yield obedience, or not to be tempted to disobey. After all, it was not too much to forego a few dances even with Kyrle Desborough, for the sake of peace, though Sir Ayling might have remembered by his own old experience that a quiet conversation may prove much more mischievous than any amount of round dancing can ever be.

‘This sort of thing cannot last for ever,’ murmured the girl to herself, as the carriage rolled along Upper Brook Street; ‘and I must content myself with the gleam of happiness and sunshine I have had. Heaven be praised for its mercy! But how can I *name* Heaven?’

She shivered as if with cold, covered and covered her face with her fan. This was the *first* time he had ever condescended to refer openly to his suspicions before a third party.

The ball in its splendour, with music, lights, gaiety, and brilliance, was like any other of the season, so there is no use in describing it; but it was on this occasion that, through a very simple episode, Rosamund disobeyed most flagrantly alike the fond advice of Gertrude and the commands of Sir Ayling.

Sir Ascot, Bertie Lawntennison, solemn, big, and *blasé* Derinzy, and many other men of the best style were present; but the staff-colonel contrived only to have his name on the card of Maud, as he dared not ask Gertrude; and that of Rosamund was filled almost immediately.

Gertrude felt herself colour with vexation, when almost the first man who addressed her, and who joined them, was Kyrle Desborough. Though there were both anger and fear in her heart—fear for Rosamund, that lent a disdainful expression to her beautiful face—Gertrude could not help having a gentle and

undefinable interest in him, for he had many pleasing and seductive ways, and, moreover, was he not the friend, the comrade and brother-officer of Vere? the sharer of many an episode of peril and toil, of joy and adventure? and withal he was undeniably handsome and courtly in manner.

A sense of all this, and the hope to save appearances, led her to accord to him more dances than perhaps she would otherwise have done.

Rosamund, to do her justice, resolved to act a part she did not feel, and while painfully conscious of Kyrle's presence, to strive to please those who sought, by sound advice, to control her wilful impulses; while he, on the other hand, was beginning to see and feel the necessity for not giving scandal in a circle so prone to adopt it.

When he approached her smilingly amid the hot, flushed, and bustling throng, and took up the card that dangled from her fan,

'Don't ask me yet a while, Kyrle,' she whispered imploringly; 'we are remarked, and I promised—I will sit out a dance with you—for—for Sir Ayling is not here.'

He understood the situation, and all it implied.

‘We must have one turn, or the omission will be observed,’ he whispered in the same tone; and initialing her card half way down the programme, turned away to dance with some one else, but his eyes and his heart followed her face and figure through the mazes of every dance.

When Desborough first found himself sliding insensibly from sympathy and friendship into pity and commiseration, and from the sweetness of honest companionship into an unwarrantable love for Rosamund, many a time he made a solemn vow that for her sake, and not for his own, he would avoid her and the terrible temptation, the intoxication, of her society, even as the tippler may vow to abstain from that which will end in his own destruction, yet return to it by a power there is no controlling.

He had striven to avert his thoughts from the girlish graceful form, the pleading saddened eyes, the matchless face, and the lips he had playfully dared to kiss on *that* night at Ringwood Hall. Ah, he remembered that

kiss, when he thought she had forgotten it, and the devil suggested that what had been done once might easily be done again; and so he had rapidly drifted—Kyrle Desborough, with all his pride and confidence, mockery and cynicism—toward the lee shore like a rudderless wreck.

‘Our dance, Lady Aldwinkle, I think—allow me,’ he whispered, when, after long and patient waiting, the desired time came; and he bore her off from the somewhat mortified Lawntennison, after the little pretence of examining her card.

Flushed with many a dance, her nerves thrilling with the music, she looked radiantly beautiful and even happy. How pure, clear, and bright her innocent eyes seemed! Yet, as he gazed down into them, he could see his own face reflected in their pupils, as his arm went round her, and they swept into the circle of waltzers.

There could be no doubt about it but that Desborough, in this matter with Lady Aldwinkle—*éclat* apart, he was neither base enough, or vain enough, to think of that—had lost his head, and was in that stage of a love

affair when a man feels restless, uneasy, and wretched if he fails to see his idol for a whole day; and now that he did see her, a mad passionate longing to fold her in his arms and kiss her passionately rose in his heart.

He knew that no tie save a legal one existed between the girl and her husband; he had somehow discovered that she had a solid and secret source for discontent with Sir Ayling; and the jealous fear took possession of his heart that if she ceased to care for himself she might attach herself to some one else—elope perhaps—who could foresee the end of this dangerous state of things?

Rosamund, in the small, and yet in one sense important, circumstance of dancing with him, had disobeyed the grave injunctions of Sir Ayling. But the temptation was great—he was absent, detained at the House; and neither Maud nor Gertrude would say aught of her transgression. And now, when panting and palpitating during a pause in the dance, she clung rather than rested on Kyrle's arm, her eyes, drawn by some irresistible impulse, wandered up to the music-gallery, and there, amid some of the household servants or other

attendants, who occasionally peeped down at the dancers, she saw a pale-faced woman, whose dark eyes regarded her with stern and watchful interest for full a minute, and then she disappeared.

This was the episode referred to; for the face was, as she afterwards told Gertrude, that of the inevitable 'Birdie'—she of the interview in the gardens, and many others.

'So, so,' thought Rosamund, as a deep sense of insult and degradation rose in her heart; 'the lady of the Rhododendrons at Bayswater, she to whom the cheques are so freely given, is actually a friend of the servants here! I have two more dances on my programme, Kyrle, and they shall be yours,' she said aloud.

'Thanks, darling,' he whispered; and away went their 'flying feet' again to the *Soldaten Lieder*, Rosamund looking, if possible, in her spirit of joy and defiance, more bright, more brilliant, and more *piquante* than ever.

Another and another followed, though the rooms were filled apparently to overflowing; then, as Rosamund complained of the heat, what so natural as that he should lead her out

to the screened and curtained balcony, where chairs and lounges were placed amid jardinières filled with the rarest exotics, and where through the openings might be seen the silver light of the now waning moon, and the Park with all its trees?

Other couples were there; but they were absorbed in each other, and conversed in low and confidential tones, and in whispers that were half love-making and often half mockery.

And there in that balcony, with the strains of the band and the buzz of the crowded ball-room in their ears, much passed between these two that, but for the impulses to which they were subjected, and the general circumstances of which one was the victim, would never have been. A love for her husband might have saved the latter, but it did not, and could not, exist; and how could Desborough fail to be swept away, when the girl looked up as he stooped over her chair, and talked to him as she did in a voice that reached his ear alone?

‘And in all the time of my idling, doubt, and absence you really loved me?’ said he, in reply to something she said.

‘I was mad enough to do so then, when I failed to gain your attention—a humiliating confession, is it not? And I am mad enough, or bad enough, to do so still, Kyrle, when such an emotion is forbidden to me. I felt great misery then, and, in one sense, I feel greater now, when I have bidden an eternal farewell to all the romance of youth, to all inheritance in the future!’

Her voice became broken, as if tears choked it, and she held her fan before her quivering face, as she said,

‘Kyrle, Kyrle, we are going too far; leave me, leave me, while there is yet time! Your voice thrills me and tears my heart. Oh, how shameful is this weakness that makes me struggle with myself and you!’

But instead of obeying her, if indeed she wished him to do so, Kyrle made the matter worse.

‘I love you now, Rosamund, as I marvel I did not do in that past time to which you refer,’ said he, in a low and very agitated voice, ‘when I saw you day after day and week after week—love you as only a man of my years and experience can love. Forgive

my studied past indifference, stupidity, what you will, darling. You know not, and never can know, the doubt and dread from which it sprang; but what avails all this now? you are no longer free, and are removed from me for ever!

Kyrle felt that this was somewhat of a farrago, and paused; on which Rosamund said,

‘I tried to be angry with you—to hate you even, and thus rouse my courage or proper pride, but failed. My sisters early discovered my secret, and Maud strove to bring me to my senses; yet, oh, so unkindly, by taunts and mockery!’

‘And Gertrude?’

‘So sweetly and so gently. But let us say no more of this, and take me to her, or our absence will be remarked.’

‘But you will not forget—to-morrow?’

She pressed her hand upon his own as a significant reply.

And as she arose, smiling, to reënter the ballroom on his arm, all trace of a conversation so exciting had passed from her face. But while all this had been occurring in the

balcony, a confab in which they were concerned was in progress elsewhere.

Sir Ayling had been enabled to leave the House earlier than he had expected, and drove straight to the ball, but long after midnight. He was there, however, but for a few minutes only; the crush was so great that he could get no further than the outer drawing-room door, from whence he could see, in the glittering distance, Rosamund sweeping past among the waltzers with Kyrle Desborough, in defiance of all injunctions; and while jammed there in the crowd—for a veritable crowd it was—he was compelled to overhear some remarks that—though no names were mentioned—were never meant for his ears, and these uttered by some reckless and heartless young fellows, among others Bertie Lawntennison, so recently the sharer of his hospitality at Winklestoke, and from whom the tender, wild, and wilful, but childlike beauty of Rosamund could gain no pity.

‘Her marriage-ring certainly hangs loosely on her finger,’ said one, twirling the spikey ends of a bandolined moustache; ‘they all talk about her—the men do.’

‘Talk—why, they rave!’

‘And what does old January think about it?’

‘He doesn’t know, of course; but it’s only the penalty every old fool must pay who marries a young and pretty wife.’

‘Pretty—by Jove, she’s downright lovely! But who is *he*?’

‘A fellow belonging to the Eighth or King’s,’ volunteered Lawntennison; ‘it is a fifty mile an hour flirtation. They’ve been going in for all the round dances, and sitting out the square ones in the conservatory.’

This was not true; but Sir Ayling felt himself perspiring with rage—yet he was compelled to hear another remark ere he could force his way down-stairs.

‘When her old Adonis shuffles off his mortal coil,’ said Lawntennison, ‘and, with his wig, false teeth, and waistbelt, goes to the “land of the leal,” as Shakespeare has it, I think—’

‘In *Twoilus and Kwessida*,’ said young De Tumpkins, who was cramming for Sandhurst. ‘Well—’

‘By Jove! the widow wont be long in supplying his place.’

With a maddening emotion of shame and ignominy, such as he had never felt before, Sir Ayling left the house unseen, and drove home in the highest wrath.

Sir Ascot saw the three sisters into the carriage; and in ominous silence they drove home, just as the ruddy dawn began to peep in the east; while Rosamund abandoned herself to reverie, and went deliberately through the whole of that conversation on the balcony, and others that should never have been, and amid which Kyrle Desborough stood out clearly and alone; and, unseen by her sisters, a soft bright smile spread over her face as she thought of them and of *to-morrow*—to-day it was now. And the stars were paling out, one by one, when the sleepy hall-porter admitted them; and she kissed Maud and Gertrude ere they separated, and in another moment she was face to face with Sir Ayling, who was seated in his dressing-closet, clad in a rich *robe-de-chambre*, pale with the lateness of the hour, and with the wrath which he had been nursing 'to keep it warm.'

