

# **A Group of Noble Dames**

(Volume I)

by Thomas Hardy

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

A Group of Noble Dames ( Volume II ) / 杨丹主编      飞天电子音像出版社  
2004

ISBN 7-900363-43-2

I. 监… II. 王…

出版发行：飞天电子音像出版社

责任编辑：杨丹

经销：全国各地新华书店

印刷：北京施园印刷厂

版次：2004 年 6 月第 1 版

书号：ISBN 7-900363-43-2

# CONTENTS

Part II AFTER DINNER.....	1
THE LADY ICENWAY .....	1
SQUIRE PETRICK'S LADY .....	24
ANNA, LADY BAXBY.....	45
THE LADY PENELOPE.....	59
THE DUCHESS OF HAMPTONSHIRE.....	81
THE HONOURABLE LAURA .....	110

## **Part II AFTER DINNER**

### **THE LADY ICENWAY**

By the Churchwarden

In the reign of His Most Excellent Majesty King George the Third, Defender of the Faith and of the American Colonies, there lived in 'a faire maner-place' , in one o' the greenest bits of woodland between Bristol and the city of Exonbury, a young lady who resembled some aforesaid ones in having many talents and exceeding great beauty. With these gifts she combined a somewhat imperious temper and arbitrary mind, though her experience of the world was not actually so large as her conclusive manner would have led the stranger to suppose. Being an orphan, she resided with her uncle, who, though he was fairly considerate as to her welfare, left her pretty much to herself.

Now it chanced that when this lovely young lady was

about nineteen, she was riding, with only a young lad as an attendant, in one o' the woods near her uncle's house, and, in trotting along, her horse stumbled over the root of a felled tree. She slipped to the ground, not seriously hurt, and was assisted home by a gentleman who came in view at the moment of her mishap. It turned out that this gentleman, a total stranger to her, was on a visit at the house of a neighbouring landowner. He was of Dutch extraction, and occasionally came to England on business or pleasure from his plantations in Guiana, on the north coast of South America, where he usually resided.

On this account he was naturally but little known in Wessex, and was but a slight acquaintance of the gentleman at whose mansion he was a guest. However, the friendship between him and the Heymeres as the uncle and niece were named warmed and warmed by degrees, there being but few folk o' note in the vicinity at that time, which made a newcomer, if he were at all sociable and of good credit, always sure of a welcome. A tender feeling sprang up

between the two young people, which ripened into intimacy. Anderling, the foreign gentleman, was of an amorous temperament; and, though he endeavoured to conceal his feeling, it could be seen that Miss Maria Heymere had impressed him rather more deeply than would be represented by a scratch upon a stone. He seemed absolutely unable to free himself from her fascination; and his inability to do so, much as he tried evidently thinking he had not the ghost of a chance with her gave her the pleasure of power; though she more than sympathized when she overheard him heaving his deep drawn sighs privately to himself, as he supposed.

After prolonging his visit by every conceivable excuse in his power, he summoned courage, and offered her his hand and his heart. Being in no way disinclined to him, though not so fervid as he, and her uncle making no objection to the match, she consented to share his fate, for better or otherwise, in the distant colony where, as he assured her, his rice, and coffee, and maize, and timber,

produced him ample means a statement which was borne out by his friend, her uncle's neighbour. In short, a day for their marriage was fixed, earlier in the engagement than is usual or desirable between comparative strangers, by reason of the necessity he was under of returning to look after his properties.

The wedding took place, and Maria left her uncle's mansion with her husband, going in the first place to London, and about a fortnight after sailing with him across the great ocean for their distant home which, however, he assured her, should not be her home for long, it being his intention to dispose of his interests in this part of the world as soon as the war was over, and he could do so advantageously; when they could come to Europe, and reside in some favourite capital.

As they advanced on the voyage she observed that he grew more and more constrained; and, by the time they had crossed the Line, he was quite depressed, just as he had been before proposing to her. A day or two before landing

at Paramaribo, he embraced her in a very tearful and passionate manner, and said he wished to make a confession. It had been his misfortune, he said, to marry at Quebec in early life a woman whose reputation proved to be in every way bad and scandalous. The discovery had nearly killed him; but he had ultimately separated from her, and had never seen her since. He had hoped and prayed she might be dead; but recently in London, when they were starting on this journey, he had discovered that she was still alive. At first he had decided to keep this dark intelligence from her beloved ears; but he had felt that he could not do it. All he hoped was that such a condition of things would make no difference in her feelings for him, as it need make no difference in the course of their lives.

Thereupon the spirit of this proud and masterful lady showed itself in violent turmoil, like the raging of a nor'-west thunderstorm as well it might, God knows. But she was of too stout a nature to be broken down by his revelation, as many ladies of my acquaintance would have



been so far from home, and right under the Line in the blaze o' the sun. Of the two, indeed, he was the more wretched and shattered in spirit, for he loved her deeply, and had been tempted to this crime by her exceeding beauty, against which he had struggled day and night, till he had no further resistance left in him. It was she who came first to a decision as to what should be done whether a wise one I do not attempt to judge.

'I put it to you,' says she, when many useless self-reproaches and protestations on his part had been uttered 'I put it to you whether, if any manliness is left in you, you ought not to do exactly what I consider the best thing for me in this strait to which you have reduced me?'

He promised to do anything in the whole world. She then requested him to allow her to return, and announce him as having died of malignant ague immediately on their arrival at Paramaribo; that she should consequently appear in weeds as his widow in her native place; and that he would never molest her, or come again to that part of the

world during the whole course of his life a good reason for which would be that the legal consequences might be serious.

He readily acquiesced in this, as he would have acquiesced in anything for the restitution of one he adored so deeply even to the yielding of life itself. To put her in an immediate state of independence he gave her, in bonds and jewels, a considerable sum ; and by the next ship she sailed again for England, having travelled no farther than to Paramaribo. At parting he declared it to be his intention to turn all his landed possessions into personal property, and to be a wanderer on the face of the earth in remorse for his conduct towards her.

Maria duly arrived in England, and immediately on landing apprised her uncle of her return, duly appearing at his house in the garb of a widow. She was commiserated by all the neighbours as soon as her story was told; but only to her uncle did she reveal the real state of affairs, and her reason for concealing it. For, though she had been innocent

of wrong, Maria's pride was of that grain which could not brook the least appearance of having been fooled, or deluded, or nonplussed in her worldly aims.

For some time she led a quiet life with her relative, and in due course a son was born to her. She was much respected for her dignity and reserve, and the portable wealth which her temporary husband had made over to her enabled her to live in comfort in a wing of the mansion, without assistance from her uncle at all. But, knowing that she was not what she seemed to be, her life was an uneasy one, and she often said to herself: 'Suppose his continued existence should become known here, and people should discern the pride of my motive in hiding my humiliation? It would be worse than if I had been frank at first, which I should have been but for the credit of this child.'

Such grave reflections as these occupied her with increasing force; and during their continuance she encountered a worthy man of noble birth and title Lord

Icenway his name whose seat was beyond Wintoncester, quite at t'other end of Wessex. He being anxious to pay his addresses to her, Maria willingly accepted them, though he was a plain man, older than herself; for she discerned in a re- marriage a method of fortifying her position against mortifying discoveries. In a few months their union took place, and Maria lifted her head as Lady Icenway, and left with her husband and child for his home as aforesaid, where she was quite unknown.

A justification, or a condemnation, of her step was seen when, not long after, she received a note from her former husband Anderling. It was a hasty and tender epistle, and perhaps it was fortunate that it arrived during the temporary absence of Lord Icenway. His worthless wife, said Anderling, had just died in Quebec; he had gone there to ascertain particulars, and had seen the unfortunate woman buried. He now was hastening to England to repair the wrong he had done his Maria. He asked her to meet him at Southampton, his port of arrival; which she need be in no

fear of doing, as he had changed his name, and was almost absolutely unknown in Europe. He would remarry her immediately, and live with her in any part of the Continent, as they had originally intended, where, for the great love he still bore her, he would devote himself to her service for the rest of his days.

Lady Icenway, self-possessed as it was her nature to be, was yet much disturbed at this news, and set off to meet him, unattended, as soon as she heard that the ship was in sight. As soon as they stood face to face she found that she still possessed all her old influence over him, though his power to fascinate her had quite departed. In his sorrow for his offence against her, he had become a man of strict religious habits, self-denying as a lenten saint, though formerly he had been a free and joyous liver. Having first got him to swear to make her any amends she should choose, she informed him that she had already wedded another husband, an excellent man of ancient family and possessions, who had given her a title, in which she

much rejoiced.

At this the countenance of the poor foreign gentleman became cold as clay, and his heart withered within him; for as it had been her beauty and bearing which had led him to sin to obtain her, so, now that her beauty was in fuller bloom, and her manner more haughty by her success, did he feel her fascination to be almost more than he could bear. Nevertheless, having sworn his word, he undertook to obey her commands, which were simply a renewal of her old request that he would depart for some foreign country, and never reveal his existence to her friends, or husband, or any person in England; never trouble her more, seeing how great a harm it would do her in the high position which she at present occupied.

He bowed his head. 'And the child our child?' he said.

'He is well,' says she. 'Quite well.'

With this the unhappy gentleman departed, much sadder in his heart than on his voyage to England; for it had never occurred to him that a woman who rated her honour

so highly as Maria had done, and who was the mother of a child of his, would have adopted such means as this for the restoration of that honour, and at so surprisingly early a date. He had fully calculated on making her his wife in law and truth, and of living in cheerful unity with her and his offspring, for whom he felt a deep and growing tenderness, though he had never once seen the child.

The lady returned to her mansion beyond Wintoncester, and told nothing of the interview to her noble husband, who had fortunately gone that day to do a little cocking and ratting out by Weydon Priors, and knew nothing of her movements. She had dismissed her poor Anderling peremptorily enough; yet she would often after this look in the face of the child of her so-called widowhood, to discover what and how many traits of his father were to be seen in his lineaments. For this she had ample opportunity during the following autumn and winter months, her husband being a matter-of- fact nobleman, who spent the greater part of his time in field- sports and

agriculture.

One winter day, when he had started for a meet of the hounds a long way from the house it being his custom to hunt three or four times a week at this season of the year she had walked into the sunshine upon the terrace before the windows, where there fell at her feet some little white object that had come over a boundary wall hard by. It proved to be a tiny note wrapped round a stone. Lady Icenway opened it and read it, and immediately walked hastily along the terrace, and through the door into the shrubbery, whence the note had come. The man who had first married her stood under the bushes before her. It was plain from his appearance that something had gone wrong with him.

'You notice a change in me, my best-beloved,' he said. 'Yes, Maria- -I have lost all the wealth I once possessed mainly by reckless gambling in the Continental hells to which you banished me. But one thing in the world remains to me the child and it is for him that I have intruded here.



Don't fear me, darling! I shall not inconvenience you long; I love you too well! But I think of the boy day and night I cannot help it I cannot keep my feeling for him down; and I long to see him, and speak a word to him once in my lifetime!'

'But your oath?' says she. 'You promised never to reveal by word or sign '

'I will reveal nothing. Only let me see the child. I know what I have sworn to you, cruel mistress, and I respect my oath. Otherwise I might have seen him by some subterfuge. But I preferred the frank course of asking your permission.'

She demurred, with the haughty severity which had grown part of her character, and which her elevation to the rank of a peeress had rather intensified than diminished. She said that she would consider, and would give him an answer the day after the next, at the same hour and place, when her husband would again be absent with his pack of hounds.

The gentleman waited patiently. Lady Icenway, who had now no conscious love left for him, well considered the matter, and felt that it would be advisable not to push to extremes a man of so passionate a heart. On the day and hour she met him as she had promised to do.

'You shall see him,' she said, 'of course on the strict condition that you do not reveal yourself, and hence, though you see him, he must not see you, or your manner might betray you and me. I will lull him into a nap in the afternoon, and then I will come to you here, and fetch you indoors by a private way.'

The unfortunate father, whose misdemeanour had recoiled upon his own head in a way he could not have foreseen, promised to adhere to her instructions, and waited in the shrubberies till the moment when she should call him. This she duly did about three o'clock that day, leading him in by a garden door, and upstairs to the nursery where the child lay. He was in his little cot, breathing calmly, his arm thrown over his head, and his silken curls crushed into

the pillow. His father, now almost to be pitied, bent over him, and a tear from his eye wetted the coverlet.

She held up a warning finger as he lowered his mouth to the lips of the boy.

'But oh, why not?' implored he.

'Very well, then,' said she, relenting. 'But as gently as possible.'

He kissed the child without waking him, turned, gave him a last look, and followed her out of the chamber, when she conducted him off the premises by the way he had come.

But this remedy for his sadness of heart at being a stranger to his own son, had the effect of intensifying the malady; for while originally, not knowing or having ever seen the boy, he had loved him vaguely and imaginatively only, he now became attached to him in flesh and bone, as any parent might; and the feeling that he could at best only see his child at the rarest and most cursory moments, if at all, drove him into a state of distraction which threatened

to overthrow his promise to the boy's mother to keep out of his sight.

But such was his chivalrous respect for Lady Icenway, and his regret at having ever deceived her, that he schooled his poor heart into submission. Owing to his loneliness, all the fervour of which he was capable and that was much flowed now in the channel of parental and marital love for a child who did not know him, and a woman who had ceased to love him.

At length this singular punishment became such a torture to the poor foreigner that he resolved to lessen it at all hazards, compatible with punctilious care for the name of the lady his former wife, to whom his attachment seemed to increase in proportion to her punitive treatment of him. At one time of his life he had taken great interest in tulip-culture, as well as gardening in general; and since the ruin of his fortunes, and his arrival in England, he had made of his knowledge a precarious income in the hot-houses of nurserymen and others. With the new idea in

his head he applied himself zealously to the business, till he acquired in a few months great skill in horticulture. Waiting till the noble lord, his lady's husband, had room for an under-gardener of a general sort, he offered himself for the place, and was engaged immediately by reason of his civility and intelligence, before Lady Icenway knew anything of the matter. Much therefore did he surprise her when she found him in the conservatories of her mansion a week or two after his arrival. The punishment of instant dismissal, with which at first she haughtily threatened him, my lady thought fit, on reflection, not to enforce. While he served her thus she knew he would not harm her by a word, while, if he were expelled, chagrin might induce him to reveal in a moment of exasperation what kind treatment would assist him to conceal.

So he was allowed to remain on the premises, and had for his residence a little cottage by the garden-wall which had been the domicile of some of his predecessors in the same occupation. Here he lived absolutely alone, and spent

much of his leisure in reading, but the greater part in watching the windows and lawns of his lady's house for glimpses of the form of the child. It was for that child's sake that he abandoned the tenets of the Roman Catholic Church in which he had been reared, and became the most regular attendant at the services in the parish place of worship hard by, where, sitting behind the pew of my lady, my lord, and his stepson, the gardener could pensively study the traits and movements of the youngster at only a few feet distance, without suspicion or hindrance.

He filled his post for more than two years with a pleasure to himself which, though mournful, was soothing, his lady never forgiving him, or allowing him to be anything more than 'the gardener' to her child, though once or twice the boy said, 'That gardener's eyes are so sad! Why does he look so sadly at me?' He sunned himself in her scornfulness as if it were love, and his ears drank in her curt monosyllables as though they were rhapsodies of endearment. Strangely enough, the coldness with which

she treated her foreigner began to be the conduct of Lord Icenway towards herself. It was a matter of great anxiety to him that there should be a lineal successor to the title, yet no sign of that successor appeared. One day he complained to her quite roughly of his fate. 'All will go to that dolt of a cousin!' he cried. 'I'd sooner see my name and place at the bottom of the sea!'

