

FALLEN FORTUNES

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Produced by Al Haines.

[image]

The scheming kinsman (page 46).

FALLEN
FORTUNES

E. EVERETT-GREEN

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The scheming kinsman. Frontispiece

The old garden was another favourite haunt of hers.

He stood quite still to watch Lord Sandford lead away the fair Geraldine.

The hero of the hour.

FALLEN FORTUNES.

CHAPTER I.

ON THE FIELD OF RAMILLIES.

"By the beard of the Prophet, we are in luck's way at last, Dicon; for if that be not the armies of the French and the Allies drawn up in battle array, my name is not Grey Dumaresq!"

The speaker had just pushed his horse over the brow of a slope which he and his servant had for some time been mounting, through the steamy warmth of a foggy May morning. The thick haze which lay heavy in this region of marshy ground had hidden the surrounding country from them hitherto; but as they reached the summit of the gradual rise they had been ascending, the cloud

wreaths suddenly drifted away, and the sun began to shine out upon the undulating plain stretched before their eyes; and lo, the plain was alive with squadrons of soldiers—infantry, cavalry, artillery—drawn up in battle array; and the note of the bugle rang through the air, whilst away in the distance, on the opposite side of the plain, there was a movement which told that already the battle had begun. A sullen roar from the guns boomed forth, and the whole plain shook with the reverberation. Great masses of smoke rolled along and slowly dispersed after each salvo; but it was upon the evolutions of the bodies of horsemen and footmen that the keen eyes of the youthful traveller were intently fixed.

"Dicon," he cried, "this is in all sooth a battle; and where the battle rages, there will the great victor of Blenheim be. We have not chanced upon this route in vain. Men warned us of the perils of seeking passage through a country which has become the theatre of war; but fortune's star has befriended us thus far, and now, if I mistake me not, we stand within sight of the greatest warrior of the age. For greatly shall I be astonished if the Duke of Marlborough himself be not conducting the evolutions of yonder squadrons."

The brilliant dark eyes of the young man lighted with a great glow of excitement and admiration. He shaded them with his hand, and intently followed the evolutions of the moving masses in the plain stretched before his eyes. He was looking upon the village of Tavières and the mound of Ottomond, and the waters of the Mehaign rolled below at his feet. The right wing of the French army rested here, as he quickly saw; but for the moment the main activity lay over in the distance beyond Ramillies and Offuz, in the direction of Anderkirk. Yet as the traveller stood intently gazing, he saw a movement in the line of the allied army on this nearer side, and he exclaimed aloud in his excitement,—

"See, Dicon, see! That attack yonder is but a feint. The key of the position lies here beneath us at Tavières, with its Tomb of Ottomond. See yonder those regiments of marching soldiers creeping round beneath the shelter of that rising ground! They will fling themselves upon the enemy's right, whilst the French general is diverting his available forces to protect his left. Villeroi, my friend, you did not well to dispose your forces in concave lines. You lose time in passing from place to place; and with such a general as our English Duke pitted against you, you cannot afford to lose any point in the game. Ha! See that? The Dutch and English soldiers are charging down upon Tavières! Watch how they come on—a great resistless tide of well-drilled veterans. See how they sweep all before them! See how the French fly forth! Ha, Villeroi, what think you now? Yes, you see your error; fain would you hurry back your reserves from left to right. But the time has gone by. They are miles away, and here are the Allies carrying all before them! Hurrah for old England! hurrah for the great Duke! Dicon, have you stomach for the fight? Do you remember Barcelona and Mountjuich? If we

were men enough to help there, why not here too?"

The fellow thus addressed grinned from ear to ear, and looked to the pistols in his holsters and the sabre slung at his side. It would not have been easy to define by a glance the nationality of this pair, who evidently stood to each other in the relation of master and man. Their faces were tanned by sun and wind, their dress, which was somewhat travel-stained and worse for wear, had plainly been purchased as need suggested—a piece here, and a piece there, and not all in the same land.

The speaker wore upon his fair curling hair—which was his own, and not one of the immense periwigs then in vogue at home and abroad—a Spanish sombrero of picturesque shape. His faded doublet, with its gold lacings, might have been English made, and was well cut, showing off the graceful lines of the slender, well-proportioned figure; but he wore buskins of soft Spanish leather with gold eyelets, and the short cloak slung across the saddle-bow had been purchased in Italy. He rode a strong, mettlesome barb, whose glossy bay coat shone like satin in the sunlight. The horse of the servant looked somewhat jaded, but that of the master might have just been taken from the stable. He was one of those splendid chargers, half Irish, half Spanish by blood, whose sureness of foot, untiring energy, and unquenchable spirit and mettle, made them at once the pride and joy of their owners. Young Dumaresq might have cut a finer figure in his own person, had he not elected to spend so large a portion of his remaining fortune upon the beast he now bestrode. But he had never for a moment regretted the purchase; and he boasted that Don Carlos had saved his life on more occasions than one.

The young man's eyes were full of fire; his hand was upon the hilt of his sword, which lay loose in its scabbard; the horse was pawing the ground and pulling on the rein, for the sound of battle was in his ears, and he was snorting with eagerness to hurl himself into the ranks of the combatants. The blare of the bugles, the roar of the guns, the shouts, screams, cheers of soldiers, the clash of sabres and the rattle of musketry, were as music to his ears. Suddenly flinging up his head, and uttering something between a snort and a neigh, the creature was off like an arrow from a bow, heading wildly, yet with a restraint and self-control which spoke worlds for his training, towards the hurly-burly raging through the battlefield below. Grey Dumaresq cast a half-laughing glance in the direction of his servant behind, who had set spurs to his steed and was following.

"Needs must, where the devil drives!" he said with a laugh. "Don Carlos will make soldiers of us, whether we will or no."

The battle of Ramillies was now raging. Marlborough's generalship had already made its mark. Tavières was in his hands; the right wing of the enemy was shaken, and the Dutch and English soldiers were preparing to charge the closely-serried lines of the French, even before the travellers had reached the

scene of action. They heard whilst they were yet half a mile away the concussion of that charge, the yells of the soldiers, the cheers of the Allies as they felt the wavering of their foes. But the French, though the first line had been broken, were not vanquished yet. The second line was composed of the pick of the young nobility—men careless of personal peril, disdainful of death, desirous only of glory and of victory. Upon these picked troops the Allies flung themselves in fury; but they stood their ground and hurled back the attacking lines, as the rocks of an iron-bound coast fling back the oncoming waves of the ocean. It was now impossible for the traveller to gauge what was happening. He was too near the scene of the tumult; but he was in the very nick of time to bear a share in one of the minor incidents of the day, which might have proved one of infinite disaster to the cause of his country.

The Duke of Marlborough, who had been directing the attack upon the French right, saw that this second charge was less successful than the first, and giving orders for reinforcements to be hurried up, he himself galloped in the direction of the fight, to encourage with his own presence the wavering soldiers, and direct the next critical operations in person. He was exceedingly well mounted, and his horse, wild with excitement, and feeling all that sympathy with his master's mood which is natural to these noble creatures, carried him so swiftly forward, that after he had galloped along the lines, giving orders here, there, and everywhere as he passed, he overshot his position, and without noting it in the confusion, was almost alone and at some small distance from his own lines. Before he could pull up his excited horse, there was a sudden rush from the French lines. Several young nobles and gentlemen had recognized the Duke, had taken in the accidental isolation of his position, and galloping forward with one consent, surrounded him before he was well aware what had happened.

It was just at this critical moment that the two travellers, half stunned by the noise of the battle, ignorant of what was happening, but eager for a share in the fray, topped a little rise in the ground which hid the plain from them, and came full upon the scene of the Duke's danger. The great General never lacked presence of mind, was never daunted by personal peril. He had realized his position, and setting his horse at a furious gallop, he had already broken through the ring of would-be captors, and was charging furiously for his own lines. At the very moment when Grey Dumaresq and his servant took in the meaning of what they saw, he had put his horse at a wide ditch which lay across his path, and the animal was rising to the leap.

"Zounds! but the beast is down! They will have him again!"

This shout rose from Dicon's throat. Grey set his teeth hard.

"It is the Duke himself; they shall never take him. Don Carlos shall save him from that!"

The Duke's horse had fallen heavily, throwing his rider over his head. Others besides his foes were heading wildly for the spot. All who saw it knew how much hung upon the turn of the next few seconds. First of all came the young stranger, who flung himself from his splendid horse, just as Marlborough rose to his feet, bruised and shaken, but with every faculty alert.

"Mount, sire, mount!" cried the traveller, holding the horse by the head to still his excited plunging. "The enemy are closing round; but only mount, and he will carry you safely. I will stake my last ducat upon it!"

The Duke had hold of the saddle by now; one of his own officers sprang forward to hold the stirrup. Next instant the General was in the saddle; but the head of the Colonel who stood at the stirrup was rolling upon the ground. A cannon ball had carried it off. How the Duke had escaped was a marvel and a mystery.

Excitement and lust of battle had fast hold of Grey Dumaresq and his horse. The gallant animal carried the Duke safely back to his own lines, amid the cheers of his soldiers. The young man swung himself upon the back of the riderless horse belonging to the killed Colonel, and followed him, scarce thinking what he was doing. None forbade him. Many had seen his prompt and timely action; many watched him as the tide of battle raged this way and that, and saw that, whether a trained soldier or not, this young stranger was no novice in the art of war. The Duke himself turned more than once to watch him, as he joined in some headlong charge, and turned and wheeled, or gave thrust or parry with the ease of practice and the skill which only comes through experience. Once in a pause he beckoned the young man to his side, and said,—

"I would speak with you, sir, when I am at leisure. Come to my quarters, wherever they may be, when the battle is over. I have somewhat to say to you."

The young man bowed low, and promised compliance with this request; but it was many long hours before he and the victorious General stood face to face. The battle itself had been won in less than four hours, but the pursuit had been long, lasting far into the night; and the dawn was well-nigh breaking in the eastern sky when Grey received a message that the Duke desired speech of him in the house at Mehlert, where he had stopped short, whilst his soldiers continued the pursuit of the flying foe almost up to the walls of Louvain.

Marlborough was sitting at a table, whereon stood the remains of a hasty meal; and from the writing materials before him, it was plain that he had been penning one of those dispatches to his wife without which he could never rest, even after the most arduous day's campaigning. He had changed some of his clothes, and though pale and somewhat jaded, preserved that air of elegance and distinction which was always one of his most marked characteristics. But even without spotless linen and fine array, there was something in the high-bred cour-

tesy of Marlborough's manner, and in the singular beauty of his face and person, which always won the hearts of those about him, and particularly so during those years when the magnificence of his military genius was making him the man of greatest mark in Europe.

He rose as the young stranger was ushered in, and offered his hand with a frank and gracious courtesy free from any alloy of condescension or patronage.

"I wish to thank you in person, sir, for the great service you this day rendered me with such timely promptitude. I have never bestridden a better horse, and owe you much for the loan. I would fain learn the name of the gentleman to whom I am so deeply indebted."

"My name, your Grace, is Grey Dumaresq; and that of my horse, Don Carlos. I thank you for your gracious words. We shall feel honoured for all time in that kind Fortune gave us the chance of rendering you some small aid in a moment of peril. The world would have been terribly the poorer by this day's work, had mischance touched the Duke of Marlborough!"

The General smiled, and motioned the young man to be seated. He himself took a seat opposite, and studied him with some attention.

"If you and your good horse are in any sort disposed to put your strength and skill at the service of your country, Mr. Dumaresq, I think I can promise you a position not far from my own person, which will not be without opportunities of profit, and will give scope to your prowess with sword and lance, which I have had the opportunity of observing more than once this day."

The young man's face flushed with pleasure. He looked eagerly into the face of the great man.

"Were I a free agent, your Grace, most gladly would I take advantage of your offer, asking nothing better at Fortune's hands than to serve you faithfully. But I am on my way to England to learn news of my father. For three years I have been absent from my native shores. For three years I have been a wanderer, and, I fear me, a spendthrift to boot. I have spent or squandered the fortune with which I started forth. Rumour has reached me that my father's health has given way, and that I am needed at home. I fear me I have not been a good son to him heretofore. I must therefore seek to be the solace of his declining years, if the reports I have heard concerning him be true."

Marlborough mused awhile with a slight smile upon his lips. He had a good memory for names, and had an idea that Sir Hugh Dumaresq, the probable father of the youth before him, had not been a man to inspire any very deep affection in the heart of his son. He bore the reputation of being a rake of the first order. It was said that he had broken his wife's heart, and cared nothing for the boy who would succeed him.

"That is a pious resolution on your part, my friend. I trust you may be

rewarded, and I will not seek to stay you. Methinks your mother was a good and gentle woman. Her son will live to do her credit yet."

The young man's eyes lighted, and his face softened.

"My mother was an angel upon this earth. Would God I had not lost her so soon! Did you know her, my lord? She was kinswoman to the hapless Lord Grey, who took up the cause of the Duke of Monmouth twenty years since, and whom your Grace defeated and routed on the field of Sedgemoor, fatal to so many. She gave me her name, and she bequeathed to me the small fortune which passed into my keeping three years ago, when I came of age. Since then I have been a wanderer in many lands. I have seen hard blows given and taken; I have been in many perils and battles. I was with Lord Peterborough when he fell upon the fort of Mountjuich, and made himself master of Barcelona, just when all hope of taking it seemed at an end. I have fought in the ranks of the Duke of Savoy against the veterans of France. I have been a soldier of fortune for this year or more, and though often in peril and hard pressed, have never received aught but a scratch now and again. I did hope that I should not travel northwards without seeing something of the campaign under the great Duke, whose name is in all men's mouths; but I did not dare to ask or hope for the honour which has been mine to-day."

Marlborough's eyes lighted as the young man spoke, and he asked many quick and pertinent questions of the traveller anent those lands of Spain and Italy, in whose politics and disposition of parties he was so keenly interested. He had desired above all things to prosecute this summer an Italian campaign. Difficulties with the Dutch field-deputies alone hindered the more dashing and offensive policy which he would so gladly have adopted. He listened with keen interest to Grey's account of his journey through Savoy, his interview with Victor Amadeus, and his successful feat of carrying important dispatches into Turin, though hemmed in by the French, and waiting sorrowfully for relief; and his escape thence, and journey to the camp of Prince Eugene, who was seeking to carry relief to the Duke of Savoy, and eventually to drive the French back over their own borders.

All this was intensely interesting to Marlborough, and he more than ever felt a desire to keep in his service a youth who seemed to possess so many of the qualifications which he most prized. But he was a man, too, who never undervalued the domestic side of life, or willingly interfered with the duties engendered by filial or conjugal ties. So he checked the words which had well-nigh risen once again to his lips, and only said graciously,—

"You have indeed been smiled upon by Dame Fortune, Mr. Dumaresq. Many a young blood would give half his fortune for the chances you have had. Methinks the world will hear of you yet. The brow of a poet, the thews of a war-

rior, a head calm and well-balanced, and a soul that shrinks not in the hour of peril—”

He paused a moment, and the young man's cheek glowed.

”Your Grace thinks too highly of my poor merits, I fear me. I trust I have not spoken as a braggart; for, in sooth, it is little I have to boast me of. A good horse beneath me, a faithful comrade by my side, a keen Toledo blade in mine hand, and all else came of itself. I have been happy in my days of peril and adventure; but now I must lay aside my weapons and my roving habits, and strive to show myself a good son, and take up my duties as my father's right hand and helper, if it be true that he is laid aside from active life, and needs me with him henceforth.”

Marlborough had taken up a pen, and was writing a few lines upon a sheet of paper which lay upon the table. When he had finished, he handed it open to the young man.

”A pass for yourself and your servant, Mr. Dumaresq; you may find it useful in passing through a disturbed country. But you will be wise to avoid the French frontier, and all cities where they have garrisons, and to confine yourself to the Dutch Netherlands, to make your way to the Hague, and thence to England. With this pass in your possession, you should then have small difficulty in travelling without molestation. And let me ask you if you have funds sufficient for your needs, since it is dear work at times travelling through a country devastated by war, and I would not have my benefactor crippled for lack of a few pieces of gold.”

The young man's face flushed slightly, but his eyes were frank and smiling. He laid his hand upon an inner breast pocket, and tapped it significantly.

”I thank your Grace from my heart; but, albeit I have squandered my fortune something too lavishly, I have yet enough and to spare to take me home. Were it otherwise,” he added, with a very engaging look upon his handsome features, ”there is nobody to whom I would be more gladly indebted than to his Grace of Marlborough.”

The Duke's face was pleasant to see. He had taken a great liking for this young man. He hesitated a moment, and said,—

”You would not care to sell your horse? I would give a goodly price for such a charger.”

”My lord, if I loved him less, most gladly would I beg your Grace's acceptance of him, and would rejoice that Don Carlos should be thus honoured. As it is, he is the greatest friend and best comrade I possess in the world. I trow I must needs take him home with me.”

”You are right, boy, you are right. And it is better so; for he might meet a bloody end any moment in these rough campaigning days. But you must not go hence without some token of the good will and gratitude John Churchill bears you. Take this ring, and wear it for my sake. And should ever trouble, or loss, or

misfortune fall upon you, and you be in need, in my absence abroad, of a friend at home, take it and show it to my wife. I shall write to her of this day's peril, and how I was saved in the nick of time; and when she sees that ring in your hands, she will know who was her husband's deliverer, and will know, too, how to receive and reward him."

The ring held out was a large amethyst of great brilliance and beauty, with a curious oriental-looking head engraved upon it, with what might be a legend in some Eastern tongue. It was a trinket which, once seen, would not easily be forgotten, and Grey Dumaresq slipped it upon his finger with a smile of gratification. It was no small thing to feel himself thus honoured by Europe's greatest general.

He rose to his feet and bowed low; but Marlborough held out his hand and pressed his fingers warmly. "I shall not forget you, my friend. I trust that yours will be one of the faces that will greet me first, when I shall return home to England after the close of the campaign."

The young man's face lighted with pleasure at these words.

"I think your Grace may rely upon that," he said. "I thank you with all my heart for this most gracious reception."

"The thanks are mine to give—yours to receive," spoke the Duke with his winning graciousness. "Farewell, my friend. May Dame Fortune continue to smile upon your career; and may you live to be prosperous and famous, and find one to love and be loved by faithfully—for, believe me, without true conjugal love, a man's life is desolate and empty, and nothing can fill the ache of a heart that has no loving ones at home to rejoice with him in his joy and weep at his misfortunes. Ambition may go far, success may be sweet; but it is love which is the true elixir of life. A man who loves and is loved can defy misfortune, poverty, even age and sickness and death; for love alone is eternal."

He spoke like one inspired, and his whole face kindled. Grey Dumaresq never forgot the smile upon the face of the great victorious General, as he saw it in that little room at Meldert on the morrow of the victory of Ramillies.

CHAPTER II. HARTSBOURNE.

The soft June dusk was falling with dewy freshness over smiling meadow and

forest glade, and the long, long shadows were melting away in the dimness of a night that would never be dark, when Grey Dumaresq halted upon the brow of a little hill, and gazed before and around him with eager pleasure, not untinged with wistfulness.

Somewhere amid those swelling woodlands lying to the south-west lay his childhood's home. He had hoped to make this spot ere the sun sank; and then he knew he could have traced the gleam of the shining streamlet, slipping like a silver streak between masses of sombre green. He might even, if the leaves had not made too thick a screen, have descried the twisted chimneys and timbered gables of the old house itself. His heart beat and his throat swelled as he gazed out over the darkening prospect. How he had loved that home of his so long as it had been blessed by his mother's presence there! With what proud delight had he sometimes pictured to himself the time when it might be his own, his very own! From childhood he had been called "the little master—the little heir." If his mother had not dubbed him so, the servants had. For Sir Hugh Dumaresq, alas, had not been a man to inspire either affection or respect in the hearts of servants or of son, and the child had dreamed dreams of the golden days which he and his mother might some day enjoy, when he should be lord of all, and live to wipe away tears from her eyes, and ensure that nothing should trouble or harass her again.

That fond dream had died its own death when the mother was laid to sleep beneath the churchyard sod, and the boy, broken-hearted and indifferent to his fate, had gone forth first to school and then to college, and had known the sweet word "home" no longer.

It was years now since he had seen Hartsbourne. At first he could not bear the idea of revisiting it, to find it empty of the one loved presence which had made it what it was to him. Afterwards his father had ceased to dwell there, had lived more and more in London, had even let the old Manor, as Grey heard before he quitted England for the roving life of the past three years.

He had been somewhat hurt and angry when this was told him; for he had planned to go and bid the old place farewell, and he no longer cared to do so then. True, it was a kinsman who dwelt there now. His father had spoken of him with a cynical smile.