'Not in bed, Sir Ayling!' said she timidly, yet half playfully, patting him on the

shoulder. 'Surely the House must have sat late?'

'I was last at the ball, madam,' he replied, rising and confronting her.

'At the ball!' she repeated, as her courage died; 'I did not see you.'

'You were too busy—too much engaged in the conservatory, on the balcony, and so forth,' said he, in a low voice, but one of concentrated fury, as he ground his false teeth.

'I do not pretend to understand you, or the tone you adopt,' replied Rosamund, cresting up a little.

'So that man was there, after all!'

'If you mean Captain Desborough—'

'I *do* mean Captain Desborough.'

'Please not to raise your voice—Parker awaits me in my room. I have no control over the invitations he may receive or accept,' said Rosamund, unclasping the diamond bracelets from her slender wrists.

'But you have control over your own actions, and, in defiance of my wishes, you danced with him.'

'Could I refuse when he asked me, and saw that my card was not filled up?'

‘Not filled up! This is not usual with you, Lady Aldwinkle. But of course it was easy to keep a place for him.’

‘Sir Ayling, you are forgetting yourself.’

He snatched her card, which dangled from the end of her fan. (Why had she not destroyed it?) The hated initials of ‘K. D.’ were there for seven dances, four being beyond the programme; for she did not accord him one till late in the night. He tore it in pieces and trod upon it, and tossed her bouquet, diamond-studded *bouquetier*, and all, into the grate.

Then, maddened by the memory of the stinging and coarse remarks so freely uttered by those heedless young men among the crush, and conceiving them to be only a tithe of what people were saying about his household, he clenched his hand, and so miserably forgot himself that he struck her on the neck, where his signet-ring inflicted a severe bruise.

Struck! The blow was given and beyond recall.

All that pride of race, of birth, and position, in which she had been so solicitously trained, and which was to her, as to her sisters, a second nature, swelled up in the girl’s

heart at an insult apparently so inconceivable. Her snowy bosom heaved painfully, she became deadly pale, and her usually soft blue eyes flashed with fire through the tears that filled them; and for a minute this ill-mated pair stood a little way apart, gazing at each other in silence.

‘A blow! and I am the daughter of Reginald Lord Templeton of Ringwood!’ said the girl loftily. ‘Sir, you forget yourself.’

‘To-night you forgot yourself, and your position in life.’

‘To-night I fully remembered it—thanks to you, Sir Ayling Aldwinkle,’ said Rosamund scornfully.

‘How—when?’

‘When I saw among the household domestics the face of a friend of yours.’

‘A friend of mine!’

‘The lady who resides at the Rhododendrons, wherever they may be. But I wish you good-morning—Parker awaits me.’

And with an expression in her sweet face all unwonted there—an expression in which scorn and shame, anger and sorrow, were singularly blended—she bowed and swept away

to her own room, more than ever resolved to keep an appointment with Desborough in the middle of the approaching day.

Her defiant air and statement perplexed Sir Ayling, who threw himself into an easy-chair; and there he remained in bitter thought long after sleepy Parker's weary fingers had accomplished the elaborate process of disrobing her mistress, who, the moment she was alone, cast herself on her bed in a passion of tears; and after these passed away, Sir Ayling could hear how restlessly the unhappy girl tossed and turned on her pillow, and how, now and then, if she got a few minutes' uneasy doze, she moaned, and woke with a fright, as if startled.

Though jealous rage still rankled in his heart, Sir Ayling was too much of a gentleman not to feel much shame for what he had done. In all the years of a long life; in all his flirtations, and the coldnesses, quarrels, or piques to which they gave rise; in all the furies he had felt at women who had deceived, cajoled, or jilted him, never had he forgot himself so far as he had done now; and he stole in to tender some apology.

But Rosamund was asleep, weary with dancing and heavy thoughts. Darkness had gone now, and the light of the golden morning stole through the curtained window on her face, from which all colour was gone, and she seemed pale and white as the waxen lily.

‘How fair she is!’ thought the old man—‘fair, but not to me! Fair and false, fair and false—oh, the old saw never fails! I have seen my best days, and hers are yet to come—with that man, who can say? who can say? Fool that I have been!’

She sighed through her sleep, and muttered something, he knew not what; but he had often heard her do so before, without regarding it much. He listened intently, with his ear near her parted lips, as a smile spread over her face, though she sighed deeply.

After this no words escaped her; but as he stole away with a furious heart, he felt sure that she was not dreaming of himself.

CHAPTER XV.

‘FOR EVERY OUNCE OF PLEASURE A POUND
OF PAIN.’

‘WHERE is all this to end, and how—Heaven help me! how is it to end?’ thought Rosamund, when, late next morning, Parker threw round her passive figure a blue-silk *robe-de-chambre*, and proceeded to brush out the silky masses of her golden hair, while the girl’s eyes were dreamily fixed upon the reflection of herself in the mirror: and a lovely reflection it was; yet she saw it not, for even vanity was dead within her then.

In her eyes was the weary, hopeless, and dissatisfied expression which was becoming their normal one now, and told of a heart that had no comfort in it; and all the while a horrible old-fashioned organ, of the dreariest tone, was grinding in the street without,

‘Oh, there is nothing half so sweet in life
As love’s young dream!’

It was not wonderful that such a dream

should have come to her, after such a marriage as her mother had made for her; nay, it had come before it, before Desborough left England for the West Indies. And this was the dream about which poets sang and painters painted, and of which uncounted novelists have written—the love implanted in our nature by God, and for which all save the sensible, the clear-headed, and of course the cold-blooded, deem the world well lost!

Suspicion keenly awakened, accusations almost bluntly made, and violence actually resorted to,—what future could she have now, but to be the slave of an old man's caprices—of one who was certain to become alternately exacting, tyrannical, slavishly maudlin perhaps, or ridiculously uxorious, and all the while suspicious of every man who addressed her?

She breakfasted in her own room—for of all that had transpired over night she did not intend to tell her sisters, not even affectionate Gertrude—and the moment the meal was over prepared resolutely to keep her appointment.

To do Sir Ayling justice, remembering what she had seen of the face that appeared

in the music-gallery, he was not disinclined to make some amends for the affront he had put upon her in his dressing-closet; but he also remembered the smile and the indistinct muttering in her sleep. So jealousy came to his aid, and no *amende* was made, but the breach was widened.

‘And with a simple and cold ‘Good-morning,’ dressed for the street, she passed through the library, where he was seated at a table writing.

‘The carriage has not been ordered,’ said he, looking up. ‘Are you going out—and on foot?’

‘Yes.’

‘Whither?’

‘Am I a child, that I must account for every action, however trivial?’

‘If we are to judge from appearances, Lady Aldwinkle, the time has come when you must do so.’

‘You shall know all—one day,’ said she, making a violent effort to restrain her tears under her closely-tied veil.

‘Speak now, if you please, madam,’ said he, in a bitter tone of affected blandness. ‘I

do not understand all this, or the new style and bearing you have so suddenly adopted.'

'Understand this, Sir Ayling,' she replied — 'that daily I feel myself becoming less and less worthy of the small trust you confide in me.'

'Indeed!' said he, growing paler, if possible, than usual; 'and to what, or *whom*, am I indebted for this circumstance?'

Rosamund made no reply, but paused irresolutely near the door, while a tremor passed over her.

'To what is it owing that you have ceased to respect—you never loved—me?'

'Perhaps it is owing to yourself.'

'To me?'

'Yourself, and your secret friend,' replied Rosamund, who—though without an atom of jealousy in the matter, and though her pride was piqued—was not sorry, circumstanced as she was then, to have this 'peg' to 'hang a grievance on.' 'Who is this woman, who makes a fool of herself with a man of your years?'

This was a sensitive point with the vain old man, and never before had Rosamund, or

any one else, dared to taunt him with his age, and, coming from her, it stung him to the quick. She saw her advantage, and repeated,

‘*Who* is this woman?’

‘One who might have been mistress of this house and of Winklestoke had Fortune proved more kind,’ was the startling reply.

‘Perhaps if *I* had not come in the way.’

‘As you please, madam.’

‘Enough, sir; we will talk no more on a subject so unsavoury,’ said Rosamund, bowing; while he, with a hand that trembled with passion, resumed his writing, and she, with a scornful glance, swept from the room.

So ended the brief interview, which, however, left more sorrow than hatred or anger in the heart of either.

Rosamund avoided her sisters. Never had she done so before, especially with gentle Gertrude; but she felt that there were duplicity, danger, and degradation in her proceedings, as she left the house, and hurried down the sunshiny street afoot, to the surprise of the stolid hall-porter, who had never seen his lady leave the house unattended before.

She looked at her watch, and went straight

to the gardens in Park Square, entering by the gate near the wretched little bronze pedestrian statue of 'Edward Duke of Kent and Strathearn,' while she knew that Kyrle, who also had a key, was to enter by a gate at another point.

She was pale as death beneath her veil, and trembled so violently that she seemed to totter rather than walk, and she sobbed violently when she met him. He, too, looked somewhat pale, as he bent his dark eyes tenderly and anxiously upon her.

Regard, intimacy, passion—what you will—had ripened with frightful rapidity between this ill-omened pair.

Poor Rosamund was the weakest, in some respects, of all the little birds that ever were fascinated by the eye of a serpent—not that brave, handsome, and in every instance in life, till *now*, honest Kyrle Desborough had aught of that in him; but his eye had fascinated the trembler, and he had gone too far to recede.

Was it that elective affinity or animal magnetism, about which so many prate; or by what influence of love suddenly developed,

read by eye from eye—by what power of intellect struggling against a more dominant will—was it that he had suddenly exercised all this influence over her, and that she had been so feeble as to forget all the world had given her, and for his sake?

No one who saw these two pacing to and fro under the shady garden trees, to all appearance conversing so quietly, could have conceived the tumultuous passion that agitated the breasts of both.

For the first time in her life there was in Rosamund's mind an emotion of triumph and revenge in the fact of meeting Kyrle in the very place where she knew Sir Ayling had been wont to meet the unknown; and when she showed him the livid mark of the blow on her delicate neck, while her eyes sparkled through their tears, Kyrle felt his blood run alternately hot and cold, and the margin of the fatal Rubicon seemed close at hand indeed.

There are weak moments when a man is not master of himself, and with Kyrle Desborough this was one of them.

'Tell me again and again,' he said, in a

low and passionate voice, 'my darling—O my darling! that the step we have resolved on does not terrify you.'

The step! It meant that she had promised to leave Sir Ayling for life, and go away—away, where to it mattered not—with Kyrle Desborough.