The lady soothed him and fell into thought, and did not recriminate. But one day, soon after, she went down to the cottage of the gardener to inquire how he was getting on, for he had been ailing of late, though, as was supposed, not seriously. Though she often visited the poor, she had never entered her under-gardener's home before, and was much surprised even grieved and dismayed to find that he was too ill to rise from his bed. She went back to her mansion and returned with some delicate soup, that she might have a reason for seeing him.

His condition was so feeble and alarming, and his face so thin, that it quite shocked her softening heart, and gazing

upon him she said, 'You must get well you must! I have been hard with you I know it. I will not be so again.'

The sick and dying man for he was dying indeed took her hand and pressed it to his lips. 'Too late, my darling, too late!' he murmured.

'But you **MUST NOT** die! Oh, you must not!' she said. And on an impulse she bent down and whispered some words to him, blushing as she had blushed in her maiden days.

He replied by a faint wan smile. 'Time was! . . . but that's past!' he said, 'I must die!'

And die he did, a few days later, as the sun was going down behind the garden-wall. Her harshness seemed to come trebly home to her then, and she remorsefully exclaimed against herself in secret and alone. Her one desire now was to erect some tribute to his memory, without its being recognized as her handiwork. In the completion of this scheme there arrived a few months later a handsome stained- glass window for the church; and



when it was unpacked and in course of erection Lord Icenway strolled into the building with his wife.

"Erected to his memory by his grieving widow," he said, reading the legend on the glass. 'I didn't know that he had a wife; I've never seen her.'

'Oh yes, you must have, Icenway; only you forget,' replied his lady blandly. 'But she didn't live with him, and was seldom seen visiting him, because there were differences between them; which, as is usually the case, makes her all the more sorry now.'

'And go ruining herself by this expensive ruby-and-azure glass- design.'

'She is not poor, they say.'

As Lord Icenway grew older he became crustier and crustier, and whenever he set eyes on his wife's boy by her other husband he would burst out morosely, saying,

"Tis a very odd thing, my lady, that you could oblige your first husband, and couldn't oblige me.'

'Ah! if I had only thought of it sooner!' she

murmured.

'What?' said he.

'Nothing, dearest,' replied Lady Icenway.

The Colonel was the first to comment upon the Churchwarden's tale, by saying that the fate of the poor fellow was rather a hard one.

The gentleman-tradesman could not see that his fate was at all too hard for him. He was legally nothing to her, and he had served her shamefully. If he had been really her husband it would have stood differently.

The Bookworm remarked that Lord Icenway seemed to have been a very unsuspicious man, with which view a fat member with a crimson face agreed. It was true his wife was a very close-mouthed personage, which made a difference. If she had spoken out recklessly her lord might have been suspicious enough, as in the case of that lady who lived at Stapleford Park in their great-grandfathers' time. Though there, to be sure, considerations arose which made her husband view matters with much philosophy.

A few of the members doubted the possibility of this.

The crimson man, who was a retired maltster of comfortable means, ventru, and short in stature, cleared his throat, blew off his superfluous breath, and proceeded to give the instance before alluded to of such possibility, first apologizing for his heroine's lack of a title, it never having been his good fortune to know many of the nobility. To his style of narrative the following is only an approximation.

### SQUIRE PETRICK'S LADY

By the Crimson Maltster

Folk who are at all acquainted with the traditions of Stapleford Park will not need to be told that in the middle of the last century it was owned by that trump of mortgagees, Timothy Petrick, whose skill in gaining possession of fair estates by granting sums of money on their title-deeds has seldom if ever been equalled in our part of England. Timothy was a lawyer by profession, and agent to several noblemen, by which means his special line of

business became opened to him by a sort of revelation. It is said that a relative of his, a very deep thinker, who afterwards had the misfortune to be transported for life for mistaken notions on the signing of a will, taught him considerable legal lore, which he creditably resolved never to throw away for the benefit of other people, but to reserve it entirely for his own.

However, I have nothing in particular to say about his early and active days, but rather of the time when, an old man, he had become the owner of vast estates by the means I have signified among them the great manor of Stapleford, on which he lived, in the splendid old mansion now pulled down; likewise estates at Marlott, estates near Sherton Abbas, nearly all the borough of Millpool, and many properties near Ivell. Indeed, I can't call to mind half his landed possessions, and I don't know that it matters much at this time of day, seeing that he's been dead and gone many years. It is said that when he bought an estate he would not decide to pay the price till he had walked over

every single acre with his own two feet, and prodded the soil at every point with his own spud, to test its quality, which, if we regard the extent of his properties, must have been a stiff business for him.

At the time I am speaking of he was a man over eighty, and his son was dead; but he had two grandsons, the eldest of whom, his namesake, was married, and was shortly expecting issue. Just then the grandfather was taken ill, for death, as it seemed, considering his age. By his will the old man had created an entail, devising the whole of the estates to his elder grandson and his issue male, failing which, to his younger grandson and his issue male, failing which, to remoter relatives, who need not be mentioned now.

While old Timothy Petrick was lying ill, his elder grandson's wife, Annetta, gave birth to her expected child, who, as fortune would have it, was a son. Timothy, her husband, through sprung of a scheming family, was no great schemer himself; he was the single one of the Petricks then living whose heart had ever been greatly moved by

sentiments which did not run in the groove of ambition; and on this account he had not married well, as the saying is; his wife having been the daughter of a family of no better beginnings than his own; that is to say, her father was a country townsman of the professional class. But she was a very pretty woman, by all accounts, and her husband had seen, courted, and married her in a high tide of infatuation, after a very short acquaintance, and with very little knowledge of her heart's history. He had never found reason to regret his choice as yet, and his anxiety for her recovery was great.

She was supposed to be out of danger, and herself and the child progressing well, when there was a change for the worse, and she sank so rapidly that she was soon given over. When she felt that she was about to leave him, Annetta sent for her husband, and, on his speedy entry and assurance that they were alone, she made him solemnly vow to give the child every care in any circumstances that might arise, if it should please Heaven to take her. This, of course, he

readily promised. Then, after some hesitation, she told him that she could not die with a falsehood upon her soul, and dire deceit in her life; she must make a terrible confession to him before her lips were sealed for ever. She thereupon related an incident concerning the baby's parentage, which was not as he supposed.

Timothy Petrick, though a quick-feeling man, was not of a sort to show nerves outwardly; and he bore himself as heroically as he possibly could do in this trying moment of his life. That same night his wife died; and while she lay dead, and before her funeral, he hastened to the bedside of his sick grandfather, and revealed to him all that had happened: the baby's birth, his wife's confession, and her death, beseeching the aged man, as he loved him, to bestir himself now, at the eleventh hour, and alter his will so as to dish the intruder. Old Timothy, seeing matters in the same light as his grandson, required no urging against allowing anything to stand in the way of legitimate inheritance; he executed another will, limiting the entail to

Timothy his grandson, for life, and his male heirs thereafter to be born; after them to his other grandson Edward, and Edward's heirs. Thus the newly-born infant, who had been the centre of so many hopes, was cut off and scorned as none of the elect.

The old mortgagee lived but a short time after this, the excitement of the discovery having told upon him considerably, and he was gathered to his fathers like the most charitable man in his neighbourhood. Both wife and grandparent being buried, Timothy settled down to his usual life as well as he was able, mentally satisfied that he had by prompt action defeated the consequences of such dire domestic treachery as had been shown towards him, and resolving to marry a second time as soon as he could satisfy himself in the choice of a wife.

But men do not always know themselves. The embittered state of Timothy Petrick's mind bred in him by degrees such a hatred and mistrust of womankind that, though several specimens of high attractiveness came under



his eyes, he could not bring himself to the point of proposing marriage. He dreaded to take up the position of husband a second time, discerning a trap in every petticoat, and a Slough of Despond in possible heirs. 'What has happened once, when all seemed so fair, may happen again,' he said to himself. 'I'll risk my name no more.' So he abstained from marriage, and overcame his wish for a lineal descendant to follow him in the ownership of Stapleford.

Timothy had scarcely noticed the unfortunate child that his wife had borne, after arranging for a meagre fulfilment of his promise to her to take care of the boy, by having him brought up in his house. Occasionally, remembering this promise, he went and glanced at the child, saw that he was doing well, gave a few special directions, and again went his solitary way. Thus he and the child lived on in the Stapleford mansion-house till two or three years had passed by. One day he was walking in the garden, and by some accident left his snuff-box on a bench. When he came back to find it he saw the little boy standing

there; he had escaped his nurse, and was making a plaything of the box, in spite of the convulsive sneezings which the game brought in its train. Then the man with the encrusted heart became interested in the little fellow's persistence in his play under such discomforts; he looked in the child's face, saw there his wife's countenance, though he did not see his own, and fell into thought on the piteousness of childhood particularly of despised and rejected childhood, like this before him.

From that hour, try as he would to counteract the feeling, the human necessity to love something or other got the better of what he had called his wisdom, and shaped itself in a tender anxiety for the youngster Rupert. This name had been given him by his dying mother when, at her request, the child was baptized in her chamber, lest he should not survive for public baptism; and her husband had never thought of it as a name of any significance till, about this time, he learnt by accident that it was the name of the young Marquis of Christminster, son of the Duke of

Southwesterland, for whom Annetta had cherished warm feelings before her marriage. Recollecting some wandering phrases in his wife's last words, which he had not understood at the time, he perceived at last that this was the person to whom she had alluded when affording him a clue to little Rupert's history.

He would sit in silence for hours with the child, being no great speaker at the best of times; but the boy, on his part, was too ready with his tongue for any break in discourse to arise because Timothy Petrick had nothing to say. After idling away his mornings in this manner, Petrick would go to his own room and swear in long loud whispers, and walk up and down, calling himself the most ridiculous dolt that ever lived, and declaring that he would never go near the little fellow again; to which resolve he would adhere for the space perhaps of a day. Such cases are happily not new to human nature, but there never was a case in which a man more completely befocused his former self than in this.

As the child grew up, Timothy's attachment to him grew deeper, till Rupert became almost the sole object for which he lived. There had been enough of the family ambition latent in him for Timothy Petrick to feel a little envy when, some time before this date, his brother Edward had been accepted by the Honourable Harriet Mountclere, daughter of the second Viscount of that name and title; but having discovered, as I have before stated, the paternity of his boy Rupert to lurk in even a higher stratum of society, those envious feelings speedily dispersed. Indeed, the more he reflected thereon, after his brother's aristocratic marriage, the more content did he become. His late wife took softer outline in his memory, as he thought of the lofty taste she had displayed, though only a plain burgher's daughter, and the justification for his weakness in loving the child the justification that he had longed for was afforded now in the knowledge that the boy was by nature, if not by name, a representative of one of the noblest houses in England.

'She was a woman of grand instincts, after all,' he said to himself proudly. 'To fix her choice upon the immediate successor in that ducal line it was finely conceived! Had he been of low blood like myself or my relations she would scarce have deserved the harsh measure that I have dealt out to her and her offspring. How much less, then, when such grovelling tastes were farthest from her soul! The man Annetta loved was noble, and my boy is noble in spite of me.'

The afterclap was inevitable, and it soon came. 'So far,' he reasoned, 'from cutting off this child from inheritance of my estates, as I have done, I should have rejoiced in the possession of him! He is of pure stock on one side at least, whilst in the ordinary run of affairs he would have been a commoner to the bone.'

Being a man, whatever his faults, of good old beliefs in the divinity of kings and those about 'em, the more he overhauled the case in this light, the more strongly did his poor wife's conduct in improving the blood and breed of

the Petrick family win his heart. He considered what ugly, idle, hard-drinking scamps many of his own relations had been; the miserable scriveners, usurers, and pawnbrokers that he had numbered among his forefathers, and the probability that some of their bad qualities would have come out in a merely corporeal child, to give him sorrow in his old age, turn his black hairs gray, his gray hairs white, cut down every stick of timber, and Heaven knows what all, had he not, like a skilful gardener, minded his grafting and changed the sort; till at length this right-minded man fell down on his knees every night and morning and thanked God that he was not as other meanly descended fathers in such matters.

It was in the peculiar disposition of the Petrick family that the satisfaction which ultimately settled in Timothy's breast found nourishment. The Petricks had adored the nobility, and plucked them at the same time. That excellent man Izaak Walton's feelings about fish were much akin to those of old Timothy Petrick, and of his descendants in a

lesser degree, concerning the landed aristocracy. To torture and to love simultaneously is a proceeding strange to reason, but possible to practice, as these instances show.

Hence, when Timothy's brother Edward said slightly one day that Timothy's son was well enough, but that he had nothing but shops and offices in his backward perspective, while his own children, should he have any, would be far different, in possessing such a mother as the Honourable Harriet, Timothy felt a bound of triumph within him at the power he possessed of contradicting that statement if he chose.

So much was he interested in his boy in this new aspect that he now began to read up chronicles of the illustrious house ennobled as the Dukes of Southwesterland, from their very beginning in the glories of the Restoration of the blessed Charles till the year of his own time. He mentally noted their gifts from royalty, grants of lands, purchases, intermarriages, plantings and buildings; more particularly their political and military achievements,

which had been great, and their performances in art and letters, which had been by no means contemptible. He studied prints of the portraits of that family, and then, like a chemist watching a crystallization, began to examine young Rupert's face for the unfolding of those historic curves and shades that the painters Vandyke and Lely had perpetuated on canvas.

When the boy reached the most fascinating age of childhood, and his shouts of laughter ran through Stapleford House from end to end, the remorse that oppressed Timothy Petrick knew no bounds. Of all people in the world this Rupert was the one on whom he could have wished the estates to devolve; yet Rupert, by Timothy's own desperate strategy at the time of his birth, had been ousted from all inheritance of them; and, since he did not mean to remarry, the manors would pass to his brother and his brother's children, who would be nothing to him, whose boasted pedigree on one side would be nothing to his Rupert's.



Had he only left the first will of his grandfather alone!

His mind ran on the wills continually, both of which were in existence, and the first, the cancelled one, in his own possession. Night after night, when the servants were all abed, and the click of safety locks sounded as loud as a crash, he looked at that first will, and wished it had been the second and not the first.

The crisis came at last. One night, after having enjoyed the boy's company for hours, he could no longer bear that his beloved Rupert should be dispossessed, and he committed the felonious deed of altering the date of the earlier will to a fortnight later, which made its execution appear subsequent to the date of the second will already proved. He then boldly propounded the first will as the second.

His brother Edward submitted to what appeared to be not only incontestible fact, but a far more likely disposition of old Timothy's property; for, like many others, he had been much surprised at the limitations defined in the other

will, having no clue to their cause. He joined his brother Timothy in setting aside the hitherto accepted document, and matters went on in their usual course, there being no dispositions in the substituted will differing from those in the other, except such as related to a future which had not yet arrived.

The years moved on. Rupert had not yet revealed the anxiously expected historic lineaments which should foreshadow the political abilities of the ducal family aforesaid when it happened on a certain day that Timothy Petrick made the acquaintance of a well-known physician of Budmouth, who had been the medical adviser and friend of the late Mrs. Petrick's family for many years; though after Annetta's marriage, and consequent removal to Stapleford, he had seen no more of her, the neighbouring practitioner who attended the Petricks having then become her doctor as a matter of course. Timothy was impressed by the insight and knowledge disclosed in the conversation of the Budmouth physician, and the acquaintance ripening to

intimacy, the physician alluded to a form of hallucination to which Annetta's mother and grandmother had been subject that of believing in certain dreams as realities. He delicately inquired if Timothy had ever noticed anything of the sort in his wife during her lifetime; he, the physician, had fancied that he discerned germs of the same peculiarity in Annetta when he attended her in her girlhood. One explanation begat another, till the dumbfounded Timothy Petrick was persuaded in his own mind that Annetta's confession to him had been based on a delusion.