"He is next of kin, after you, my son; and he has a greater gift of thrift than will ever be mine or yours, I take it. If anything should befall you on these wanderings upon which your heart is set, he would be the one to come after me, and take title and estates in his own right. If he like now to pay me my price, he may share the old house with the rats and the bats, for all I care. I love not to spend good money upon leaking roofs and bowing walls. Give me the parks and the coffee-houses, the Mall and the play-house! The devil may fly away with

that rotten old house, for all I care!”

This sentiment, rapped out with a good many of the fashionable oaths of the time, had been Grey's first intimation that his beloved old home was falling into decay. As a child it had seemed all the more perfect from that lack of newness or primness, the wildness of the garden, the encroachments of weed and woodland, which mark the first stages of decay. These words had opened his eyes to the fact that his father was letting the old place take care of itself, without regard to the future, and even then he had been conscious of the stirrings of a certain vague resentment. But he had been powerless to act; for although he had just received a small fortune which his mother had hoarded for him, and which had been nursed for him by a kinsman on the Grey side, he had no power to take over Hartsbourne and expend his wealth upon the old home; moreover, by that time the longing for travel and adventure was keen upon him, and he had made every arrangement for a tour of the then known world. His father rather encouraged than lamented his proposed absence; and the youth longed to be his own master, and to feel the strength of his wings.

Yet now, after three years' wandering about the world, Grey found himself gazing with a swelling heart upon the familiar outlines of the region of his childhood's home, and the voices of the past seemed calling him aloud—tender, sweet-toned voices, which had been silent for long, but which awoke now to cry aloud with strange insistence.

The solemn moon rose over the tree-tops as Grey gazed breathlessly upon the dim panorama before him, and instantly the world became flooded with a mystic radiance. A church spire stood suddenly out like a silver beacon, and Grey caught his breath as he watched; for his mother's grave lay beneath the walls of that little church, and the cross upon its apex seemed like a finger beckoning to him to come.

“Yonder is our goal, Dicon,” spoke the young man, as his servant, whom he had outridden in his eager haste, spurred up the ridge to his side. “You cannot see the house in this uncertain light; but it lies in yon deep hollow, away to the right from the church. The river winds about it, guarding it from ill, as I used to think in my boyish fantasy. I have seen the harts and does come down from the forest to drink at its waters. Hartsbourne was the name they gave the house, and methinks it was well named. Ah me!—to think how many years have passed since I beheld it all! Hark! Can you not hear the old familiar voices calling the wanderer home?”

The honest servant nodded his head with a smile upon his rugged features. He loved his young master devotedly, and was not unaccustomed to share his musings, whether they were dashed with poetic melancholy or were full of reckless daring. Whatever his master's mood, honest Dick admired him with equal

fervour. As their horses picked a way down the descent in the darkness, he hazarded a question.

"You think you will find your noble father there, sir?"

"Why, surely yes, Dicon. Where should a man be when failing in health and strength, if not at his own home?"

"As for that, sir, I know nothing. But you have told me how that he loved not his own house, but gave it over into the hands of his kinsman, that he might take his pleasure elsewhere."

"Very true, Dicon; but that was when he was hale and strong. When ill-health and feebleness overtook him, I doubt not that all was changed. True, I have not heard from him these many months; but that is no marvel, since I myself have been a very wandering Jew. But the gentleman who brought me news of him unawares did say that he was about to quit London, for whose giddy round he had no longer strength or inclination. I have never doubted but that Hartsbourne would be the place of his choice; and hither have I come. I might have learned news of him by going straight to London; but why turn aside from our way for that, when I feel so sure that it is here we shall find him? Doth not nature call every man home to his bed at night, and to his own home at the close of his life? My father is not old—Heaven send he may live long yet; but if disease has crippled his powers and robbed him of his zest of life, I doubt not but that it is here we shall surely find him."

Two days previously the travellers had landed safely at the port of Harwich, having had a safe and speedy crossing from the Hague. The pass given them by the Duke of Marlborough had rendered their journey from Louvain an easy one. From the seaport, Grey had taken the direct road into Hertfordshire, feeling certain that here, and not in London, would he now find his father. He had hoped to arrive ere set of sun; but a few mischances along the road, and the sultry heat of the midday hours, had delayed them. Nevertheless, being now so near, he pressed on steadily. He could not rest so near to home, save beneath the old roof-tree. As the windings of the path grew more familiar, his heart throbbed in his breast. Here they passed the boundary of his father's estate. That broken cross marked the spot. And yonder, sleeping in the moonlight, hoary and beautiful, lay the ruined fragments of what had once been an old priory. He could see that the walls had crumbled away during his years of absence; but one beautiful arch still stood as of old, the delicate tracery showing clear in the moonlight. White owls flitted from the thick wreaths of ivy, and hooted weirdly as they sailed by on noiseless wing. A wild cat leaped out with a menacing yell, and both horses snorted and plunged at the sight and sound. Dick's hand was on his pistol stock; but seeing what it was, he uttered a half uneasy laugh.

"A bad omen, my master," he spoke, as he quieted his horse. "That wild

black thing was liker some witch or devil than aught I have clapped eyes on this many a day. Saints preserve us from spell or charm!”

For Dick, albeit a good Protestant by profession, had caught some of the phrases of the people in whose lands he had dwelt, and he was by no means free from superstition, though a bold enough rogue to meet any peril that he could combat with sword or bullet.

”Tush, Dicon! Dost fear a cat, man? For my part, I love all the wild things of the woods, and would be the friend of all. See yonder! There should be a tangled path leading down through the forest glade, and across the stream by a ford to the house itself. Methinks I cannot lose the way, though the path be overgrown, and the light treacherous.—Onward, good Carlos! Fodder and rest are nigh at hand. Within the space of half an hour you and I should both be installed safely at home.”

Home! The word was as music to his ears. It seemed to set itself to the beat of the horses’ hoofs along the tangled path, which Grey had some trouble in finding. But once found, he was able to trace it without difficulty; and soon the soft whisper of the water fell upon his ears, and the stream lay before him shining in the moonlight.

How beautiful it was upon this still June night! The young green of the trees could not shut out the silvery beams of the moon. The forest was full of whispering voices, and every voice seemed to be welcoming back the stranger-son. The warblers amid the sedges and the fringe of alders along the course of the winding stream filled the air with soft music, not less sweet, if less powerful, than that of the nightingale pouring out his heart in song a little farther away. Sometimes a sleeping deer in some deep hollow sprang up almost from beneath their feet, and dashed, phantom-like, away into the dim aisles of the wood.

And now the wall loomed up before them which separated the house and its precincts from the wilderness of wood and water beyond. Grey well knew this mouldering wall, from which the coping had fallen in many places, and which showed more than one ill-repaired breach in the once sound masonry. The ivy had grown into a tangled mass upon it, and was helping to drag it down. Any active marauder could have scaled it easily. But Grey turned his horse, and skirted round it for some distance. For he knew that a door at the angle gave entrance into the stable-yard, and from thence to the courtyard and entrance-hall of the old house; and as it was already past midnight, he preferred to take this way rather than approach by the avenue to the front of the house.

He turned the angle of the wall, and there was the entrance he was making for. But how desolate it all looked! The double doors had rusted from off their hinges, and stood open, none seeming to care to close them at night. The courtyard was so grass-grown that the feet of the horses scarcely sounded as

they entered. A range of stables stood half open, some mouldy straw rotting in the stalls, but no signs of life either in the stables below or the living-rooms above. Grey directed Dicon to the forage store, and bade him look if there were not something to be found there for the horses; and whilst the man was thus engaged, finding enough odds and ends to serve for a meal for the beasts, the master passed through an inner door into a second courtyard, and gazed upward at a range of lancet windows which, in former days, had belonged to the rooms occupied by the servants.

Not a light glimmered in any casement; not a dog barked challenge or welcome. It was not wonderful that the house should be dark and silent at such an hour; but it was more than darkness which reigned here. There was a look of utter desolation and neglect brooding over the place. Broken casements hung crazily, and swung creaking in the night air. Tiles had slipped from the roof, chimney stacks seemed tottering to their fall. True, the great nail-studded oaken door, which Grey well remembered as leading through a long arched passage past the servants' quarters and into the front entrance-hall, was closed and locked; but rust had eaten deep into all the iron work, and cobwebs hung in festoons from the eaves of the dilapidated porch.

In vain Grey beat upon the door with the pommel of his sword. Not a sound from within betokened the presence of living creature. A sudden fear shook him lest he had come too late. This idea had never troubled him before. His father was still young in years. Dissipation might have weakened him, made him an easy prey to disease; but surely, surely had aught worse than that befallen, he would have heard it—he would have been summoned back. It was not any very tender bond that had existed betwixt father and son; but after all, they had no one else. Grey felt his heart grow suddenly cold within him.

Then a new idea entered his head. He turned away from the door, and passed hastily through the courtyard into a walled enclosure beyond, which had plainly once been a fine kitchen-garden, where giant espaliers still lined the paths, and masses of apple blossom glimmered ghostly in the moonlight. Striding along one of the paths under the house wall, where shuttered windows, looking like blind eyes, gave back a stony stare, he reached at last a quaint little offshoot of the house, set in an angle where house and garden wall joined; and he uttered a short exclamation of satisfaction as he saw that here there were traces of habitation in clean, bright window panes, flowers in a strip of border beneath, and a door that looked as though it could move upon its hinges. Upon this door he thumped with hearty good will.

"Jock! Jock! Wake up, man—wake up! Don't tell me that you are a ghost too—that the old house is peopled only with ghosts of the past.—A dog's bark! Good! Where there is dog, there is man.—Wake up, Jock! Wake up and open the

door. Have no fear. It is I—the young master.”

”God bless my soul! Ye don’t say so!” cried a cracked voice from within.—
”Quiet, Ruff; be still, man!—Yes, yes, I’m comin’, I’m comin’.”

The sound of a bolt slipped back gave evidence of this, and next moment the door was opened from within, a shaggy head was thrust forth, and an old man, evidently just risen from his bed, gazed for a moment at the intruder, who stood plainly revealed in the moonlight and uttered a heartfelt exclamation.

”Heaven be praised!—it is Sir Grey himself!”

The young man fell back as though before a blow. ”Sir Grey! What mean you by that, Jock? Sir Grey!”

”Why, master dear, you surely have heard the news! You have been Sir Grey since the week after Christmas.”

”You mean—my father—nay, Jock—how can I speak the words?”

”He died two days after Christmas, Sir Grey. He had me with him to the last. He never trusted that knave of a kinsman, not he, though he had let himself get fast into his clutches. Ah, if you had but been with us then! Woe is me! for we wanted you sorely. It was hard upon All Saints’ Day that the old master came back. He was sick; he had lost the use of his limbs. The leeches said they could do naught for him, but that he might live to be an old man yet. He made light of it at first. He vowed he would cheat them all. But we all saw death in his face. In two months he lay over yonder by the side of our sweet lady.”

Jock, though no great speaker at ordinary times, had made, for him, a long speech, because the young master said not a word, but stood leaning against the angle of the wall as though overcome by the news he had heard.

”And why was I not sent for?” The words were a whisper.

”You were, Sir Grey, you were—leastways the master told me so. He said that Mr. Barty had written many letters, and sent them after you by trusty messengers. But Lord, if ’twere only what that rogue said, belike the trusty messenger was nothing better than the fire, into which he dropped his own letters after satisfying the master by writing them.”

”What mean you, Jock?” asked Grey, with dry lips. ”And who is this Mr. Barty of whom you speak?”

”Faith, none other but him as hopes one day to style himself Sir Bartholomew Dumaresq—your father’s cousin, Sir Grey, and next of kin after you. ’Tis he as has got his grip so fast upon Hartsbourne that it’ll be a tough bit of work to shake it off. He’s got mortgages on the place, the old master told me at the last, and he’s been squeezing it like a sponge these many years—cutting the timber, grinding the tenants, living like a miser in one corner of the house, letting all else go to wrack and ruin, that there may be nothing for the heir to come into. Oh, the master saw through him at the last, that he did; but ’twas

too late then. Here he is, stuck fast like a leech to the old place, and sucking its life-blood dry, and protected by the law, so that even you can't touch him; the master told me that before he died. He'd got him to sign papers when he was merry with wine, and knew not nor cared what he signed. So long as Mr. Barty supplied him with money, he cared for naught else; and now he's got such a grip on house and lands that it'll be a matter of years before ever he can be got out, if ever that day come at all."

A numb feeling began to creep over Grey. He felt like one walking in a bad dream. The blow of hearing of his father's death was a heavy one. It seemed to shake the foundations of his life to their very base. And now his home was lost to him! Little as he understood the machinations of his kinsman, he grasped that he had come into nothing but a barren title and nominal possession of a ruinous and dilapidated old house, the revenues of which were in some way alienated to another. He had heard such tales before. He did not discredit old Jock's recital. It fitted in only too well with what he knew of his father's recklessness and selfish expenditure, and his kinsman's artful grasping policy. So, after all, he had come to a home that was not his; and he would have to face the world again as something very like a beggar.

Old Jock's hand upon his arm aroused him to a sense of outward things. Dicon had come up, and was listening with wide eyes and falling jaw to the recital of the same story as had been told in outline to Grey. The fuller details only made it sound more true and lifelike.

"Come in, Sir Grey, come in. There's bite and sup for you in the cupboard. The old master didn't forget me, and I can make shift to earn my bread by hook or by crook even without regular wage. Come in, come in, and I'll give ye what I've got for ye. 'Twas all the old master had left from his hoard; but he said it would give you a start in life, and that your wits must do the rest. He gave it me private like, when Mr. Barty was off the place, and I buried it beneath the hearthstone that same day. 'Tis all safe for you, Sir Grey; and you won't go penniless into the world, for all that this villain of a kinsman reigns at Hartsbourne, where you should be."

CHAPTER III. THE SCHEMING KINSMAN.

They sat face to face in a room which Grey well remembered. It had been lined with folios in those days—great tomes in which he had dug with breathless delight, for the treasures of wood-cuts and the strange stories they possessed—and illuminated missals, where, amid a mass of gilding and wonderful colours, the story of saint or martyr could be traced. Other and more modern works had been also there, specimens of the art of printing as carried on through the days of the Stuarts. But where were all these tomes and scrolls and books now? Grey swept the empty shelves with quick, indignant glances. A motion of his hands seemed to ask the question his lips were too proud to speak.

A small and wizened man sat before him, his eyes furtively scanning the young man's face with an unwinking attention. He could not have been old, this parchment-faced kinsman—not more than five-and-forty at the most—and yet he wore the look of an old man, and was fond of speaking of himself as such. The unhealthy pallor of his face bespoke a life of inaction, and the lines and wrinkles on the puffy skin, and the emaciation of the frame and claw-like hands, seemed either to indicate some wasting disease, or else a miser-like habit of life which denied its owner the common necessities of existence. Grey fancied that perhaps this latter surmise might be the right one; for he himself would have fared ill at breakfast that morning, had it not been for the fish which Dicon had caught and cooked for the pair, ere he presented himself at the meal to which his kinsman invited him on hearing of his advent to the old house. That meal had been so frugal that Grey almost disdained to partake of it. And now he and Mr. Dumaresq sat facing each other in the green light which fell through the big north window, against which the trees almost brushed, rather like combatants in a duel, each of which measures the strength and skill of the other before attempting to strike.

The wizened man made a deprecating gesture with his hand, and answered the unspoken question.

"Sold, sold—every one of them! I did my best to keep them in the family, but it was of no avail. Your father would have money—no matter at what cost. I was toiling all I knew for him, as it was. Everything that could be got out of the estate I squeezed out for him. Never man had so faithful a steward as I was to my poor cousin. But it was like pouring water through a sieve. Nay, you need not look so fiercely at me. I am not traducing the dead. Ask those with whom he consorted. Ask the boon companions he made in gay London town. Ask his very servants, an you will. You will hear the same tale from all. He spent money like water. Never did he trouble his head where it was to come from. I have papers; I can show them if you have knowledge of the law enough to understand. I advanced him sum after sum, on such poor security as this tumble-down house and impoverished estate has to offer. I beggared myself for his sake. He was the only kinsman left me. I could deny him nothing. And when my funds were

gone, I must needs squeeze all that could be squeezed out of the house and land. The books went; the timber was felled; the pictures were taken away; the best of the furniture went to adorn the houses of merchants and parvenus. I argued and entreated in vain. When the wild fit was upon him, Hugh would listen to nothing. I had to content myself with serving him, by seeing that he was not cheated beyond bearing by the crew of harpies he had around him. At least I secured him equitable prices for family heirlooms; but it went to my heart to see them vanish one by one. And now, what is left save the shell of the old house, and an estate burdened and impoverished well-nigh beyond the power of redemption?"

He heaved a great sigh, looking cunningly at the young man out of the corners of his ferret-like eyes. Grey's glance was stern and direct. His words were quietly and coldly spoken.

"We will see about that. I am here to take up my burden. I will learn whether or not Hartsbourne be past redemption."

"You!" cried 'Mr. Dumaresq quickly; "and pray what can you do?"

"I can live here quietly, and see what can be done towards retrieving the past. Even if I toil with my own hands, I shall think it no shame, if it be for the home of my forefathers."

"You live here!" sneered the other, seeking to mask the sneer by a smile; "and by what right will you do that, pray?"

"I am the owner," answered Grey proudly. "I presume that I have the right to live in my own house, and to administer such revenues as may be left to the estate?"

"Oh yes, fair kinsman, so soon as the mortgages be paid. I will get them out for your high mightiness to examine. Pay them off, and house and manor are yours to do with as you will. But till that time come, I, and not you, am master here. The revenues are mine; the house I have the right to occupy, to the exclusion of any other. It is all writ fair to see—signed and sealed. Will you see the papers for yourself? They will make pleasant study for a summer morning."

"I will look at the papers anon," answered Grey quietly; "but first I would know from you what it all means. It is you, not I, to whom Hartsbourne belongs, then? You are the master, and I am the guest?"

"For the present, yes; but a welcome guest, none the less," spoke the older man with a repulsive leer. "The situation, my bold young cousin, is easily understood. Your father loved not the old family house. I did love it. Could he have sold it, it would have been mine long since; but he had not the power to alienate it from the title. But he did all else that was possible. He raised mortgage upon mortgage upon it—first on the house, then on the land. I came to live in the house, and paid him rent for it once. Then I supplied him with money and took up the

mortgages. He and I had been boys together. The tie between us was strong. I verily believe he was glad to have me here, and when he was sick and smitten with mortal disease he came hither to die, and I was with him to the last. He was grateful for my devoted service. He was glad to think that I should live on here afterwards. 'It is no life for a young man,' he said almost at the last. 'Grey will carve out a career for himself. Here he could only rot and starve like a rat in a hole.' And I pointed out that you were my natural heir, and that you might not have very long to wait before coming a second time into your inheritance."

Grey sat silent and baffled. It was little he knew of the law; but he had heard before this of men who had left nothing save debts and troubles for those who came after them. Many a fair manor and estate passed into alien hands for years, or even for generations, when trouble fell upon the owners. He understood only too well how it had been here at Hartsbourne—everything squeezed out of the estate, nothing put in, till at last the house was falling into ruin, and the rights of the lord of the manor had passed away from the owner. It was no consolation to Grey that a Dumaresq had supplanted him. He was cut to the heart by the selfish extravagance of his father, and the way in which he had played into the hands of this schemer. He saw how impossible it would be to attempt to live here himself, even if he could establish a legal right to do so. He was not certain if his father could have done anything which should actually hinder him from claiming possession of the house which was his, but to find money to pay off the mortgages—he might as well have sought for money to buy the moon! And even then, how could he live in a house without money, without servants, without friends? No; he must seek to carve out a fortune for himself. His fair dream of a peaceful life in England as a country squire was shattered into a thousand pieces. Some day perhaps—some day in the dim and distant future, when fortune and fame were his—he might come back to take possession of his own. It should be his dream—the goal of his ambition—to dwell at Hartsbourne as its lord and master. But for the present he could call nothing his own save the good horse cropping the lush June grass in the paddock, and that casket so carefully hidden beneath the hearthstone of old Jock's living-room. He would look at the papers. He would make careful study of them. He would take notes as to the amount necessary to clear the estate and make him master in reality. And then he would go; he would not be beholden to this kinsman, whose shifty face he distrusted heart and soul, though his words were smooth and fair. He would ride forth into the fair world of an English midsummer, and would see what the future held there for him.