Incompatibility, difference of years, pique—it was not, we have said, jealousy—the blank in her existence, and the insult of the blow, with a terror of, and disgust for, the future,—had all brought about this terrible crisis on one hand, and his now passionate, yet undoubtedly selfish, love on the other; for, as the stronger of the two, he ought to have resisted the infatuation to which they were giving way.

'Speak, darling,' he urged; 'you do not feel terrified?'

'No,' replied Rosamund, in a husky voice. 'I have given you my promise, and—and—I shall abide by it.'

But as she spoke there came to memory the more solemn promise made elsewhere, and her heart seemed to die within her.

'Are you happy, then?'

‘Not quite, Kyrle—even with you, and the knowledge that soon I shall be with you for ever.’

‘Until death do us part.’

‘O Kyrle, do not use these words now—here, at least,’ she pleaded, in a choking voice.

‘How you tremble, Rosamund!’ said he, caressing her hand, for none was near them just then.

‘I tremble, yet I do not shrink. You have my promise, and I shall keep it, wicked though it be—keep it or die! Oh, would that I could die now—die with my poor aching head on your breast!’

He regarded her soft pale face with great tenderness and passionate anxiety.

‘Mamma has made me what I am; she and Fate have brought me to this!’ wailed the girl in her heart, but her pallid lips uttered no sound.

Then after a time, as if she still sought excuses to her own conscience, she spoke of the woman whose face she had seen last night, and who had crossed her path so often since the day in St. George’s Church ; and, like her-

self, Kyrle Desborough seemed glad of having a grievance to grasp at and dilate upon.

‘There was a rumour—but perhaps I should not speak of it,’ he began, with hesitation.

‘A rumour of what?’

‘I heard it at the club,’ said he, pausing; ‘but the story would seem to have been revived after dying out long ago.’

‘Concerning whom?’

‘Sir Ayling. It was to the effect that he was once secretly married to a woman in humble life, and that she died before she could compel him to acknowledge her.’

Sooth to say, such is the weakness of human nature that Desborough was not sorry at such a time to rehearse this perilous rumour, as a species of salve to his own conscience, which rather pricked him.

‘But she may not be dead; and if alive, *what*, then, am I?’ exclaimed Rosamund, as an area for terrible speculations was suddenly opened to her, though, considering the step in contemplation, they mattered little; but, as one in a dream, she recalled the conversation she had overheard in that same

garden between Sir Ayling and the unknown, when he bestowed the jewels upon her, and when she heard them openly canvassing her own marriage, admitting that they were dear to each other; how, under her own eyes, he fondled 'Birdie,' and besought her to have confidence in him, though he 'kept her existence unknown to all the world.'

The rumour, now mentioned for the first time by Desborough, fired Rosamund's heart, to which anger and a keen sense of humiliation lent a surreptitious courage with somewhat of a *soupeçon* of revenge; so the poison worked rapidly, and the perilous plans they were forming were perfected but all too soon, and when next they met it was to be for a final flight. And, like a pair of guilty conspirators, they left the gardens as they had entered them, by separate gates.

In the delirium of this time—an epoch in his life to which Desborough in after years looked back with much of consternation and astonishment—he forgot her future and his own—forgot or cared not what the world, society, almost even his dearest friend Vere, might say or think.

In Rosamund he saw only a dazzling yet unhappy young creature, of whose loving nature, worth, and general attractiveness he had been so madly blind in the past time—an affection with which he had trifled, a woman whom he had lost, and whose beauty would do honour to any position in life.

With her too, in the blind desperation of their mad resolve, the painful and certain contingencies of the future were ignored or committed to oblivion with the fact, that, *the step* once taken, never again could they appear in ‘society’ together: he might, but not she; for that ordeal applies a different standard or moral code to the failures and defects of the sexes.

Kyrle only thought, if he thought at all, of dwelling with her and living for her alone in some secluded corner of Italy or Switzerland, in some Utopia unknown to the British tourist or Cook’s couponist, if such a place there be, and where they could pass away their lives together in one sweet day-dream,

‘The world forgetting, by the world forgot.’

What *then* would Rosamund be?

A mockery to those among whom she now

moved; too many of them, though more highly born than herself, yet profligate in heart, the slaves of pleasure amid pretended purity, women destitute alike of sincerity and honour, yet dwelling in the lap of luxury and leading the lives of sybarites.

Rosamund was too impulsive, too much of a woman, not to be rather inclined to sacrifice herself for the man she loved, though she could scarcely hope that the sacrifice could bring her unalloyed joy in the future; yet her present was so miserable as to inspire her with a species of vengeance against the world.

The story related to her by Desborough might be all false; and even if the woman lived, Sir Ayling dared not put her in her proper place after his public marriage with herself.

No, no; the idea was all too absurd and preposterous, and in the then whirl of her thoughts Rosamund soon ceased to think upon the subject, or perhaps to care about it at all.

Would she yet live to learn the truth of the terrible axiom?—‘For every ounce of

pleasure there is a pound of pain; for every drop of milk, a sea of fire. The comedy is short, but the tragedy is long; iniquity soon plays its part, and then Vengeance leaps on the stage.'

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MISSING NOTE.

WHILE all this was being enacted in London, Vere, in his hut at Shorncliffe Camp, was full of much anxious thought on the subject of Kyrle Desborough and Lady Aldwinkle, though they had parted so jauntily, to all appearance, on the steps of the club.

He could hear little of him but in the shape of perilous gossip, for Kyrle was so pre-occupied that he seldom wrote to him, and when Vere tried to lure him down to visit the old corps, urging that surely he must be tired of town now, Kyrle wrote back, jocularly saying that he maintained with Johnson, 'the old bullying lexicographer (who believed in the Cock Lane ghost, but not in the earthquake at Lisbon), that he who is tired of London is tired of life, because in London we have all that life can require.'

Herbert Vere could not help having almost

a brother's regard for Desborough, they had been so long companions, and had, as the phrase is, 'knocked about' together so much, stood by each other in many a time of trouble and danger, and mutually 'done' many a bill; for, with ample means, in an expensive regiment, both were sometimes a little necessitous.

He was full of thought too for Rosamund, the whole circumstances of whose marriage were familiar to him. He had a sincere regard for the girl, as who that knew her had not? and, from all he had heard, the fear of a horrible *fiasco*, which he had not the power of averting, haunted him.

Of Lady Templeton he never thought; but he *did* much of Gertrude, nathless her apparent duplicity to himself. If money could avert it he would freely have given thousands; but here money, the usual panacea for everything under the sun, availed not.

Often he assumed his pen to remonstrate or advise, but as often relinquished it, as he reflected by what right, beyond friendship, could he attempt to act monitor to Kyrle Des-

borough, his senior in years as well as in rank when with the Eighth or King's?

He was not the kinsman of Lady Aldwinkle, and in hot temper Desborough might tell him so; and perhaps the whole affair was mere 'gup,' after all. Yet it went to his heart to hear Toby Finch, Prior, Clive, and other thoughtless young fellows—half boys—making a jest of it after mess, in the smoking-room or over the billiard-table—and certes, when talking of women, even of ladies, there is not much chivalry in the youth of the present day; and Vere thought how much that he heard at times would, in his father's days, have led to an exchange of shots at twelve paces.

Then, ever and anon, he thought with bitterness—or was it sorrow?—of Gertrude; for the impression she had made upon him was too strong to be easily effaced.

'Yes, yes,' he would mutter, 'it was like a woman, as Kyrle used to say, and despite his changed opinions of late, to employ every artifice to gain an honest fellow's heart—an honest fool's rather—and then throw him over when a wealthier match turned up, heed-

less of how it might embitter his whole existence.'

Then he would recall the assurances of Desborough that she was *not* engaged to Sir Ascot. If not, what then was the meaning of all that he had, either so fortunately or so miserably, been fated to overhear?

Past times and memories, words and scenes, came back to him—a strangely tangled web of love and sorrow, pique and anger—all to give place, again and again, to the remembrance that she was no longer his, and never could be now. But then neither was she, so far as he could learn, the affianced of this new rival; and anon, amid his perplexity and jealous disdain, there would come a wild craving to see her once more—a desire that scattered to the winds all reason dictated or wisdom resolved.

It was while he was in this mingled mood of mind that an event occurred which changed the whole face of affairs.

In a corner of the overland trunk, into which he had thrust his dress clothes in hot and fiery haste, on the night he left Winklestoke in a tempest of disgust and wrath, his

valet found a little pink note, which was handed to him one night as he left the mess hut.

Frayed, crushed, and crumpled, it was the note of Gertrude—the note given to him by the butler at the dinner-table, which, of course, he could not read then, and had so mysteriously mislaid.

He experienced a species of shock on seeing it now, and in tremulous haste he proceeded to peruse it:

‘My dearest Herbert,’ it ran, ‘I am really unable to leave my room to-night, my head aches so, and I am *so* worried about the folly of Rosamund and your friend Captain Desborough, and have some dread of how Sir Ayling may comport himself—only he is too much of a courtly gentleman to compromise himself. In that matter I beseech you to use your influence, and remonstrate with Desborough, as I shall certainly do with Rosamund. Only think, Herbert—but I shall tell you all about it to-morrow—I had a proposal in the garden this evening from Sir Ascot, who would persist in his fear that I was en-

gaged to that odious Derinzy. O my darling, he never once thought of you. Is it not a joke?—With a thousand kisses,

‘GERTRUDE.’

After gazing at it like one who had been stunned, again and again he read the note; and he now saw how singularly and skilfully he had misapplied all that he had overheard; and he cursed his fate for leading him to the spot where he had been compelled to overhear a conversation every word of which had been, as it were, burnt into his heart.

Thus were accounted for Gertrude’s laughing but persistent assertions of a non-engagement to one who had no hope with her, and who formed an attachment to a girl beneath him in rank elsewhere. This was Derinzy with the keeper’s daughter; and all this, and much more, Vere had deemed applicable to himself.

‘What can she think of me but as a madman, or worse?’ he thought. ‘Oh, how am I to explain this cruel mistake—how seek pardon for the unpardonable insult I have put upon her and all her family by my own sus-

picious and impulsive folly? My darling, my darling, I have not an hour to lose!

To see the colonel, late though the hour, was the resolution and practice of the instant. He got a month's leave, and took the last train for town, acting with such haste and excitement as utterly to bewilder Toby Finch and others who saw him leave the camp.

He travelled townwards, burning with impatience and dread that he might be too late to make amends on the morrow, by laying his apologies, his pleadings, and his heart at the feet of Gertrude; and again and again he rehearsed in fancy all that he had to say, all that he thought must take place at an interview so sweet and tender as it must be. And so he coned, muttered, and laughed to himself in a fashion that made it fortunate that he was alone, and had a compartment of the carriage to himself; and he counted the stations as the train flew past them, all unwitting that ere the next day was done he would be taking the *down* train with scarcely greater impatience.