'You look down in the mouth?' said the doctor, pausing.

'A bit unmanned. 'Tis unexpected-like,' sighed Timothy.

But he could hardly believe it possible; and, thinking it best to be frank with the doctor, told him the whole story which, till now, he had never related to living man, save his dying grandfather. To his surprise, the physician informed him that such a form of delusion was precisely what he

would have expected from Annetta's antecedents at such a physical crisis in her life.

Petrick prosecuted his inquiries elsewhere; and the upshot of his labours was, briefly, that a comparison of dates and places showed irrefutably that his poor wife's assertion could not possibly have foundation in fact. The young Marquis of her tender passion a highly moral and bright-minded nobleman had gone abroad the year before Annetta's marriage, and had not returned till after her death. The young girl's love for him had been a delicate ideal dream no more.

Timothy went home, and the boy ran out to meet him; whereupon a strangely dismal feeling of discontent took possession of his soul. After all, then, there was nothing but plebeian blood in the veins of the heir to his name and estates; he was not to be succeeded by a noble-natured line. To be sure, Rupert was his son; but that glory and halo he believed him to have inherited from the ages, outshining that of his brother's children, had departed from

Rupert's brow for ever; he could no longer read history in the boy's face, and centuries of domination in his eyes.

His manner towards his son grew colder and colder from that day forward; and it was with bitterness of heart that he discerned the characteristic features of the Petricks unfolding themselves by degrees. Instead of the elegant knife-edged nose, so typical of the Dukes of Southwesterland, there began to appear on his face the broad nostril and hollow bridge of his grandfather Timothy. No illustrious line of politicians was promised a continuator in that graying blue eye, for it was acquiring the expression of the orb of a particularly objectionable cousin of his own; and, instead of the mouth-curves which had thrilled Parliamentary audiences in speeches now bound in calf in every well-ordered library, there was the bull-lip of that very uncle of his who had had the misfortune with the signature of a gentleman's will, and had been transported for life in consequence.

To think how he himself, too, had sinned in this same

matter of a will for this mere fleshly reproduction of a wretched old uncle whose very name he wished to forget! The boy's Christian name, even, was an imposture and an irony, for it implied hereditary force and brilliancy to which he plainly would never attain. The consolation of real sonship was always left him certainly; but he could not help groaning to himself, 'Why cannot a son be one's own and somebody else's likewise!'

The Marquis was shortly afterwards in the neighbourhood of Stapleford, and Timothy Petrick met him, and eyed his noble countenance admiringly. The next day, when Petrick was in his study, somebody knocked at the door.

'Who's there?'

'Rupert.'

'I'll Rupert thee, you young impostor! Say, only a poor commonplace Petrick!' his father grunted. 'Why didn't you have a voice like the Marquis's I saw yesterday?' he continued, as the lad came in. 'Why haven't you his looks,

and a way of commanding, as if you'd done it for centuries hey?'

'Why? How can you expect it, father, when I'm not related to him?'

'Ugh! Then you ought to be!' growled his father.

As the narrator paused, the surgeon, the Colonel, the historian, the Spark, and others exclaimed that such subtle and instructive psychological studies as this were precisely the tales they desired, as members of a scientific club, and begged the master-maltster to tell another curious mental delusion.

The maltster shook his head, and feared he was not genteel enough to tell another story with a sufficiently moral tone in it to suit the club; he would prefer to leave the next to a better man.

The Colonel had fallen into reflection. True it was, he observed, that the more dreamy and impulsive nature of woman engendered within her erratic fancies, which often started her on strange tracks, only to abandon them in sharp

revulsion at the dictates of her common sense sometimes with ludicrous effect. Events which had caused a lady's action to set in a particular direction might continue to enforce the same line of conduct, while she, like a mangle, would start on a sudden in a contrary course, and end where she began.

The Vice-President laughed, and applauded the Colonel, adding that there surely lurked a story somewhere behind that sentiment, if he were not much mistaken.

The Colonel fixed his face to a good narrative pose, and went on without further preamble.

### ANNA, LADY BAXBY

By the Colonel

It was in the time of the great Civil War if I should not rather, as a loyal subject, call it, with Clarendon, the Great Rebellion. It was, I say, at that unhappy period of our history, that towards the autumn of a particular year, the Parliament forces sat down before Sherton Castle with over



seven thousand foot and four pieces of cannon. The Castle, as we all know, was in that century owned and occupied by one of the Earls of Severn, and garrisoned for his assistance by a certain noble Marquis who commanded the King's troops in these parts. The said Earl, as well as the young Lord Baxby, his eldest son, were away from home just now, raising forces for the King elsewhere. But there were present in the Castle, when the besiegers arrived before it, the son's fair wife Lady Baxby, and her servants, together with some friends and near relatives of her husband; and the defence was so good and well-considered that they anticipated no great danger.

The Parliamentary forces were also commanded by a noble lord for the nobility were by no means, at this stage of the war, all on the King's side and it had been observed during his approach in the night-time, and in the morning when the reconnoitring took place, that he appeared sad and much depressed. The truth was that, by a strange freak of destiny, it had come to pass that the stronghold he was set

to reduce was the home of his own sister, whom he had tenderly loved during her maidenhood, and whom he loved now, in spite of the estrangement which had resulted from hostilities with her husband's family. He believed, too, that, notwithstanding this cruel division, she still was sincerely attached to him.

His hesitation to point his ordnance at the walls was inexplicable to those who were strangers to his family history. He remained in the field on the north side of the Castle till it occurred to him to send a messenger to his sister Anna with a letter, in which he earnestly requested her, as she valued her life, to steal out of the place by the little gate to the south, and make away in that direction to the residence of some friends.

Shortly after he saw, to his great surprise, coming from the front of the Castle walls a lady on horseback, with a single attendant. She rode straight forward into the field, and up the slope to where his army and tents were spread. It was not till she got quite near that he discerned her to be his

sister Anna; and much was he alarmed that she should have run such risk as to sally out in the face of his forces without knowledge of their proceedings, when at any moment their first discharge might have burst forth, to her own destruction in such exposure. She dismounted before she was quite close to him, and he saw that her familiar face, though pale, was not at all tearful, as it would have been in their younger days. Indeed, if the particulars as handed down are to be believed, he was in a more tearful state than she, in his anxiety about her. He called her into his tent, out of the gaze of those around; for though many of the soldiers were honest and serious-minded men, he could not bear that she who had been his dear companion in childhood should be exposed to curious observation in this her great grief.

When they were alone in the tent he clasped her in his arms, for he had not seen her since those happier days when, at the commencement of the war, her husband and himself had been of the same mind about the arbitrary conduct of

the King, and had little dreamt that they would not go to extremes together. She was the calmest of the two, it is said, and was the first to speak connectedly.

'William, I have come to you,' said she, 'but not to save myself as you suppose. Why, oh, why do you persist in supporting this disloyal cause, and grieving us so?'

'Say not that,' he replied hastily. 'If truth hides at the bottom of a well, why should you suppose justice to be in high places? I am for the right at any price. Anna, leave the Castle; you are my sister; come away, my dear, and save thy life!'

'Never!' says she. 'Do you plan to carry out this attack, and level the Castle indeed?'

'Most certainly I do,' says he. 'What meaneth this army around us if not so?'

'Then you will find the bones of your sister buried in the ruins you cause!' said she. And without another word she turned and left him.

'Anna abide with me!' he entreated. 'Blood is thicker

than water, and what is there in common between you and your husband now?'

But she shook her head and would not hear him and hastening out, mounted her horse, and returned towards the Castle as she had come. Ay, many's the time when I have been riding to hounds across that field that I have thought of that scene!

When she had quite gone down the field, and over the intervening ground, and round the bastion, so that he could no longer even see the tip of her mare's white tail, he was much more deeply moved by emotions concerning her and her welfare than he had been while she was before him. He wildly reproached himself that he had not detained her by force for her own good, so that, come what might, she would be under his protection and not under that of her husband, whose impulsive nature rendered him too open to instantaneous impressions and sudden changes of plan; he was now acting in this cause and now in that, and lacked the cool judgment necessary for the protection of a woman

in these troubled times. Her brother thought of her words again and again, and sighed, and even considered if a sister were not of more value than a principle, and if he would not have acted more naturally in throwing in his lot with hers.

The delay of the besiegers in attacking the Castle was said to be entirely owing to this distraction on the part of their leader, who remained on the spot attempting some indecisive operations, and parleying with the Marquis, then in command, with far inferior forces, within the Castle. It never occurred to him that in the meantime the young Lady Baxby, his sister, was in much the same mood as himself. Her brother's familiar voice and eyes, much worn and fatigued by keeping the field, and by family distractions on account of this unhappy feud, rose upon her vision all the afternoon, and as day waned she grew more and more Parliamentary in her principles, though the only arguments which had addressed themselves to her were those of family ties.

Her husband, General Lord Baxby, had been expected to return all the day from his excursion into the east of the county, a message having been sent to him informing him of what had happened at home; and in the evening he arrived with reinforcements in unexpected numbers. Her brother retreated before these to a hill near Ivell, four or five miles off, to afford the men and himself some repose. Lord Baxby duly placed his forces, and there was no longer any immediate danger. By this time Lady Baxby's feelings were more Parliamentary than ever, and in her fancy the fagged countenance of her brother, beaten back by her husband, seemed to reproach her for heartlessness. When her husband entered her apartment, ruddy and boisterous, and full of hope, she received him but sadly; and upon his casually uttering some slighting words about her brother's withdrawal, which seemed to convey an imputation upon his courage, she resented them, and retorted that he, Lord Baxby himself, had been against the Court-party at first, where it would be much more to his

credit if he were at present, and showing her brother's consistency of opinion, instead of supporting the lying policy of the King for the sake of a barren principle of loyalty, which was but an empty expression when a King was not at one with his people. The dissension grew bitter between them, reaching to little less than a hot quarrel, both being quick-tempered souls.

Lord Baxby was weary with his long day's march and other excitements, and soon retired to bed. His lady followed some time after. Her husband slept profoundly, but not so she; she sat brooding by the window-slit, and lifting the curtain looked forth upon the hills without.

In the silence between the footfalls of the sentinels she could hear faint sounds of her brother's camp on the distant hills, where the soldiery had hardly settled as yet into their bivouac since their evening's retreat. The first frosts of autumn had touched the grass, and shrivelled the more delicate leaves of the creepers; and she thought of William sleeping on the chilly ground, under the strain of these



hardships. Tears flooded her eyes as she returned to her husband's imputations upon his courage, as if there could be any doubt of Lord William's courage after what he had done in the past days.

Lord Baxby's long and reposeful breathings in his comfortable bed vexed her now, and she came to a determination on an impulse. Hastily lighting a taper, she wrote on a scrap of paper:

'Blood is thicker than water, dear William I will come;' and with this in her hand, she went to the door of the room, and out upon the stairs; on second thoughts turning back for a moment, to put on her husband's hat and cloak not the one he was daily wearing that if seen in the twilight she might at a casual glance appear as some lad or hanger-on of one of the household women; thus accoutred she descended a flight of circular stairs, at the bottom of which was a door opening upon the terrace towards the west, in the direction of her brother's position. Her object was to slip out without the sentry seeing her, get to the stables, arouse one of the

varlets, and send him ahead of her along the highway with the note to warn her brother of her approach, to throw in her lot with his.

She was still in the shadow of the wall on the west terrace, waiting for the sentinel to be quite out of the way, when her ears were greeted by a voice, saying, from the adjoining shade

'Here I be!'

The tones were the tones of a woman. Lady Baxby made no reply, and stood close to the wall.

'My Lord Baxby,' the voice continued; and she could recognize in it the local accent of some girl from the little town of Sherton, close at hand. 'I be tired of waiting, my dear Lord Baxby! I was afeard you would never come!'

Lady Baxby flushed hot to her toes.

'How the wench loves him!' she said to herself, reasoning from the tones of the voice, which were plaintive and sweet and tender as a bird's. She changed from the home-hating truant to the strategic wife in one moment.

'Hist!' she said.

'My lord, you told me ten o'clock, and 'tis near twelve now,' continues the other. 'How could ye keep me waiting so if you love me as you said? I should have stuck to my lover in the Parliament troops if it had not been for thee, my dear lord!'

There was not the least doubt that Lady Baxby had been mistaken for her husband by this intriguing damsel. Here was a pretty underhand business! Here were sly manoeuvrings! Here was faithlessness! Here was a precious assignation surprised in the midst! Her wicked husband, whom till this very moment she had ever deemed the soul of good faith how could he!

Lady Baxby precipitately retreated to the door in the turret, closed it, locked it, and ascended one round of the staircase, where there was a loophole. 'I am not coming! I, Lord Baxby, despise ye and all your wanton tribe!' she hissed through the opening; and then crept upstairs, as firmly rooted in Royalist principles as any man in the

Castle.

Her husband still slept the sleep of the weary, well-fed, and well- drunken, if not of the just; and Lady Baxby quickly disrobed herself without assistance being, indeed, supposed by her woman to have retired to rest long ago. Before lying down, she noiselessly locked the door and placed the key under her pillow. More than that, she got a staylace, and, creeping up to her lord, in great stealth tied the lace in a tight knot to one of his long locks of hair, attaching the other end of the lace to the bedpost; for, being tired herself now, she feared she might sleep heavily; and, if her husband should wake, this would be a delicate hint that she had discovered all.

It is added that, to make assurance trebly sure, her gentle ladyship, when she had lain down to rest, held her lord's hand in her own during the whole of the night. But this is old-wives' gossip, and not corroborated. What Lord Baxby thought and said when he awoke the next morning, and found himself so strangely tethered, is likewise only

matter of conjecture; though there is no reason to suppose that his rage was great. The extent of his culpability as regards the intrigue was this much; that, while halting at a cross- road near Sherton that day, he had flirted with a pretty young woman, who seemed nothing loth, and had invited her to the Castle terrace after dark an invitation which he quite forgot on his arrival home.

The subsequent relations of Lord and Lady Baxby were not again greatly embittered by quarrels, so far as is known; though the husband's conduct in later life was occasionally eccentric, and the vicissitudes of his public career culminated in long exile. The siege of the Castle was not regularly undertaken till two or three years later than the time I have been describing, when Lady Baxby and all the women therein, except the wife of the then Governor, had been removed to safe distance. That memorable siege of fifteen days by Fairfax, and the surrender of the old place on an August evening, is matter of history, and need not be told by me.

The Man of Family spoke approvingly across to the Colonel when the Club had done smiling, declaring that the story was an absolutely faithful page of history, as he had good reason to know, his own people having been engaged in that well-known scrimmage. He asked if the Colonel had ever heard the equally well-authenticated, though less martial tale of a certain Lady Penelope, who lived in the same century, and not a score of miles from the same place?

The Colonel had not heard it, nor had anybody except the local historian; and the inquirer was induced to proceed forthwith.

## THE LADY PENELOPE

By the man of Family

In going out of Casterbridge by the low-lying road which eventually conducts to the town of Ivell, you see on the right hand an ivied manor-house, flanked by battlemented towers, and more than usually distinguished

by the size of its many mullioned windows. Though still of good capacity, the building is much reduced from its original grand proportions; it has, moreover, been shorn of the fair estate which once appertained to its lord, with the exception of a few acres of park-land immediately around the mansion. This was formerly the seat of the ancient and knightly family of the Drenguards, or Drenkhards, now extinct in the male line, whose name, according to the local chronicles, was interpreted to mean *Strenuus Miles*, vel *Potator*, though certain members of the family were averse to the latter signification, and a duel was fought by one of them on that account, as is well known. With this, however, we are not now concerned.