It was not an exhilarating hour which he spent over the parchments spread out before his eyes, which were eagerly explained to him by the lynx-eyed kinsman, who seemed half afraid to trust them out of his own claw-like clutches. But

Grey perused them with attention, making notes the while; and after studying these at the close, whilst the deeds were being locked away, he said,—

”Then when I return with thirty thousand pounds in my pocket, I can take over Hartsbourne, house and lands and all, and be master of my own estate in deed as well as in word?”

”And how are you to come by this thirty thousand pounds, fair coz?” asked Mr. Dumaresq, with something slightly uneasy in his shifty glance. ”Right gladly would I receive mine own, and make way for a gallant gentleman like you; but where are these riches of Aladdin to come from?”

”Perchance from the same source as yours did come, sir,” answered Grey, looking full at his interlocutor. ”The Dumaresqs have not ranked as a wealthy family since the days of the Civil War, when they lost so much. But you seem to have found fortune’s golden key; and if you, why not I?”

Did he shrink and cower under these words, or was it only Grey’s fancy that he did so? The young man could not be sure, though he had his suspicions. At any rate he spoke suavely enough.

”Thrift and care, my young friend, care and thrift—these qualities are better than any golden key of hazard. My father was a careful, saving man, and at his death bequeathed me greater wealth than I dreamed he did possess. I followed in his footsteps until, for your father’s sake, I elected to prop the falling fortunes of the house rather than live in selfish affluence on my own revenues. Well, I did what seemed right; and my reward shall be the hope of seeing Hartsbourne one day restored to its former glories. But for the present I must needs live like a poor man, though that is no trouble to one who has ever made thrift the law of life.”

Grey went forth from the presence of his kinsman with a cloud on his brow and a fire in his heart.

”Why doth he speak of himself as poor?” he asked of himself. ”He takes to himself all the revenues of the estate; and when I was a boy, I always heard that the farms were prosperous, the land fertile, the timber fine, game and deer plentiful, and the tenants able to pay their dues. If all that comes in goes into his pocket, wherefore doth he live like a miser? wherefore doth he let the house fall into decay? he ruined himself for my father’s sake? Tush! A man with that face sacrifice himself for another! Nay; but he is hoarding up gold for himself, or I greatly mistake me. Truly do I believe that he is playing some deep game of his own. Well, I can but wait and see what time will bring forth. It is a shame that the old house should be left to go to ruin like this, with its revenues falling regularly into the hands of a Dumaresq! Why doth he not spend them upon the fine old structure, to make it what it was before? Why, now I see. He thinks it would stimulate me to fresh desire to make myself master. He may haply think

that I care not for a habitation given up to rats and ghosts and cobwebs. He little thinks that every fallen stone seems to cry out aloud to me, and that the lower falls the old house in ruin and neglect, the more urgent is the voice with which it urges me to come and save it."

The young man was walking up and down the grass-grown avenue as he thus mused. From thence he could see in perspective the long south front, with its many mullioned windows, its beautiful oriels, and the terrace up and down which he had raced in the days of his happy childhood. Straight in front was the eastern portion of the house, with its great entrance doors, led up to by a fine double stairway, beneath which a coach could stand, and its occupants in wet weather enter by a lower door. But the stone work was chipped and broken; the balustrade had lost many of its balls, which lay mouldering in the long grass that grew up to the very walls. Moss and lichen and stone-crop clothed all, and the creepers which clung about the house itself were wild and tangled, and in many cases had completely overgrown the very windows, so that scarce a trace of them could be seen.

Yet even in its decay the old house was strangely beautiful, and Grey's heart was stirred to its depths. He wandered through the tangled garden, and out towards the fish-ponds beyond and then by a winding pathway he made his way to the churchyard, and stood bare-headed at his mother's grave.

"I will win it back, mother; I will win it back!" He spoke the words aloud, in a low-toned, earnest voice. "You loved the place, and you taught me to love it. For that alone I would seek to call it one day mine own. I will win it back, and methinks your heart will rejoice when your son is ruling there at last."

Grey had meant to leave that very day; but there was much he longed to see, and his kinsman had given him an earnest invitation to pass the night beneath the old roof-tree. Repugnant as this man was to him, and bitterly as he resented his conduct and distrusted his motives, it was not in the young man's nature to be churlish. Every hour of daylight he spent wandering about the place, revisiting his boyish haunts, and chatting with old Jock, who, without being able to give any exact reason for it, distrusted and despised the present master as heartily as Grey himself.

"The old master did too, at the last. I am main sure of it," he said; "else for why should he have given me yon box, sir? And why should he have bidden me hide it and guard it, and let none see it till Sir Grey should claim it himself? For years he had thought him a friend; but I trow he knew him for a false one at the last. You'll best him yet, Sir Grey—see if you don't. A villain always outwits himself in the end. You'll be master here one day, please God, or my name's not Jock Jarvis!"

Grey had taken out the casket, and found that it contained three hundred

golden guineas—the remnant of his father’s fortune, and all that he had been able to preserve to his son of what had once been a fine estate. A few words cautioned Grey to be careful of the hoard, and let no one know of its existence—”no one” plainly meaning his kinsman. It also contained a few faintly traced words of farewell, and just a plea for forgiveness—evidently written when mortal weakness was upon the writer—which brought sudden tears to the eyes of the son, and blotted out the bitterness of heart which had been growing up as he mused upon his fallen fortunes and his lost inheritance.

That evening Grey supped with his kinsman in a corner of the despoiled library, which seemed the only room in the house now lived in. He had walked through some of the other state apartments, denuded of their pictures and the best of the furniture, and looking ghostlike with closed shutters and overgrown windows. He had not had heart to pursue his investigations far; and all that he carried away with him were saddened memories, and one little mouldering volume of poems, with his mother’s name on the fly leaf, which he had found lying in a corner of the little room with the sunny oriel, where she had passed the greater part of her time. He thought he even remembered the book in her hands; and he slipped it into his breast as though it were some great treasure. The sneering smile of his kinsman as he bade him keep the volume, and saw where he placed it, did not endear him any the more. He wished he could get rid of his companionship, but that seemed impossible; and Grey soon gave up the tour of the house, and let himself be led back to the library.

”No, I have no plans,” he said briefly, as they sat at their frugal supper, to which, in honour of the occasion, a small flagon of wine had been added. ”I think I shall remain in England. I have been a wanderer something too long. A homely saying tells us that the rolling stone gathers no moss. I have youth and health and strength, and the world lies before me. Men have won success with more against them before this, and why not I?”

”I should have thought the battlefield would have tempted you. There is honour and renown to be won there, to say nothing of the spoils of a vanquished foe,” spoke Mr. Dumaresq, looking at him in a peering, crafty fashion. ”Surely a gallant young gentleman of your birth and training would not lack for opportunities of distinction amid the perils and glories of war!”

Suddenly Grey became aware that his kinsman was anxious for him to go and fight in the cause of the Allies. It could not be that he had heard of the happy chance which had made Marlborough his friend, for he had spoken of that to none; and even if Dicon had boasted to old Jock, neither cared to have aught to do with the deaf and cross-grained serving-man who waited upon the master within doors. A moment more and Grey had found the clue, and realized that his own death would make Bartholomew Dumaresq not only absolute master

of Hartsbourne, but a baronet to boot; and in every battle thousands of brave soldiers were left dead upon the field, whilst many fell victim to wounds and the ravages of disease caught during the hard weeks of campaigning.

"I think I shall remain in England," he answered quietly. "I have seen something of war, but a career of peace has more attractions for me," and he smiled to see the look of chagrin which played for a moment over the crafty face of his kinsman.

Grey did not find it easy to sleep when he had climbed up into the great canopied bed in the guest chamber allotted to him. He scarcely remembered this room. It was very large, and before he went to rest Grey drew aside all the mouldering draperies from the windows, and opened every casement wide to the summer night. Even so the place felt musty. There were strange creakings and groanings of the furniture, and the owls without hooted and hissed in the ivy wreaths. More than one bat flew in and out, circling over his head in uncanny flight; and had it not been that the previous night had been an almost sleepless one, Grey would scarce have closed an eye. As it was, he grew drowsy gradually, and felt a strange swimming in his head to which he was a stranger. He was just wondering whether the wine he had taken at supper, the taste of which seemed curious to him at the time, could have anything to do with this, when sleep suddenly fell upon him like a pall, and for a space he could not gauge he remained lapped in the unconsciousness of oblivion.

What was it roused him? Or was he indeed awake? The moonlight streamed into the room, and lay like bars upon the floor. Its radiance was sufficient to light every corner of the room, and Grey found himself lying still as a stone, yet sweeping every corner with his gaze, for surely he was not alone. He felt some presence close beside him, yet where could it be?

Suddenly his gaze travelled upwards, and for a few awful seconds he lay gazing as the bird before the gaze of the snake.

A shining poniard hung, as it were, over his head. He saw the gleaming silver of the blade. Its haft was grasped by a hand—a lean, claw-like hand. Its point was aimed at his own heart.

For a few endless seconds Grey lay staring up helplessly. Then the blade moved swiftly downwards. With a motion as swift, the young man threw himself sidewise out of bed and upon the floor, and turning, sprang to his feet to meet the murderous foe.

Behold there was nothing! He was alone in the great moonlit room. The curtains behind the bed's head were slightly shaken—nothing more.

Horrified and bewildered, Grey dashed them aside. Behind was a wall panelled like the rest of the room in black oak. Was it his fancy, or had he heard just as he sprang to his feet the click as of a closing spring? Grey passed his hand over

and over the woodwork, but could find nothing to give a clue. Old memories of secret sliding panels, unknown passages to hiding-places, and ghostly visitants to sleeping guests, rose in succession before him. But this was something more than an ordinary ghostly visitor. Grey saw again the murderous gleam of cold steel over his head—saw the claw-like hand in its faded russet sleeve, the fierce downward sweep of the weapon.

”It was my kinsman, and he sought to do me to death—here in the haunted chamber, where perhaps some infernal machinery exists whereby the corpse could have been quickly and quietly removed and heard of no more. Who would care save Dicon, and what could a poor varlet like that do if the master of Hartsbourne were to assert that his kinsman had ridden off in the early hours of the morning, he knew not whither? Did he drug the wine? Was this in his head all the while? Or was the idea suggested only by my refusal to place my neck in peril at the wars? O Barty, Barty Dumaresq, a pretty villain art thou! Before this I might perhaps have been tempted to return to the Duke, and seek to win my spurs at his side; but now—no. I will take the safer, if the slower, path to fame and fortune, and I will live to make you rue the day you sought to rid yourself, by secret assassination, of the man in whose shoes you hope some day to stand.”

CHAPTER IV. ON THE ROAD.

With the first streak of midsummer dawn Grey Dumaresq was in the paddock, looking well to the condition of his horse, and grooming the soft, satin coat lovingly with his own hands.

”We must be up and away, my beauty, ere the sun be high. This is no place for either you or me, albeit every foot of ground is mine own, and it will go hard if I let that weasel-faced scoundrel filch it altogether from me. I know him now in his true colours. Heaven send the day may come when I shall repay with interest that which I owe him.”

The horse tossed his head and neighed as though in response; and perhaps Dicon heard the sound from where he slept, for almost at once he was at his master’s side; and old Jock came cautiously out by the doorway leading towards the house, and looked relieved and gratified to see the young master abroad.

”Eh, but I have been sore troubled with bad dreams this night,” he said, as

he shambled up. "Yon house is full of such, I take it. How slept you, my master? and how fare you this morn? It is good to see you looking so spruce and sound. Bad luck to the dreams that drove sleep from my pillow at last."

"I had my dreams too, Jock, and I have not slept since," answered Grey, with a significant glance at the old man. "Tell me, good fellow, what know you of the panelled guest-chamber, with the row of windows looking south over the park? Ha! why look you so, man? What know you of the chamber?"

"Did he put you there, my master? Then Peter lied to me, the false-tongued knave. If I had known that! No wonder the dreams were bad that came to me. The haunted room! Tush! it is not ghosts that hurt, but men who come and go at will and leave no trace behind."

"I thought so," spoke Grey composedly. "Then there is a secret way of entrance into that room?"

"Ay, behind the bed. I do not know the trick, but I have heard of it. Men have been done to death in that room ere this, and none the wiser for it. Oh if I had but known!"

Grey's eyes were fixed full upon the pallid face of the old man. He put the next question gravely and almost sternly.

"Tell me truly, my friend. Think you that this kinsman of mine would plot to do me hurt? He made profession of friendship."

"He made the same to Sir Hugh," answered Jock in a trembling voice, "and for long the master believed in him. But methinks he never would have died as he did, had he not come to live here with Mr. Barty at Hartsbourne."

Grey started and changed colour, clinching his hand,

"You think that this kinsman of ours compassed his death?"

Jock looked over his shoulder as though fearful of listening ears. He drew a step nearer; and Dicon, with fallen jaw and staring eyes, came up close to listen.

"How can I tell? I was seldom in the house. I work in the garden, and because I am a cheap servant, asking no money, but making a pittance by what I can sell, Mr. Barty has kept me here where he found me. But when the old master came, he often sent for me. Before he became too ill, he sometimes crawled to my little cottage yonder for a bit of chat. He told me the doctors and leeches told him he had but to rest and live simply in the country for a few years to be a sound man again. But for all that he dwindled and dwindled away, and was gone in two months."

"Did no leech attend him here?" asked Grey breathlessly.

"Not till the very last, when they sent me to Edgeware to fetch one who could do naught. Mr. Barty professed to know many cures, and the master believed in him. He eased his pain, but he sank into an ever-increasing, ever-mastering drowsiness, and he shrank away to skin and bone. It went to my heart

to see him. Many's the time when I have wondered whether it would have ended so if he had not taken Mr. Barty's simples and draughts."

"Was he poisoned, then?" asked Grey, between his shut teeth.

Jock looked nervously over his shoulder; the word seemed to frighten him. He shook his old head from side to side.

"Nay, nay, how can I tell—a poor old ignorant man like me? But he used to say that you would likely never come home again (travellers met such a deal of peril, he would say), and then his eyes would gleam and glisten, for there was but the old master's life and yours betwixt him and the title and all."

Grey ground his teeth, and his eyes flashed. Somehow he did not doubt for a moment that foul play had been used to compass his father's death. Had he not escaped assassination himself that night only by the skin of his teeth?

"Could any man living throw light upon this matter?" he asked. "The leech from Edgeware, or any other?"

"I misdoubt me if any could, save wall-eyed Peter, Mr. Barty's man; and I trow his master makes it worth while for him to hold his tongue and know nothing."

"Gold will sometimes unloose a miscreant's tongue."

"Ay, ay, maybe; but Mr. Barty's purse is longer than yours, Sir Grey, and his mind is crookeder and his ways more artful. Don't you go for to anger him yet: hurt might come to you an you did. Get you gone from the place, and that right soon; for the sooner you leave Hartsbourne behind you, the safer it will be for you."

"Yes, my master; let us indeed be gone," pleaded Dicon earnestly. "This is a God-forsaken hole, not fit for you to dwell in. Take the store of gold pieces, and let us begone, for I trow that harm will come to you if you linger longer here."

It took little to persuade Grey to be off and away. Old Jock provided them with a meal, and they could break their fast at the old inn at Edgeware, through which they would pass. He had no desire to go through the farce of a farewell to his kinsman. He only desired to shake off the dust of his feet against him; and ere the chimes of the church rang out the hour of six, Grey was turning on the crest of a ridge of rising ground, to look his last for the nonce upon the old home he had dreamed of so many a time, and round which so many loving thoughts centred.

"Let kind Fortune but smile upon me, Dicon, and show me the way to affluence and fame, and I will yet be lord and master there, and the manor of Hartsbourne shall be one of the fairest in the land!"

"Why, so you shall, Sir Grey, and that right speedily!" cried honest Dick, who had an unbounded admiration for his young master, and an immense confidence in his luck, albeit no special good fortune had befallen him since he had

taken service with him.

Dick had led a seafaring life during his earlier years, and Grey had picked him up in a shipwrecked, ragged, and starving condition on the coast of Spain some two years previously. In those days ship-wrecked sailors often had a hard time of it, even though the terrors of the galleys or the Inquisition did not loom quite so perilously before them as had been the case a century before. To find himself taken into the service of a young English gentleman of quality, and to be the companion of his travels, had been a piece of luck that Dick thanked Providence for every day of his life. He had been one of four servants at the outset; but as Grey's resources diminished, or his roving life took him into perils for which some men had little stomach, he gradually lost his retinue, till, for the past year, Dick alone had followed him, and the two had become friends and comrades, as well as master and servant. Now at their first halting-place, where they paused to let the horses breathe after a steady half-hour's gallop, Grey opened the wallet at his side, which he had filled with gold pieces from the casket (the rest he had sewn carefully into his clothes for safety), and counted out a certain number, which he shook in his fist as he spoke.

"Dicon, I am going to London to try my luck there. But, as I have oftentimes heard, fortunes are as easily lost there as won, wherefore it may be that I shall become a beggar instead of growing in wealth and greatness."

"Heaven forbid!" ejaculated Dick in passionate protest.

"Well, Heaven watches over the undeserving as well as the virtuous, so there is e'en hope for me," answered Grey with his winning smile. "But look ye here, Dicon. You have been a faithful rogue, and have served me well, and I hope we may company together many a long day yet. But inasmuch as there are uncertainties in life, and we are going forth into a new world, where perchance I may sink rather than swim, I desire to give you six months' wage in advance, whilst I have my pockets lined with gold, so that should any untoward chance befall me, as it has befallen better men than myself, I shall not have to turn you adrift unrewarded, nor will you, if you can be a wise varlet, and husband your resources, be thrown on the world without some means of support."

Dick seemed about to protest, but either the look on his master's face or some idea which had entered his own head held him silent. He took the coins without counting them, and producing a greasy leathern pouch, such as sailors often carry with them, he dropped the gold pieces into it one by one, tied it up, and fastened it safely in an inner pocket.

"That pouch stuck by me when I lost everything else in the world, and well-nigh my own life," said the fellow with a grin. "My mother did give it me when I first went to sea, and she told me as a wise witch woman had given it her. She thought 'twas the caul of a child; and like enough it be, for salt water never hurts

it, and I was the only one saved of all the crew that went down off the Spanish coast. I'd sooner part with the gold pieces than with the pouch that holds them."

They both rode on with thoughtful faces after this brief interlude. Grey was turning over a dozen different schemes in his mind; but all were vague and chimerical. Now and again he looked at an amethyst ring upon his finger, and it came over him that the shortest cut to fortune might be to present himself as a suppliant for favour at the feet of the great Duchess of Marlborough, who was said to rule the Queen with a rod of iron, and whose known devotion to her husband would be certain to raise high in her favour any person who had rendered him so timely a service as that which Grey had been able to offer on the day of Ramillies.

But then, again, it seemed to Grey that to claim reward for that chance service, which had cost him nothing, was little better than playing the beggar or the sycophant. There was in his nature a strong strain of chivalrous romance—of love of adventure for its own sake, without thought of reward or favour. That encounter with the great Duke, the interview which had followed, the consciousness that he had done his country a notable service that day—all these things were very sweet to him, forming an episode pleasant to look back upon. If he now presented himself on the strength of it as a petitioner for place or favour, at once the whole thing would be vulgarized—he would be lowered in his own estimation, sinking to the level of one of the crowd of greedy flatterers and place-hunters who thronged the antechambers of the rich and great, and fawned upon them for the crumbs of patronage which they were able to dispense as the price of this homage.

Grey had seen this sort of thing at foreign courts, and his soul had sickened at it. Doubtless, in this great world of London it was the same. As a baronet, a young man of parts, with an attractive person, and, at present, a well-filled purse, he might not improbably please the fancy of the Duchess, and obtain some post in her household or about the Court that would give him a chance at least to rise. But the more he thought of this the less he liked the idea, and at last he flung it from him in scorn.

"I would sooner live in Grub Street, and drive a quill!" he said half aloud. "I could praise a hero with my pen, but I cannot fawn and flatter with my lips. And methinks I am not fit for the life of a place-man: I have been too long mine own master. Surely there are ways by which a man may rise in the world without abasing himself in his own esteem first. I will go to London, and look about me with open eyes. There are the world of politics, the world of art and literature, and the theatre of war, if other spheres should fail. Surely there must be a place for me somewhere; but I will not choose the latter if I can help it. I fear not death on mine own account; but I desire to live, and to grow rich, that I may square

matters with yonder villain, and avenge upon him my father's untimely death!"

For that his father had been in some sort done to death by his false kinsman, Grey did not now doubt, though whether he would be able to bring that crime home to him later, he could not at present surmise. Much might be possible to a man with friends in high places; but these would have to be found and won ere any step could be taken.