He was well aware of Gertrude's pride and spirit, and he trembled in apprehension of a

cold, and perhaps final, repulse. If she had in the past time thrust his heart back upon himself to a certain degree, he had terribly repaid her now. So fear of her innate pride was ever before him: would love conquer it? She was so sweet and gentle that he could scarcely doubt it.

Yet he had put an unparalleled affront upon her; and what view might not Lady Templeton, Maud, and others—even the playful Rosamund—have led her to take of the event? In every way he considered and thought over the whole situation; he experienced a mixture of anguish and shame that made his cheek burn and his heart to fail him.

He had put a cutting insult for months past on a girl who, though highly born and gently bred, had no near kinsmen to call him to account on this subject; and even this conviction added greatly to his sense of regret and compunction.

He felt conscious that he had allowed blind passion and jealousy to carry him away too far and too suddenly; that he ought at least to have had the generosity to give her

the benefit of a doubt or the chance of an explanation. He had done neither, but rushed away at once in a gust of wrath and suspicion, which the past teachings of Kyrle Desborough, in his cynical days, had no doubt done much to foster and confirm.

How would she look, how receive?—if perhaps she received him at all; for it was quite possible she might proudly, and with justice, decline to do so. And as he pondered thus, her beautiful face, her appealing eyes of violet-blue, her wealth of dark-brown hair, her smile, her voice, her manner, and that great individuality which she possessed, and which was peculiarly her own, all came upbraidingly before him.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE ALARM.

IT was a sunny sultry afternoon, and Gertrude was seated alone in a little drawing-room or boudoir, Rosamund's peculiar sanctum, in Portland Place.

It was the perfection of such a London apartment, though on a tiny scale—all silk hangings, muslin, porcelain, and *bijouterie*. A curtain festooned the doorway that led to the larger drawing-rooms; there were fresh flowers in the fireplace; a baby-like aquarium in one corner, with gold and silver fish shooting to and fro; a little aviary in one of the windows; and a silk-fringed mantelpiece, like the console-tables, littered with all manner of pretty nothings in Dresden-ware and Chinese ivory.

The young mistress of the house had driven away to shop, accompanied by her husband

—a most unusual circumstance. Maud was riding in the Park with Miss Derinzy and her brother the colonel, an arrangement of which Gertrude by no means approved, as that gallant officer had been struck off their visiting-list; and she was, as she said, alone, and lost in reverie, for the last new novel had dropped from her hand.

The evident unhappiness and moody pre-occupation of her favourite and once merry little sister were dwelling in her mind, and drew her away from her own special ‘worry;’ so that times there were—and this was one of them—when she ceased to think of Vere, but of Rosamund alone.

She was in this mood when a visitor was announced; and as the hour was early for such an arrival, she looked up with surprise.

‘SIR HERBERT VERE,
Eighth or King’s.’

Such was the name on the card presented to her.

‘Vere—here—here! what can he want or mean?’ was the thought that flashed upon her mind; and for a moment she forgot, in

her astonishment, her past indignation at his unexplained, and apparently unexplainable, conduct, and conceived she was about to faint, and by doing so humiliate herself for ever in her own opinion.

Then she found herself mechanically advancing to meet him, as he stood irresolute, hat in hand, saying some of the usual and inevitable commonplaces. What they were she knew not, and never could or cared to remember. A cloud was before her eyes, and out of it, as it were, seemed to come the voice of Vere.

The latter was glad that she was alone; but he had so schooled himself, that he was prepared to make his explanation and pleadings before any of her family—even to Sir Ayling, or to the august Lady Templeton herself, that mirror of aristocratic coldness.

Gertrude was a picture of a noble presence and a beautiful face; yet confusion was the prevailing expression of the latter—a confusion blended with inquiry, wonder, and sorrow, as he took her passive hand in his.

‘I know not what to say to you, Gertrude,’ said he, in a very faltering voice, ‘or in what

terms to explain, and to entreat your pardon for that which must have seemed to you the conduct of a madman.'

'Herbert!'

She uttered the name with difficulty, as she felt the potent spell of her lover's voice.

'Darling, you call me so again—after all, after all!'

'I do not understand all this,' said she wearily, and with something like a sob—a swelling at least—in her throat.

'I mean with reference to my sudden departure from Winklestoke, my absence and silence since then. Listen to me, Gertrude; in a few words I can tell you all, though I may not hope for your pardon.'

Breathlessly, almost incoherently, in his haste and anxiety, he told her all that he had overheard, the mistake he had made, and how he had, applying them to himself, adopted her references to the movements and character of another; and the gust of blind jealousy, of sickening doubt and genuine sorrow, the whole episode had excited in his heart; and she heard him with utter astonishment.

'O Herbert,' she exclaimed, but in a low

voice, and with her eyes full of upbraiding and of tears, as she sharply withdrew her hands from his clasp, 'how could you, how dared you think so meanly of *me*?'

'Gertrude!' said he appealingly, as he clasped his hands and regarded her eagerly.

'This is indeed a revelation!' said she, casting her eyes upwards—'a strange proof of how low we may, unwillingly, fall, even in the eyes of those who love us.'

'Gertrude, I have endured so much—'

'And think you that I have endured nothing—that my pride has not suffered, my love repined, and my sense of unexplained wrong been keen?' she exclaimed, weeping freely now.'

'But now that you know all 'you will forgive me, darling?' said Vere, venturing to caress her. 'You once loved me so well—'

'And I love you still, though indeed you do not deserve it.'

'But you will forgive me?' he urged again, taking fresh courage now.

'I fear that I must—I cannot help myself; but, O Vere, never let doubt or mistrust mislead you so cruelly, so fatally again!'

She spoke gaspingly, and held up her white face. He kissed her, and, as his lips met hers, almost timidly, both coloured, they knew not why. Then, hand in hand, they sat together; and the explanation, the mistake, with all its consequent emotions, like the forgiveness therefor, were gone over again and again, and dissected to the minutest particular. And Gertrude's sorrow was soothed, even as her natural indignation melted under the spell of Vere's voice and the caressing expression of his handsome eyes; and her heart, naturally a warm and passionate, but, better than all, an honest one, was throbbing with the purest pleasure.

After a pause, that was not idly spent, however, Gertrude, while passing her hand caressingly over Vere's dark-brown hair, said, with a little spasmodic laugh,

'Is it not terrible to think that, but for the discovery of that little note, we might have gone on to the end of our lives without any explanation or reconciliation? It seems now too dreadful for contemplation!'

'And you might have married some one else, my own Gertrude!'

‘Well, it would have been a just punishment to you, Herbert. And you?’

‘I should have died an old bachelor, like my uncle Joseph, and been the last of the Veres of Quincey Hall. I am sure that I should, darling; for after loving you I could love no one else.’

And we are certain that Vere felt this to be the case then; all the more that his heart was as sore with remorse and compunction as it had previously been with jealousy, anger, and wounded self-esteem.

The cloud that had enveloped them was dispersed now, and fortunately no unlucky visitor arrived to mar or interrupt their happy *tête-à-tête*; for, full of themselves, their past, their present, and their future, they had a thousand things to say.

A ring of Vere’s—the same identical diamond ring which, long ago, he had taken from his dressing-case at Aldershot Camp for the same purpose—was now transferred to the engaged finger of Gertrude, who regarded it with a fond bright smile, as the most valuable, or valued, of her jewels; and tenderly he kissed her white hand as he slipped it on, and

felt something of prayer in his soul as he pressed her to his heart, with the conviction that now she was really his own—his own after all!

Nor could he help for a moment reflecting deeply over the singular chances, circumstances—which you will—that occur in the course of human life, and which may—nay, too often do—change the whole current of it for good or for evil, for sorrow or joy; and also the mysterious influences we may unwittingly exercise over the fate of each other. So true is the now hackneyed quotation:

‘Oh, many a shaft, at random sent,
Finds mark the archer never meant;
And many a word, at random spoken,
May soothe or wound a heart that’s broken.’

And the same thoughts were occurring to Gertrude, as she regarded Vere with her bright smile—the long and tender smile of love and a secret understanding—in her soft dark eyes—a smile impossible to describe, while, as she laughingly told him, ‘joy gave her a very lumpy sensation in her throat.’

It was only but a short time before all this that Maud, as she departed, whip in hand, and

in her riding-habit, had said to her mockingly, and with direct reference to Vere,

‘You are surely learning to know what utter humbugs men are—how immeasurable and incomprehensible their conceit—yes, and deceit!’

Could Maud have peeped in and seen them now!

After a time, Gertrude said, in a low voice, while colouring deeply,

‘There is one matter to which I referred, in the note you so unfortunately mislaid, Herbert, concerning your friend Captain Desborough, on which I should wish to speak with you.’

‘With reference to—to Lady Aldwinkle,’ replied Vere, seeing that she paused and an expression of pain crossed her face.

‘Have *you* heard their names mentioned?’

‘Of course, dearest Gertrude,’ he replied, with a tone of sadness and annoyance.

‘But—but I mean together?’

‘Yes; at Shorncliffe: gossips—heedless young fellows *will* talk, you know.’

‘At Shorncliffe! good Heavens!’ exclaimed Gertrude, with a kind of sob in her voice.

‘You forget that Desborough was one of ours, and his name is still a household word at the mess. I have already spoken with him on the subject, earnestly and as a friend—’

‘Thanks, dear Herbert—thanks.’

‘But he made light of the whole affair, and stigmatised it as the veriest of shallow gossip; and from all I know of Kyrle, I cannot believe it to be more. *Now*, however, my darling, Heaven be thanked, my position with Rosamund, as *your* sister, is entirely changed; Kyrle loves me well, I know, and I shall have influence enough, doubt it not, to make him cease to compromise her, as he seems to be doing now, whether in a spirit of idleness, folly, or vanity, I know not—probably all the three.’

Vere spoke confidently, and he was reckoning without his host; but this assurance allayed the fears of Gertrude, and her face beamed again with sunny smiles.

The hours of the summer afternoon stole drowsily on; full of themselves, their reunion, and their own communings, the lovers marked not how the time was passing, and that neither Lady Aldwinkle nor Sir Ayling had appeared.

Suddenly the loud shriek of a woman—Parker's voice apparently, in the great staircase—followed by a mad ringing of many electric bells, resounded through the whole mansion, startling the usually stately and quiet household in Portland Place from its propriety; and from Vere's encircling arm Gertrude started up, pale, terrified, and trembling, in anticipation of some dire catastrophe, she knew not of what!

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE ELOPEMENT.

IT was in the morning of the same day when Herbert Vere paid his eventful visit to Portland Place, and an hour or two before it occurred, when Rosamund began to make preparations for her flight. 'The quiet way in which the great businesses of life are transacted by some people is marvellous,' says Holme Lee. 'I have found more noise and bother made about the ill-cooking of a family joint for dinner than over the fatal crisis which was the ruin of a life-time!'