In the early part of the reign of the first King James, there was visiting near this place of the Drenguards a lady of noble family and extraordinary beauty. She was of the purest descent; ah, there's seldom such blood nowadays as hers! She possessed no great wealth, it was said, but was sufficiently endowed. Her beauty was so perfect, and her

manner so entrancing, that suitors seemed to spring out of the ground wherever she went, a sufficient cause of anxiety to the Countess her mother, her only living parent. Of these there were three in particular, whom neither her mother's complaints of prematurity, nor the ready raillery of the maiden herself, could effectually put off. The said gallants were a certain Sir John Gale, a Sir William Hervy, and the well-known Sir George Drengard, one of the Drengard family before-mentioned. They had, curiously enough, all been equally honoured with the distinction of knighthood, and their schemes for seeing her were manifold, each fearing that one of the others would steal a march over himself. Not content with calling, on every imaginable excuse, at the house of the relative with whom she sojourned, they intercepted her in rides and in walks; and if any one of them chanced to surprise another in the act of paying her marked attentions, the encounter often ended in an altercation of great violence. So heated and impassioned, indeed, would they become, that the lady



hardly felt herself safe in their company at such times, notwithstanding that she was a brave and buxom damsel, not easily put out, and with a daring spirit of humour in her composition, if not of coquetry.

At one of these altercations, which had place in her relative's grounds, and was unusually bitter, threatening to result in a duel, she found it necessary to assert herself. Turning haughtily upon the pair of disputants, she declared that whichever should be the first to break the peace between them, no matter what the provocation, that man should never be admitted to her presence again; and thus would she effectually stultify the aggressor by making the promotion of a quarrel a distinct bar to its object.

While the two knights were wearing rather a crest-fallen appearance at her reprimand, the third, never far off, came upon the scene, and she repeated her caveat to him also. Seeing, then, how great was the concern of all at her peremptory mood, the lady's manner softened, and she said with a roguish smile

'Have patience, have patience, you foolish men! Only bide your time quietly, and, in faith, I will marry you all in turn!'

They laughed heartily at this sally, all three together, as though they were the best of friends; at which she blushed, and showed some embarrassment, not having realized that her arch jest would have sounded so strange when uttered. The meeting which resulted thus, however, had its good effect in checking the bitterness of their rivalry; and they repeated her speech to their relatives and acquaintance with a hilarious frequency and publicity that the lady little divined, or she might have blushed and felt more embarrassment still.

In the course of time the position resolved itself, and the beauteous Lady Penelope made up her mind; her choice being the eldest of the three knights, Sir George Drengard, owner of the mansion aforesaid, which thereupon became her home; and her husband being a pleasant man, and his family, though not so noble, of as

good repute as her own, all things seemed to show that she had reckoned wisely in honouring him with her preference.

But what may lie behind the still and silent veil of the future none can foretell. In the course of a few months the husband of her choice died of his convivialities , and the Lady Penelope was left alone as mistress of his house. By this time she had apparently quite forgotten her careless declaration to her lovers collectively; but the lovers themselves had not forgotten it; and, as she would now be free to take a second one of them, Sir John Gale appeared at her door as early in her widowhood as it was proper and seemly to do so.

She gave him little encouragement; for, of the two remaining, her best beloved was Sir William, of whom, if the truth must be told, she had often thought during her short married life. But he had not yet reappeared. Her heart began to be so much with him now that she contrived to convey to him, by indirect hints through his friends, that she would not be displeased by a renewal of his

former attentions. Sir William, however, misapprehended her gentle signalling, and from excellent, though mistaken motives of delicacy, delayed to intrude himself upon her for a long time. Meanwhile Sir John, now created a baronet, was unremitting, and she began to grow somewhat piqued at the backwardness of him she secretly desired to be forward.

'Never mind,' her friends said jestingly to her 'never mind; why hesitate upon the order of them? Take 'em as they come.'

This vexed her still more, and regretting deeply, as she had often done, that such a careless speech should ever have passed her lips, she fairly broke down under Sir John's importunity, and accepted his hand. They were married on a fine spring morning, about the very time at which the unfortunate Sir William discovered her preference for him, and was beginning to hasten home from a foreign court to declare his unaltered devotion to her. On his arrival in England he learnt the sad truth.

If Sir William suffered at her precipitancy under what she had deemed his neglect, the Lady Penelope herself suffered more. She had not long been the wife of Sir John Gale before he showed a disposition to retaliate upon her for the trouble and delay she had put him to in winning her. With increasing frequency he would tell her that, as far as he could perceive, she was an article not worth such labour as he had bestowed in obtaining it, and such snubbings as he had taken from his rivals on the same account. These and other cruel things he repeated till he made the lady weep sorely, and wellnigh broke her spirit, though she had formerly been such a mettlesome dame. By degrees it became perceptible to all her friends that her life was a very unhappy one; and the fate of the fair woman seemed yet the harder in that it was her own stately mansion, left to her sole use by her first husband, which her second had entered into and was enjoying, his being but a mean and meagre erection.

But such is the flippancy of friends that when she met

them, and secretly confided her grief to their ears, they would say cheerily, 'Lord, never mind, my dear; there's a third to come yet!' at which maladroit remark she would show much indignation, and tell them they should know better than to trifle on so solemn a theme. Yet that the poor lady would have been only too happy to be the wife of the third, instead of Sir John whom she had taken, was painfully obvious, and much she was blamed for her foolish choice by some people. Sir William, however, had returned to foreign cities on learning the news of her marriage, and had never been heard of since.

Two or three years of suffering were passed by Lady Penelope as the despised and chidden wife of this man Sir John, amid regrets that she had so greatly mistaken him, and sighs for one whom she thought never to see again, till it chanced that her husband fell sick of some slight ailment. One day after this, when she was sitting in his room, looking from the window upon the expanse in front, she beheld, approaching the house on foot, a form she

seemed to know well. Lady Penelope withdrew silently from the sickroom, and descended to the hall, whence, through the doorway, she saw entering between the two round towers, which at that time flanked the gateway, Sir William Hervy, as she had surmised, but looking thin and travel-worn. She advanced into the courtyard to meet him.

'I was passing through Casterbridge,' he said, with faltering deference, 'and I walked out to ask after your ladyship's health. I felt that I could do no less; and, of course, to pay my respects to your good husband, my heretofore acquaintance . . . But oh, Penelope, th'st look sick and sorry!'

'I am heartsick, that's all,' said she.

They could see in each other an emotion which neither wished to express, and they stood thus a long time with tears in their eyes.

'He does not treat 'ee well, I hear,' said Sir William in a low voice. 'May God in Heaven forgive him; but it is asking a great deal!'

'Hush, hush!' said she hastily.

'Nay, but I will speak what I may honestly say,' he answered. 'I am not under your roof, and my tongue is free. Why didst not wait for me, Penelope, or send to me a more overt letter? I would have travelled night and day to come!'

'Too late, William; you must not ask it,' said she, endeavouring to quiet him as in old times. 'My husband just now is unwell. He will grow better in a day or two, maybe. You must call again and see him before you leave Casterbridge.'

As she said this their eyes met. Each was thinking of her lightsome words about taking the three men in turn; each thought that two-thirds of that promise had been fulfilled. But, as if it were unpleasant to her that this recollection should have arisen, she spoke again quickly: 'Come again in a day or two, when my husband will be well enough to see you.'

Sir William departed without entering the house, and she returned to Sir John's chamber. He, rising from his



pillow, said, 'To whom hast been talking, wife, in the courtyard? I heard voices there.'

She hesitated, and he repeated the question more impatiently.

'I do not wish to tell you now,' said she.

'But I wooll know!' said he.

Then she answered, 'Sir William Hervy.'

'By G- I thought as much!' cried Sir John, drops of perspiration standing on his white face. 'A skulking villain! A sick man's ears are keen, my lady. I heard that they were lover-like tones, and he called 'ee by your Christian name. These be your intrigues, my lady, when I am off my legs awhile!'

'On my honour,' cried she, 'you do me a wrong. I swear I did not know of his coming!'

'Swear as you will,' said Sir John, 'I don't believe 'ee.' And with this he taunted her, and worked himself into a greater passion, which much increased his illness. His lady sat still, brooding. There was that upon her face which had

seldom been there since her marriage; and she seemed to think anew of what she had so lightly said in the days of her freedom, when her three lovers were one and all coveting her hand. 'I began at the wrong end of them,' she murmured. 'My God that did I!'

'What?' said he.

'A trifle,' said she. 'I spoke to myself only.'

It was somewhat strange that after this day, while she went about the house with even a sadder face than usual, her churlish husband grew worse; and what was more, to the surprise of all, though to the regret of few, he died a fortnight later. Sir William had not called upon him as he had promised, having received a private communication from Lady Penelope, frankly informing him that to do so would be inadvisable, by reason of her husband's temper.

Now when Sir John was gone, and his remains carried to his family burying-place in another part of England, the lady began in due time to wonder whither Sir William had betaken himself. But she had been cured of precipitancy ,

and was prepared to wait her whole lifetime a widow if the said Sir William should not reappear. Her life was now passed mostly within the walls, or in promenading between the pleasaunce and the bowling-green; and she very seldom went even so far as the high road which then skirted the grounds on the north, though it has now, and for many years, been diverted to the south side. Her patience was rewarded ; for one day, many months after her second husband's death, a messenger arrived at her gate with the intelligence that Sir William Hervy was again in Casterbridge, and would be glad to know if it were her pleasure that he should wait upon her.

It need hardly be said that permission was joyfully granted, and within two hours her lover stood before her, a more thoughtful man than formerly, but in all essential respects the same man, generous, modest to diffidence, and sincere. The reserve which womanly decorum threw over her manner was but too obviously artificial, and when he said 'the ways of Providence are strange,' and added after

a moment, 'and merciful likewise,' she could not conceal her agitation, and burst into tears upon his neck.

'But this is too soon,' she said, starting back.

'But no,' said he. 'You are eleven months gone in widowhood, and it is not as if Sir John had been a good husband to you.'

His visits grew pretty frequent now, as may well be guessed, and in a month or two he began to urge her to an early union. But she counselled a little longer delay.

'Why?' said he. 'Surely I have waited long! Life is short; we are getting older every day, and I am the last of the three.'

'Yes,' said the lady frankly. 'And that is why I would not have you hasten. Our marriage may seem so strange to everybody, after my unlucky remark on that occasion we know so well, and which so many others know likewise, thanks to talebearers.'

On this representation he conceded a little space, for the sake of her good name. But the destined day of their

marriage at last arrived, and it was a gay time for the villagers and all concerned, and the bells in the parish church rang from noon till night. Thus at last she was united to the man who had loved her the most tenderly of them all, who but for his reticence might perhaps have been the first to win her. Often did he say to himself; 'How wondrous that her words should have been fulfilled! Many a truth hath been spoken in jest, but never a more remarkable one!' The noble lady herself preferred not to dwell on the coincidence, a certain shyness, if not shame, crossing her fair face at any allusion thereto.

But people will have their say, sensitive souls or none, and their sayings on this third occasion took a singular shape. 'Surely,' they whispered, 'there is something more than chance in this . . . The death of the first was possibly natural; but what of the death of the second, who ill-used her, and whom, loving the third so desperately, she must have wished out of the way?'

Then they pieced together sundry trivial incidents of

Sir John's illness, and dwelt upon the indubitable truth that he had grown worse after her lover's unexpected visit; till a very sinister theory was built up as to the hand she may have had in Sir John's premature demise. But nothing of this suspicion was said openly, for she was a lady of noble birth nobler, indeed, than either of her husbands and what people suspected they feared to express in formal accusation.

The mansion that she occupied had been left to her for so long a time as she should choose to reside in it, and, having a regard for the spot, she had coaxed Sir William to remain there. But in the end it was unfortunate; for one day, when in the full tide of his happiness, he was walking among the willows near the gardens, where he overheard a conversation between some basket-makers who were cutting the osiers for their use. In this fatal dialogue the suspicions of the neighbouring townsfolk were revealed to him for the first time.

'A cupboard close to his bed, and the key in her pocket.

Ah!' said one.

'And a blue phial therein h'm!' said another.

'And spurge-laurel leaves among the hearth-ashes.

Oh-oh!' said a third.

On his return home Sir William seemed to have aged years. But he said nothing; indeed, it was a thing impossible. And from that hour a ghastly estrangement began. She could not understand it, and simply waited. One day he said, however, 'I must go abroad.'

'Why?' said she. 'William, have I offended you?'

'No,' said he; 'but I must go.'

She could coax little more out of him, and in itself there was nothing unnatural in his departure, for he had been a wanderer from his youth. In a few days he started off, apparently quite another man than he who had rushed to her side so devotedly a few months before.

It is not known when, or how, the rumours, which were so thick in the atmosphere around her, actually reached the Lady Penelope's ears, but that they did reach

her there is no doubt. It was impossible that they should not; the district teemed with them; they rustled in the air like night-birds of evil omen. Then a reason for her husband's departure occurred to her appalled mind, and a loss of health became quickly apparent. She dwindled thin in the face, and the veins in her temples could all be distinctly traced. An inner fire seemed to be withering her away. Her rings fell off her fingers, and her arms hung like the flails of the threshers, though they had till lately been so round and so elastic. She wrote to her husband repeatedly, begging him to return to her; but he, being in extreme and wretched doubt, moreover, knowing nothing of her ill-health, and never suspecting that the rumours had reached her also, deemed absence best, and postponed his return awhile, giving various good reasons for his delay.

At length, however, when the Lady Penelope had given birth to a still-born child, her mother, the Countess, addressed a letter to Sir William, requesting him to come back to her if he wished to see her alive; since she was



wasting away of some mysterious disease, which seemed to be rather mental than physical. It was evident that his mother-in-law knew nothing of the secret, for she lived at a distance; but Sir William promptly hastened home, and stood beside the bed of his now dying wife.

'Believe me, William,' she said when they were alone, 'I am innocent innocent!'

'Of what?' said he. 'Heaven forbid that I should accuse you of anything!'

'But you do accuse me silently!' she gasped. 'I could not write thereon and ask you to hear me. It was too much, too degrading. But would that I had been less proud! They suspect me of poisoning him, William! But, oh my dear husband, I am innocent of that wicked crime! He died naturally. I loved you too soon; but that was all!'

Nothing availed to save her. The worm had gnawed too far into her heart before Sir William's return for anything to be remedial now; and in a few weeks she breathed her last. After her death the people spoke louder,

and her conduct became a subject of public discussion. A little later on, the physician, who had attended the late Sir John, heard the rumour, and came down from the place near London to which he latterly had retired, with the express purpose of calling upon Sir William Hervy, now staying in Casterbridge.

He stated that, at the request of a relative of Sir John's, who wished to be assured on the matter by reason of its suddenness, he had, with the assistance of a surgeon, made a private examination of Sir John's body immediately after his decease, and found that it had resulted from purely natural causes. Nobody at this time had breathed a suspicion of foul play, and therefore nothing was said which might afterwards have established her innocence.

It being thus placed beyond doubt that this beautiful and noble lady had been done to death by a vile scandal that was wholly unfounded, her husband was stung with a dreadful remorse at the share he had taken in her

misfortunes, and left the country anew, this time never to return alive. He survived her but a few years, and his body was brought home and buried beside his wife's under the tomb which is still visible in the parish church. Until lately there was a good portrait of her, in weeds for her first husband, with a cross in her hand, at the ancestral seat of her family, where she was much pitied, as she deserved to be. Yet there were some severe enough to say and these not unjust persons in other respects that though unquestionably innocent of the crime imputed to her, she had shown an unseemly wantonness in contracting three marriages in such rapid succession; that the untrue suspicion might have been ordered by Providence as a punishment for her self-indulgence. Upon that point I have no opinion to offer.