Grey often felt within himself the stirrings of ambition. He had shown promise of something akin to genius in his Oxford days, and there had not been lacking those among his companions and tutors who had declared that he could win fame and fortune through academic laurels. But Grey had then turned a deaf ear to such propositions. He desired to travel and see the world, and he had done this with much zest. But the muse within had not been altogether silent, and he had many times covered sheets of paper with flowing stanzas or stately sonnets, which bore witness to the fire that burned within. His pencil, too, was not without cunning; and his study of the treasures of many an art gallery, many a foreign church, had given him knowledge and culture beyond what the average gallant of the day could boast. The double strand in his nature was very marked—a reckless love of adventure, and a delicate appreciation of the beautiful. Often he longed after the days of the early troubadours, when the two walked hand in hand. He pondered these matters in his busy brain as he rode onward in the sunny brightness of the June morning, and found it in his heart to wish that he was not thus possessed by such conflicting passions. He felt he would have had a better chance of success had his bent in any one direction been more decided.

They pulled up at the quaint old inn at Edgeware, and rode into the courtyard, where lackeys and hostlers were making merry together, and where some handsome horses were being groomed down, prior to being put into the cumbersome but very handsome coach that stood beneath the protecting galleries which ran round the court. The lackeys wore a livery of snuff-coloured cloth, with a quantity of gold lace about it. The panels of the coach were snuff-coloured, and there was much heavy gilding about it, which was being polished with great zeal by the servants of the inn. It was plainly the equipage of some person of quality, and had evidently put up there for the night, but was likely to be wanted shortly for the road again.

Grey dismounted, and leaving Dick in charge of the horses, made his way in through the low-browed entrance, along a sanded passage, and so to the public room, the door of which stood open. As a boy he had known this house, and it still seemed familiar to him, though it had changed hands since he had been there last, and his face was not known to mine host.

"Your pardon, sir," spoke this functionary, bustling forward on his entrance, "but this room is bespoke for my Lord Sandford. If you are wanting a meal, it

shall be quickly served elsewhere—”

But at that moment a rollicking voice from the foot of the adjacent staircase broke in upon the excuses of the host.

”Gadzooks, man, but it shall be nothing of the sort. Set a cover for the gentleman at my table. Gosh! is a man so enamoured of his own company that he must needs drive all the world away?—Come in, sir, come in, and take pot-luck with me.—Landlord, see you give us of your best, or I’ll spit you on your own jack! I’ve a great thirst on me, mind you; and let the dishes be done to a turn.—Take a seat in the window, sir; the air blows fresh and pleasant, but it will be infernally hot ere noon. I must be off and away in good time. In London streets you can find shade; but these country roads—hang them all!—get like What’s-his-name’s fiery furnace seven times heated if they don’t chance to run through forest land!”

The speaker was a young man of perhaps seven-and-twenty, though reckless dissipation had traced lines in his face which should not so early have been there. He was dressed according to the most extravagant fashion of the day, with an immense curled wig, that hung half-way down his back; a coat of velvet, richly laced, the sleeves so short that the spotless lawn and ruffles of the shirt showed half-way up the forearm; a wonderful embroidered vest, knee breeches of satin equally gorgeous, and silk stockings elaborately gartered below the knee with bands of gold lace. He carried a fashionably cocked hat beneath his arm, with a gold-headed cane; and a small muff was suspended from his neck by gold chains. The muff held a golden snuff-box, with a picture on the lid which modesty would refuse to describe; and the young spark took snuff and interlarded his talk with the fashionable oaths of the day as a matter of course.

He looked curiously at Grey when they had taken their seats; for the traveller, though dressed with exceeding simplicity, and wearing his own hair in loose, natural curls, just framing his face and touching his shoulders, was so evidently a man of culture and of gentle blood that the dandy was both impressed and perplexed by him. For high-bred look and instinctive nobility of bearing Lord Sandford could not hold a candle to Grey Dumaresq.

”I saw you ride into the yard just now. Fine horse that of yours, sir—very fine horse! If he’s ever for sale, mind you let me know of him. Lord Sandford—your very humble servant—always to be heard of at Will’s Coffee House or the Mohawk Club. Seem to remember your face; but dash me if I can give it a name. Awful memory for names I have—know too many fellows, I suppose. Not that there are so many like you, either; but hang me, I must have met you somewhere before.”

Grey had caught the fleeting memory, and answered at once,—

”We were at Oxford together, my lord. Not at the same college, though; but we have met, doubtless. My name is Grey Dumaresq—”

"Why, to be sure. Gad! but that's strange! Thought I wasn't wrong about a face! I heard you spout forth a poem once. Lord, it was fine, though I didn't understand one word in ten! Latin or Greek—rabbit me if I know which! And I knew your father, too; met him in London now and again. He's not been seen anywhere these eight or nine months."

"My father died last Christmas," spoke Grey gravely. "I did not know it myself, being abroad." And led on by Lord Sandford's questions, which, if not very delicately put, showed a real interest in the subject, Grey gave him a bare outline of his own life since quitting Oxford, and of the position in which he now found himself.

"Oddsfish, man—as our merry monarch of happy memory used to say—but yours is a curious tale. The ladies will rave over the romance of it—coupled with that face of yours. Oh, never say die, man! You've the world before you. What more do you ask than such a face, such a story, and a few hundred pounds in your pocket? Why, with decent luck, those hundreds ought to make thousands in a very short time. You trust yourself to me, my young friend. I know my London. I know the ropes. I will show you how fortunes are made in a night; and you shall be the pet of the ladies and the envy of the beaux before another month has passed. We will find you an heiress for a wife, and—heigh, presto!—the thing is done."

Grey started, and made a gesture as of repulsion, whereat Lord Sandford roared with laughter; and there was something so heartwhole and infectious in his laugh that Grey found himself joining in almost without knowing it. The man had a strong personality, that was not to be doubted, and at this moment Grey felt himself singularly lonely, singularly perplexed about his own immediate future. He did not know London. He had scarcely set foot within its precincts, save on the occasion when he went to bid his father farewell, and when it seemed to him that he stepped into Pandemonium itself. Since then he had visited many foreign capitals, and had accustomed himself to the life there to some extent; but only to the life of a traveller—an onlooker. Now he felt that something more lay before him—that it was as a citizen and a unit in the great hive that he must go. And how to steer his bark through the shoals and quicksands of the new life, he had very small idea. To win fame and fortune was his wish; but how were these good things to be achieved? Never had it entered his head to look upon marriage as a way of gaining either.

"Zounds, man, don't look like that! Better men than you or I have not been shamed to thank their wives for their promotion. But there are more ways of killing a cat than hanging. We'll look about and see. You put yourself in my hands, and I'll show you the ropes. No, no; no thanks. I want some diversion myself. Poor Tom Gregory, my boon companion, made a fool of himself over the

wine the other night, and got spitted like a cockchafer by Captain Dashwood. I've felt bad ever since. I tried what a trip into the country would do for me. But dash it all, I can't stand the dreariness of it. I am on my way back to town as fast as may be. And you shall come with me. Nay, I'll take no denial. A man must have something to do with his time, or he'll get into a pretty peck of mischief. I've taken a liking to you; and I always get my own way, because I won't listen to objections."

So an hour later, when the coach rumbled out from under the archway of the old inn, Grey Dumaresq sat within by Lord Sandford's side, and Dick, with a puzzled but satisfied face, led his master's horse behind.

CHAPTER V. A HIGH-BORN DAME.

Westward from Whitehall, just after one had left behind the streets and lanes of the fashionable westerly portion of London town, and emerged into a fair region of smiling meadows, blossoming fruit-trees, orchards, and woodlands, were in those days to be found many pleasant and stately houses, varying in size and splendour according to the condition of the owner, but fair mansions for the most part, and inhabited by persons of quality, many of whom held posts at Court, and found this proximity to Whitehall a matter of no small convenience.

Some of the fairest and seemliest of these mansions were those which lay along the river banks, with gardens terraced to the water's edge, where light wherries could deposit gay gallants at the foot of the steps leading to the wide gravelled walks, and where a gay panorama of shipping could be seen by those who paced the shady walks, or sat in the little temples and bowers which made a feature of so many of these gardens.

There was one house in particular that in these days had a notoriety of its own. It had been an old manor house in the time when London had not extended so far to the west, and it lay embosomed in a quaint old garden, where fair and tall trees made a pleasant shade through the hot summer days, where the turf was emerald green and soft to the foot, and roses flourished in wild abundance. Now there was a formal Dutch garden set in the midst of the old-time wilderness, where clipped box edges divided the parterres of brilliant-hued blossoms sent from Holland, and where nymphs disported themselves around marble fountains,

and heathen divinities on pedestals kept watch and ward over the long terraces which lined the margin of the river. But in spite of these innovations of modern taste, the silvan charm of the old garden had by no means been destroyed, and there were many who declared that not even Hampton Court itself could hold a candle to Lord Romaine's riverside garden for beauty and brightness and the nameless fascination which defies analysis. Lord Romaine was accounted a rising man. The friend of Marlborough and Godolphin, a moderate Whig in politics, a courtier above all else, and loyal to the backbone, he had been regarded with favour by the late King, who had given him some appointment about the Court, which had been confirmed by the Queen on her accession. And although Queen Anne was herself of such strong Tory leanings, she was beginning to find that the moderate Whigs were the men most useful and most to be depended upon; and the shrewd Duchess Sarah—her dear "Mrs. Freeman"—herself a convert from high Tory principles to those of their moderate opponents, was using her influence steadily and strongly to bring the Queen round to the same state of mind.

So Lord Romaine's star was likely to rise with the rising tide of Whig supremacy; and as he was a man of very large private means, and kept open house in a lavish fashion, it was likely enough that he would make his mark in the world. It would be certainly no fault of his wife if he did not.

Truth to tell, Lady Romaine's head had been somewhat turned when, three years before, her husband succeeded to his father's title and estates, and from being Viscount Latimer, with moderate means and only a measure of Court favour to depend upon, became an earl with a very large rent-roll, and a great fortune in ready money, which his father, who lived a secluded existence in the country, had amassed during the later years of his life. As Lord and Lady Latimer this couple had lived at the riverside house they still occupied when in town; but it had not then worn the aspect that it did to-day, albeit the garden had been something of a hobby to its owner for many years.

The lady cared little for the garden, save for the admiration it aroused in others; but she longed with a mighty longing to furbish up the old house after her own design, and as soon as the funds for this were in their hands, not a moment was lost in the carrying out of her cherished plans and projects. With a rapidity that astonished the town, a great new front was added to the old building, converting it into a quadrangle, in the centre of which a great fountain threw its waters high into the air. All the new rooms were large, stately, and imposing, and furnished according to the latest mode. Inlaid cabinets from the far East, crammed with curios of which my lady knew not even the names; crooked-legged chairs and sofas of French make; furniture in the new mahogany wood, just beginning to attract attention and admiration; rich carpets and hangings from In-

dia, Persia, or China; embroideries from all quarters of the globe; Italian pottery, Spanish inlaid armour, silver trinkets from Mexico, feather work from the isles of the west—all these things, jostled and jumbled together in rich confusion, made Lady Romaine's new house the talk of the town; and her tall powdered lackeys and turbaned negro pages were more numerous and more sumptuously attired than those of any other fashionable dame of her acquaintance.

My lady was at her toilet upon this brilliant June morning; and as custom permitted the attendance of gentlemen at this function, in the case of married ladies, the hall and staircase leading up to her suite of private apartments were already thronged by a motley crew.

There were dandies, fresh from their own elaborate toilets, reeking of the perfume in which they had bathed themselves, displaying in their own persons all the hues of the rainbow, and all the extravagant fripperies of the day, laughing and jesting together as they mounted the softly-carpeted stairs, their cocked hats under their arms, or descended again after having paid their *devoirs* to my lady, often cackling with mirth over some *bon mot* they had heard or uttered. There were chattering French milliners or French hair-dressers, with boxes or bundles of laces, silks, perfumes, or trinkets, wherewith to tempt the fancy of their patroness. There were gaily-dressed pages running to and fro with scented notes; turbaned negro boys carrying a lap-dog or monkey or parrot to the doting mistress, who had suddenly sent for one of her pets. Tire-women pushed themselves through the throng, intent on the business of the toilet, which was such an all-absorbing matter; and the whole house seemed to ring with the loud or shrill laughter and the ceaseless chatter of this motley throng, bent on killing time in the most approved fashion.

Some of the dandies about to depart, who were sipping chocolate from cups of priceless Sèvres china, and talking in their free, loose fashion with each other, kept looking about them as though in hope or expectation, and more than once the name of "Lady Geraldine" was bandied about between them. One young blood asked point blank why she was never to be seen at her mother's toilet. A laugh broke from his companions.

"If it's Lady Geraldine you come to see, you can save yourself the trouble of the visit. They say she was brought up by a Puritan grandmother, who died last year, and left her all her fortune. However that may be, the Lady Geraldine never appears when she can escape doing so. My lady gives way to her. They say she does not care to have a grown-up daughter at her heels, she who might pass for four-and-twenty herself any day, but for that damning evidence. But they say the father is beginning to declare that his daughter is no longer to be kept in the background. I suppose the next thing will be that they will marry her to some young nobleman. Gadzooks! with that face and that fortune—if the fortune be

not a clever myth—they ought not to find it a difficult task!”

”I heard it said at the club that Sandford was the favoured suitor for the hand of Lady Geraldine,” said one young exquisite, speaking with a lisp and taking snuff.

There was a laugh from the group of men standing by.

”Oh, Sandford is my lady’s favourite! They say he is a kinsman; and he amuses her vastly, and gives her all the homage her heart desires. But Lord Romaine may have something to say to that. Sandford is going the pace that kills, and is playing old Harry with his fortune and estate. And as for my Lady Geraldine—well, ’tis said the pretty little Puritan will look at none of us. Split me! but it will be a pretty comedy to watch! The awakening of Aphrodite; isn’t that the thing to call it? But Aphrodite is not generally credited with much coyness—ha, ha, ha! Perhaps it is but a pose on the part of the pretty maid. The sweet creatures are so artful in these days, one can never be too cautious.” And a roar of laughter answered this sally, caution being about the last quality ever cultivated by the speaker.

Whilst all this was going on within doors, the object of these latter remarks was enjoying a silvan solitude in the most secluded portion of the beautiful old garden.

Far away from the house, far out of earshot of all the fashionable clamour resounding there, set in the midst of a dense shrubbery of ilex and yew, was an arbour—itsself cut out of a giant yew-tree—commanding a view of a portion of the river, slipping by its alder-crowned banks, and overlooking a small, square lawn, sunk between high turf walls, in the centre of which stood an ancient moss-grown sundial, whose quaintly-lettered face was a source of unending interest to the fair girl, who had made of this remote and sheltered place a harbour of refuge for herself.

She was seated now just within the arbour, an open book of poetry upon her knee; but she was not reading, for her chin rested in the palm of her hand, as she leaned forward in an unstudied attitude of grace, her elbow on her knee, her wonderful dark eyes fixed full upon the shining river, a dreamy smile of haunting sweetness playing round her lips. At her feet a great hound lay extended, his nose upon his paws, his eyes often lifted to the face of his mistress, his ears pricked at the smallest sound, even at the snapping of a twig. Nobody could surprise the Lady Geraldine when she had this faithful henchman at her side.

The girl was dressed with extreme simplicity for the times she lived in, when hoops were coming in, stiff brocades, laces and lappets, high-heeled coloured shoes, and every extravagance in finery all the rage. True, the texture of her white silk gown was of the richest, and it was laced with silver, and fastened with pearl clasps that must have cost a great sum; but it was fashioned with a

simplicity that suggested the rustic maiden rather than the high-born dame. Yet the simple elegance of the graceful, girlish figure was displayed to such advantage that even the modish mother had been able to find no fault with the fashion in which her daughter instructed that her gowns should be cut; and surmises and bets were freely exchanged by the gallants crowding Lord Romaine's house as to whether it were a deep form of coquetry or real simplicity of taste which made the Lady Geraldine differ so much from the matrons and maids about her.

She wore no patches upon her face, though the dazzling purity of her complexion would thereby have been enhanced. And in days when the hair was dressed into tower-like erections, and adorned with powder, laces, ribbons, and all manner of strange fripperies, this girl wore her beautiful waving golden tresses floating round her face in the fashion of the ladies of Charles the Second's reign, or coiled them with careless grace about her head in a natural coronet. With powder or pomatum, wires or artificial additions, she would have nothing to do. She had been brought up in the country by her grandmother, a lady of very simple tastes, who would in no wise conform to the extravagant fashions which had crept in, and were corrupting all the old-time grace and simplicity of female attire.

"Leave those fripperies to the gallants," had been the old lady's pungent remark; "what do we want with powder and periwigs, patches and pomatum?"

She remembered the simple elegance of the court-dresses of the ladies in the Stuart times, and had no patience with the artificial trappings that followed. Moreover, albeit not a Puritan in any strict sense of the word—being a loyal advocate of the Stuart cause—she was a woman of great piety and devotion, and studied her Bible diligently; so that she took small pleasure in the adornment of the person in gaudy clothing, and the broidering of the hair, and in fine array. She taught her granddaughter to think more of the virtue of the meek and quiet spirit, and to seek rather to cultivate her mind, and store it with information and with lofty aspirations, than to give her time and thoughts to the round of folly and dissipation which made up the life of the lady of fashion.

Geraldine was so happy in the care of her grandmother, and felt so little at home with her fashionable mother, that her visits had been few and far between hitherto, until the sudden death of Mrs. Adair six months previously had obliged her to return permanently to her father's roof.

Here she found a state of things which amazed and troubled her not a little, and greatly did she marvel how her mother could be the daughter of the guardian of her childhood. True, Lady Romaine had married very young, and early escaped from the watchful care of her judicious mother; but it seemed marvellous that so close a tie could have existed between them, and the girl would look on with amaze and pain at her mother's freaks and follies, wondering how any woman

could find entertainment in the idle, foolish, and often profane vapourings of the beaux who fluttered about her, and how any sane persons could endure such a life of trivial amusement and ceaseless meaningless dissipation.

Pleading with her father her grief at her grandmother's death, she had obtained a six months' respite from attendance at the gay functions which made up life to Lady Romaine. Those six months had been spent, for the most part, in the privacy of her own apartments, which she had furnished with the dim and time-honoured treasures of her grandmother's house, all of which were now her own, and which made her quarters in the old part of the house like an oasis of taste, and harmony, and true beauty in an ocean of confused and almost tawdry profusion. The old garden was another favourite haunt of hers, for there were portions of it which were seldom invaded by the gay butterflies who often hovered about the newer terraces and the formal Dutch garden, and the hound always gave her ample warning of any approaching footstep, so that she could fly and hide herself before any one could molest her.

So here she prosecuted her studies, read her favourite authors, and when the house was quiet—her mother having flown off to some gay rout or card-party or ball—she would practise her skill on the lute, virginal, spinet, or harp, and her fresh young voice would resound through the house, drawing the servants to the open windows to hear the sweet strains.

Lady Romaine would have humoured the girl's fancy for seclusion indefinitely. She felt almost humiliated by the presence of a daughter so stately and so mature. Geraldine was nineteen, but might have passed for more, with her grave, refined beauty, and her lack of all the kittenish freakishness which made many matrons seem almost like girls, even when their charms began to fade, and nature had to be replaced by art. Lady Romaine fondly believed that her admirers took her for four-and-twenty; and now to have to pose as the mother of a grown-up daughter was a bitter mortification, and one which disposed her to make as speedy a marriage for Geraldine as could well be achieved. Lord Romaine had at last insisted that his daughter should appear in the world of fashion, and she had been once or twice to Court in her parents' train, where her striking beauty and unwonted appearance had made some sensation. Geraldine had little fault to find with what she saw and heard there. Good Queen Anne permitted nothing reprehensible in her neighbourhood, and her Court was grave to the verge of dullness. She was a loving and a model wife; and the Duchess was devoted to her husband, though often making his life a burden by her imperious temper. Anything like conjugal infidelity was not tolerated therefore by either of these ladies, and decorum ruled wherever the Queen was to be found.

But at other places and in other company matters were far different, and already Geraldine began to shrink with a great disgust and distaste from the com-

pliments she received, from the coarse, foolish, affected talk she heard, and from the knowledge of the senseless dissipation which flowed like a stream at her feet, and which seemed to encircle the span of her life in a way that made escape impossible.