Quietly and leisurely to all appearance Rosamund passed to her room, her heart beating wildly, and her temples throbbing; and the servants who stood respectfully still as she passed, or who fell back before her, could little have guessed the wild tumult of thought that agitated her.

With all her aversion for and doubt of her

husband, and with all her mad love for Desborough, she *did* tremble at the step she was about to take, and even pondered whether it was not too late to retreat—to recall her fatal promise; and looking at her jewelled watch—one of her wedding gifts—she knew that in three hours the inevitable time would arrive.

Then, as she thought again of her comfortless though splendid home and her loveless existence, her brain whirled, and despair, mingled with passion, coming to her assistance, left her open to the influence of her evil angel; and in nervous haste she set about her packing, most scrupulously setting aside in her jewel-case all the family diamonds and every precious gift given to her by Sir Ayling.

There lay a miniature of the late lord, her father; but she dared not open the case, lest the face might seem to upbraid her. There too lay the once treasured flowers of a withered bouquet, given to her long ago by Desborough, which, oddly enough, seemed very worthless now.

She paused sometimes in the process of selecting what she deemed barely necessary;

and when all was packed, she still supposed there was something left undone, and stood dazed and bewildered, to think and weep, and press her cold little hands upon her burning forehead, and look wonderingly at her figure reflected in the opposite mirror, with all her rippling hair, seeming bright as the Fornarina of Raphael.

In a travelling portmanteau she put all she deemed requisite from amid the stores of her vast wardrobe. It left the house ostensibly for a charity, but in charge of Desborough's soldier-valet, who stolidly took it away in a cab; and then she felt that the first stage of her terrible journey was fairly inaugurated.

Opening her desk, she seated herself to write a last letter to her husband; but often did her tremulous small hand, and eyes full of welling tears, fail her before she accomplished something like the following incoherent epistle:

'When you read this, I shall be far away, and cannot hope but that you will do so with emotions of bitterness and hate for me. Despite the blow you gave me, I feel shame and

sorrow for all I shall bring on you and yours—on mine and myself; but I am not the mistress of my own actions. I loved Kyrle Desborough long before I married you—loved him, at first, almost without knowing it, deeming it then but the affection of a sister, though I often tried and prayed to shut it out of my heart. I never misled you into the idea that I loved you, whatever mamma may have said to deceive you—vanity or deceit was never mine. If you loved me once, as I doubt not you did, I could not appreciate it. Oh, pardon me for saying so; but perhaps some other—*one* you know of so well—may console you yet, when I am far, far away, I know not where, and, it may be, forgotten by all who love me now.

‘To remain with you would be but a life-long deception—a hypocrisy. To-morrow—nay, to-night—the Channel will roll between us; so farewell for ever, and that God may bless you is still the last wish of

‘ROSAMUND.’

Then she added a little tender postscript, and enclosing the key of her jewel-case, folded,

sealed, and addressed the note to Sir Ayling, placing it where she knew it was sure to be found.

‘If it should reach his hand before I am fairly gone—out of the house!’ she thought, with an emotion amounting to terror; ‘but no—no one will be here till I am safe and away with Kyrle.’

Painfully agitated, she had paused again and again in her writing, and entwined her delicate hands one within the other, when her eye fell on her wedding ring. She felt that she was disgracing the noble name of an old and hitherto stainless race. How would her name figure in the future editions of Burke and Debrett? Would it be blotted for ever out of *Peerage* and *Baronetage* alike?

‘Rosamund, married to Sir Ayling Aldwinkle, Bart., of Winklestoke’—and what next? How was the dissolution of that marriage to appear? So, with all the acuteness of persistent self-torture, she continued thus to question herself and already to canvass the future.

Her little dog fawned upon her, and her birds chirped at her approach; and she looked

at them wistfully—who would caress one and feed the other, by that hour to-morrow?—and then she slowly quitted the room, as she fully believed for ever.

Meanwhile Kyrle Desborough, in a very jubilant state of mind, was busy elsewhere, consulting the Continental *Bradshaw* for information concerning the Paris trains; at his bankers' getting circular notes and letters of credit for a pretty heavy sum, as he was resolved that, come what might, no single luxury of all the many by which Rosamund was now surrounded should be wanting to her in the land of their adoption, though where it was to be finally he had not as yet the most remote idea.

Rosamund had ordered the carriage at two precisely, in pursuance of her plans, saying she wished to shop; but was rather put out by Sir Ayling announcing that he would accompany her, and, as there was an early meeting of the House, she might deposit him at Westminster, a quarter which was quite out of her calculations, and at a distance from the place of assignation.

Ashamed, perhaps, of his recent gusts of

jealous passion, more than all ashamed of the unmanly blow—altogether an unparalleled event in his life—for Sir Ayling was a true gentleman in bearing and breeding, and of a calibre unknown to the fashionable ‘cads,’ whose mockery had maddened him—he was more than usually suave to Rosamund on this day, and she felt conscious of it, as he conducted her to the carriage.

The hall-porter, portly and purple-faced, quitted his leathern armchair to open the broad front door; the two tall and carefully matched footmen, powdered and with canes, were there, one bearing a bouquet, the other a Maltese spaniel, as she and Sir Ayling quitted the house in state and drove away.

As carriage after carriage rolled past them in the broad and magnificent thoroughfare, many of them coroneted, when the occupants thereof bowed and smiled to her, admiring the excellent taste of her costume and the brilliance of her fair beauty, she could not help thinking how these people would view the step she was about to take—how harshly she would be judged, and how ‘self-righteously’ the great mass of the undiscovered

would condemn her, till she passed into oblivion and ceased to occupy their tongues.

At a fashionable modiste's in Regent Street the carriage pulled up, and Rosamund alighted.

'You will not be long, I hope,' said Sir Ayling.

'Only a few minutes; wait for me,' replied Rosamund, in a breathless and husky tone, to the last words she was ever to hear her husband utter in this world; and she disappeared into the maze, the throng, that filled the establishment.

Without making the pretence of even purchasing anything, in the deep preoccupation of her mind and the flurry of her thoughts, she passed out at another entrance the place had in Piccadilly just as a carriage drew up, and a showy dowager alighted from it.

'Lady Aldwinkle—and on foot!' she exclaimed.

'The carriage is at the other door,' faltered Rosamund, drawing down her veil.

'My at home day is Friday; we shall expect to see you. Naughty thing! what a stranger you have been!' And Lady Lawn-

tennison (for she was mother to the youth of that name) passed in.

‘Her at home!’ thought Rosamund, as she hastened away; ‘what will be said of me then and there?’

In the street, a few yards off, Kyrle awaited her in a common cab. He hurried her in and drew up the windows, as she was in a passion of tears. Excitement failed to bear her up, and she lay sunk with her head on his shoulder, as the vehicle, whose driver had been well ‘tipped’ beforehand, tore through the Haymarket to Charing Cross.

There the bustle, the clamour, the crowds of people, the piles of luggage of every sort and size, the barrows being rolled to and fro, the little wagons laden with flaring lamps, the clinking of hammers upon wheels, the banging and slamming of carriage-doors, the railway bookstall with all its many-coloured volumes, the flaming posters that everywhere met the eye—though each and all were familiar sights and sounds, to Rosamund, in that eventful hour, they all seemed a portion of some unreal phantasmagoria, in which she formed a stunned and bewildered unit; while

she clung to Kyrle's strong arm as the only reliance which she had now in this changing and selfish world.

'Train for Dover—this way, sir; this way, ma'am. Here you are,' said the guard; 'this is the 2.50 train.'

'It reaches Dover—when?' asked Desborough, pressing his trembling companion's hand to his side.

'At 5.10, sir, sharp. Your luggage, with the lady's, is in the van ahead.'

'We wish to be alone.'

'All right, captain,' replied the guard, with a knowing smile, while the necessary coin was deftly slipped into his apparently unconscious hand.

The carriage was chosen and the seats selected; but ere the door closed Rosamund was fated to experience her first shock. Bertie Lawntennison and another young fellow were smoking on the platform, and a lightning glance was exchanged between them.

'By Jove, there goes Desborough of the Eighth, with a girl!' said one.

'Who is she?'

'What is she? Some little Oxford Street

milliner, I daresay. Sterner stuff has been vanquished by the prowess of the gallant Eighth before now.'

'She seems a good style of girl,' said Bertie—'rather *petite*, perhaps. Close veiled—that is artful!'

Kyrle sharply closed the window; but they passed and repassed it, till the guard put up an 'Engaged' label, when they shrugged their shoulders, laughed, and withdrew.

'It looks deuced like our friend Desborough levanting with somebody's luggage,' said Bertie Lawntennison. 'Somehow, I know the girl's figure. Who *can* she be?'

Rosamund heard their idle laughter, and it stung her to the soul. But now the train glided out of the station, and swept across the broad bosom of the river, as Kyrle's arm went round her, and she nestled her tear-blurred face in his neck, and uttered disjointed remarks from time to time, while he strove to raise her spirits and make her smile.

'If I could only think that they would love me still!' she exclaimed.

'They, darling?'

‘Gertrude and mamma, when they know all.’

‘Who could help loving you, Rosamund?—my own Rosamund now!’

‘By [to-morrow—even to-night—they will have learned that I have given up everything for you—for you, Kyrle.’

After a pause she said, in a low voice,

‘Let me but once appear before the world as your wife, Kyrle, and then—then all our doubts and sorrows will be over.’

‘As my wife,’ repeated Kyrle; and while he pressed her to his heart, he was conscious of a half-perceptible shiver, as he thought of all the preliminaries ere that could be the case.

But amid the flush of his passion, the thought did not as yet occur to him, could he present to the world as his wife a *divorcée*, however beautiful, or however highly born, or must they live entirely in seclusion, and for each other alone? ‘There is a peculiar state of feeling,’ says a writer, ‘which a man sometimes experiences when he has bravely resisted some hydra-headed temptation to do anything pleasant, but wrong, yet which cir-

cumstances appear determined to force upon him. He struggles against it boldly at first; but as each victory serves only to lessen his own strength, while that of the enemy continues unimpaired, he begins to tell himself that it is useless to contend longer, and he yields at last from a mixed feeling of fatalism and irritation.'

But had Kyrle Desborough so struggled or resisted ere he threw the onus of his proceedings on Fate or the course of things in general?

His own conscience said *no*; but he strove not to think of it, and abandoned himself to the joy of the time.

'Kyrle,' said the girl plaintively, 'in all the world, from this hour, I have no one to rely on save you! My young life has been a wrecked one; the waves of an inexorable Fate have closed round me; and till we stand before the altar, and perhaps even after that, I shall feel myself hateful before men, and unholy to God!'