The reverend the Vice-President, however, the tale being ended, offered as his opinion that her fate ought to be quite clearly recognized as a punishment. So thought the Churchwarden, and also the quiet gentleman sitting near.

The latter knew many other instances in point, one of which could be narrated in a few words.

## THE DUCHESS OF HAMPTONSHIRE

By the Quiet Gentleman

Some fifty years ago, the then Duke of Hamptonshire, fifth of that title, was incontestibly the head man in his county, and particularly in the neighbourhood of Batton. He came of the ancient and loyal family of Saxelbye, which, before its ennoblement, had numbered many knightly and ecclesiastical celebrities in its male line. It would have occupied a painstaking county historian a whole afternoon to take rubbings of the numerous effigies and heraldic devices graven to their memory on the brasses, tablets, and altar-tombs in the aisle of the parish-church. The Duke himself, however, was a man little attracted by ancient chronicles in stone and metal, even when they concerned his own beginnings. He allowed his mind to linger by preference on the many graceless and

unedifying pleasures which his position placed at his command. He could on occasion close the mouths of his dependents by a good bomb-like oath, and he argued doggedly with the parson on the virtues of cock-fighting and baiting the bull.

This nobleman's personal appearance was somewhat impressive. His complexion was that of the copper-beech tree. His frame was stalwart, though slightly stooping. His mouth was large, and he carried an unpolished sapling as his walking-stick, except when he carried a spud for cutting up any thistle he encountered on his walks. His castle stood in the midst of a park, surrounded by dusky elms, except to the southward; and when the moon shone out, the gleaming stone facade, backed by heavy boughs, was visible from the distant high road as a white spot on the surface of darkness. Though called a castle, the building was little fortified, and had been erected with greater eye to internal convenience than those crannied places of defence to which the name strictly appertains. It was a castellated mansion as

regular as a chessboard on its ground-plan, ornamented with make-believe bastions and machicolations, behind which were stacks of battlemented chimneys. On still mornings, at the fire-lighting hour, when ghostly house- maids stalk the corridors, and thin streaks of light through the shutter-chinks lend startling winks and smiles to ancestors on canvas, twelve or fifteen thin stems of blue smoke sprouted upwards from these chimney-tops, and spread into a flat canopy on high. Around the site stretched ten thousand acres of good, fat, unimpeachable soil, plentiful in glades and lawns wherever visible from the castle-windows, and merging in homely arable where screened from the too curious eye by ingeniously-contrived plantations.

Some way behind the owner of all this came the second man in the parish, the rector, the Honourable and Reverend Mr. Oldbourne, a widower, over stiff and stern for a clergyman, whose severe white neckcloth, well-kept gray hair, and right-lined face betokened none of those

sympathetic traits whereon depends so much of a parson's power to do good among his fellow-creatures. The last, far-removed man of the series altogether the Neptune of these local primaries was the curate, Mr. Alwyn Hill. He was a handsome young deacon with curly hair, dreamy eyes so dreamy that to look long into them was like ascending and floating among summer clouds a complexion as fresh as a flower, and a chin absolutely beardless. Though his age was about twenty-five, he looked not much over nineteen.

The rector had a daughter called Emmeline, of so sweet and simple a nature that her beauty was discovered, measured, and inventoried by almost everybody in that part of the country before it was suspected by herself to exist. She had been bred in comparative solitude; a rencounter with men troubled and confused her. Whenever a strange visitor came to her father's house she slipped into the orchard and remained till he was gone, ridiculing her weakness in apostrophes, but unable to overcome it. Her

virtues lay in no resistant force of character, but in a natural inappetency for evil things, which to her were as unmeaning as joints of flesh to a herbivorous creature. Her charms of person, manner, and mind, had been clear for some time to the Antinous in orders, and no less so to the Duke, who, though scandalously ignorant of dainty phrases, ever showing a clumsy manner towards the gentler sex, and, in short, not at all a lady's man, took fire to a degree that was wellnigh terrible at sudden sight of Emmeline, a short time after she was turned seventeen.

It occurred one afternoon at the corner of a shrubbery between the castle and the rectory, where the Duke was standing to watch the heaving of a mole, when the fair girl brushed past at a distance of a few yards, in the full light of the sun, and without hat or bonnet. The Duke went home like a man who had seen a spirit. He ascended to the picture-gallery of his castle, and there passed some time in staring at the bygone beauties of his line as if he had never before considered what an important part those specimens



of womankind had played in the evolution of the Saxelbye race. He dined alone, drank rather freely, and declared to himself that Emmeline Oldbourne must be his.

Meanwhile there had unfortunately arisen between the curate and this girl some sweet and secret understanding. Particulars of the attachment remained unknown then and always, but it was plainly not approved of by her father. His procedure was cold, hard, and inexorable. Soon the curate disappeared from the parish, almost suddenly, after bitter and hard words had been heard to pass between him and the rector one evening in the garden, intermingled with which, like the cries of the dying in the din of battle, were the beseeching sobs of a woman. Not long after this it was announced that a marriage between the Duke and Miss Oldbourne was to be solemnized at a surprisingly early date.

The wedding-day came and passed; and she was a Duchess. Nobody seemed to think of the ousted man during the day, or else those who thought of him concealed their

meditations. Some of the less subservient ones were disposed to speak in a jocular manner of the august husband and wife, others to make correct and pretty speeches about them, according as their sex and nature dictated. But in the evening, the ringers in the belfry, with whom Alwyn had been a favourite, eased their minds a little concerning the gentle young man, and the possible regrets of the woman he had loved.

'Don't you see something wrong in it all?' said the third bell as he wiped his face. 'I know well enough where she would have liked to stable her horses to-night, when they have done their journey.'

'That is, you would know if you could tell where young Mr. Hill is living, which is known to none in the parish.'

'Except to the lady that this ring o' grandsire triples is in honour of.'

Yet these friendly cottagers were at this time far from suspecting the real dimensions of Emmeline's misery, nor

was it clear even to those who came into much closer communion with her than they, so well had she concealed her heart-sickness. But bride and bridegroom had not long been home at the castle when the young wife's unhappiness became plainly enough perceptible. Her maids and men said that she was in the habit of turning to the wainscot and shedding stupid scalding tears at a time when a right-minded lady would have been overhauling her wardrobe. She prayed earnestly in the great church-pew, where she sat lonely and insignificant as a mouse in a cell, instead of counting her rings, falling asleep, or amusing herself in silent laughter at the queer old people in the congregation, as previous beauties of the family had done in their time. She seemed to care no more for eating and drinking out of crystal and silver than from a service of earthen vessels. Her head was, in truth, full of something else; and that such was the case was only too obvious to the Duke, her husband. At first he would only taunt her for her folly in thinking of that milk-and-water parson; but as time

went on his charges took a more positive shape. He would not believe her assurance that she had in no way communicated with her former lover, nor he with her, since their parting in the presence of her father. This led to some strange scenes between them which need not be detailed; their result was soon to take a catastrophic shape.

One dark quiet evening, about two months after the marriage, a man entered the gate admitting from the highway to the park and avenue which ran up to the house. He arrived within two hundred yards of the walls, when he left the gravelled drive and drew near to the castle by a roundabout path leading into a shrubbery. Here he stood still. In a few minutes the strokes of the castle-clock resounded, and then a female figure entered the same secluded nook from an opposite direction. There the two indistinct persons leapt together like a pair of dewdrops on a leaf; and then they stood apart, facing each other, the woman looking down.

'Emmeline, you begged me to come, and here I am,

Heaven forgive me!' said the man hoarsely.

'You are going to emigrate, Alwyn,' she said in broken accents. 'I have heard of it; you sail from Plymouth in three days in the Western Glory?'

'Yes. I can live in England no longer. Life is as death to me here,' says he.

'My life is even worse worse than death. Death would not have driven me to this extremity. Listen, Alwyn I have sent for you to beg to go with you, or at least to be near you to do anything so that it be not to stay here.'

'To go away with me?' he said in a startled tone.

'Yes, yes or under your direction, or by your help in some way! Don't be horrified at me you must bear with me whilst I implore it. Nothing short of cruelty would have driven me to this. I could have borne my doom in silence had I been left unmolested; but he tortures me, and I shall soon be in the grave if I cannot escape.'

To his shocked inquiry how her husband tortured her, the Duchess said that it was by jealousy. 'He tries to wring

admissions from me concerning you,' she said, 'and will not believe that I have not communicated with you since my engagement to him was settled by my father, and I was forced to agree to it.'

The poor curate said that this was the heaviest news of all. 'He has not personally ill-used you?' he asked.

'Yes,' she whispered.

'What has he done?'

She looked fearfully around, and said, sobbing: 'In trying to make me confess to what I have never done, he adopts plans I dare not describe for terrifying me into a weak state, so that I may own to anything! I resolved to write to you, as I had no other friend.' She added, with dreary irony, 'I thought I would give him some ground for his suspicion, so as not to disgrace his judgment.'

'Do you really mean, Emmeline,' he tremblingly inquired, 'that you that you want to fly with me?'

'Can you think that I would act otherwise than in earnest at such a time as this?'

He was silent for a minute or more. 'You must not go with me,' he said.

'Why?'

'It would be sin.'

'It CANNOT be sin, for I have never wanted to commit sin in my life; and it isn't likely I would begin now, when I pray every day to die and be sent to Heaven out of my misery!'

'But it is wrong, Emmeline, all the same.'

'Is it wrong to run away from the fire that scorches you?'

'It would look wrong, at any rate, in this case.'

'Alwyn, Alwyn, take me, I beseech you!' she burst out. 'It is not right in general, I know, but it is such an exceptional instance, this. Why has such a severe strain been put upon me? I was doing no harm, injuring no one, helping many people, and expecting happiness; yet trouble came. Can it be that God holds me in derision? I had no supporter I gave way; and now my life is a burden and a

shame to me . . . Oh, if you only knew how much to me this request to you is how my life is wrapped up in it, you could not deny me!

'This is almost beyond endurance Heaven support us,' he groaned. 'Emmy, you are the Duchess of Hamptonshire, the Duke of Hamptonshire's wife; you must not go with me!'

'And am I then refused? Oh, am I refused?' she cried frantically. 'Alwyn, Alwyn, do you say it indeed to me?'

'Yes, I do, dear, tender heart! I do most sadly say it. You must not go. Forgive me, for there is no alternative but refusal. Though I die, though you die, we must not fly together. It is forbidden in God's law. Good-bye, for always and ever!'

He tore himself away, hastened from the shrubbery, and vanished among the trees.

Three days after this meeting and farewell, Alwyn, his soft, handsome features stamped with a haggard hardness that ten years of ordinary wear and tear in the world could



scarcely have produced, sailed from Plymouth on a drizzling morning, in the passenger-ship Western Glory. When the land had faded behind him he mechanically endeavoured to school himself into a stoical frame of mind. His attempt, backed up by the strong moral staying power that had enabled him to resist the passionate temptation to which Emmeline, in her reckless trustfulness, had exposed him, was rewarded by a certain kind of success, though the murmuring stretch of waters whereon he gazed day after day too often seemed to be articulating to him in tones of her well-remembered voice.

He framed on his journey rules of conduct for reducing to mild proportions the feverish regrets which would occasionally arise and agitate him, when he indulged in visions of what might have been had he not hearkened to the whispers of conscience. He fixed his thoughts for so many hours a day on philosophical passages in the volumes he had brought with him, allowing himself now and then a few minutes' thought of Emmeline, with the strict yet

reluctant niggardliness of an ailing epicure proportioning the rank drinks that cause his malady. The voyage was marked by the usual incidents of a sailing-passage in those days a storm, a calm, a man overboard, a birth, and a funeral the latter sad event being one in which he, as the only clergyman on board, officiated, reading the service ordained for the purpose. The ship duly arrived at Boston early in the month following, and thence he proceeded to Providence to seek out a distant relative.

After a short stay at Providence he returned again to Boston, and by applying himself to a serious occupation made good progress in shaking off the dreary melancholy which enveloped him even now. Distracted and weakened in his beliefs by his recent experiences, he decided that he could not for a time worthily fill the office of a minister of religion, and applied for the mastership of a school. Some introductions, given him before starting, were useful now, and he soon became known as a respectable scholar and gentleman to the trustees of one of the colleges. This

ultimately led to his retirement from the school and installation in the college as Professor of rhetoric and oratory.

Here and thus he lived on, exerting himself solely because of a conscientious determination to do his duty. He passed his winter evenings in turning sonnets and elegies, often giving his thoughts voice in 'Lines to an Unfortunate Lady,' while his summer leisure at the same hour would be spent in watching the lengthening shadows from his window, and fancifully comparing them with the shades of his own life. If he walked, he mentally inquired which was the eastern quarter of the landscape, and thought of two thousand miles of water that way, and of what was beyond it. In a word he was at all spare times dreaming of her who was only a memory to him, and would probably never be more.

Nine years passed by, and under their wear and tear Alwyn Hill's face lost a great many of the attractive characteristics which had formerly distinguished it. He was

kind to his pupils and affable to all who came in contact with him; but the kernel of his life, his secret, was kept as snugly shut up as though he had been dumb. In talking to his acquaintances of England and his life there, he omitted the episode of Batton Castle and Emmeline as if it had no existence in his calendar at all. Though of towering importance to himself, it had filled but a short and small fragment of time, an ephemeral season which would have been wellnigh imperceptible, even to him, at this distance, but for the incident it enshrined.

One day, at this date, when cursorily glancing over an old English newspaper, he observed a paragraph which, short as it was, contained for him whole tomes of thrilling information rung with more passion-stirring rhythm than the collected cantos of all the poets. It was an announcement of the death of the Duke of Hamptonshire, leaving behind him a widow, but no children.

The current of Alwyn's thoughts now completely

changed. On looking again at the newspaper he found it to be one that was sent him long ago, and had been carelessly thrown aside. But for an accidental overhauling of the waste journals in his study he might not have known of the event for years. At this moment of reading the Duke had already been dead seven months. Alwyn could now no longer bind himself down to machine-made synecdoche, antithesis, and climax, being full of spontaneous specimens of all these rhetorical forms, which he dared not utter. Who shall wonder that his mind luxuriated in dreams of a sweet possibility now laid open for the first time these many years? for Emmeline was to him now as ever the one dear thing in all the world. The issue of his silent romancing was that he resolved to return to her at the very earliest moment.

But he could not abandon his professional work on the instant. He did not get really quite free from engagements till four months later; but, though suffering throes of impatience continually, he said to himself every day: 'If she has continued to love me nine years she will love me ten;

she will think the more tenderly of me when her present hours of solitude shall have done their proper work; old times will revive with the cessation of her recent experience, and every day will favour my return.'

The enforced interval soon passed, and he duly arrived in England, reaching the village of Batton on a certain winter day between twelve and thirteen months subsequent to the time of the Duke's death.

It was evening; yet such was Alwyn's impatience that he could not forbear taking, this very night, one look at the castle which Emmeline had entered as unhappy mistress ten years before. He threaded the park trees, gazed in passing at well-known outlines which rose against the dim sky, and was soon interested in observing that lively country-people, in parties of two and three, were walking before and behind him up the interlaced avenue to the castle gateway. Knowing himself to be safe from recognition, Alwyn inquired of one of these pedestrians what was going on.