But she had been taught obedience as one of the cardinal virtues, and the days of emancipated daughters were not yet. When her father bade her lay aside her mourning and join in the life of the house, she knew she must obey. But she had asked from him the favour of being permitted to design her own dresses, and to follow her own tastes in matters pertaining to her own toilet, and also that she might be excused attendance at her mother's morning levee; for the spectacle of crowds of men flocking in and out of her mother's apartments, and witnessing the triumphs of the coiffeurs and tire-women, was to her degrading and disgusting; and though Lord Romaine laughed—being himself so inured to the custom—and told her she was a little fool, and must get the better of her prudery, he gave way to her in this, and the more readily because she represented to him how that these morning hours were now the only ones she could command for study; and he was proud to find in his daughter an erudition and talent very rare amongst women in those days.

[image]

The old garden was another favourite haunt of hers (page 96).

But now an approaching footstep warned the girl that her pleasant morning was over. The dog sprang up, but did not growl. It was Geraldine's own serving-woman approaching with the girl's white-plumed hat and long silver-laced gloves.

"My lady's coach waits, and she desires your presence," was the message that reached her. Geraldine sat down to let the woman fasten the hat upon her head, and with a sigh she put away her books in their basket, and gave it to the charge of the faithful hound. She had found that her treasures were far more carefully safeguarded by him than when left in the care of a giddy maid, who was more bent on having the same kind of amusement with the men-servants that her mistress had with the gallants than of seeking to discharge her duties faithfully and well.

"Hasten, child, hasten!" cried Lady Romaine's shrill voice from the entrance-hall, as Geraldine approached. She was a wonderful object as she stood there in the full light of the June sunshine, her stiff amber brocade sweeping round her in great billows, her waist laced in like that of a wasp, and accentu-

ated by the style of the long-pointed bodice; her high-heeled shoes, ornamented to extravagance, the heels being bright red and the uppers sewed with precious stones; gems glittering in the mass of laces at her throat, and in a number of clasps fastened to the bodice; her hair towering upwards to such a height that she could scarce sit comfortably in her lofty coach, and could wear nothing in the way of head-gear save the laces and ribbons which were worked in with much skill by the French hair-dresser. She was redolent of perfume; gloves, lace handkerchief, dainty muff, every little knickknack, of which she possessed so many, all emitted the same cloying sweetness. Geraldine felt herself heave a sigh of oppression as she followed this grotesque object into the coach. She was growing used to the aspect presented by the dames of fashion, but there were moments when her first disgust came over her in great waves.

"I marvel that you like to make yourself such a figure of fun, child," remarked the mother, as she settled herself in her coach, smirked towards the piece of looking-glass let in opposite, and turned a sidelong glance upon her daughter; "'tis enough to set the gallants laughing to see how you habit yourself. Well, well; you are a lucky girl to have found a suitor so soon. Now take good heed to show him no saucy airs, should he present himself at our box at the play to-day. He has been away these last days, but he can never long absent himself from town. Mind you have a smile for him when he appears, or I shall have somewhat to say to you later, Miss Impertinence." And the lady's ivory fan came down somewhat smartly upon Geraldine's arm.

"Of whom are you speaking, ma'am?" she asked, whilst the colour mounted suddenly in her fair face.

"Oh, come now; so we are already posing as a belle of many beaux! Pray who has ever cast a glance upon you save my good kinsman Sandford? And, mind you, he is a man of taste and fashion, and it is a great compliment that he has singled you out for notice. There be girls would give their ears for a kind glance from his eyes, and there are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it; so mind your manners, miss, and treat him to no tricks. It is high time you were wed, and had a husband to look after you, and that is why I take you about. For, as for pleasure in such company, one might as well play bear-leader to a snow queen!"

"I did not know that Lord Sandford had done me any favour," spoke Geraldine quietly. "I have seen him but seldom, and he has spoke not over much to me. But I will bear your wishes in mind, madam, should he appear to-day."

"Ha! there he is!" suddenly cried my lady, becoming excited, and rapping smartly with her fan on the glass of the window. The next minute the coach had pulled up, and Lord Sandford, attired in the very height of the fashion, was

bowing over her hand with his courtliest air.

CHAPTER VI. THE PASTIMES OF THE TOWN.

"The sun shines once again," quoth Lord Sandford, as he raised the extended hand of Lady Romaine to his lips, and dropped a light kiss upon her scented glove. "The sun shines in the sky; but let him beware and look to his laurels, for there are stars abroad of such dazzling lustre that Phoebus must have a care lest the brightness of his shafts be quenched in a more refulgent glow." And the young man gazed into the lady's eyes with a bold laughing stare that pointed the meaning of the compliment.

"La! but you talk the greatest nonsense!" cried Lady Romaine, highly delighted, as she tapped him smartly with her fan. "Come, tell me where you have been these many days. Some said you had been a-wooing in the country, and others that your dolts of tradesmen were dunning you to distraction, and others that you had fought a duel and had need to fly; but, pardieu! if one believed all the gossip of the town, one would have enough to do. I know there has been a duel, and I am aching to hear all about it. I'll warrant you know all the story, since he was your friend. Come, get into the coach, and tell me all about it. Were you there? What was it all about? And what sort of an end did he make?"

Lady Romaine's face expressed the eager pleasure and curiosity of a child talking over some trivial pleasure; she flirted her fan, cast languishing glances, and played off upon the young Earl all those countless little airs and graces which characterized the fine lady of the period.

But Geraldine drew back in her corner, her face growing cold and pale. She had scarcely acknowledged Lord Sandford's presence, only just bending her head in response to his bow. He had not addressed her as yet, and he appeared engrossed by the mother; but he flashed one quick glance upon her now, and possibly read something of the pain and disgust which possessed her, for he answered,—

"Nay, madam, let us not talk of what is past and done. How can thought of gloom and death dwell in so radiant a presence? In sooth, all dark thoughts take to themselves wings in this company, and will not be caught or caged. I forget that we are not in the bowers of Arcadia; for, in sooth, I am transported thither

so soon as these poor eyes be dazzled by the light of those twin stars of love and beauty!"

Again Lady Romaine tapped him with her fan. She loved a compliment, however fulsome; but she wanted at this moment to be entertained by the account of the duel, which had made a little stir in the town, from the fact of one of the combatants having been the boon companion and friend of Lord Sandford.

"You dear, tormenting devil! But I will have the story yet! And we are all dying to know how you will get on without your Fidus Achates. By my troth, you do not look as though you had wasted away in fruitless longing. Perchance you have found already another to fill his place?"

"Perhaps I have, madam," was the negligent reply. "I had not known the town had so much thought to spare for worthless me. I' faith, I am a bigger man than I thought for. But I must not keep your coach standing in this blaze of sunshine. Whither are you bound, fair ladies? To some Arcadian bowers of Paphos, I doubt not, where Orpheus will charm you with his lyre, and nymphs will cluster round in envy, marvelling at those charms which not even Aphrodite herself can rival."

"Oh fie! you are a sad flatterer!" cried Lady Romaine, sinking back upon her cushions and waving her hand. "We are bound to Lady Saltire's hazard table for an hour's play. Shall we meet you there, my lord? Afterwards, we take supper at our favourite India house, and then to the play—Wynstanly's water theatre. He has a new piece—monstrous fine, those who have seen it vow. They have nymphs, and mermaids, and tritons, and I know not what beside; and they ask a pretty price for the boxes, I can tell you. But la! one must go and see what all the world is talking of. Mind you come to our box if you be there. We shall expect you, and shall welcome you and any friend you like to bring."

"Even the new Fidus Achates, of whom you spoke just now?" asked Lord Sandford, with a slightly ironical bow.

"Oh gracious, yes!" cried Lady Romaine, excited by the very idea; "bring him at once and present him to us. I hope he is a pretty fellow, and can turn a merry quip and tell a story. You should have heard Beau Sidney last night! Sakes! I thought I should have split my sides!"

At this juncture the horses became so fidgety with standing in the glare of the sun that Lord Sandford stepped back, and the coach rolled upon its way. Lady Romaine waved her scented kerchief, and then routed her scent-bottle out of her reticule, and turning sharply upon her daughter, said,—

"Why sit you ever like a stuffed owl, without so much as a word or a smile? I die for shame every time I take you out. What have I done to be punished with such a daughter? One would think you to be a changeling child, if you did not so favour the Adairs. How think you you will ever get wed, sitting gaping there like

a farm-house wench, who is afraid to open her lips lest she should betray herself by her speech. You put me to shame, child; I could cry with mortification. What will the world say, save that I have an idiot for a daughter?"

Geraldine knew not what to answer. As she listened to the fatuous and stilted talk which was fashionable in her mother's world, with its senseless mythological allusions and high-flown extravagances, it often seemed to her that these gay dandies and dames were all playing at madmen together. Her tongue had never learned the trick of such talk. It perplexed and disgusted her, seeming trivial and childish when it was not improper or profane. She saw other young girls who listened eagerly, and as eagerly reproduced the flowery nonsense amongst themselves and their admirers; but it seemed impossible to her to do the like, and she listened in humble silence to her mother's tirades, wondering whether there were something radically wrong about herself, or whether the absurdity and folly were in others.

"But, madam," she said gently at the last, "why should I get me a husband so soon? My grandmother was against very early marriages, and as she lay dying she often warned me to make very careful choice ere I gave my hand in troth-pledge. She said I must needs be certain of mine own heart, for that no more wretched life could exist for woman than when she was tied to a man she could not love or respect."

"Tush, child! Your grandmother was a good woman. I speak no hurt of her. But she knew less of life than many a girl of eighteen does nowadays, and her ideas were all topsy-turvy. A woman wants a fine establishment, her powdered footmen, her negro boys, her dresses, her jewels, and all the world doing her homage. That is what makes the pleasure of life. A good husband who can give you all that is what you want; and what can you ask better than the addresses of Lord Sandford? I tell you there are half the girls in town would give their ears for his smiles. He has been extravagant, 'tis true; but the estate can stand a heavy drain, and he is lucky at cards. He soon finds himself on his legs again. When he marries he will open his great house in the Strand, of which he uses but one wing now. With your fortune and his estates and his luck in gaming, you might be the gayest couple in town. Look to it, girl, that you show him no airs. I am ashamed to have such a mannerless wench for a daughter. If you are not more careful, you will drive all the beaux away; and then, when it is too late, you will be sorry."

Geraldine had her own ideas on that point. It was her one desire just now to keep at arm's length all those gay popinjays that fluttered about her mother. Lord Sandford, it is true, was somewhat removed from the crowd by a handsomer person, a more distinguished air, and by a greater force of character. On more than one occasion, when he had put himself about to gain her ear, she had found

that he could drop his mask of gay affectations, and be both shrewd and entertaining. Some of his criticisms had even interested and aroused her; but she was very far from being captivated. She did not know whether it would be possible to give to such a man either love or reverence, and without either one or other Geraldine had resolved not to marry, though she knew that it was a hard task for a daughter to set at naught the wishes of her parents in these matters. She saw that both father and mother, though for different reasons, desired her to make a speedy choice, and take up her position in the fashionable world as a lady of title and importance.

However, she was spared further strictures by the arrival of the carriage at Lady Saltire's fine house: and shortly she found herself standing behind her mother's chair at the hazard table, half stunned by the clatter and clamour of voices, watching with grave, pained eyes the eager faces of the players, their excited gestures as they reached for their winnings, their rage and disappointment when the luck went against them, the greed she saw in all faces—that lust after gold which is of all vices one of the most hateful and degrading.

Old men and young girls, matrons and aged dames, all crowded round the tables, their hoops crushing together, their tall powdered heads sometimes meeting in sharp collision. There were scented dandies, who regarded this "ladies' play" as the merest bagatelle, and lost or won their gold pieces with careless grace, thinking of the more serious play which awaited them later at the club, or at the lodgings of some member of their own set.

Amongst this motley crowd, gaily apparelled servants moved to and fro, handing coffee, chocolate, and delicate confectionery, or offering scented waters for the refreshment of the ladies. The gentlemen preferred stronger potations, and congregated together, laughing and jesting. But not infrequently they would be joined by some giddy young matron, who called them all by their Christian names, passed jests with them that would not bear repetition in these days, and even toasted some "pretty fellow," laughing gaily and giddily the while.

There were a few graver spirits congregated together in one small room, and Geraldine could catch fleeting glimpses of them through an open door. She knew some of the faces, and that they were politicians and men of letters; and she thought they were discussing some literary point, for one held a paper in his hand, and he seemed to be reading from it to the others.

"I'll warrant they have got a new ode to my Lord of Marlborough yonder," spoke a voice at Geraldine's elbow; and turning she saw an elderly man whose face was known to her from his having been a guest at her father's house. "They had a great trouble after the victory of Blenheim to find a poet able to hymn the triumph in periods sufficiently fine; but I think it was Lord Halifax who discovered Mr. Addison, whose noble lines set the city wondering. Belike he has

broken forth into lyric or epic praise over the battle of Ramillies, and the marvellous effects it has had abroad. Shall we go and listen to his periods?"

Geraldine was thankful to get away from the heated atmosphere of the card-room, and to find herself amongst men and women who had other fashions of thought and speech. But she was not allowed much peace in these different surroundings; for she was quickly summoned to her mother's side, taken from house to house, ever seeing and hearing the like vapourings, the like fripperies and follies. It was the same thing at the dinner or supper, where her mother had a whole train of young bloods in her wake. She gave them the best the house afforded, and spent her time quizzing the dresses of the other ladies at the surrounding tables, learning all the gossip about any person whose face or costume struck her, and drinking in flattery and adulation as a bee sips honey from the flowers.

In spite of her efforts to please her mother, Geraldine found it impossible to take any share in this strange sort of gaiety. Her answers were little more than monosyllables. Often she did not even understand the allusions or the far-fetched metaphors of those who addressed her. More often she shrank from their glances and their open compliments, feeling degraded by both, but powerless to repel them. She was thankful when at last she found herself by her mother's side in the box at Wynstanly's; for here she hoped she might find some measure of peace, since the box would not hold any great number of persons, and her mother was never satisfied without the attention of four or five gentlemen at once.

If the play in itself were not very entertaining, the effects of fire and water were rather magnificent, and something new, so that more attention was given to the stage than was usual at such entertainments in those days. The fashionable listeners did not turn their backs upon the players and talk at the top of their voices all the while the play was in progress, as in some houses, and Geraldine was quite wrapped in contemplation of the monsters and mermaids and denizens of the deep, with Father Neptune and his trident at their head, so that she knew nothing of what went on in the box where she sat, till a voice at her elbow spoke insistently.

"They lack but one thing more—snow-white Aphrodite rising in peerless beauty from the foam of the sea; and yet the audience has but to turn its eyes hither, and behold they will see that crowning marvel for themselves!"

The girl started, and looked full into the eyes of Lord Sandford, bent upon her with a significance there was no misunderstanding. He was dressed in a daring costume of scarlet and gold, with quantities of lace and sparkling jewels. Even his well-turned legs were encased in scarlet stockings, and his shoes were of the same flaming hue. His height and breadth of shoulder always made him a notable figure; and the immense wig he wore, which to-night was cunningly powdered

so as to look almost like frosted silver, added to the distinction of his appearance. Gilded popinjay Lord Sandford with all his extravagances could never be called. There was something too virile and strong about his whole personality for that.

"I do not like compliments, my lord," she answered, the words escaping her lips almost before she was aware; "I have heard something too much of Venus and Cupid, Pallas and Hymen, since I made my appearance in London routs. I am but a simple country maid, and desire no high-flown compliments. I am foolish enough to regard them rather as honeyed insults. I pray you pardon my freedom of speech."

"I pray you pardon mine," spoke Lord Sandford quickly. "You have spoken, Lady Geraldine, a deeper truth than perchance you know. I, for one, will not offend again. I would that all our sisters, wives, and daughters would look as you and speak as you."

The frank sincerity in face and voice pleased her, and a smile dawned in her eyes. It was the first he had ever seen bent on him, and he was struck afresh with the pure unsullied beauty of this girl's face. Truth to tell, his first attraction towards her had been the rumour of her fortune, for he was more deeply in debt than he wished the world to know; but something in the remoteness and isolation in which she seemed to wrap herself piqued and interested him; for his jaded palate required fresh food when it was to be had, and the vein of manliness and strength which his life had never altogether warped or destroyed responded to the sincerity he read in Lady Geraldine's fair face.

The curtain was down now. For a few minutes he spoke of the play and the water apparatus, worked by a windmill on the roof, which was exciting so much interest in London. Geraldine's eyes meantime travelled round the box. She saw her mother engrossed in gay talk with a small circle of admirers; but one of these edged himself somewhat away from the rest, and finally stood apart, leaning against the wall of the box and surveying the house from that vantage point.

Geraldine's eyes were riveted with some interest upon this newcomer, whom she was certain she had never seen before. In some indefinable way he was different from the men she had been used to meet at such places. For one thing, he wore his own hair; and the floating brown curls, like Cavalier love-locks, seemed to her infinitely more becoming than the mass of false hair which was so much in vogue in all ranks save the lowest. His dress, too, though far more simple than that of the beaux fluttering round her mother, seemed to her far more graceful and distinguished. His stockings, breeches, and vest were all of white, with a little silver frosting. His coat was of pale blue, with silver buttons; and his lace cravat, though small and unostentatious, was rich in quality, and fastened by a beautiful pearl. He carried neither muff nor snuff-box, cane nor toothpick. He did not simper nor ogle, nor look as though he desired to attract

the eyes of the house upon himself. But he was, notwithstanding, a rather notable figure as he stood looking gravely and thoughtfully downwards; there was something very graceful in his attitude, and in the carriage of his head, and his features were so remarkably handsome that Lady Romaine turned her eyes upon him many times, and exerted all her artifices to draw him back to her immediate neighbourhood. But he was perfectly unconscious of this, not hearing the chatter which went on about him, lost in some reverie of his own, which brought a peculiar dreamy softness into his eyes.

Lord Sandford, following the direction of Geraldine's glance, looked at this motionless figure, then back at the girl, and laughed.

"Lady Geraldine, pray permit me to present to you my newly-made friend and comrade, Sir Grey Dumaresq, who, I doubt not, is dying to make his bow to so fair a lady."

She flashed him a glance half merry, half reproachful, and he suddenly laid his hand upon his lips, a laugh rolling from them hearty and full.

"I' faith I had forgot! How shall I teach my rebel tongue a new language? But Sir Grey will atone for all my defects.—Here is a lady, if you will believe it, O friend, who loves not the sugared and honeyed phrase of adulation, but seeks in all things truth, virtue, and I know not what else beside. It is whispered to me that she is a mistress of all the *belles lettres*, and perchance a poetess herself."

"Nay, my lord," answered Geraldine, with a blush and a smile—"only one who loves the poesy of those who have lived before, and left their treasures for us who come after, and would fain drink in all the beauty of their thoughts and of their lives."

Lord Sandford good-naturedly yielded his seat to Grey, whose sensitive face had lighted at the girl's words.

"Methought I had come to a world where naught was dreamed of save fashion and frippery, false adulation and falser scorn. I am well-nigh stunned by the clamour of tongues, the strife of parties, the bustle of this gay life of fashion."

"Oh, and I too—I too!" breathed the girl softly: and he flashed at her a quick, keen glance of sympathy and interest.

"I was bred in the country; my grandam brought me up. I lived with my books, amid silvan solitudes, the songs of birds, the scent of flowers. This great glittering world of folly and fashion is like a fiery wheel going round in my head. Ofttimes I could cry aloud for mercy, the pain and bewilderment are so great. I know there must be noble men and good in this strange Pandemonium; but I know not where to find them, and my heart grows sick. Would that I could go back to my books and my dreams! But alas! a maiden may not choose for herself."

"Still there is life here," spoke Grey quickly, "and it behoves us to know men as well as books. I have studied both. I will study them again. I would fain learn

all that life has to teach, whether for weal or woe. No hermit-monk was ever truly a man. Yet there be times when one shrinks in amaze from all one sees and hears."

The chord of sympathy was struck. They passed from one thing to another. She found one at last who knew and loved the poets of her childhood's dreams—who could talk of Spenser and Sidney, of Watson, Greville, and Drayton, quoting their verses, and often lighting upon her favourite passages. Here was a man who knew Milton and Clarendon, Hobbes, Herbert, Lovelace and Suckling, Lord Herbert of Cherbury and Izaak Walton. He had read eagerly, like herself, poetry and prose, drama and epic, lyric and sonnet. He could speak of Poetry as one who had loved and courted her as a mistress. The girl longed to ask him if he had written himself, but maiden shyness withheld her. Yet her eyes brightened as she talked, and the peach-like colour rose and deepened in her cheeks; and Lord Sandford, turning back once again from the mother to look at the daughter, was struck dumb with admiration and delight.

"There is a rose worth winning and wearing, though the stem may not be free from a sharp thorn," he said to himself; and Lady Romaine, who chanced to catch sight of Geraldine during a shifting of the admirers who surrounded her, gave something very like a start, and felt a curious thrill run through her in which pride and envy were blended.