'Do not repine thus, my darling; the fault has all been Lady Templeton's,' urged Kyrle.

‘O mamma,’ continued Rosamund, in the same strain, ‘I may have done much to make you pity me, and you pitied me not; but till *now* I have done nothing to make you blush for me.’

‘In an hour from this we shall catch the Calais boat. Take heart, my love; the morning will see us in France.’

The girl smiled; but her loving heart was sore. She lay with her head on Kyrle’s shoulder, and felt his arm caressingly around her. Her eyes were fixed dreamily on the distant landscape; but she neither saw it, as it lay steeped in the red hazy light of the afternoon sun, nor the nearer objects, that seemed to be flying swiftly past; for a terror now seized her, which she did not mention to Desborough.

She was thinking, if not divorced (a horrible sound the word seemed to have)—cast off, dead in the eye of the law, and free to marry again—what would be her fate? Sir Ayling might not take that course; she had heard of such proceedings being ignored in a spirit of revenge. Kyrle could not then marry her; and if he should tire of her and her repining,

weary of her presence, and grow heedless of her great love (she had heard that such things were inevitable), how more horrible would be her fate then!

But oh, no, no; it would not, could not be; and she thrust aside these bitter surmises, amid which the beautiful frankness of her usually merry and earnest eyes died out of their blue depth, and a kind of hungry hunted look came into them.

Had she already begun to look the stern contingencies of the *future* in the face?

She knew all the stir and speculation to which her fatal step would give rise, of all that gossips and all that 'society' would say. How much bitterness, ridicule, malevolence, and laughter would be excited, and how little pity or mercy would be accorded!

But what mattered all these? They could never reach her ears; and she should leave all that, with the rolling sea, far behind her.

She thought of her mother's angry pride, her aristocratic horror and dismay; but the idea of all these proved as nothing when compared with her genuine sorrow for the emotions of the gentle and loving Gertrude; and

at the thought of her Rosamund's tears fell fast and hot and bitter. A passionate longing to see her once again swelled up in her heart; and it seemed difficult, with regard to that good sister, to realise the conviction that it was 'all for love, or the world well lost,' and that they might never meet again till that day when the great Dawn shall rise and the shadows flee away!

Would her photos fill the shop windows, now that she had become guilty, where they had never been seen when she was virtuous and innocent? She could not doubt that horrible contingency, and that they would be, for criticism, in the hand of every fast fellow in town.

It has been said that the lives of human creatures advance only by steps along tracks that have been already trodden by thousands—yea by myriads—of mortal feet since Time was born.

'It may be so,' thought poor Rosamund; 'but comparatively few, happily, have had to tread the terrible path I am now traversing—a path lit by desperation as much as love, and leading—whither? How nice it would be to

die now, with my head on Kyrle's shoulder, and there would be an end of all! In heaven they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God. But I—I am not fit for heaven.'

So pondered the girl, but without the least idea of returning ere it was yet too late; while the swift express train flew inexorably on and on and on towards Dover.

One ever-recurring idea was the memory of all the runaway wives of whom she had heard or read, in romance or reality—the fallen from place, from house and home, and the love of all save *one*, whose love soon died; and though her soul sank within her in dread and apprehension, yet she clung all the closer to Kyrle now, as her last hope and stay on earth. But of all these thoughts that coursed wildly through her busy little brain—thoughts which required his tenderest words and caresses to soothe—she gave him no indication of their existence, lest they should, not unnaturally, sound like doubt, regret, and even upbraiding.

And now the swift train, clanking, snorting, and screaming, went plunging down into

the deep valley which is formed by an opening in the white chalky hills, and entered the kind of half amphitheatre where stands picturesque and historical Dover.

‘Courage, darling, courage,’ whispered Kyrle Desborough, pressing her closer to him; ‘a little time will find us beyond the sea in France.’

But it was fated to be otherwise.

A heavy gale was blowing—a tempest, in fact; and the ‘silver streak’ was rolling in mountains of foam over every pier and jetty. Neither the Antwerp, the Calais, nor Ostend Belgian Government steam packets could put to sea; so there was nothing for the two fugitives but to tarry in Dover for the night, to tarry in England, though, in the mad fever of her own heart, Rosamund found relief only in swift locomotion.

‘There is no chance of our crossing the Channel to-night, my love,’ said Kyrle, with a glance of inexpressible tenderness; ‘but there can be no pursuit,’ he added, laughing, to cheer her. ‘At home they know not which way we have gone; and even if they did, the days of postchaises and of bribed postboys are past;

so we can wait with patience for the morrow, Rosamund.'

'Weather very boisterous, sir,' said the head-waiter of the hotel to which they drove, very fussily; 'wind northerly, sea uncommon rough, the barometer falling, and all the steamers put back. At Folkestone, this morning, the tide rose to the wonderful height of twenty-two feet, sir, nigh to the top of the harbour basin; and here it is quite as bad. Chambermaid for the lady, sir; yes, sir.'

The evening was already and unnaturally darkening, fast into night apparently, before the proper time. From the windows of the stately and palatial hotel, in the gray haze that enveloped the Straits, not a vestige of the French coast was visible; and Cape Grisnez, with its lighthouse, was blurred completely out. So there were Kyrle Desborough and Rosamund prisoners *pro tem.*, though in Dover, which has been justly termed 'the grand railway terminus for England in connection with all Europe.'

Rosamund's tears, we have said, were like April showers. Already, under the influence of strange places and faces, they were passing

away. She knew that her letter must have been found by that time, and the secret of their flight known to her whole family circle at Portland Place and elsewhere. Yet already she was becoming content, if not quite happy, even hopeful, and was able to converse calmly with Desborough, to reply by fond smiles to his tenderness and caresses, and to consult and canvass with him the route to be taken after reaching and leaving Paris—whether to Switzerland, the Austrian Tyrol, or the Lower Pyrenees, where surely, in some secluded village, they would be safe beyond the reach or ken of the obnoxious but too probably inevitable British tourist.

Even while they were considering these details for the future, the wind and sea began to go down together; and Desborough, though very well content to remain in Dover, began to have hope of the Calais boat putting to sea before midnight.

CHAPTER XIX.

A CATASTROPHE.

ON that day the House of Commons was not favoured with the presence of Sir Ayling Aldwinkle; and the members who relied on his supporting some measure in hand were puzzled how to account for his absence, unless illness had supervened, while the lobbies, tea-room, library, &c. were searched for him in vain.

In the carriage at the shop-door in Regent Street Sir Ayling waited for some time with tolerable patience, till he began to think of his required attendance at Westminster.

‘Why, she must be purchasing the entire stock,’ said the old gentleman querulously, as he glanced at his watch. ‘Tompkins,’ said he to one of the matched footmen with the long canes, ‘go in and see if Lady Aldwinkle is nearly done here.’

The man touched his gold-garnished hat and dived into the crowded shop, and, after some delay, his stolid visage again appeared at the carriage window.

‘Been all over the premises, Sir Ayling; Lady Aldwinkle is not there, and has been seen by no one.’

‘Oh, impossible! Open the door,’ said the baronet, with growing irritation and surprise.

Entering the shop, amid the maze of counters, customers, and assistants, male and female, he looked everywhere for Rosamund, and as vainly prosecuted his inquiries. On all hands he met with attention and respect; and eventually the startling information was given to him that, more than half an hour ago, Lady Aldwinkle *had* been seen to pass through the shop, enter a cab, and drive away.

‘Enter a cab and drive away? Where?’ he demanded, with absolute incredulity.

‘Can’t say, Sir Ayling. Home perhaps.’

‘Home in a cab, and the carriage at the door? There must be some mistake in all this. But thanks,’ he added, with a sickly

smile, to hide the start he had received, the vague and undefinable suspicion of some great and impending evil or calamity; and even his stolid servants noted the extreme pallor of his face as he came forth, and seemed laboriously, and not with his little skip, to clamber into the carriage.

‘To Westminster, Sir Ayling?’ said the servant, touching his hat.

‘No—home, and quickly!’

The stately house was soon reached. Lady Aldwinkle had *not* returned, the hall-porter said.

‘Let the carriage wait,’ was the command of Sir Ayling, huskily given, for the mystery seemed thickening. That she might have left the shop by the wrong way in mistake or been taken ill never occurred to him; but a terrible suspicion of something led him to ascend to her rooms, as if there he should find some solution of the matter.

As he entered that chamber where her wardrobes stood, and which had witnessed her packing and final preparations, Parker approached him, and delivered a letter which she had found, addressed to him ‘in my lady’s

hand,' and which contained something hard and metallic.

'Thanks; leave me,' said he.

The room swam round him, as vague suspicions seemed to be fast becoming solid convictions. Parker retired, but, true to the curious instincts of her class, went no further than the corridor. She thought she should like to see *how* Sir Ayling looked after he had read the letter of his lady, and marvelled much why she should write to him at all.

While his hands trembled and his eyes grew dim, he tore open the note—the farewell note—and read it rapidly down to the little hastily added postscript, in which she again forgave him for the blow he had inflicted; implored in child-like fashion his pardon for any errors of which she might have been guilty; and prayed that God—of whom she trembled to think—might bless him and lengthen out his years, and even that he might get another wife more worthy of him than herself; and again she bade him an eternal farewell in this world, adding that to Gertrude she was unable to write.

He did not read the letter a second time;

there was no occasion to do so. He took in all its terrible and damning import at once, with the whole situation. That wife, the girl of whom he was so proud, whom he idolised, and on whom he had lavished so much, had fled him, a fugitive, and in the arms of another! He crushed up the fatal note, reeled like a drunken man, and, clutching the marble mantelpiece, placed his throbbing brow upon its cold slab, and strove to unravel the whirl of thought that involved his brain.

Proud, aristocratic in all his ways and thoughts, proud of his family and the position it had ever held in English society, it was the dictum of that select circle of which he felt the dread and horror now, mingled with his real shame and grief. He seemed to see it all and hear it: the heartless gibes and scandal of the world, of London; the mockery of the clubs at 'the old fool'—mockeries in which he had joined with such genuine gusto in times past, when that befell others which had now befallen him, sorrow and dishonour.

He remembered the remarks he had heard on the staircase during the night of that fatal ball, with the mocking, stinging, and biting

comparisons between his young wife's beauty and his own veneered old age.

The crushed letter and the jewel-case key dropped from his hand. One minute sufficed for him to take in the *sense* of the whole situation—that she had gone, gone and disgraced him for ever. Blindness came over him; he made a wild clutch at the air, as a low cry escaped him; and heavily he fell senseless with a crash upon the floor.

The watchful Parker heard the alarming sounds and rushed in; and, on finding him to all appearance dead, it was her loud scream and prompt application to the bell-handle which caused the alarm that roused Gertrude and Vere from their delicious *tête-à-tête*.