'Her Grace gives her tenantry a ball to-night, to keep up the old custom of the Duke and his father before him, which she does not wish to change.'

'Indeed. Has she lived here entirely alone since the Duke's death?'

'Quite alone. But though she doesn't receive company herself, she likes the village people to enjoy themselves, and often has 'em here.'

'Kind-hearted, as always!' thought Alwyn.

On reaching the castle he found that the great gates at the tradesmen's entrance were thrown back against the wall as if they were never to be closed again; that the passages and rooms in that wing were brilliantly lighted up, some of the numerous candles guttering down over the green leaves which decorated them, and upon the silk dresses of the happy farmers' wives as they passed beneath, each on her husband's arm. Alwyn found no difficulty in marching in along with the rest, the castle being Liberty Hall to-night. He stood unobserved in a corner of the large apartment

where dancing was about to begin.

'Her Grace, though hardly out of mourning, will be sure to come down and lead off the dance with neighbour Bates,' said one.

'Who is neighbour Bates?' asked Alwyn.

'An old man she respects much the oldest of her tenant-farmers. He was seventy-eight his last birthday.'

'Ah, to be sure!' said Alwyn, at his ease. 'I remember.'

The dancers formed in line, and waited. A door opened at the farther end of the hall, and a lady in black silk came forth. She bowed, smiled, and proceeded to the top of the dance.

'Who is that lady?' said Alwyn, in a puzzled tone. 'I thought you told me that the Duchess of Hamptonshire '

'That is the Duchess,' said his informant.

'But there is another?'

'No; there is no other.'

'But she is not the Duchess of Hamptonshire who used to ' Alwyn's tongue stuck to his mouth, he could get no



farther.

'What's the matter?' said his acquaintance. Alwyn had retired, and was supporting himself against the wall.

The wretched Alwyn murmured something about a stitch in his side from walking. Then the music struck up, the dance went on, and his neighbour became so interested in watching the movements of this strange Duchess through its mazes as to forget Alwyn for a while.

It gave him an opportunity to brace himself up. He was a man who had suffered, and he could suffer again. 'How came that person to be your Duchess?' he asked in a firm, distinct voice, when he had attained complete self-command. 'Where is her other Grace of Hamptonshire? There certainly was another. I know it.'

'Oh, the previous one! Yes, yes. She ran away years and years ago with the young curate. Mr. Hill was the young man's name, if I recollect.'

'No! She never did. What do you mean by that?' he said.

'Yes, she certainly ran away. She met the curate in the shrubbery about a couple of months after her marriage with the Duke. There were folks who saw the meeting and heard some words of their talk. They arranged to go, and she sailed from Plymouth with him a day or two afterward.'

'That's not true.'

'Then 'tis the queerest lie ever told by man. Her father believed and knew to his dying day that she went with him; and so did the Duke, and everybody about here. Ay, there was a fine upset about it at the time. The Duke traced her to Plymouth.'

'Traced her to Plymouth?'

'He traced her to Plymouth, and set on his spies; and they found that she went to the shipping-office, and inquired if Mr. Alwyn Hill had entered his name as passenger by the *Western Glory*; and when she found that he had, she booked herself for the same ship, but not in her real name. When the vessel had sailed a letter reached the Duke from her, telling him what she had done. She never

came back here again. His Grace lived by himself a number of years, and married this lady only twelve months before he died.'

Alwyn was in a state of indescribable bewilderment. But, unmanned as he was, he called the next day on the, to him, spurious Duchess of Hamptonshire. At first she was alarmed at his statement, then cold, then she was won over by his condition to give confidence for confidence. She showed him a letter which had been found among the papers of the late Duke, corroborating what Alwyn's informant had detailed. It was from Emmeline, bearing the postmarked date at which the *Western Glory* sailed, and briefly stated that she had emigrated by that ship to America.

Alwyn applied himself body and mind to unravel the remainder of the mystery. The story repeated to him was always the same: 'She ran away with the curate.' A strangely circumstantial piece of intelligence was added to this when he had pushed his inquiries a little further. There

was given him the name of a waterman at Plymouth, who had come forward at the time that she was missed and sought for by her husband, and had stated that he put her on board the Western Glory at dusk one evening before that vessel sailed.

After several days of search about the alleys and quays of Plymouth Barbican, during which these impossible words, 'She ran off with the curate,' became branded on his brain, Alwyn found this important waterman. He was positive as to the truth of his story, still remembering the incident well, and he described in detail the lady's dress, as he had long ago described it to her husband, which description corresponded in every particular with the dress worn by Emmeline on the evening of their parting.

Before proceeding to the other side of the Atlantic to continue his inquiries there, the puzzled and distracted Alwyn set himself to ascertain the address of Captain Wheeler, who had commanded the Western Glory in the year of Alwyn's voyage out, and immediately wrote a letter

to him on the subject.

The only circumstances which the sailor could recollect or discover from his papers in connection with such a story were, that a woman bearing the name which Alwyn had mentioned as fictitious certainly did come aboard for a voyage he made about that time; that she took a common berth among the poorest emigrants; that she died on the voyage out, at about five days' sail from Plymouth; that she seemed a lady in manners and education. Why she had not applied for a first-class passage, why she had no trunks, they could not guess, for though she had little money in her pocket she had that about her which would have fetched it. 'We buried her at sea,' continued the captain. 'A young parson, one of the cabin-passengers, read the burial-service over her, I remember well.'

The whole scene and proceedings darted upon Alwyn's recollection in a moment. It was a fine breezy morning on that long-past voyage out, and he had been told that they were running at the rate of a hundred and odd miles a day.

The news went round that one of the poor young women in the other part of the vessel was ill of fever, and delirious. The tidings caused no little alarm among all the passengers, for the sanitary conditions of the ship were anything but satisfactory. Shortly after this the doctor announced that she had died. Then Alwyn had learnt that she was laid out for burial in great haste, because of the danger that would have been incurred by delay. And next the funeral scene rose before him, and the prominent part that he had taken in that solemn ceremony. The captain had come to him, requesting him to officiate, as there was no chaplain on board. This he had agreed to do; and as the sun went down with a blaze in his face he read amidst them all assembled: 'We therefore commit her body to the deep, to be turned into corruption, looking for the resurrection of the body when the sea shall give up her dead.'

The captain also forwarded the addresses of the ship's matron and of other persons who had been engaged on board at the date. To these Alwyn went in the course of

time. A categorical description of the clothes of the dead truant, the colour of her hair, and other things, extinguished for ever all hope of a mistake in identity.

At last, then, the course of events had become clear. On that unhappy evening when he left Emmeline in the shrubbery, forbidding her to follow him because it would be a sin, she must have disobeyed. She must have followed at his heels silently through the darkness, like a poor pet animal that will not be driven back. She could have accumulated nothing for the journey more than she might have carried in her hand; and thus poorly provided she must have embarked. Her intention had doubtless been to make her presence on board known to him as soon as she could muster courage to do so.

Thus the ten years' chapter of Alwyn Hill's romance wound itself up under his eyes. That the poor young woman in the steerage had been the young Duchess of Hamptonshire was never publicly disclosed. Hill had no longer any reason for remaining in England, and soon after

left its shores with no intention to return. Previous to his departure he confided his story to an old friend from his native town grandfather of the person who now relates it to you.

A few members, including the Bookworm, seemed to be impressed by the quiet gentleman's tale; but the member we have called the Spark who, by the way, was getting somewhat tinged with the light of other days, and owned to eight-and-thirty walked daintily about the room instead of sitting down by the fire with the majority and said that for his part he preferred something more lively than the last story- -something in which such long-separated lovers were ultimately united. He also liked stories that were more modern in their date of action than those he had heard to-day.

Members immediately requested him to give them a specimen, to which the Spark replied that he didn't mind, as far as that went. And though the Vice-President, the Man of Family, the Colonel, and others, looked at their watches,



and said they must soon retire to their respective quarters in the hotel adjoining, they all decided to sit out the Spark's story.

## THE HONOURABLE LAURA

By the Spark

It was a cold and gloomy Christmas Eve. The mass of cloud overhead was almost impervious to such daylight as still lingered on; the snow lay several inches deep upon the ground, and the slanting downfall which still went on threatened to considerably increase its thickness before the morning. The Prospect Hotel, a building standing near the wild north coast of Lower Wessex, looked so lonely and so useless at such a time as this that a passing wayfarer would have been led to forget summer possibilities, and to wonder at the commercial courage which could invest capital, on the basis of the popular taste for the picturesque, in a country subject to such dreary phases. That the district was alive with visitors in August seemed but a dim tradition

in weather so totally opposed to all that tempts mankind from home. However, there the hotel stood immovable; and the cliffs, creeks, and headlands which were the primary attractions of the spot, rising in full view on the opposite side of the valley, were now but stern angular outlines, while the townlet in front was tinged over with a grimy dirtiness rather than the pearly gray that in summer lent such beauty to its appearance.

Within the hotel commanding this outlook the landlord walked idly about with his hands in his pockets, not in the least expectant of a visitor, and yet unable to settle down to any occupation which should compensate in some degree for the losses that winter idleness entailed on his regular profession. So little, indeed, was anybody expected, that the coffee-room waiter a genteel boy, whose plated buttons in summer were as close together upon the front of his short jacket as peas in a pod now appeared in the back yard, metamorphosed into the unrecognizable shape of a rough country lad in corduroys and hobnailed boots,

sweeping the snow away, and talking the local dialect in all its purity, quite oblivious of the new polite accent he had learned in the hot weather from the well-behaved visitors. The front door was closed, and, as if to express still more fully the sealed and chrysalis state of the establishment, a sand-bag was placed at the bottom to keep out the insidious snowdrift, the wind setting in directly from that quarter.

The landlord, entering his own parlour, walked to the large fire which it was absolutely necessary to keep up for his comfort, no such blaze burning in the coffee-room or elsewhere, and after giving it a stir returned to a table in the lobby, whereon lay the visitors' book now closed and pushed back against the wall. He carelessly opened it; not a name had been entered there since the 19th of the previous November, and that was only the name of a man who had arrived on a tricycle, who, indeed, had not been asked to enter at all.

While he was engaged thus the evening grew darker; but before it was as yet too dark to distinguish objects upon

the road winding round the back of the cliffs, the landlord perceived a black spot on the distant white, which speedily enlarged itself and drew near. The probabilities were that this vehicle for a vehicle of some sort it seemed to be would pass by and pursue its way to the nearest railway-town as others had done. But, contrary to the landlord's expectation, as he stood conning it through the yet unshuttered windows, the solitary object, on reaching the corner, turned into the hotel-front, and drove up to the door.

It was a conveyance particularly unsuited to such a season and weather, being nothing more substantial than an open basket-carriage drawn by a single horse. Within sat two persons, of different sexes, as could soon be discerned, in spite of their muffled attire. The man held the reins, and the lady had got some shelter from the storm by clinging close to his side. The landlord rang the hostler's bell to attract the attention of the stable-man, for the approach of the visitors had been deadened to noiselessness by the snow,

and when the hostler had come to the horse's head the gentleman and lady alighted, the landlord meeting them in the hall.

The male stranger was a foreign-looking individual of about eight- and-twenty. He was close-shaven, excepting a moustache, his features being good, and even handsome. The lady, who stood timidly behind him, seemed to be much younger possibly not more than eighteen, though it was difficult to judge either of her age or appearance in her present wrappings.

The gentleman expressed his wish to stay till the morning, explaining somewhat unnecessarily, considering that the house was an inn, that they had been unexpectedly benighted on their drive. Such a welcome being given them as landlords can give in dull times, the latter ordered fires in the drawing and coffee-rooms, and went to the boy in the yard, who soon scrubbed himself up, dragged his disused jacket from its box, polished the buttons with his sleeve, and appeared civilized in the hall. The lady was

shown into a room where she could take off her snow-damp'd garments, which she sent down to be dried, her companion, meanwhile, putting a couple of sovereigns on the table, as if anxious to make everything smooth and comfortable at starting, and requesting that a private sitting-room might be got ready. The landlord assured him that the best upstairs parlour usually public should be kept private this evening, and sent the maid to light the candles. Dinner was prepared for them, and, at the gentleman's desire, served in the same apartment; where, the young lady having joined him, they were left to the rest and refreshment they seemed to need.

That something was peculiar in the relations of the pair had more than once struck the landlord, though wherein that peculiarity lay it was hard to decide. But that his guest was one who paid his way readily had been proved by his conduct, and dismissing conjectures, he turned to practical affairs.

About nine o'clock he re-entered the hall, and,

everything being done for the day, again walked up and down, occasionally gazing through the glass door at the prospect without, to ascertain how the weather was progressing. Contrary to prognostication, snow had ceased falling, and, with the rising of the moon, the sky had partially cleared, light fleeces of cloud drifting across the silvery disk. There was every sign that a frost was going to set in later on. For these reasons the distant rising road was even more distinct now between its high banks than it had been in the declining daylight. Not a track or rut broke the virgin surface of the white mantle that lay along it, all marks left by the lately arrived travellers having been speedily obliterated by the flakes falling at the time.

And now the landlord beheld by the light of the moon a sight very similar to that he had seen by the light of day. Again a black spot was advancing down the road that margined the coast. He was in a moment or two enabled to perceive that the present vehicle moved onward at a more headlong pace than the little carriage which had preceded it;

next, that it was a brougham drawn by two powerful horses; next, that this carriage, like the former one, was bound for the hotel-door. This desirable feature of resemblance caused the landlord to once more withdraw the sand-bag and advance into the porch.

An old gentleman was the first to alight. He was followed by a young one, and both unhesitatingly came forward.

'Has a young lady, less than nineteen years of age, recently arrived here in the company of a man some years her senior?' asked the old gentleman, in haste. 'A man cleanly shaven for the most part, having the appearance of an opera-singer, and calling himself Signor Smithozzi?'

'We have had arrivals lately,' said the landlord, in the tone of having had twenty at least not caring to acknowledge the attenuated state of business that afflicted Prospect Hotel in winter.

'And among them can your memory recall two persons such as those I describe? the man a sort of baritone?'



'There certainly is or was a young couple staying in the hotel; but I could not pronounce on the compass of the gentleman's voice.'

'No, no; of course not. I am quite bewildered. They arrived in a basket-carriage, altogether badly provided?'

'They came in a carriage, I believe, as most of our visitors do.'

'Yes, yes. I must see them at once. Pardon my want of ceremony, and show us in to where they are.'

'But, sir, you forget. Suppose the lady and gentleman I mean are not the lady and gentleman you mean? It would be awkward to allow you to rush in upon them just now while they are at dinner, and might cause me to lose their future patronage.'

'True, true. They may not be the same persons. My anxiety, I perceive, makes me rash in my assumptions!'

'Upon the whole, I think they must be the same, Uncle Quantock,' said the young man, who had not till now spoken. And turning to the landlord: 'You possibly have not

such a large assemblage of visitors here, on this somewhat forbidding evening, that you quite forget how this couple arrived, and what the lady wore?' His tone of addressing the landlord had in it a quiet frigidity that was not without irony.

'Ah! what she wore; that's it, James. What did she wear?'

'I don't usually take stock of my guests' clothing,' replied the landlord drily, for the ready money of the first arrival had decidedly biassed him in favour of that gentleman's cause. 'You can certainly see some of it if you want to,' he added carelessly, 'for it is drying by the kitchen fire.'

Before the words were half out of his mouth the old gentleman had exclaimed, 'Ah!' and precipitated himself along what seemed to be the passage to the kitchen; but as this turned out to be only the entrance to a dark china-closet, he hastily emerged again, after a collision with the inn-crockery had told him of his mistake.