"Gracious! I did not know I had so handsome a daughter! I must wed her as fast as may be, else shall I find my beaux going from me to her," was her unspoken thought; and aloud she said, tapping Lord Sandford with her fan, "Pray tell my daughter that I am about to depart. We have had enough of the naiads and dryads, and I am tired and hungry. Who will come home with me to supper—to take pot-luck with us?"

There was an eager clamour in response; but when the supper-party assembled round Lady Romaine's chocolate tables in her favourite private parlour, she noted that Geraldine had disappeared to bed, and that Sir Grey Dumaresq had not availed himself of her open invitation.

CHAPTER VII.

A FAIR FACE.

If Grey Dumaresq was a man who craved a variety of experiences, and wished to

see life under different aspects, he was getting his wish now; for the gay world of fashion, into which he suddenly found himself plunged, differed *in toto* from any of his former experiences; and so swift was the pace, and so shifting the throng amid which he moved, that he often felt as though his breath were fairly taken away, and as though he had suddenly stepped into a new existence.

Lord Sandford had chanced upon the young baronet at a moment when a blank had been made in his own life by the sudden and violent death of one who had been his boon companion and friend. The gay young man, who had fallen in a foolish duel a few weeks before, had been the inmate of his house and the companion in all his freaks and follies; so much so, that without him the young nobleman felt for the moment bewildered and lost, and had absented himself from town with a view to "getting over it," as he hoped: for he despised himself for any sign of weakness, and would not for worlds have had his comrades and boon companions know how the loss had affected him.

Then, as it seemed just by a lucky chance, this young and attractive man had fallen as from the very skies at his feet. Grey Dumaresq, new to the world of London, curious and speculative, willing to see all, learn all, participate in all, seemed exactly the person to fill the gap in his life. Grey had no place of abode; why, then, should he not occupy the vacant chambers in the wing of the great mansion in the Strand which Lord Sandford used as his customary lodging, when he was not spending his time with friends, or making one of a gay party elsewhere? Grey had no valid reason for declining the invitation pressed upon him. Lord Sandford was a masterful man, and his strong personality impressed itself upon Grey with something between attraction and repulsion. But, on the whole, attraction seemed the stronger power, and curiosity to know more of this man and his life held Grey's soul in thrall. He had always experienced a vivid curiosity to taste life in its various forms, to know and understand the thoughts, the feelings, the aspirations, the ambitions of other men. His travels had given him insight into many matters; but he felt that these new experiences were likely to be more searching, more exciting, more full of keen personal interest. He had been, as it were, a spectator heretofore; now he was to be a participator.

He had not meant to be any man's guest; he had meant to take a modest lodging of his own, and look about him for something in the way of employment, but Lord Sandford had roared with laughter over such a notion.

"What! Sir Grey Dumaresq going cap in hand to some proud place-giver to ask for patronage, or I know not what! Gadzooks, man, with that face, that figure, that horse, and a purse full of guineas, you can do better than that! Trust yourself to me. I'll show you where fame and fortune lie. You shall redeem your rat-infested old house in a very brief while, if you will but trust yourself to my guidance. You be Damon to my Pythias—or is it t'other way round, eh?—and I'll

show you the royal road to the goal you want.”

For lack of any definite plans, Grey had consented for the nonce to accept Lord Sandford’s advice, and had quickly found himself installed in some gloomy and stately yet luxurious chambers in a vast house, of which only a portion was open for use, and the rest given over to a neglect and decay that Hartsbourne itself could scarcely rival.

”But we shall change all that some day,” spoke Lord Sandford, with a careless laugh, as Grey expressed his surprise at the vast rooms and long galleries shut up and infested by rats and spiders. ”Oh yes, we shall change all that some day; but what does a bachelor want with such a house as this? What should I be the better for a crowd of liveried servants, eating off their heads, idling away their time dicing and drinking? What have I to give an army of scullions and cooks to do—I who seldom take a meal at home after my morning chocolate? No, no; I know a trick worth two of that. I don’t ruin myself to keep a crew of fat, lazy rogues about me, cheating me at every turn. Half a dozen fellows and a few kitchen wenches do well enow for me; but when Lady Sandford comes to her husband’s home—ah well! then we shall see the difference.”

But though he talked jestingly from time to time of the Lady Sandford that was to be, he gave Grey no hint as to whether his fancy inclined more to one or another of the many gay maidens with whom he chatted and flirted, danced and romped, in the fashion of the day; and so bewildering and dazzling were these young madams and their surroundings that the newcomer was lost in a maze of wonder and bewilderment, and found it hard to distinguish one face from another, until he met one, different from all the rest.

But Grey was not left idle; he had small time for musing. The very first day of his sojourn in London he was surrounded by a fluttering crowd of tailors, glove-sellers, barbers, fencers, sellers and purveyors of every imaginable ware, who all professed their eagerness to serve him, and quoted Lord Sandford as a patron who could swear to their honesty and the excellence of their goods.

Into the midst of this motley throng Lord Sandford thrust himself, laughing his great hearty laugh, and quickly sent to the right-about two-thirds of the importunate crowd—a jest here, a keen thrust there, a slap on back or shoulder in another quarter, emphasizing his forcible hints. And when the room was cleared of all but the lucky few, he flung himself into an armchair with another laugh, telling Grey he was sorry his knaves of servants, who looked for perquisites everywhere, had let in this flood of rogues upon him, but added that he must needs have the wherewithal to cut a proper figure in London town, and forthwith set about the business of ordering an outfit for the young man which almost took his guest’s breath away.

”Poof!” he cried, when the latter strove to remonstrate, ”you have plenty

of money; and these rascals can wait if it suits your pleasure. Father's memory! Oh, be hanged to all such mawkish sentiment! You need not think less of your father because you wear a blue coat in lieu of a black! Rabbit me! but you are of a different world from this if you keep alive your father's memory for six months after his decease! No, no; you must cut a figure. Sir Hugh's name is clean forgot by now. I'll eat my boots if 'tis not so. I'll have you as gay as my fancy paints you. No black—no sables for the gentleman, I tell you. Let us see those other patterns. Ah! here is something more like."

Grey submitted. In sooth, he cared but little for the colour of his clothes, or the set of his hat, or the cut of his coat. He let Lord Sandford have his way for the most part, only insisting here and there upon soft and tender tints, and showing a predilection for white, which his friend quite approved.

"You shall be a foil to me, not a rival. I have learned that art from the ladies. I like to blaze like old Sol in his strength; you shall rather recall gentle Luna amid her galaxy of stars. Faugh! One's tongue gets into this silly trick of speech, so that one cannot drop it even betwixt man and man! But you are right to think that white becomes you well. You will look a pretty fellow, in all conscience, when you have added a peruke to your other adornments."

But here Grey stood firm. Nothing would induce him to cumber his head with one of those mountains of hair. In vain the perruquiers displayed their wares; in vain Lord Sandford bantered and laughed, and made out that he would be reckoned as a mad fellow by the young bloods of the city. Grey would not yield an inch. He had always found his own hair sufficient and comfortable, and he would wear it to the end. And as the discomfited perruquier at last departed, Lord Sandford broke into another of his great laughs.

"I' faith you are right, man. I like you the better that you have the courage of your opinions, and care no whit for fashion. You'll be a match for more than the perruquiers yet. There's a fighting strain in your blood. I can see it in the glint of your eye. Well, you shall not lack opportunity to fight as well as to laugh here in London town; but we'll not have cold steel or hot lead again. I've seen enough of that cursed duelling to last me for a lifetime."

Grey was quickly to discover the nature of the battles in which he was to take a part, and at the first he shrank from them with an instinctive aversion he could not well have defined, being no grave moralist or philosopher. Contests of skill or of luck at the gaming tables were all the rage of the day with the young dandies of the town, and the man who could keep a steady head, and in some cases a steady hand, was certain in the long run to obtain advantage over his fellows. At one club a game something like our modern billiards was all the rage; and, of course, a man who was moderate in his cups could score heavily over the reckless, dissipated bloods, who were seldom sober after sundown. Dice and

cards had their vogue at other places; and though some of the games played were those purely of chance, others required no small skill and a clear head to ensure success, and it was here that Lord Sandford's strong head and Grey's cool blood and temperate habits gave them the advantage.

The young man had not been a fortnight in town before finding his capital doubled, as well as all bills paid to the astonished tradesmen, who seldom looked to receive their money within a twelvemonth. He was disposed to be troubled at this easy fashion of making money; but Lord Sandford laughed him to scorn.

"Zounds, man, what does it matter? Those young popinjays are bound to lose their money to some one. Why not then to honest fellows like you and me, who pay our bills and do good to the community with the money? Scruples! Faugh! you must rid yourself of them! Sir Hugh Dumaresq's son need not trouble himself thus. Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die. Isn't that good Scripture?" But the reckless young lord paled a little at the sound of his own words. He had seen sudden death once too often for his peace of mind of late.

In sooth, Grey felt but little scruple in taking his winnings. The young man was not greatly in advance of his age, although he was indued with a nature more finely strung and aspirations more lofty than belonged to most. Gambling was so much a matter of course both in this and in other lands, and the devotees of the amusement so numerous and so bent upon their sport, that it would have needed stronger convictions than Grey as yet possessed to make any stand on such a point. He took the same risks as the others, and if his coolness of head, steadiness of hand, and quick observation and memory served to make for success in his case, he rather regarded this as a witness to his superiority, and felt only a small sense of reluctance in pocketing his gains; which reluctance he could only attribute to a lingering memory of words spoken by his mother when he was a growing boy, and news came to them from time to time of Sir Hugh's losses over cards, and the necessity for further retrenchments upon the already impoverished estate.

But the cases being so dissimilar, Grey did not see that he need debar himself from this easy highroad to fortunes, as it then seemed. Nobody was dependent upon him. Nobody was there to grieve over his troubles or to rejoice over his success. His honest serving-man was in sooth the only being in any way deeply attached to him; and Dick was as delighted at his master's brave appearance, and at the golden stream running into his pocket, as though he had achieved some great success or triumph.

There was one way by which Grey had pocketed considerable sums of money that was very congenial to him, and had given him some very happy hours. This was the speed and strength of his horse, which Lord Sandford had made boast of, vowing in the hearing of some of the smartest dandies of the town

that Don Carlos would beat any steed against whom he was pitted—a challenge eagerly taken up by the young bloods, proud of their own horses and horsemanship, to whom trials of skill and strength, and contests over which wagers might freely be exchanged, were as the very salt of life.

So either out at Hampstead, or at Richmond or Hampton Court, Don Carlos had been set to show the metal of which he was made, and had come off easy victor in every race and every match, whether flat running, or leaping, or a course of the nature of a steeplechase had been elected. His strength and speed, sagacity and endurance, had never once failed him, and already he was the talk of the town, and Grey could have sold him for a great price had he been willing to part with his favourite.

Many bright eyes had smiled upon the young centaur, many languishing glances had been cast at him. He had been called up again and again to be presented to some high-born dame, or some bevy of laughing maidens, and he had bowed with courtly grace, and received their sugared compliments with suitable acknowledgments. But no face had attracted him as that face he had seen once at the water theatre, almost upon his first appearance in the gay world. He knew that it belonged to Lady Geraldine Romaine; and often his eyes roved round some gay assemblage, searching half unconsciously for a sight of her tall and graceful figure, and the sweet, earnest face, so different from the laughing and grimacing crowd in which he now moved. Grey had not known much of women, so far. His college life first, and then his roving career of adventure, had hindered him from making friendships save with those of his own sex; and his deep love for his mother had preserved as a living power his chivalrous belief in women, and a resolute determination to disbelieve the idle, malicious, and vicious tales he heard of them on all sides. Womanhood was sacred to him, and should be sacred to the world. That was his inalienable conviction; and he had striven to be blind and deaf to much of what had often been passing around him, that he might not sink to the level of the men he met, who would tear to tatters a woman's reputation for an evening's pastime, or revel in every ugly bit of scandal or tittle-tattle that the young beaux' valets learned from the lackeys of other fine folk, and retailed with additions at the door of the theatre, the gates of the Park, or on the staircases of the fashionable houses whither their masters and mistresses flocked for amusement, unconscious or heedless of the gossip spread abroad about them by their servants at the doors.

Grey took no pleasure in the society of these fashionable dames. His tongue had not learned the trick of the artificial language then in vogue. He was disgusted by the gross flattery every lady looked to receive, and the lispings plitudes of the attendant beaux filled him with scorn. It was small wonder that he chose rather the society of men of more virility and stronger fibre, such as Lord

Sandford and his chosen friends; for though many of them were wild young rakes, and not a few had a very doubtful record, yet Grey knew little enough about that, and found them not without attraction, although the higher part of his nature revolted from much that he saw and heard. Nevertheless, he regarded it all as a part of the experience in life which he craved, and he might have become in a short while just such another as these, had it not been for an incident which suddenly arrested him in his career of dissipation, and turned his thoughts into different channels.

It had been early June when he came to town, and now July had come, with its sultry suns and breathless nights, when Grey oftentimes felt after an evening over cards that it was mockery to go to bed, and lounged away the residue of the night at his open window, enjoying the only coolness and freshness that was to be had, as the wind came whispering from the river charged with refreshing moisture.

Sometimes the river seemed to call him; and at such times he would lay aside his finery, clothe himself in some plainer habit, and betake himself through the silent house, where the night watchman was always found slumbering at his post, out through the big courts and down to the river steps, where a few light wherries were always kept moored, one of which he would select, and shoot out upon the glimmering river to meet the new day there.

Some of his happiest hours were spent thus; and at such times as these he felt rising within him a vague sense of unrest and of disgust. He had come to the world of London to conquer fate, to make for himself a name and a career; and here he was wasting day after day in coffee-houses or clubs, with a crowd of idlers whose thoughts never rose above the fancy of the hour, whose only ambition was to kill time as easily and pleasantly as possible, and to line their pockets with gold, that they might have more to throw away on the morrow.

Was this what he would come to? Was this what he was made for? Would he become like unto them, a mere roisterer and boon companion, a man without aspirations and without ambition? His cheeks burned at the thought; and he sent his light craft spinning rapidly up the stream as the questions formed themselves.

It was an exquisite summer morning. The bells in the many towers and steeples of the city had chimed the hour of five. The sun had long been up, yet the glamour and glory of the new-born day still lay upon the sleeping city and the dewy meadows of the opposite shore. Grey rowed on rapidly, yet drinking in the beauty of all he saw. He knew not how far he had rowed; he had lost count of his surroundings; he was absorbed in a deep reverie, when he was suddenly brought up breathless and wondering by the sound of a voice singing—a voice so clear and sweet and true that he asked himself whether it could be any creature of earth that sang, or whether it might be some nymph or mermaid such as sailors

spoke of in their wondrous tales.

He gazed about him. He saw that he was passing a garden, and that a group of weeping willows overhung the water at this spot. The singing seemed to come from thence. Burning curiosity possessed him, and he very slowly and softly rowed himself onwards, till the prow of his boat met the drooping boughs with a soft rustle. The song ceased suddenly. Grey turned in his seat, and drew himself within the sheltering shade; as he did so, a quick exclamation broke from him. He dropped his oars as he exclaimed,—

”The Lady Geraldine!”

* * * * *

How had it come about? Grey never could have said. But now it was all told—the story of his chequered life. She had been silent at the first—not exactly resentful of his intrusion, not unwilling to let him have speech of her again, but quiet, with a maidenly reserve and dignity which had acted upon him like a charm. It brought back to him the memory of his mother, and her noble dignity. The look in her eyes recalled those things that he had learned at her knee, and those aspirations after true greatness of life which she had cherished and fostered. Suddenly his present life looked to him utterly sordid, mean, and unworthy; and in a burst of confidence, for which he could have given no reason, he told her all his tale, encouraged by the soft and earnest glances of her beautiful eyes, although she scarcely spoke a word from beginning to end.

And now she looked at him with a great compassion in her face.

”Oh, it is sad, it is sad!” she said in her earnest musical tones. ”I know a little how sad it is. I see it too. But you are a man. You are strong, you are your own master. Why do you let yourself be made the sport and plaything of fate? Oh, do not do it! Rise to your calling as a man, as a gentleman, as a Christian! You can—I know you can! I read it in your face! What is Lord Sandford to you? The acquaintance of a few weeks. What are his comrades to you? You know that in your heart you despise them. Then will you make yourself as one of them? Will you sink to their level? Oh no, no, no! Break the fetters; they cannot be fast riveted yet. Break them, and stand a free man, and then see what the world has to offer you.”

She was gazing at him now, not shyly, not as a maiden archly coquetting with a handsome young swain, but as a woman yearning to reclaim one whose footsteps had well-nigh slipped in the mire, and whose whole soul was stirred by the effort.

Grey listened like a man who dreams; and yet his eyes were on fire, and his heart was kindled to a great flame—shame at his own weakness, yearnings after

vanished memories and half-forgotten aspirations struggling together with some new and utterly unknown emotion which seemed to come surging over him like a flood, leaving him speechless, motionless.

She had risen, and now held out her hand.

"You will triumph yet. I am assured of it. And I shall pray God to give you His strength and grace. Farewell, sir; we may meet again sometimes. I shall hear of you. I shall listen to hear naught but good. Your mother's voice shall plead through mine. Give up evil companions; give up idle dissipation, and all that it brings in its train. Lead the higher life of the Courteous Knight, the Spotless Knight, the Knight of the Holy Grail. Did we not speak of them all when first we met, and methought you looked such a one yourself? Be true to that better self; and so I say farewell again. May God be with you!"

She was gone, and Grey stood looking after her as a man who sees a vision.

CHAPTER VIII. A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

As Grey Dumaresq drifted downstream with the tide that sunny July morning, he felt as though something new and wonderful had come into his life, as though some great and marvellous change had fallen upon him, which, for good or ill, must leave its mark upon his life.

He did not try to analyze the strange feelings which possessed him. For a time he did not even consciously think. He seemed to be drifting along a shining pathway—drifting, he scarce knew whither, and did not care to ask. His heart was strangely heavy, and yet strangely light. A curious loathing and shame at himself was blended with a sense of exultant triumph, which held him in a mood of ecstasy. For a long while he drifted onwards, scarce thinking or knowing whither he went, till a sudden consciousness that he was passing Lord Sandford's house brought him to himself with a sense of shock. He had left that house only two hours before; yet it might have been as many years that had rolled over his head, so different were his feelings, so changed was his outlook upon life.

He moored his boat, and went up to his room. Before long he would be expected to drink coffee or chocolate at his friend's levee, meet all those of his comrades who had energy to pay their customary *devoirs* to their patron, and discuss the plans for the ensuing day and night. Grey dashed some cold water

over his hot head, and sat down to think.

What would Lord Sandford say if he suddenly expressed his intention of giving up gambling in all its many insidious forms, in order to enter upon a life totally different from that of the past weeks? It was not as though he had any alternative plan to unfold to him. He was as ignorant how his fortune was to be made now, after several weeks in gay London town, as he had been on his first approach to that city. He could almost hear the great guffaw of laughter with which Lord Sandford would greet his confession. He half feared the powerful personality and the imperious temper of the man who had been a good friend to him, and who had the reputation of being a dangerous enemy when his will was crossed. Grey knew that this man liked him—went near to loving him—would not easily let him go. He knew that he would appear both ungrateful and capricious; and the young man writhed at the thought of seeming either the one or the other. But yet he must break away. Pacing up and down the room, he seemed to see the soft earnest eyes of the Lady Geraldine bent upon him. He had pledged his word to her, and in spirit to his dead mother. From that pledge there was no drawing back. Yet how could the break best be made?

He thought over the engagements already entered into. Was it needful that these should be kept? He thought not—at least not those which were but promises to meet at such and such clubs or coffee-houses for the purposes of card-playing and similar recreations. But there was one engagement that Grey did not see his way honourably to break. He had promised to ride Don Carlos the following Saturday in a course against three other picked horses, and heavy wagers, he knew, had been laid upon or against his steed. This engagement he felt he could not break; but the rest he would. He might even make the excuse that Don Carlos wanted attention, and that he was going to take him into the country for purposes of training; and, once away from Sandford House, he ought to be able to pen a letter to the master which might excuse his return, and explain the nature of the change which had come over him.

Yes, that would be the way. He would not go open-mouthed to him this morning, to be perhaps scoffed or cajoled into some rash compromise. Grey knew that his ability to see both sides of a question often led him into difficulties and the appearance of vacillation. Surely he could keep his pledge if he made the break with a certain diplomatic skill. Not only would it be easier to himself, but it might prove the safer method also.