Doctors were summoned in hot haste from all quarters, but life was pronounced to be extinct, and gone beyond the power of human recall. He had died of a shock of some kind; the exact nature of it could not be ascertained without future examination; but the action of the heart had suddenly ceased, and for ever.

It was very stunning, this event. Vere had seen men slain in the field by all manner

of wounds; he had seen them die in agony in the jungles—on board of a ship, and sunk to leeward with a shot at their heels; but this shock, happening in a quiet and orderly London household, was so sudden and unexpected that it came with double force.

He knew but little of the dead man save as a courteous old gentleman and hospitable host with old-fashioned manners. Now he was gone. His chair and his place at table were vacant; yet it seemed strangely impossible to separate him from all his surroundings, and feel that the door might open a thousand times, yet he would not enter; that people would talk and talk the catastrophe thread-bare.

Still more would they have talked had they known the contents of the crumpled note which Vere found, with the jewel-case key, lying near the dead man's right hand, and gave to Gertrude.

Its contents—a clue to the whole event—filled her with blank horror and dismay. She remembered that occasion when, in her anger, Rosamund had stigmatised her marriage as a crime, the effects of which might recoil on

those who brought it about; and now the time seemed to have come.

‘O Herbert!’ exclaimed Gertrude, in a low but piercing voice, as her head fell on Vere’s breast; ‘thank Heaven she has no children—no daughters to disgrace before the world!’

‘With such home-ties all this might never have been,’ said he. ‘But how could Desborough act thus, and with *your* sister?’ he added, in growing indignation.

Gertrude remembered much that her proud cold mother and the stately Maud forgot—that Rosamund had been a victim to circumstances and family involvements, sold like the timber at Ringwood Hall, as the girl had often said herself; that she had been, with all her high-breeding and loveliness, hoydenish rather than bold, and indiscreet rather than erring, until now; a child always rather than a woman, even after her marriage; a creature all-loving and full of impulses. So she felt more gentle pity than anger at the wild step she had taken.

And now she grew painfully conscious that, but for that wretched misconception at

Winklestoke, Vere's influence must too probably have prevented this most dreadful *fiasco*.

On saying something of this kind to him, amid her heavy tears,

'Cheer up, dearest Gertrude,' said he; 'it may not yet be too late for me to exert my influence with Kyrle. Whither can they have gone?'

'Her letter speaks of the Channel.'

'That would infer they were *en route* for France.'

'Or Belgium.'

'France it must be. They have gone by the tidal train, and I have not a moment to lose if I am to follow and stop this horror, ere it is too late.'

In another moment he had pressed her to his breast, and was speeding as fast as a hansom cab could take him towards Charing Cross.

Eloped, and with Rosamund! To Vere it seemed incredible, as his memory reverted to all the caustic and cynical remarks Kyrle had made on that autumn evening—for it was autumn in England then—when they were

together in Up Park Camp, when the news of her marriage came, and on many other occasions.

And with all his dismay at the whole affair in which he was now involved, he felt a keen sense of satisfaction in the knowledge that he was serving Gertrude, obeying her behests, her entreaties or commands, and was already acting as one of the family at a crisis so perilous and deadly as this.

She was without hope of his being successful. He knew not in what hotel to find them, or under what name they might be travelling; once in France, all trace of them would be lost, and the absence of Lady Aldwinkle at such a crisis could not be concealed, or unaccounted for, in two days hence.

All the speculation, the sneers, the shame and shadowy horrors which, with the bitter mortifications of her own future, the unfortunate Rosamund had already, within a few short hours, begun to form, rose like a dark column before Gertrude, and filled her with dismay and grief.

It would be the ruin of their fair name,

a blight upon their hearth and honour; better it were, a thousand times, that Rosamund should be lying where her dead husband now lay, than living a living death, during which her name would never be uttered without sorrow and shame.

CHAPTER XX.

AT DOVER.

MEANWHILE the summer evening was being passed in mingled joy and excitement by the pair we left at Dover.

They were to dine alone, *tête-à-tête*—the *table d'hôte* was of course to be scrupulously avoided—and Rosamund had come from her dressing-room charmingly but simply attired; yet had she missed Parker's nimble fingers when dressing her luxuriant hair. For the first time in her life she had been without a personal attendant, nor would that want be supplied till they reached Paris—it might be Naples.

Heedless of the waiter—he was perhaps used to that sort of thing, and appeared to be stolidly laying the table—they stood in the deep recess of a bay window with arms entwined, looking at the raging storm—the

subsidence of which Kyrle was hopefully predicting in defiance of the barometer—and at the grand effect of the red gleams of sunshine on the tumultuous sea as they burst at times through the rents in the fast-flying clouds; at the vessels scudding before the wind towards the Channel, and other features in the view; and Desborough strove to interest her in all they saw. But there are moments when we are alike indifferent to the wild or to the soft beauties of Nature; for to admire and observe them well the head and the mind must be free.

‘The wind is evidently going down,’ said Desborough, ‘and I am sure, darling, the Calais boat will be able to leave about eleven to-night.’

‘The waiters do not think so.’

‘Of course not, nor is it their interest to do so.’

‘As you please, dearest Kyrle. It matters not where I am when with you; but—*don't*, the man is looking.’

‘But for this confounded squall we should have been close in by Calais pier by this time. Do you like being on the sea?’

‘Not at night.’

‘But the voyage is a short one; and then we are so anxious to reach Paris.’

After remaining silent for a few minutes, as if lost in thought, Rosamund suddenly said,

‘O Kyrle, Kyrle, can I be the same Rosamund who was in Portland Place this morning—the same Lady Aldwinkle who drove down Regent Street?’

‘Why so strange a question, my darling, and why use that name here?’

‘Because I feel as if—as if—I know not how to express or describe it.’

‘What, love?’

‘As if I were two persons—*one* here with you; another *there*, where I ought to be.’

‘My poor pet, this is a mere mental confusion. You are all with me, and are mine alone—my own at last, my very own.’ And he drew her caressingly close to him.

And while the frothy gray sea lashed and roared over the pier before the windows of the Lord Warden, as if it rose in especial fury to stay their further departure, and when, full of her own reactionary thoughts,

Rosamund, though she did not quite shrink from Desborough, was inclined to repress his caresses, some thoughts began to occur to him of what his old friend Vere would be certain to say of him now, and the hard names he would be sure to give him, and, perhaps more than all, to the partner of his flight, his future wife,—and his bronzed cheeks burned scarlet.

They still lingered in the recess of the bay window, watching the tossing waves, communing in low affectionate tones from time to time, in total oblivion of the choice *entrées*, the chicken and lobster-salad, the *pâtés* and iced champagne, that awaited them; in fact, eating and drinking seemed, as yet, to be a forgotten part of their programme.

‘Sir, sir, these are private rooms!’ they suddenly heard the waiter saying at the door, in a tone of remonstrance.

‘Stand aside, fellow, or I shall knock you down!’ cried a familiar voice, in accents of authority, as the door was thrown open, and Vere entered with a flushed face and hat in hand.

‘Vere—you here!’ exclaimed Desborough,

as he motioned to the perplexed waiter to retire.

‘I suppose I must apologise for this apparent intrusion; but the errand on which I have come is imperative, and brooks no delay.’

There was a stern and sorrowful gravity in his face that was quite unusual, but they attributed it to the cause of their elopement.

Anger spread over the dark features of Kyrle Desborough, as he was not inclined, especially at a time like this, to permit even his dearest friend to interfere with his actions, or adopt a tone of reprehension; while shame and dismay were painfully visible in the pale downcast face and averted eyes of Rosamund, as she, automaton-like, held out her hand to him. Her lips were white and firmly pressed together, and in her heart she felt a sudden terror, she knew not of what precisely. She covered her face with her hands, and then looked up with eyes dim with tears.

‘To what are we indebted for this sudden—visit, Vere?’ asked Desborough.

‘To your own actions. How shameful, how cruel, how selfish and pitiless of you, to lure this mere girl from her home, her station, and her husband!’

‘I may deserve all your reprobation, Vere, but I do not wish to have it hurled at me thus, and in her presence especially,’ said Desborough, with growing hauteur and sternness. ‘I know not by what right you mix yourself up in this matter, or how you came to know of our movements at all.’

‘I have come here direct from Portland Place.’

‘Sent after me by Sir Ayling?’ asked Desborough, with something of scorn in his tone.

‘Sent by Gertrude Templeton. Stricken down by this act, Sir Ayling is lying a corpse under his own roof, and his sudden death lies at your door! What, are you the same Kyrle Desborough that I followed up the breach at the Main Bastion, and through the Cashmere Gate at Delhi? O Kyrle, Kyrle!’

Dead—old Sir Ayling dead! The listeners were thunderstruck; sorrow replaced the shame of Rosamund, and astonishment the

hot anger into which Desborough had been carefully lashing himself.

‘This sounds all incomprehensible. Explain yourself, Vere,’ said he.

A very few words served to do so, and to paint the agony of mind in which he had left Gertrude; and as they listened the fugitives looked blankly in each other’s face.

‘O Kyrle, Kyrle!—my God! he is dead! I have killed him—I have killed him!’ exclaimed Rosamund.

‘Poor old man!’ said he reflectively, as he tugged each of his thick moustaches.

‘Oh, what will become of me now!’ exclaimed the girl again, as she covered her face with her hands; and a new and undefined terror—remorse, perhaps—took possession of her, and she shivered visibly when Desborough put his arm round her.

He felt conscious of this new emotion and the source from whence it sprang, and he gazed silently and anxiously down on the golden tresses of her bowed head, and the convulsed features of her white face—for a lover ever analyses everything that proceeds from the object of his regard. Thus it is

that, when with the object of his passion, if it be a true one, the lover never wearies, but always finds something to observe in her looks, her motions, and most casual remarks; and the slightest shade of dissatisfaction stole into the features of Desborough.

‘Thank Heaven, I have been in time!’ said Vere.

‘But for the storm—’ began Desborough.

‘You would have escaped me, and all would have been destruction then. But after what I have told you, you will surely both return with me to town?’

Desborough was touched by the tone of entreaty so suddenly adopted by his old comrade, and pressed his hand as if in assent; and knowing how Vere loved, or had loved, Gertrude Templeton, he now felt some sincere shame for the part he was playing.

Vere placed a hand caressingly on the head of Rosamund, and she clasped it between both of hers, as she said,

‘Take me back; take me back again, ere it is too late.’

Vere regarded her kindly and pityingly; for he knew, but not to the full extent, how

much she had been thrust on one hand, and allured on the other, to that stage in the path of virtue when the finger-post points to vice.

‘How came you to follow us?’ asked Kyrle.

‘Gertrude sent me,’ replied Vere.

‘Gertrude?’ said Rosamund, looking up inquiringly.

‘Yes. A little time will explain all that to you, and much more; but we are not too late to catch the seven-thirty train, which will deposit us in town in three hours or less.’