'I beg your pardon, I'm sure; but if you only knew my feelings , you would make allowances. Anything I have broken I will willingly pay for.'

'Don't mention it, sir,' said the landlord. And showing the way, they adjourned to the kitchen without further parley. The eldest of the party instantly seized the lady's cloak, that hung upon a clothes-horse, exclaiming: 'Ah! yes, James, it is hers. I knew we were on their track.'

'Yes, it is hers,' answered the nephew quietly, for he was much less excited than his companion.

'Show us their room at once,' said the old man.

'William, have the lady and gentleman in the front sitting-room finished dining?'

'Yes, sir, long ago,' said the hundred plated buttons.

'Then show up these gentlemen to them at once. You stay here to- night, gentlemen, I presume? Shall the horses be taken out?'

'Feed the horses and wash their mouths. Whether we stay or not depends upon circumstances,' said the placid

younger man, as he followed his uncle and the waiter to the staircase.

'I think, Nephew James,' said the former, as he paused with his foot on the first step 'I think we had better not be announced, but take them by surprise. She may go throwing herself out of the window, or do some equally desperate thing!'

'Yes, certainly, we'll enter unannounced.' And he called back the lad who preceded them.

'I cannot sufficiently thank you, James, for so effectually aiding me in this pursuit!' exclaimed the old gentleman, taking the other by the hand. 'My increasing infirmities would have hindered my overtaking her to-night, had it not been for your timely aid.'

'I am only too happy, uncle, to have been of service to you in this or any other matter. I only wish I could have accompanied you on a pleasanter journey. However, it is advisable to go up to them at once, or they may hear us.' And they softly ascended the stairs.

On the door being opened, a room too large to be comfortable, lit by the best branch-candlesticks of the hotel, was disclosed, before the fire of which apartment the truant couple were sitting, very innocently looking over the hotel scrap-book and the album containing views of the neighbourhood. No sooner had the old man entered than the young lady who now showed herself to be quite as young as described, and remarkably prepossessing as to features perceptibly turned pale. When the nephew entered, she turned still paler, as if she were going to faint. The young man described as an opera-singer rose with grim civility, and placed chairs for his visitors.

'Caught you, thank God!' said the old gentleman breathlessly.

'Yes, worse luck, my lord!' murmured Signor Smithozzi, in native London-English, that distinguished alien having, in fact, first seen the light in the vicinity of the City Road. 'She would have been mine to-morrow. And I think that under the peculiar circumstances it would be

wiser considering how soon the breath of scandal will tarnish a lady's fame to let her be mine to-morrow, just the same.'

'Never!' said the old man. 'Here is a lady under age, without experience child-like in her maiden innocence and virtue whom you have plied by your vile arts, till this morning at dawn '

'Lord Quantock, were I not bound to respect your gray hairs '

'Till this morning at dawn you tempted her away from her father's roof. What blame can attach to her conduct that will not, on a full explanation of the matter, be readily passed over in her and thrown entirely on you? Laura, you return at once with me. I should not have arrived, after all, early enough to deliver you, if it had not been for the disinterestedness of your cousin, Captain Northbrook, who, on my discovering your flight this morning, offered with a promptitude for which I can never sufficiently thank him, to accompany me on my journey, as the only male relative I

have near me. Come, do you hear? Put on your things; we are off at once.'

'I don't want to go!' pouted the young lady.

'I daresay you don't,' replied her father drily. 'But children never know what's best for them. So come along, and trust to my opinion.'

Laura was silent, and did not move, the opera gentleman looking helplessly into the fire, and the lady's cousin sitting meditatively calm, as the single one of the four whose position enabled him to survey the whole escapade with the cool criticism of a comparative outsider.

'I say to you, Laura, as the father of a daughter under age, that you instantly come with me. What? Would you compel me to use physical force to reclaim you?'

'I don't want to return!' again declared Laura.

'It is your duty to return nevertheless, and at once, I inform you.'

'I don't want to!'

'Now, dear Laura, this is what I say: return with me

and your cousin James quietly, like a good and repentant girl, and nothing will be said. Nobody knows what has happened as yet, and if we start at once, we shall be home before it is light to-morrow morning. Come.'

'I am not obliged to come at your bidding, father, and I would rather not!'

Now James, the cousin, during this dialogue might have been observed to grow somewhat restless, and even impatient. More than once he had parted his lips to speak, but second thoughts each time held him back. The moment had come, however, when he could keep silence no longer.

'Come, madam!' he spoke out, 'this farce with your father has, in my opinion, gone on long enough. Just make no more ado, and step downstairs with us.'

She gave herself an intractable little twist, and did not reply.

'By the Lord Harry, Laura, I won't stand this!' he said angrily. 'Come, get on your things before I come and compel you. There is a kind of compulsion to which this



talk is child's play. Come, madam- -instantly, I say!'

The old nobleman turned to his nephew and said mildly: 'Leave me to insist, James. It doesn't become you. I can speak to her sharply enough, if I choose.'

James, however, did not heed his uncle, and went on to the troublesome young woman: 'You say you don't want to come, indeed! A pretty story to tell me, that! Come, march out of the room at once, and leave that hulking fellow for me to deal with afterward. Get on quickly come!' and he advanced toward her as if to pull her by the hand.

'Nay, nay,' expostulated Laura's father, much surprised at his nephew's sudden demeanour. 'You take too much upon yourself. Leave her to me.'

'I won't leave her to you any longer!'

'You have no right, James, to address either me or her in this way; so just hold your tongue. Come, my dear.'

'I have every right!' insisted James.

'How do you make that out?'

'I have the right of a husband.'

'Whose husband?'

'Hers.'

'What?'

'She's my wife.'

'James!'

'Well, to cut a long story short, I may say that she secretly married me, in spite of your lordship's prohibition, about three months ago. And I must add that, though she cooled down rather quickly, everything went on smoothly enough between us for some time; in spite of the awkwardness of meeting only by stealth. We were only waiting for a convenient moment to break the news to you when this idle Adonis turned up, and after poisoning her mind against me, brought her into this disgrace.'

Here the operatic luminary, who had sat in rather an abstracted and nerveless attitude till the cousin made his declaration, fired up and cried: 'I declare before Heaven that till this moment I never knew she was a wife! I found her in her father's house an unhappy girl unhappy, as I

believe, because of the loneliness and dreariness of that establishment, and the want of society, and for nothing else whatever. What this statement about her being your wife means I am quite at a loss to understand. Are you indeed married to him, Laura?'

Laura nodded from within her tearful handkerchief. 'It was because of my anomalous position in being privately married to him,' she sobbed, 'that I was unhappy at home and and I didn't like him so well as I did at first and I wished I could get out of the mess I was in! And then I saw you a few times, and when you said, "We'll run off," I thought I saw a way out of it all, and then I agreed to come with you oo-oo!'

'Well! well! well! And is this true?' murmured the bewildered old nobleman, staring from James to Laura, and from Laura to James, as if he fancied they might be figments of the imagination. 'Is this, then, James, the secret of your kindness to your old uncle in helping him to find his daughter? Good Heavens! What further depths of

duplicity are there left for a man to learn!'

'I have married her, Uncle Quantock, as I said,' answered James coolly. 'The deed is done, and can't be undone by talking here.'

'Where were you married?'

'At St. Mary's, Toneborough.'

'When?'

'On the 29th of September, during the time she was visiting there.'

'Who married you?'

'I don't know. One of the curates we were quite strangers to the place. So, instead of my assisting you to recover her, you may as well assist me.'

'Never! never!' said Lord Quantock. 'Madam, and sir, I beg to tell you that I wash my hands of the whole affair! If you are man and wife, as it seems you are, get reconciled as best you may. I have no more to say or do with either of you. I leave you, Laura, in the hands of your husband, and much joy may you bring him; though the situation, I own,

is not encouraging.'

Saying this, the indignant speaker pushed back his chair against the table with such force that the candlesticks rocked on their bases, and left the room.

Laura's wet eyes roved from one of the young men to the other, who now stood glaring face to face, and, being much frightened at their aspect, slipped out of the room after her father. Him, however, she could hear going out of the front door, and, not knowing where to take shelter, she crept into the darkness of an adjoining bedroom, and there awaited events with a palpitating heart.

Meanwhile the two men remaining in the sitting-room drew nearer to each other, and the opera-singer broke the silence by saying, 'How could you insult me in the way you did, calling me a fellow, and accusing me of poisoning her mind toward you, when you knew very well I was as ignorant of your relation to her as an unborn babe?'

'Oh yes, you were quite ignorant; I can believe that readily,' sneered Laura's husband.

'I here call Heaven to witness that I never knew!'

'Recitativo the rhythm excellent, and the tone well sustained. Is it likely that any man could win the confidence of a young fool her age, and not get that out of her? Preposterous! Tell it to the most improved new pit-stalls.'

'Captain Northbrook, your insinuations are as despicable as your wretched person!' cried the baritone, losing all patience. And springing forward he slapped the captain in the face with the palm of his hand.

Northbrook flinched but slightly, and calmly using his handkerchief to learn if his nose was bleeding, said, 'I quite expected this insult, so I came prepared.' And he drew forth from a black valise which he carried in his hand a small case of pistols.

The baritone started at the unexpected sight, but recovering from his surprise said, 'Very well, as you will,' though perhaps his tone showed a slight want of confidence.

'Now,' continued the husband, quite confidently, 'we want no parade, no nonsense, you know. Therefore we'll dispense with seconds?'

The signor slightly nodded.

'Do you know this part of the country well?' Cousin James went on, in the same cool and still manner. 'If you don't, I do. Quite at the bottom of the rocks out there, just beyond the stream which falls over them to the shore, is a smooth sandy space, not so much shut in as to be out of the moonlight; and the way down to it from this side is over steps cut in the cliff; and we can find our way down without trouble. We we two will find our way down; but only one of us will find his way up, you understand?'

'Quite.'

'Then suppose we start; the sooner it is over the better. We can order supper before we go out supper for two; for though we are three at present '

'Three?'

'Yes; you and I and she '

'Oh yes.'

'We shall be only two by and by; so that, as I say, we will order supper for two; for the lady and a gentleman. Whichever comes back alive will tap at her door, and call her in to share the repast with him she's not off the premises. But we must not alarm her now; and above all things we must not let the inn-people see us go out; it would look so odd for two to go out, and only one come in. Ha! ha!'

'Ha! ha! exactly.'

'Are you ready?'

'Oh quite.'

'Then I'll lead the way.'

He went softly to the door and downstairs, ordering supper to be ready in an hour, as he had said; then making a feint of returning to the room again, he beckoned to the singer, and together they slipped out of the house by a side door.

The sky was now quite clear, and the wheelmarks of the brougham which had borne away Laura's father, Lord



Quantock, remained distinctly visible. Soon the verge of the down was reached, the captain leading the way, and the baritone following silently, casting furtive glances at his companion, and beyond him at the scene ahead. In due course they arrived at the chasm in the cliff which formed the waterfall. The outlook here was wild and picturesque in the extreme, and fully justified the many praises, paintings, and photographic views to which the spot had given birth. What in summer was charmingly green and gray, was now rendered weird and fantastic by the snow.

From their feet the cascade plunged downward almost vertically to a depth of eighty or a hundred feet before finally losing itself in the sand, and though the stream was but small, its impact upon jutting rocks in its descent divided it into a hundred spirts and splashes that sent up a mist into the upper air. A few marginal drippings had been frozen into icicles, but the centre flowed on unimpeded.

The operatic artist looked down as he halted, but his thoughts were plainly not of the beauty of the scene. His

companion with the pistols was immediately in front of him, and there was no handrail on the side of the path toward the chasm. Obeying a quick impulse, he stretched out his arm, and with a superhuman thrust sent Laura's husband reeling over. A whirling human shape, diminishing downward in the moon's rays farther and farther toward invisibility, a smack- smack upon the projecting ledges of rock at first louder and heavier than that of the brook, and then scarcely to be distinguished from it then a cessation, then the splashing of the stream as before, and the accompanying murmur of the sea, were all the incidents that disturbed the customary flow of the little waterfall.

The singer waited in a fixed attitude for a few minutes, then turning, he rapidly retraced his steps over the intervening upland toward the road, and in less than a quarter of an hour was at the door of the hotel. Slipping quietly in as the clock struck ten, he said to the landlord, over the bar hatchway

"The bill as soon as you can let me have it, including

charges for the supper that was ordered, though we cannot stay to eat it, I am sorry to say.' He added with forced gaiety, 'The lady's father and cousin have thought better of intercepting the marriage, and after quarrelling with each other have gone home independently.'

'Well done, sir!' said the landlord, who still sided with this customer in preference to those who had given trouble and barely paid for baiting the horses. "'Love will find out the way!'" as the saying is. Wish you joy, sir!'

Signor Smithozzi went upstairs, and on entering the sitting-room found that Laura had crept out from the dark adjoining chamber in his absence. She looked up at him with eyes red from weeping, and with symptoms of alarm.

'What is it? where is he?' she said apprehensively.

'Captain Northbrook has gone back. He says he will have no more to do with you.'

'And I am quite abandoned by them! and they'll forget me, and nobody care about me any more!' She began to cry afresh.

'But it is the luckiest thing that could have happened. All is just as it was before they came disturbing us. But, Laura, you ought to have told me about that private marriage, though it is all the same now; it will be dissolved, of course. You are a wid virtually a widow.'

'It is no use to reproach me for what is past. What am I to do now?'

'We go at once to Cliff-Martin. The horse has rested thoroughly these last three hours, and he will have no difficulty in doing an additional half-dozen miles. We shall be there before twelve, and there are late taverns in the place, no doubt. There we'll sell both horse and carriage to-morrow morning; and go by the coach to Downstaple. Once in the train we are safe.'

'I agree to anything,' she said listlessly.

In about ten minutes the horse was put in, the bill paid, the lady's dried wraps put round her, and the journey resumed.

When about a mile on their way, they saw a

glimmering light in advance of them. 'I wonder what that is?' said the baritone, whose manner had latterly become nervous, every sound and sight causing him to turn his head.

'It is only a turnpike,' said she. 'That light is the lamp kept burning over the door.'

'Of course, of course, dearest. How stupid I am!'

On reaching the gate they perceived that a man on foot had approached it, apparently by some more direct path than the roadway they pursued, and was, at the moment they drew up, standing in conversation with the gatekeeper.

'It is quite impossible that he could fall over the cliff by accident or the will of God on such a light night as this,' the pedestrian was saying. 'These two children I tell you of saw two men go along the path toward the waterfall, and ten minutes later only one of 'em came back, walking fast, like a man who wanted to get out of the way because he had done something queer. There is no manner of doubt

that he pushed the other man over, and, mark me, it will soon cause a hue and cry for that man.'

The candle shone in the face of the Signor and showed that there had arisen upon it a film of ghastliness. Laura, glancing toward him for a few moments observed it, till, the gatekeeper having mechanically swung open the gate, her companion drove through, and they were soon again enveloped in the white silence.

Her conductor had said to Laura, just before, that he meant to inquire the way at this turnpike; but he had certainly not done so.

As soon as they had gone a little farther the omission, intentional or not, began to cause them some trouble. Beyond the secluded district which they now traversed ran the more frequented road, where progress would be easy, the snow being probably already beaten there to some extent by traffic; but they had not yet reached it, and having no one to guide them their journey began to appear less feasible than it had done before starting. When the little

lane which they had entered ascended another hill, and seemed to wind round in a direction contrary to the expected route to Cliff-Martin, the question grew serious. Ever since overhearing the conversation at the turnpike, Laura had maintained a perfect silence, and had even shrunk somewhat away from the side of her lover.