When he saw Lord Sandford in the midst of his friends, laughing at the last bit of scandal, passing jokes over the latest repartee of the redoubtable Duchess of Marlborough to the meek Queen, discussing the rivalries of the ministers, and the other rivalries (to them more important) of the reigning beauties of the gay world, Grey felt that it would indeed be impossible to speak in this company of

any of those things which were in his mind. He contented himself by standing aloof, looking out of the window and sipping his chocolate, whilst the gay flood of talk surged around him, and he caught a word here and a phrase there, but always heard when Lord Sandford's resonant tones dominated those of all others.

"Talk of rival beauties; we shall see sport to-night. Lady Romaine and Lady Saltire—dearest friends and dearest foes—are to go to Vauxhall Gardens to-night, each in a new toilet specially designed and ordered for the occasion. It will be a ladies' battle, in very truth; and public opinion must needs decide which of the rival queens is fairest to look upon. I have promised both the dear creatures to be there, to give my admiration to both alike. Shall I risk the undying enmity of either by giving the palm to one? No such fool, gentlemen—no such fool is Sandford. I vow I will have ready such a pretty speech or couplet for each that she shall go away with a better opinion of me than ever! Ha, ha, ha! I love to see the pretty dears, tricked out in their finery, and ready to tear each other's eyes out! So, gentlemen, I cancel all previous engagements for to-night. I am for Vauxhall, and Heaven only knows how late we shall be detained there by the battle of beauty."

"We will all be there!" cried the young bloods, who were at all times ready to follow Lord Sandford to whatever place of entertainment he elected to go; and one voice followed with a laughing question,—

"Will the snow maiden be there in the train of her mother?"

Grey felt himself start, and was glad his face was turned away. He would not for worlds that the sharp mocking eyes of Lord Sandford should see him at this moment, albeit he had no notion of any sort that he had special interest in his spotless Lady Geraldine.

[image]

He stood quite still to watch Lord Sandford lead away the fair Geraldine (page 155).

"I trow so," was the carelessly-spoken reply of Lord Sandford, as he adjusted his wig and suffered his valet to spray some delicate perfume over his person, as a finishing touch to his toilet. "The Lady Geraldine is no longer to lead the life of a nun. It has been decreed that she is to show her lovely face abroad, and add thereby a lustre to her mother's charms."

"A lustre her ladyship would well dispense with," laughed another. "She would sooner pose as the stepmother than the mother of a grown-up daughter—ha, ha! How comes it that this young beauty hath never been shown before to

the world? Other damsels make their *début* at sixteen; but the Lady Geraldine can scarce be less than twenty, and has the dignity of matronhood."

"A vast deal more dignity than the most part of our matrons do show forth," spoke Lord Sandford incisively. "Doubtless she learned it from her grandam, her mother's mother and her father's aunt; for my Lord and my Lady Romaine are cousins, and Mrs. Adair was trusted and revered by both. Young children are in the way of such gay ladies of fashion, wherefore the babe was sent to its grandam, and remained with her till the virtuous and discreet old lady died, having bequeathed her store of wisdom and discretion to the beautiful maid she had reared."

"And her fortune too," sniggered one gay dandy. "Do not forget that item, my lord. It is whispered that it will make the biggest of her charms. What is the figure? Doth anybody know?"

All disclaimed any precise information, and Lord Sandford spoke no word; his brow was slightly furrowed, and there was a subdued gleam in his eye which warned those who saw it that something in the conversation was not to his mind. They therefore hastened to change it, and many of them said adieu and sauntered away. Only a small knot remained with their patron, discussing the plans for the day; and Grey stood still in the embrasure of the window, his heart still beating with curious violence and rapidity. When those men were speaking of Geraldine, he had scarce been able to keep his fingers from their throats. What business had they taking her pure name upon their lips? And why had they spoken of her fortune? Could it be true that she was so great an heiress? He hated to believe it; yet what was it to him? He was wakened from his reverie by a quick question from Lord Sandford, which he heard as through the mists of a dream, and answered,—

"'Tis true I am not quite myself. I slept not at all last night, and have been on the river well-nigh since sunrise to rid me of the vapours. Methinks I will seek some sleep in mine own rooms ere night. Reckon not on me for to-day's pastime."

"Ay, you have the air of a man squeamish and in need of rest. Go get thee a good sleep, friend Grey, for we must keep you in fettle for the match on Saturday. Man and beast must come to the field strong and robust, with nerve and wind and muscle true and taut. But you must make one of our party to Vauxhall to-night. There will be many bright eyes on the lookout for the gay cavalier, as the ladies call you for your love-locks. You must not fail us there."

For a moment Grey hesitated, prudence and passion fighting together for mastery. But the overwhelming desire to see Geraldine again—perhaps to speak a word of farewell—overcame him, and he answered briefly as he strolled through the room on his way out,—

"I shall be ready enough for that; you can reckon on me."

How the day passed Grey never knew, and it was still broad daylight when he and his comrades started for the gardens of Vauxhall, where it was the fashion to spend the evening hours when nothing more attractive offered, and where such music and such illuminations as the times had to offer were to be enjoyed, and where ladies and their attendant beaux fluttered about like so many gay butterflies, and found opportunity as the dusk fell for walks and talks of a more private nature in the bosky alleys and shady paths than they could hope to gain in crowded routs and card-parties. Supper could be obtained too, and pleasant little parties made up; and the fashionable world found it agreeable on these hot summer nights to take their pleasure out in the open air.

Grey detached himself from his friends upon the first opportunity, and wandered alone through the gardens, avoiding encounters with persons he knew, though often accosted with laugh and jest and challenge by masked ladies, or young bloods eager to make friends with one whose face and figure began to be known, owing to his successes in horsemanship with Don Carlos, and his friendship with Lord Sandford. But Grey made small response to overtures, quickly shook himself free, and pursued his solitary ramble, till at length a sound of gay voices, laughter, and almost uproarious mirth, in which the tones of Lord Sandford could plainly be heard, drew him to a wide open space where an illuminated fountain seemed to have drawn a great concourse of people; and there, amid a tossing crowd of gaudy gallants, and ladies with towering heads, mincing, giggling, uttering little shrieks, little jests, or playing off an infinitude of coquetries and artifices to attract admiration, he beheld the stately white-robed figure around which his thoughts and fancies had been playing all through the long hours of the day.

He saw not the rival queens of beauty in their gorgeous apparel. He saw not the surging crowd that eddied around them, appraising, flattering, admiring, laughing. He only saw one white figure, standing aloof and for the moment alone, the moonbeams glimmering upon the shining whiteness of her dress, the fair face bent, as though in some sort of sorrow or shame. He saw it, and he was instantly at her side.

Whether or not he spoke, he knew not. He offered his arm, and the next moment he was leading her away from that giddy, mocking crowd; and he felt the clinging clasp of her fingers thrilling him to his heart's core. He heard the breath of relief as the chorus of flippant merriment died away in the distance. He paused, and a quick exclamation escaped his lips.

"This is no place for you, Lady Geraldine. Why do they bring you hither?"

She answered not, but turned her gaze for a moment towards him, and then dropped her eyes. With an impulse for which he could not account, he covered

the fingers which lay upon his arm with his own disengaged hand, and passionate words sprang to his lips.

"Give me only the right, fair lady, and I will save you from them all. I ask only to live and die as your knight—your champion—without wages—without reward!"

Then he was silent. His breath came thick and fast. He felt the quiver of the hand he held. He knew not how long the silence lasted, it was so strangely sweet, so full of mysterious meaning.

"I thank you, sir. I trow that you speak truth, and that your words are not idle froth—gone in a moment—as the words of so many of yonder gallants. But it may not be. I may not give you such a right. A maiden is not free to choose her friends; and the knights of chivalry are long since vanished from the earth. I would that I might call you friend, that sometimes we might meet and hold converse together. I trust that I may learn a good report of you, that one day I may speak with pride of having known you in your youth. But that must suffice us. Let it be enough for both. I may not—"

She hesitated, and her voice died into silence. She spoke with a repressed emotion which he scarcely understood. The tumult of his own heart was such that he could not seek to gauge the depths of her feelings.

"If I may not be your knight, let me at least be your friend—your servant!" he pleaded. "And if there is anything wherein I can serve you—"

She seemed struck by the phrase. She lifted her bent head and gazed earnestly at him; but the words she spoke seemed strange.

"You are the friend of Lord Sandford; is it not so?"

"I have been his comrade these many weeks. He has shown me much kindness and good-fellowship. I owe him gratitude."

"And you must know him well, I doubt not. Tell me, Sir Grey—and I pray you deceive me not—what kind of a man is this same Lord Sandford? Is he leal and true, faithful, loving, and loyal? Is he better than the crowd who follow at his heels and ape his manners, use his name as a watchword, and fawn upon his favour? Tell me, what think you of him? A friend must needs speak sooth."

"Lady, you have asked a hard question, inasmuch as I know but little of the man, albeit I have lived with him above a month. He attracts me, and yet there be moments when he repels me too. He is a good friend—I would not speak a word against him; yet it is said that he can be a bitter and an unscrupulous enemy; and those who have lost his favour withdraw themselves as speedily as possible from his notice, fearful lest some evil may befall them."

"Is he then cruel and rancorous?"

"I can believe that he might be, were his passions roused. He has that forceful nature which tends to vehement liking and bitter hatred. I have experienced

the one; I have not tasted of the other. For the rest, he is a man of parts, and can do all well to which he puts his hand. Methinks he would be strong enough to break off his reckless and vicious habits, had he but motive sufficient to make him! desire to do so. But for the nonce he floats with the current, and lives as the world lives. More I cannot say."

At that moment a swift, firm tread was heard approaching along the dim alley; and Geraldine looked hastily round, her hand dropping from Grey's arm.

"It is he!" she whispered, and there was a catch in her voice which the young man heard without understanding. He faced round, and beheld the towering figure of Lord Sandford beside them.

"Well chanced upon!" quoth he in his resonant tones. "I was sent by your mother in search of you, Lady Geraldine. The court of beauty has sat. To her has been adjudged the prize. She now desires the presence of her daughter, to share her triumph. We shall sup anon, and the table will not be complete without one gracious and lovely presence. Lady Geraldine, honour me by accepting my escort.—Grey, will you join us?"

He spoke the last words over his shoulder, and there was a note in his voice which the young man had never heard before, and which he did not fully understand. It seemed to sting him, but he knew not why.

"I thank you—no," he answered. "I am going home."

And then he stood quite still to watch Lord Sandford lead away the fair Geraldine, who threw him one strange, half-appealing glance over her shoulder, but spoke no word of farewell.

Grey had meant to go home, but somehow he could not bring himself to do so. His brain seemed on fire, and his heart with it. He knew not what ailed him, but a fever was consuming him. He left the gardens, but walked on and on, not knowing or caring whither he went. The night was far spent, and the dawn was beginning to blush in the eastern sky, before he found himself in the region of Sandford House again.

The place was still and deserted. The revellers and roisterers seemed all at home. A watchman dozed at his post, thankful for the peace of the streets, and Grey met no interruption, till suddenly, round a corner, he came face to face with his host, who gave him a look, uttered a short laugh, and linked his arm within his.

"Well met, friend Grey! You too have had no desire to woo the somnolent god? We find metal more attractive elsewhere. Say now, what think you of the future Lady Sandford? Methought you had eyes but for her to-night. Will she not queen it right royally here—the beautiful stately creature? You have taste, Grey, and I am well pleased that you have. Those painted, patched, and powdered Jezebels, smirking and ogling and running all over the town for the adulation of

the crowd, are as little to your mind as to mine. We can flatter and fool and make mock with the best; but when it comes to marriage! Faugh! one's soul sickens at the thought. What man in his senses would trust his happiness or his honour in the hands of that tawdry crew? Gilt and tinsel do very well to play with; but when one desires to purchase, one asks for gold."

Grey's heart seemed to stand still within him. He felt growing numb and cold. As they passed beneath the gateway, and the lamp shone upon his face, Lord Sandford saw that it was white as death, and a strange gleam came into his own eyes.

"Come, my friend, you do not answer. What think you of the wife that I have chosen? What think you of the Lady Geraldine Adair? Is she not a matchless creature? Who would have believed such a sport could come from such a tree?"

Grey commanded himself by a great effort.

"Is the Lady Geraldine Adair, then, your affianced wife?"

"That, or next door to it. My suit is approved of her parents. We shall be betrothed ere long. I thought you might be learning as much from her own lips to-night. Did I not hear my name pass between you twain?"

"She did ask some question anent you," answered Grey, who had no desire to fence or parry—he felt too stunned and bewildered; "but she spoke not of any troth-plight. Why should she?"

"True, why should she? She is not one of your empty-headed chatterers. She wears not her heart upon her sleeve. And your acquaintance is of the slightest; is it not so? Have you met before, since that evening in the water theatre when I did first present you to each other?"

"I have seen her but once between," answered Grey, still in the same quiet, stunned fashion; and when they had entered the house, he made excuse to go at once to his room, declining all proffer of refreshment or further converse.

Lord Sandford looked after him with an intent look upon his face, which slowly clouded over, till there was something almost malignant and ferocious in his aspect.

"So it is as I thought. He has been hit, and hard hit. Where can he have seen her in the interim? They would not have been standing thus, talking thus, if some bond had not been established between them. Yet I thought I had kept an eye upon him. I knew there might be danger. I saw it the first moment that they met. There is something akin in their natures. They feel it themselves. Hr-r-rr! that must be put a stop to. I will have no rival in Geraldine's heart. She does not love me yet; but she fears me a little, and she thinks of me. That is no bad basis to build upon. I shall win her yet, if I have a fair field. But a rival—no, that must not be! And yet I read somewhat in her eyes to-night which had not been there before. The fiend take all false friends! I must rid myself of this one,

and that speedily. I have liked him; but he shall not stand in my way. Well, 'tis I have made him: I can quickly unmake him. Let me but think of the way and the means. Grey Dumaresq, you are a pretty fellow and a pleasant comrade; but you shall never be suffered to stand in the light of Sandford's hopes and plans and desires. Look to yourself, my friend; for evil is abroad for you!"

CHAPTER IX.

"A MAD WORLD, MY MASTERS."

"Master, master, wake up! What ails you? Have you forgot the day, and what has to be done?"

Dick, with an expression of uneasiness and determination upon his face, was shaking Grey somewhat vehemently by the shoulder. The latter seemed to find it hard to wake; and when his eyes opened at last, there was a lack-lustre expression in them that was strange and unnatural. Dick's honest face clouded over yet more.

"I was certain there was some devilry afoot when they all came here last night. I have never seen my master in such a mad mood of merriment," he muttered half aloud, as he turned away to get a brimming glass of pure cold water from the table. "What has come over them, I don't know. But I like not the change. I liked not the look in Lord Sandford's eyes. He is a great man, I doubt it not; but I wish my master had chanced upon another as a friend and comrade in this great Babylon of a city. There is more going on here than I well understand."

"What are you grumbling over there to yourself, Dicon?" asked Grey from his bed, and his voice sounded more natural and quiet than his servant had heard it yet; "and where am I? For sure this room is strange to mine eyes, nor have I any recollection of it overnight; and how come you to be here, for that matter, honest Dicon? Methought you were at Hampstead, watching over Don Carlos, that he might be ready for Saturday's race."

"Yes, master, and so I am; and this is the hostelry at Hampstead where I have taken up my quarters with the horse; and hither it was that you came yestere'en, with Lord Sandford and his friends, to be ready for the match to-day. But beshrew me if I did think yesterday you would be fit for the saddle to-day! Is it strange I should mutter and grumble to myself when such things happen?"

"Nay now, what things, good Dicon? I pray you tell me," spoke Grey, as he

drained at one draught the ice-cold water, and drew a long breath of relief. "I feel like a man waking from a strange and fevered dream; for, in sooth, I know but little of what has been passing these last days. Some strange madness seems to have possessed me. I had meant to say farewell to Lord Sandford and his world, and seek mine own fortunes in some other field. Yet methinks I have not made the break. I have visions of wild orgies and furious gaming—such as I held aloof from before. Dicon, I fear me I have made a desperate fool of myself, and of my fortunes too. Tell me, what money have I with me now?"

"Not much, master. I took what you had—a matter of some twenty guineas perhaps. I have it safe in a bag. But surely that is not all. You had won a fortune, you did tell me—"

"Ay, and now I have lost it. I can recollect how the guineas flew, and how the stakes were doubled, and how I lost again and yet again. I take it I am a ruined man, good Dicon. These twenty guineas saved from the wreck are all the fortune I possess, and belike it is better so—better so."

"Better!" echoed the dismayed Dick; "nay, my master. But you will win it back again. The luck cannot always be against you. Think how it was at the first!"

"Yes, Dicon, and perchance it had been better had the luck been worse. I love not such gains as these. Besides, there is somewhat in this beyond my ken. Lord Sandford desired my friendship and company then, and luck was with me. Now that he desires it no more, the luck has changed, and that so strangely and desperately that one might almost say there was magic in it."

Dick's jaw dropped; he longed to know more, but feared to intrude too much upon his master's secrets. Grey, however, knew how faithful and attached was his stanch henchman, and as he went through his morning toilet he told him a little of the events of the past three days, in as far as he himself could remember them.

"I have offended Lord Sandford doubly," he said, "though he will not openly admit it. But I know—I feel the change. I trow that he is my enemy. Nay, Dicon, look not so aghast; it will matter little in the future, since to-day I take my leave of him, and most like in this great whirling world our paths will not again cross, either for weal or woe."

"But how?—what? He did seem to love you well."

"I think he did; but a mischance befell. He did not tell me of his troth-pledge to a fair lady—a lady of surpassing beauty, and of a virtue and purity which make her like a bright particular star amid the painted dames and mincing damsels of this giddy London town. Twice or thrice did I meet her and pay homage to her wondrous beauty and goodness. It was words she spoke to me that decided me, ere ever any ill-blood had been aroused, to leave off from this life of pleasure-

seeking and distraction, and seek a nobler career than that of the butterfly dandy fluttering round the town. But Lord Sandford thought that there was somewhat more than this betwixt us. Of that I am assured. A flame of jealousy swept over him; and when I told him of my resolution, I trow that his suspicions received confirmation. I did not see it then, but I see it now. He thought I left him to pursue my ends alone, and, perchance, to seek to win the lady of his choice. But he spoke nothing of this—only insisted that for this week my engagements should be kept, and that after to-day's race I might go my own way, and I was so resolved. He was not unkindly; yet there was something strange and stern in his bearing and language, and you have seen how his imperious temper and will sweep all before them. I myself was strangely dazed and something sorrowful. I scarce do know why my heart was so heavy within me. I let him have his way; and you behold what that way has been. I am a ruined man, beggared of all my winnings; and methinks my Lord Sandford has plotted for this very thing."

"It is a shame! Would I could take my horsewhip to him—"

"Nay, nay, good Dicon; be not so wroth," spoke Grey calmly and quietly. "In sooth, I know not that I owe him aught but thanks. When all is said and done, it was but ill-gotten gain. I would sooner face life with none of it upon me. I had a few guineas to start with—well, it was more than a few; yet had I spent my time in London, I should have had but little left by now. I have learned many lessons, and I shall start clear of debt, and without my pockets filled with other men's gold."

Dick was scarce moralist enough to understand or appreciate his master's scruples—scruples new, indeed, to Grey himself—but the faithful fellow was ready to accept any verdict and any decision made by the man he loved and served; and as he put the finishing touches to the workmanlike riding toilet which he had in readiness, he remarked with a short laugh,—

"Faith, master, you and I betwixt us, with Don Carlos and my good nag for company, and a few guineas in our pockets, need not fear the future; and I trow it will be well for you to be quit for ever of my Lord Sandford's company. I liked him not greatly for your friend; I hate him with a goodly hatred since he shows himself your foe. Shall we turn our backs upon him and upon London town, and seek our fortunes with the army over the water, where his Grace of Marlborough will give you welcome?"

"I scarce know what the future will bring for me, Dicon," was the reply, spoken gravely, yet with a certain listless indifference not lost upon the servant; "I have made no plans as yet. Let us see what this day brings forth first."

"I wager it will fill our pockets anew with gold!"

"I will not touch their gold!" spoke Grey with eyes that suddenly flashed fire. "I have cancelled all my wagers. I will take nothing at their hands. I will ride

Don Carlos and ride my best for mine own honour and that of the good steed I shall bestride; but their money will I not touch. I have done with all that. Nay, stare not in such amaze, good Dicon. I have not taken leave of my senses; rather, I trow, I have come to my better mind. Now get me somewhat to eat here, and then we will to the stables to see my beauty. This match once over, we turn a new page in our life's story. Who knows what the next will be?"