‘And how came you to trace us here?’

‘By the merest, but most fortunate, chance in the world, Kyrle. I met Tom Kenny of ours. You remember Tom, the marksman, who is now, poor fellow, a commissionaire. He was right glad to see me, for the sake of the old Eighth, and told me that he had seen you and a lady enter this hotel; and so I am here, though you gave the very uncommon name of Captain Smith.’

Though not loving Desborough less, a great horror of the calamity she had caused was apparent in Rosamund’s face. Ashy pale, it became fixed in its abstraction. Her eyes

were wide open, with a dreamy, wild, sleep-walking expression in them; but under the sense of Vere's presence, protection, and advice she rallied a little, but a painful hectic flush at times gave place to the pallor of death, as it seemed.

With decision, prudence, and caution, yet all not the less inspired by love, Kyrle Desborough saw that now, since poor old Sir Ayling was dead, eloping was no longer a necessity, and, like the frozen, crushed, and terrified Rosamund, whom it was so difficult to regard in the light of a widow, he saw that the sooner she was back in her own house, the better for all parties, and more than all for herself.

Hence to the friendly propositions of Vere he had not a word of opposition to offer; and poor little Rosamund seemed to have no longer a will of her own, and to be disposed to cling to Vere as a sure guide and protector. Though the shock of Sir Ayling's sudden death appalled her and excited remorse, it could not cause grief.

She had never loved, and latterly had barely respected, him; but now that he was

dead—dead, poor old man—how difficult it was to think so!—she recalled with genuine sorrow, repentance, and compunction innumerable kindly acts, delicate, gentlemanly, and fatherly attentions, of which, in the whirlpool of her passion for Kyrle Desborough, she had been oblivious, and callously so, at the time.

Even 'Birdie,' that fertile source of suspicion and mistrust, was forgotten now by Rosamund.

Flying with Desborough, she felt herself like some wild and desperate creature, clinging to a strong and loving arm; but now, by this catastrophe and the tossing waves, she was driven back upon herself, upon her own thoughts, and that horror from which she had fled—'society.'

Kyrle Desborough was not a fool; hence he had no vanity: he was not, and never had been, a rake either by name or nature; and thus his heart too was full of honest and genuine shame, pity, and compunction—shame for himself, pity for Rosamund, and compunction for the whole affair. So now he welcomed (a 'muff,' therefore, some fellows,

such as Lawntennison, will call him) the intervention of Herbert Vere, which saved the name of the girl he loved from being compromised, and saved her and himself from the reprehension of the good, the wise, and the—untempted.

By one or two coincidences, and by Vere's promptitude, Rosamund knew, like Gertrude, of all that she had been saved from—the dreadful contingencies of the future; that the dreadful secret of what she intended to do was known to none out of their own circle; and that he had saved the name, fame, and honour of herself and all her family. And now that the delirium—for such it was in one sense—had passed away, she had a deep and fervent love for, and emotion of the purest gratitude to, the affianced of her sister.

And so that night, after all the wild and varying tumult of thought she had undergone, poor Rosamund came home weeping, pale, and full of great sorrow, to the house at Portland Place, which she seemed to have left ages, not hours, ago—the great house where the old man lay dead—and Rosamund, we say, went to sleep like a weary, grieved, and

naughty child in the arms of Gertrude, with her cheek on the soft bosom of that dear sister, whose lips were pressed ever and anon on the golden hair of her she deemed a rescued one—rescued by Herbert Vere.

The latter had driven directly home with her, dropping Kyrle *en route*; and the latter, in a very mingled mood of mind, spent at the club the night of his elopement.

CHAPTER XXI.

‘ ALL’S WELL THAT ENDS WELL.’

IT was with an emotion of great awe, and while clinging to the arm of Gertrude, that Rosamund next morning entered the stately bedchamber where Sir Ayling was laid out dead.

Though front to front with death, she dared not look on the pale face of the thin and rigid figure, the outline of which was so painfully distinct and suggestive, as it lay there with a white sheet reverently spread over it, in the room, which was half darkened and seemed full of ghostly and uncertain shadows, for all the blinds were down.

She, however, had no time to fashion her trembling lips, or arrange her thoughts for prayer, or to indulge in any demonstration of sorrow or remorse, for the calamity her brief flight had, unconsciously, occasioned ; for her eye instantly caught the figure of a woman,

who knelt at the foot of the bed, with her face buried thereon, and her hands, which were clasped, outstretched before her, as if in a paroxysm of grief. Her bonnet had dropped aside, and her hair was all in disorder.

She looked up as the sisters entered, and Rosamund instantly recognised 'Birdie.'

Birdie there, and at such a time! Her presence at once nerved and reassured the young widow, at whose approach she rose, calm and pale, with eyes all red and inflamed with weeping.

'You here, madam, *you!*' Rosamund said inquiringly, and not without some hauteur of manner.

'Yes,' replied the stranger quietly, but pointedly; 'I did not desert him.'

Rosamund coloured painfully, but said,

'Why are you, of all persons, here?'

'Why were *you* not here before me, Lady Aldwinkle?'

'Yesterday—I was absent.'

'So it would appear,' said the other.

'But who and what are you?' asked Gertrude now, with something of irritation.

'One whom he loved, and who loved him

well,' replied the woman, who was very lady-like, and who wept profusely—'his unfortunate daughter.'

'Daughter!'

'Yes, madam.'

'Your mother — Sir Ayling never had any other wife than me!' exclaimed Rosamund.

'That I know, madam; hence my unfortunate, obscure, and miserable life. Who my mother was can matter nothing to you, lady; she has long been in her grave.'

So this was the secret so unwisely kept, and thus the cause of so much bitterness.

She was double the age of Rosamund, and, in his senile vanity, poor old Sir Ayling had been loth to acknowledge her existence; and hence the whole error, which involved so much.

'And those meetings in the gardens?' said Rosamund.

'I am a governess, Lady Aldwinkle, and went there with the children, my pupils; and there often my father, Sir Ayling, met me.'

'A governess?'

'Yes; one whose life has been one of

many bitter humiliations and few sweets,' said the woman sadly.

'Pardon my past abruptness, my rudeness—suspicions,' said Rosamund, taking her hand.

'Suspicions, Lady Aldwinkle?'

'Yes; I knew not who you were. How could I fathom a secret so sedulously kept? But, believe me, when I say it in presence of the dead, that your future life shall be my care.'

The poor thing looked at her wistfully, as if she longed now, at that moment, when both their hearts were softened, to kiss her dead father's girl-wife, but Rosamund was in no kissing mood.

But she meant all she said, and more; and in time to come 'Birdie,' secured by a competence for life, was rendered independent of all the miserable contingencies of teaching for a subsistence, a measure which Sir Ayling, with all his wealth, had been too selfish, or perhaps too heedless, to accomplish for her.

So in due time poor Sir Ayling Aldwinkle, the last of his old Saxon line, was duly borne to his tomb, in the deep old family vault

under Winklestoke Church, shoulder-high, by eight servants in his own livery—among them the two tall matched footmen who had stood by the door when he and Rosamund passed out of the house together for the last time—when they had taken the oaken coffin from the open car, which showed it, with all its mountings, and the piles of white flowers upon the lid, in bold relief amid the blackness.

Among these was a beautiful white cross, sent by Kyrle Desborough, then self-exiled at Paris.

It was in no spirit of hypocrisy that Kyrle sent this poor tribute of respect to lie on the coffin of the old man, whom he felt he had wronged, or sought to wrong; and Vere of ours did not think so as he laid it on the lid, and held Rosamund's trembling hand clasped in his, as she stood by his side all robed in sable crape.

Desborough was too honourable and generous, infatuated though he had been, not to feel intense compunction for the whole share he had in this deplorable affair; but there it ended, for he could scarcely be expected to indulge in grief.

On that solemn day Rosamund seemed as one in a dream. She had a stunned and bewildered aspect, for a severe illness was coming upon her; and when the grave and pompous rector of Winklestoke besought her to have comfort, as her good husband had been taken from earth to heaven, from corruptibility to incorruptibility, he might as well have said from Mile End to Mayfair, for all that she, poor girl, took in. All sounded unsatisfactory and vague, unless we except the threat—for such it sounded—that one day she should meet him again.

A serious attack of fever prostrated Rosamund. It was the result of what she had undergone for months past; and all the world of the West End—at least the fashionable part thereof, and who knew nothing of the little trip to Dover—were edified to discover, through the medium of this illness, how much she loved and valued ‘her dear old hub, don’t you know,’ and sorrowed for his sudden, though it could scarcely be deemed untimely, end.

While Desborough lingered anxiously in Paris through all that illness—and it was a

protracted one—Gertrude never left her sister's side. Hers was the gentle hand that smoothed the sufferer's pillow, that succeeded in achieving what no one else could do—that poured through the pale lips the first nourishment that restored strength ; and her eyes were the first to notice the favourable changes that announced returning health, when

‘ Sideways her face reposed
On one white arm, and tenderly unclosed
By tenderest pressure a faint damask mouth,
To slumbering pout ;’

and to Gertrude's loving eyes the girl, as she lay still and pale, looked like some exquisite image.

Lady Templeton, of course, watched occasionally by her daughter's bedside ; and cold and passionless though she was, she beheld the colour returning to her cheek with a joy that was not unmixed with hope and new ambitions.

Sir Ayling's settlements had been, as she frequently declared, ‘ princely ;’ and hence she had now high and mighty aspirations for the future of Rosamund, all unaware that the young lady, in marrying a second time, had

quite made up her mind to please herself, after the hatchment, with its winkles and periwinkles *gules* and *or* quarterly, which had hung in Portland Place for many months, was taken down.

So, before the next year's London season was quite ended, Sophy Finch had officiated, with others, as a bridesmaid at two marriages in St. George's Church, within a short period of each other; and there was every prospect of her figuring at a third.

Whose marriages these two were we need scarcely say. Many officers of the Eighth—then lying at the Tower—were present at both; and at one Vere's entire company attended, each man bearing a bouquet of violets, to give *éclat* to the scene, and to the great delight and bewilderment of the mob.

The third, which was then undoubtedly in prospect, was that of Maud and big Jocelyn Derinzy, who had now become a viscount on the death of the old peer his grandfather.

'How *la mère* Templeton brought it about is best known to herself; but it beats cock-fighting, don't you know,' as Bertie Lawntenison said.

This she deemed her trump card ; for the proud old woman was ambitious to the last. And Vere and Gertrude, when, on their wedding-tour in Italy, they saw the intended marriage announced in a fashionable print, laughed merrily as they thought of how many mistakes, *malheurs*, and mischances there had been in the past time, and how 'all's well that ends well.'

THE END.

LONDON :
ROBSON AND SONS, PRINTERS, PANCRAS ROAD, N.W