'Why don't you talk, Laura,' he said with forced buoyancy, 'and suggest the way we should go?'

'Oh yes, I will,' she responded, a curious fearfulness being audible in her voice.

After this she uttered a few occasional sentences which seemed to persuade him that she suspected nothing. At last he drew rein, and the weary horse stood still.

'We are in a fix,' he said.

She answered eagerly: 'I'll hold the reins while you run forward to the top of the ridge, and see if the road takes a favourable turn beyond. It would give the horse a few minutes' rest, and if you find out no change in the direction, we will retrace this lane, and take the other turning.'

The expedient seemed a good one in the circumstances, especially when recommended by the singular eagerness of her voice; and placing the reins in her hands a quite unnecessary precaution, considering the state of their hack he stepped out and went forward through the snow till she could see no more of him.

No sooner was he gone than Laura, with a rapidity which contrasted strangely with her previous stillness, made fast the reins to the corner of the phaeton, and slipping out on the opposite side, ran back with all her might down the hill, till, coming to an opening in the fence, she scrambled through it, and plunged into the copse which bordered this portion of the lane. Here she stood in hiding under one of the large bushes, clinging so closely to its umbrage as to seem but a portion of its mass, and listening intently for the faintest sound of pursuit. But nothing disturbed the stillness save the occasional slipping of gathered snow from the boughs, or the rustle of some wild animal over the crisp flake-bespattered herbage. At



length, apparently convinced that her former companion was either unable to find her, or not anxious to do so, in the present strange state of affairs, she crept out from the bushes, and in less than an hour found herself again approaching the door of the Prospect Hotel.

As she drew near, Laura could see that, far from being wrapped in darkness, as she might have expected, there were ample signs that all the tenants were on the alert, lights moving about the open space in front. Satisfaction was expressed in her face when she discerned that no reappearance of her baritone and his pony-carriage was causing this sensation; but it speedily gave way to grief and dismay when she saw by the lights the form of a man borne on a stretcher by two others into the porch of the hotel.

'I have caused all this,' she murmured between her quivering lips. 'He has murdered him!' Running forward to the door, she hastily asked of the first person she met if the man on the stretcher was dead.

'No, miss,' said the labourer addressed, eyeing her up and down as an unexpected apparition. 'He is still alive, they say, but not sensible. He either fell or was pushed over the waterfall; 'tis thought he was pushed. He is the gentleman who came here just now with the old lord, and went out afterward with a stranger who had come a little earlier. Anyhow, that's as I had it.'

Laura entered the house, and acknowledging without the least reserve that she was the injured man's wife, had soon installed herself as head nurse by the bed on which he lay. When the two surgeons who had been sent for arrived, she learned from them that his wounds were so severe as to leave but a slender hope of recovery, it being little short of miraculous that he was not killed on the spot, which his enemy had evidently reckoned to be the case. She knew who that enemy was, and shuddered.

Laura watched all night, but her husband knew nothing of her presence. During the next day he slightly recognized her, and in the evening was able to speak. He

informed the surgeons that, as was surmised, he had been pushed over the cascade by Signor Smithozzi; but he communicated nothing to her who nursed him, not even replying to her remarks; he nodded courteously at any act of attention she rendered, and that was all.

In a day or two it was declared that everything favoured his recovery, notwithstanding the severity of his injuries. Full search was made for Smithozzi, but as yet there was no intelligence of his whereabouts, though the repentant Laura communicated all she knew. As far as could be judged, he had come back to the carriage after searching out the way, and finding the young lady missing, had looked about for her till he was tired; then had driven on to Cliff- Martin, sold the horse and carriage next morning, and disappeared, probably by one of the departing coaches which ran thence to the nearest station, the only difference from his original programme being that he had gone alone.

During the days and weeks of that long and tedious

recovery, Laura watched by her husband's bedside with a zeal and assiduity which would have considerably extenuated any fault save one of such magnitude as hers. That her husband did not forgive her was soon obvious. Nothing that she could do in the way of smoothing pillows, easing his position, shifting bandages, or administering draughts, could win from him more than a few measured words of thankfulness, such as he would probably have uttered to any other woman on earth who had performed these particular services for him.

'Dear, dear James,' she said one day, bending her face upon the bed in an excess of emotion. 'How you have suffered! It has been too cruel. I am more glad you are getting better than I can say. I have prayed for it and I am sorry for what I have done; I am innocent of the worst, and I hope you will not think me so very bad, James!'

'Oh no. On the contrary, I shall think you very good as a nurse,' he answered, the caustic severity of his tone being apparent through its weakness.

Laura let fall two or three silent tears, and said no more that day.

Somehow or other Signor Smithozzi seemed to be making good his escape. It transpired that he had not taken a passage in either of the suspected coaches, though he had certainly got out of the county; altogether, the chance of finding him was problematical.

Not only did Captain Northbrook survive his injuries, but it soon appeared that in the course of a few weeks he would find himself little if any the worse for the catastrophe. It could also be seen that Laura, while secretly hoping for her husband's forgiveness for a piece of folly of which she saw the enormity more clearly every day, was in great doubt as to what her future relations with him would be. Moreover, to add to the complication, whilst she, as a runaway wife, was unforgiven by her husband, she and her husband, as a runaway couple, were unforgiven by her father, who had never once communicated with either of them since his departure from the inn. But her immediate

anxiety was to win the pardon of her husband, who possibly might be bearing in mind, as he lay upon his couch, the familiar words of Brabantio, 'She has deceived her father, and may thee.'

Matters went on thus till Captain Northbrook was able to walk about. He then removed with his wife to quiet apartments on the south coast, and here his recovery was rapid. Walking up the cliffs one day, supporting him by her arm as usual, she said to him, simply, 'James, if I go on as I am going now, and always attend to your smallest want, and never think of anything but devotion to you, will you try to like me a little?'

'It is a thing I must carefully consider,' he said, with the same gloomy dryness which characterized all his words to her now. 'When I have considered, I will tell you.'

He did not tell her that evening, though she lingered long at her routine work of making his bedroom comfortable, putting the light so that it would not shine into his eyes, seeing him fall asleep, and then retiring

noiselessly to her own chamber. When they met in the morning at breakfast, and she had asked him as usual how he had passed the night, she added timidly, in the silence which followed his reply, 'Have you considered?'

'No, I have not considered sufficiently to give you an answer.'

Laura sighed, but to no purpose; and the day wore on with intense heaviness to her, and the customary modicum of strength gained to him.

The next morning she put the same question, and looked up despairingly in his face, as though her whole life hung upon his reply.

'Yes, I have considered,' he said.

'Ah!'

'We must part.'

'O James!'

'I cannot forgive you; no man would. Enough is settled upon you to keep you in comfort, whatever your father may do. I shall sell out, and disappear from this hemisphere.'

'You have absolutely decided?' she asked miserably. 'I have nobody now to c-c-care for '

'I have absolutely decided,' he shortly returned. 'We had better part here. You will go back to your father. There is no reason why I should accompany you, since my presence would only stand in the way of the forgiveness he will probably grant you if you appear before him alone. We will say farewell to each other in three days from this time. I have calculated on being ready to go on that day.'

Bowed down with trouble, she withdrew to her room, and the three days were passed by her husband in writing letters and attending to other business-matters, saying hardly a word to her the while. The morning of departure came; but before the horses had been put in to take the severed twain in different directions, out of sight of each other, possibly for ever, the postman arrived with the morning letters.

There was one for the captain; none for her there were never any for her. However, on this occasion something



was enclosed for her in his, which he handed her. She read it and looked up helpless.

'My dear father is dead!' she said. In a few moments she added, in a whisper, 'I must go to the Manor to bury him . . . Will you go with me, James?'

He musingly looked out of the window. 'I suppose it is an awkward and melancholy undertaking for a woman alone,' he said coldly. 'Well, well my poor uncle! Yes, I'll go with you, and see you through the business.'

So they went off together instead of asunder, as planned. It is unnecessary to record the details of the journey, or of the sad week which followed it at her father's house. Lord Quantock's seat was a fine old mansion standing in its own park, and there were plenty of opportunities for husband and wife either to avoid each other, or to get reconciled if they were so minded, which one of them was at least. Captain Northbrook was not present at the reading of the will. She came to him afterward, and found him packing up his papers, intending

to start next morning, now that he had seen her through the turmoil occasioned by her father's death.

'He has left me everything that he could!' she said to her husband. 'James, will you forgive me now, and stay?'

'I cannot stay.'

'Why not?'

'I cannot stay,' he repeated.

'But why?'

'I don't like you.'

He acted up to his word. When she came downstairs the next morning she was told that he had gone.

Laura bore her double bereavement as best she could. The vast mansion in which she had hitherto lived, with all its historic contents, had gone to her father's successor in the title; but her own was no unhandsome one. Around lay the undulating park, studded with trees a dozen times her own age; beyond it, the wood; beyond the wood, the farms. All this fair and quiet scene was hers. She nevertheless remained a lonely, repentant, depressed being, who would

have given the greater part of everything she possessed to ensure the presence and affection of that husband whose very austerity and phlegm qualities that had formerly led to the alienation between them seemed now to be adorable features in his character.

She hoped and hoped again, but all to no purpose. Captain Northbrook did not alter his mind and return. He was quite a different sort of man from one who altered his mind; that she was at last despairingly forced to admit. And then she left off hoping, and settled down to a mechanical routine of existence which in some measure dulled her grief; but at the expense of all her natural animation and the sprightly wilfulness which had once charmed those who knew her, though it was perhaps all the while a factor in the production of her unhappiness.

To say that her beauty quite departed as the years rolled on would be to overstate the truth. Time is not a merciful master, as we all know, and he was not likely to act exceptionally in the case of a woman who had mental

troubles to bear in addition to the ordinary weight of years. Be this as it may, eleven other winters came and went, and Laura Northbrook remained the lonely mistress of house and lands without once hearing of her husband. Every probability seemed to favour the assumption that he had died in some foreign land; and offers for her hand were not few as the probability verged on certainty with the long lapse of time. But the idea of remarriage seemed never to have entered her head for a moment. Whether she continued to hope even now for his return could not be distinctly ascertained; at all events she lived a life unmodified in the slightest degree from that of the first six months of his absence.

This twelfth year of Laura's loneliness, and the thirtieth of her life drew on apace, and the season approached that had seen the unhappy adventure for which she so long had suffered. Christmas promised to be rather wet than cold, and the trees on the outskirts of Laura's estate dripped monotonously from day to day upon

the turnpike-road which bordered them. On an afternoon in this week between three and four o'clock a hired fly might have been seen driving along the highway at this point, and on reaching the top of the hill it stopped. A gentleman of middle age alighted from the vehicle.

'You need drive no farther,' he said to the coachman. 'The rain seems to have nearly ceased. I'll stroll a little way, and return on foot to the inn by dinner-time.'

The flyman touched his hat, turned the horse, and drove back as directed. When he was out of sight, the gentleman walked on, but he had not gone far before the rain again came down pitilessly, though of this the pedestrian took little heed, going leisurely onward till he reached Laura's park gate, which he passed through. The clouds were thick and the days were short, so that by the time he stood in front of the mansion it was dark. In addition to this his appearance, which on alighting from the carriage had been untarnished, partook now of the character of a drenched wayfarer not too well blessed with this

world's goods. He halted for no more than a moment at the front entrance, and going round to the servants' quarter, as if he had a preconceived purpose in so doing, there rang the bell. When a page came to him he inquired if they would kindly allow him to dry himself by the kitchen fire.

The page retired, and after a murmured colloquy returned with the cook, who informed the wet and muddy man that though it was not her custom to admit strangers, she should have no particular objection to his drying himself; the night being so damp and gloomy. Therefore the wayfarer entered and sat down by the fire.

'The owner of this house is a very rich gentleman, no doubt?' he asked, as he watched the meat turning on the spit.

"Tis not a gentleman, but a lady,' said the cook.

'A widow, I presume?'

'A sort of widow. Poor soul, her husband is gone abroad, and has never been heard of for many years.'

'She sees plenty of company, no doubt, to make up for

his absence?'

'No, indeed hardly a soul. Service here is as bad as being in a nunnery.'

In short, the wayfarer, who had at first been so coldly received, contrived by his frank and engaging manner to draw the ladies of the kitchen into a most confidential conversation, in which Laura's history was minutely detailed, from the day of her husband's departure to the present. The salient feature in all their discourse was her unflagging devotion to his memory.

Having apparently learned all that he wanted to know among other things that she was at this moment, as always, alone the traveller said he was quite dry; and thanking the servants for their kindness, departed as he had come. On emerging into the darkness he did not, however, go down the avenue by which he had arrived. He simply walked round to the front door. There he rang, and the door was opened to him by a man-servant whom he had not seen during his sojourn at the other end of the house.

In answer to the servant's inquiry for his name, he said ceremoniously, 'Will you tell The Honourable Mrs. Northbrook that the man she nursed many years ago, after a frightful accident, has called to thank her?'

The footman retreated, and it was rather a long time before any further signs of attention were apparent. Then he was shown into the drawing-room, and the door closed behind him.

On the couch was Laura, trembling and pale. She parted her lips and held out her hands to him, but could not speak. But he did not require speech, and in a moment they were in each other's arms.

Strange news circulated through that mansion and the neighbouring town on the next and following days. But the world has a way of getting used to things, and the intelligence of the return of The Honourable Mrs. Northbrook's long-absent husband was soon received with comparative calm.

A few days more brought Christmas, and the forlorn



home of Laura Northbrook blazed from basement to attic with light and cheerfulness. Not that the house was overcrowded with visitors, but many were present, and the apathy of a dozen years came at length to an end. The animation which set in thus at the close of the old year did not diminish on the arrival of the new; and by the time its twelve months had likewise run the course of its predecessors, a son had been added to the dwindled line of the Northbrook family.

At the conclusion of this narrative the Spark was thanked, with a manner of some surprise, for nobody had credited him with a taste for tale-telling. Though it had been resolved that this story should be the last, a few of the weather-bound listeners were for sitting on into the small hours over their pipes and glasses, and raking up yet more episodes of family history. But the majority murmured reasons for soon getting to their lodgings.

It was quite dark without, except in the immediate neighbourhood of the feeble street-lamps, and before a few

shop-windows which had been hardly kept open in spite of the obvious unlikelihood of any chance customer traversing the muddy thoroughfares at that hour.

By one, by two, and by three the benighted members of the Field-Club rose from their seats, shook hands, made appointments, and dropped away to their respective quarters, free or hired, hoping for a fair morrow. It would probably be not until the next summer meeting, months away in the future, that the easy intercourse which now existed between them all would repeat itself. The crimson maltster, for instance, knew that on the following market-day his friends the President, the Rural Dean, and the bookworm would pass him in the street, if they met him, with the barest nod of civility, the President and the Colonel for social reasons, the bookworm for intellectual reasons, and the Rural Dean for moral ones, the latter being a staunch teetotaller, dead against John Barleycorn. The sentimental member knew that when, on his rambles, he met his friend the bookworm with a pocket-copy of

something or other under his nose, the latter would not love his companionship as he had done to-day; and the President, the aristocrat, and the farmer knew that affairs political, sporting, domestic, or agricultural would exclude for a long time all rumination on the characters of dames gone to dust for scores of years, however beautiful and noble they may have been in their day.

The last member at length departed, the attendant at the museum lowered the fire, the curator locked up the rooms, and soon there was only a single pirouetting flame on the top of a single coal to make the bones of the ichthyosaurus seem to leap, the stuffed birds to wink, and to draw a smile from the varnished skulls of Vespasian's soldiery.

• End •