It was not much that Grey could eat. The three days which had passed since he and Lord Sandford had come to an understanding, which was well-nigh a rupture, had left a mark upon him. Moreover there was a weary ache at his heart which he did not fully understand, and which was harder to bear than aught beside. Dimly he knew that it had some connection with the Lady Geraldine Adair; but he feared to search too deeply into that matter. She was as far removed from him as the moon in the heavens, and he believed her plighted to another, and that one a man who had stood his friend, even though suspicion, jealousy, and an imperious temper had changed friendship into something very like enmity. Grey never for a moment dreamed of regarding himself as an aspirant for that fair hand; but he knew that the motive which was urging him to change the manner of his life and become a worthier and a better man was the hope that she might watch his career, and hear a whisper of his fame or his success; or that he might win some laurels in the fields of literature, art, or politics, which he might perchance in some sort lay at her feet.

This, however, lurked in the background of his thoughts. He scarcely owned to himself that he expected ever to look upon that fair face again; hence the sensation of heart sickness which had rendered him well-nigh desperate for a few days, and had helped him to squander without a qualm the hoard which his previous successes had accumulated. And now the end of this mad life of gay folly had come. He had drained the cup to the dregs, and found it bitter to the taste. He had neither liking nor respect for the companions with whom he had associated. Towards Lord Sandford his feelings were very mixed. The power of the man was too great to be shaken off entirely, nor could he despise or dislike him. But the tie of friendship had snapped asunder. A chasm had opened between them, and he felt that he was regarded, if not as a foe, yet as something akin, and it needed not Dick's words of warning to tell him that the less he saw of this man in the future the better it would be for himself.

Sounds of laughter and revelry greeted his ears as he slipped quietly out towards the paddock and shed where his horse had been stabled these past weeks, tended and exercised by Dick, and ready for whatever demand might be made upon him. He greeted his master with a neigh of recognition, dropped his nose in the extended hand, and stood tranquil and content under Grey's quiet caresses. The glossy coat was satin smooth, the delicate tracery of veins could be distinctly

seen, and each muscle stood out hard and taut; there was no superfluous flesh, but a firmness and excellence of condition that brought a smile of satisfaction to Grey's face. He turned with a smile to Dick, who stood by beaming.

"Not much fear of him to-day, eh, Dicon?"

"He would jump the moon, master, if you asked it of him," was the proud and confident answer.

"How do the others look? Have you seen them?"

"Pretty bits of horseflesh every one; and there is a black stallion of Mr. Artheret's that will take some beating. But he's too heavy for some of the jumps. He don't take off fast enough. And he's a nasty temper too. There's a gray Arab with pace; but he falls away behind, as they all do. I don't think Don Carlos will be troubled long by him. None of the others will take much beating. Pretty to look at, but not trained for what they've got to do. Lord Sandford was here yesterday early, looking at the jumps, and he had several of them made stiffer; but there's nothing Don Carlos cannot sail over like a bird!"

"Let us go and see," said Grey. "I will take a canter on the turf to warm myself to the saddle. Soh, boy, soh!" as he lightly vaulted to his seat, and the horse curveted beneath him. "We will take a look at these obstructions. The stiffer they are, the better you and I will be pleased—eh, my beauty?"

Dick mounted his nag, and rode beside his master to the course, where the horses were to be matched against each other when Lord Sandford and his friends should have finished their merry meal, and be ready to witness the exhibition. It was a fine stretch of ground which had been chosen—nearly a mile in length, and with several natural obstacles, which had been increased in some cases artificially, to test better the strength and skill of horse and rider. A stream of water with rather awkward banks ran across the course in one place, and in another was a dip in the ground filled with gorse bushes—a nasty place to get entangled in, if the horse could not be persuaded to clear the whole thing with a flying leap. A broken stone wall with a ditch in front was another obstacle; and the last was a barrier entirely artificial, made of hurdles and bushes high enough to tax the mettle of any horse, though not absolutely insurmountable. Still it was a formidable object enough, and Grey looked at it critically, walking Don Carlos up and down, to let the creature take his own observations with regard to the leap he was to make.

"It was here they were busy yesterday, but I could not see all they did. I was afraid to leave Don Carlos with so many strangers about. Some of the grooms with the other horses looked up to mischief. But I heard them say afterwards that Lord Sandford had not been satisfied with the field as it was. He said they must have something that really would be a test, or the black stallion and Don Carlos were like to come in together."

But now a horn blew gaily, and horsemen were seen approaching from many quarters. In the neighbourhood of the inn all was bustle and excitement, whilst from all sides there appeared streams of people converging to this spot. Some fine carriages had been driven out from London, with bedecked ladies eager to witness the contest. Others had stayed the night in the neighbourhood to be ready; and all the natives of the place who could get a holiday had come to gape at the fine folks, and see the grand gentlemen racing their own horses.

Indeed the hour for the contest had well-nigh come. Grey could see that the other horses were assembling, their riders decked in every colour of the rainbow, quite eclipsing the quiet and workmanlike suit of buff which he wore. But Grey's taste had always disinclined him to gaudy colours. The soft leather, finely chased and stamped in gold, pleased his eye more than rich-hued cloths or velvets. His breeches were of white buckskin cut by Lord Sandford's own tailor, and he wore long boots fitted with silver spurs, albeit he scarcely ever had need of the latter when he bestrode Don Carlos. His scarf was of white silk fringed with gold, and his only adornment was a cravat of fine lace, fastened with a diamond clasp. His cocked hat matched his buff coat, and was adorned with a white plume. Altogether, as he rode forward to his place, it would have been hard to find a fault with his dress or person; and the ladies behind their fans audibly praised his elegant figure, graceful seat, and distinguished and handsome face.

Grey, all unconscious of the favour bestowed upon him, rode up and saluted courteously the gentlemen who were to meet him and each other in rivalry. Lord Sandford, splendidly mounted, was to act as judge at the winning post. Another of his friends was to be starter; and gentlemen were posted at various points along the course to see that all the rules laid down were observed, and that no rider deviated from the well-pegged-out route prescribed for all. The spectators scattered hither and thither, taking up stations wherever their fancy prompted. The course seemed marked out by a glittering border extending down both sides. The sun shone brilliantly in the sky, and all nature seemed in gladsome mood.

Grey cast a keen look at the seven rival steeds as they were brought into line for the start. He picked out in a moment the two of whom Dicon had spoken, and saw that he had judged well. Then he gave his whole mind to the task in hand, checked with hand and voice the prancing of the excited Don Carlos, and brought him up to his appointed place docile and motionless.

The word was given, but the black stallion had bounded off a few seconds too soon, and had to be recalled. A second start was spoiled by two other competitors, who suddenly reared at each other, and strove to fight. One iron hoof, indeed, inflicted such a wound upon the shoulder of his neighbour that that horse had to be taken away limping and bleeding.

It was trying to all, horses and riders alike; but at the third start all got off,

though Grey saw that again the black stallion had made his bound a second too soon. This gave him a few yards the advantage, which, as his rider pressed him hard from the first, and his temper was evidently up, he increased in the next minute to more than a length. The Arab and Don Carlos were neck and neck, and sailed over the first easy jump side by side, the stallion having cleared it with a tremendous bound a couple of seconds earlier.

The water jump was next, and it was obvious that one spot offered greater advantages to the horse than any other. The stallion made for this spot with a rush, took off and bounded clear over, just as Don Carlos and the Arab came rushing up neck and neck, each rider desirous of the advantage of the sound bank. Grey set his teeth and glanced at his adversary. A collision at the leap might be fatal to one or both, so far as the race went. His rival would not budge an inch—that he saw. With a muttered oath between his teeth, he pulled his left rein, and used his knees. Don Carlos felt, and instantly understood: swerving slightly, he gathered himself together, and rose magnificently where the water was wider and the bank less safe; but he landed safely, and with a hardly perceptible scramble found his feet again, and amid the plaudits of the people raced on after the Arab, who, having got a momentary advantage, was now slightly in advance.

The black stallion had just reached the downward dip leading to the deep ditch filled with gorse bushes. His rider had had perforce to pull him up somewhat, lest he should slip and fall, for the ground was sandy and treacherous. But Don Carlos had been born and bred to this sort of wild work, and dashing onwards and downwards with the agility of a deer, came neck and neck with his rival, and having passed the Arab, cleared with a bound the treacherous gully, landing true and safe upon the opposite side. The Arab followed in his tracks, his rider taking advantage of the lead given; but the black stallion slipped and snorted, could not be made to try the leap till another of the horses came up and took it, after which he sprang across with a vicious energy which tried the horsemanship of his rider, and tore like a wild thing after the leading pair.

These had cleared one after the other the wall and ditch; but the Arab was showing signs of distress, whilst Don Carlos looked fresh and eager as at the start. There now remained only a quarter of a mile of smooth sward, and then the last critical jump; and Grey, knowing himself first, and not knowing what had betided his rivals, sailed happily onward, secure of victory, though he heard behind him the thud of flying horse hoofs, and knew that the black stallion was not beaten yet. It was he who snorted with such excitement and fury, and seemed to awaken thunders with his iron-shod hoofs.

One glance over his shoulder, and Grey passed his whip very lightly across the neck of Don Carlos. The gallant animal sprang forward like an arrow from a bow, showing how well within himself he had been travelling so far. The sound

of other beating hoofs was fainter now. Grey looked keenly at the great obstacle looming up in his path, and measured the height at various places, deciding where the leap could best be taken.

He felt the tension of the muscles beneath him. Don Carlos was gathering himself together for the leap. He would not fail, falter, or refuse. The great mass seemed rushing up against him. He felt the slackening with which Don Carlos faced his task, the motion of his flanks as he took off and rose. Then what was it happened? The sound of a click, sharp and clear—a sickening sensation of falling, sinking, struggling, plunging. Grey felt for a moment as though the end had come. He and his horse seemed falling into the very bowels of the earth. A black shadow almost overhead showed him that the stallion had cleared the barrier, and the air was full of shouts, screams, cheers, and cries.

Next moment he felt strong hands lifting and dragging him upwards. Dick's white face looked into his own, and the first words he heard were hissed in his ear by his faithful henchman.

"Foul play, foul play, my master. That ditch was dug and concealed—ay, and more than concealed; it has been an old well at some time, and it will open with a spring. You have been grossly tricked and cozened. It has been a trap cleverly laid and baited. But let me only get at them—my Lord Sandford—"

Dick almost choked in his fury; but Grey was now on his feet, and his one thought was for the good horse, who had dropped downwards into this unseen, unsuspected pit, and was gasping in affright, but might possibly have escaped serious injury. He himself felt little ill effects, having had a marvellous escape. But his soul was stirred within him, and in getting out the horse he saw plainly that Dick had been right, and that some sort of old trap-door concealed an opening into the ground which might have been at one time a well, but was now silted up with sand. By luring the foremost rider to this particular spot to take the leap, any astute enemy aware of the nature of the ground could almost certainly ensure his overthrow and defeat; and Grey had his suspicions that Lord Sandford had hoped that he might then and there break his neck—a thing which might very well have happened.

There was a crowd round the spot now, and great horror was expressed by many at sight of the unsuspected well, no voice being louder than Lord Sandford's in proclaiming astonishment and indignation. But Grey took no notice of the clamour, only busying himself about his horse; and presently, with some difficulty, the sagacious and docile creature was got out, and it appeared that no limb was broken, though one hock was deeply cut, and one shoulder badly strained.

Grey stood in silent thought awhile, his hand upon the neck of his favourite, who stood with drooping head and dejected mien, as though wondering whether

he would ever be whole and sound again. Dick was binding up the wound, his face like a thunder-cloud. A knot of persons of all ranks stood watching at a little distance; but Grey had courteously waved away all proffers of help, and indicated that he desired no attentions.

"Dicon," he said in a low tone, "we must now part for a while. Don Carlos will need you more than I. He is now my sole fortune, and must be respected as such. Take him and your own nag, and walk them both by easy stages to Hartsbourne. There are paddocks enough and to spare, and I surely have the right to pasture my horse in one; but if the thing should come to my kinsman's ears, give him what is due in money, and I will repay you. Old Jock Jarvis will be your friend. He will rejoice in your company and give you house-room with him, and it is not so far but that I can get news of you from time to time. Your good horse will bring you to London in three hours or less any day you have a mind to come; and you can watch for me what goes on yonder, and bring me word again."

It was a grief to Dick to part from his master; but he saw the need, and he loved the horse only second to Grey himself.

"I will do your behest, master. Nay, I want no money; I have plenty for all my needs. I too have made some modest wealth here in this great city. Only tell me where I may find you, and I will be gone, and do what can be done for the poor beast."

"You shall always get news of me at Wills' Coffee House, good Dicon," was the answer. "Where I go and how I live, I know not yet; but I will leave word there for you. So now, farewell. I turn a new page in my life from this day forth."

CHAPTER X.

"THE OLD LION."

Grey Dumaresq, having settled matters with his servant, and adjusted the disarray of his own dress and person, turned towards a group of men who were standing round Lord Sandford, making believe to laugh and jest, but showing some vague symptoms of uneasiness as they cast sidelong glances in the direction of their erstwhile comrade.

Grey walked straight up to Lord Sandford, and looked him full in the eyes. Did the glance of the other quail ever so little before his? He thought so, but

could scarce be certain.

"My lord," he said, "I have to thank you for many acts of kindness and courtesy, and a certain liberality of treatment which I have received at your hands and within your doors. In taking my farewell, I wish freely to acknowledge all this debt. But other matters which I need not specify, yet which are well understood by your lordship, have transpired to change the relations betwixt us; and I wish to add that I desire to be beholden to no man. In the rooms allotted to me in your lordship's house there is a quantity of wearing apparel, jewels, trinkets, for which I have no more use. I pray you have them sold, and the amount thus realized will reimburse you for all charges you have been at in my maintenance during the time I have dwelt beneath your roof. That is all I have to say.—Gentlemen, I wish you a very good day."

And lifting his hat with quiet dignity and grace, Grey made them a general salute and turned upon his heel.

But Lord Sandford's voice came thundering after him. "Do you desire to insult me, sir? Am I a beggarly inn-keeper, that I should sell a guest's belongings to pay my bill? What do you mean by such words? Do you desire that I should demand satisfaction for them at your hands?"

Grey did not know whether this man desired to fasten a quarrel upon him or not, and, truth to tell, he did not care. He just turned his head over his shoulder, and threw back an answer in tones of scarcely veiled contempt.

"That is for your lordship to decide. I shall have pleasure in giving any satisfaction demanded at any time, and in any place appointed. For the rest, a man who has sought to compass the death of a comrade by a foul trick need scarcely fear to soil his hands by the touch of his gold. Again I wish you good-day, my lord."

And without so much as turning his head again, Grey Dumaresq walked off, his head held high, neither observing nor returning the many salutes and bright arch glances shot at him from the lane of bystanders through which he needs must pass, but walking like a man in a dream, and so disappearing from view along the white road which led Londonwards.

Round Lord Sandford men were buzzing like bees disturbed.

"Insolent young jackanapes!" "What did he mean?" "What was his motive in such an insult?" "What will you do, my lord?" "Whither has he gone? Whither will he go?" "Is it true that he is ruined?" "He has lost his horse, at least. None will give him a score of guineas for the beast now." "How did it chance?" "Was it an accident?" "What meant he by his words?" All were pouring out these and like questions; but there was none to answer them, till Lord Sandford himself spoke.

"The fellow's wits are gone astray," he cried in his loud, dominating tones. "It is the Dumaresq blood. Sir Hugh was just such another—mad as a March hare

half his time, flinging his gold to the winds, and quarrelling with every man he met. Like father, like son. It has been coming on for days. I misdoubted me if ever he would ride this race. He came and told me he must reform. That was ever his father's cry, and he would disappear into the country for a while, and reappear again as gay as ever. 'Tis the same with the son. I saw it then, and I strove to combat the madness; but 'tis ill dealing with the lunatic. You see what we get for our pains! Tush! let the fellow alone. I did wrong to answer him. Let him go his own way, and we will think of him no more."

And Lord Sandford, with a heavy cloud upon his brow, and a look about the corners of his mouth which warned those about him to say no more, but leave matters as they were, flung away from them, and made his way back alone to the inn, from which he was presently seen to issue forth in his gorgeous chariot, driving furiously along the road which led to St. Albans.

His boon companions, thus left to their own devices, went over to the spot where the strange thing had befallen at the race, and where the country folk had gathered with shakings of the head and questionings beneath their breath; and there, plain for all men to see, was the yawning hole with the open trap hanging down, and the marks of the heavy fall of the good horse, whose escape with whole bones was little short of a miracle.

An old countryman was holding forth to a knot of eager questioners, now swelled by Lord Sandford's friends.

"I mind well when there was a house here; 'twas pulled down when I were a young chap. And the well must ha' bin hereabouts. That old trap has been in the ground ever since I can mind; but there be no water now, and the sand has pretty nigh silted it up. I've a-looked in many a time, and the hole gets less and less deep. When I saw them setting up the brushwood and things here, I made sure they had covered the trap well. I walked about it, but never saw sign of it. If I'd a thought of danger, I'd ha' told one of the fine folks. I suppose they never seed it. The grass and stuff do grow long and rank this time o' year. And so the gentleman's horse trod on it, and it gave way with him. Mercy me, but 'tis a wonder he didn't break his neck then and there!"

Lord Sandford's comrades looked each other in the eyes, and drew a little away. All knew that something strange had passed upon him of late, and that there was some rupture betwixt him and the man who had but lately accused him of seeking to compass his death.

"Did he know?" "Was it plot or plan of his?" whispered one and another; but none could give the answer.

A wild, wet September day was drawing to its close, amid pelting squalls of cold rain, when a tall young man, gaunt and hollow-eyed, pushed his way into a small coffee-house in an obscure thoroughfare somewhere in the region of Drury Lane, and took a seat in a dark corner as near to the stove as he could get, for he looked pinched with cold, and his plain and rather threadbare black suit was pretty well wet through. As soon as he was seated, he drew from his breast a roll of paper, which he regarded with solicitude. That at least was dry, and he heaved a sigh that sounded like one of satisfaction.

In this narrow street the daylight had completely faded, though it was not yet six o'clock. The room was furthermore darkened by clouds of tobacco smoke which the guests were puffing forth. The smell of coffee mingled with the ranker fumes of the tobacco, and the clink of cup and spoon made ceaseless accompaniment to the talk, which went on in a continuous stream.

Grey (for it was he) leaned his head on his hand wearily, and fell into something like a doze as he sat in his shadowy corner. He was exhausted in mind and in body. He was faint with hunger, and yet half afraid to order food; for his funds were dwindling almost to the vanishing point, and as yet he had found no means of replenishing his exchequer. But he had not been able to resist the temptation to escape from the buffetings of the tempest, and when the boy in attendance upon the guests came to ask his pleasure, he ordered some coffee and bread, and devoured it with a ravenous appetite when it was set before him.

The pangs of hunger stayed, if not appeased, he began to look about him, and to wonder into what manner of company he had thrust himself. He had never before been inside this house, though he had, in the first days of his new career, taken his meals in some of the numerous coffee or chocolate houses, or the taverns which abounded throughout the town. Latterly he had generally bought his food at the cheapest market, and had eaten it in the attic to which he had removed himself and his few belongings. He was beginning to wonder how long he should be able even to retain that humble abode as his own. Dame Fortune's smiles seemed quite to have deserted him, and abject poverty stared him grimly in the face.

A smoking lamp had been brought in, and hung overhead, lighting up the faces of the company with its yellow glare. There was something strange and Rembrandt-like in the effect of the picture upon which Grey's eyes rested. Leaning back dreamily with his head against the wall, he could almost fancy himself back in one of those foreign picture galleries, in which heretofore he had delighted, and where so many hours of his time had been spent.

But this was a living picture, shifting, changing, breaking up into groups and re-forming again; and the hum of talk went on unceasingly, as one after another took up the word and launched forth his opinions, generally in florid

and flowery language, and with much gesticulation and indignation.

What first struck Grey as strange was the anger which seemed to possess all these men. That they were in no good case was well-nigh proved by the shabbiness of their dress, and by the fact of their being gathered in this very humble and cheap place of resort, which would not tempt any but those in adverse circumstances. But over and above their poverty, they seemed to be railing at neglect or injustice of some sort, and ever and anon would break out into virulent abuse of some person or persons, whose names were unknown to Grey, but who evidently were characters well known to the others of the company.

"There is no such thing as justice left, or purity of taste, or any such thing!" shouted a handsome, well-proportioned fellow, whose face had attracted Grey's notice several times, and seemed dimly familiar to him. "Look at the mouthing mountebanks that walk the boards now! They strut like peacocks, they gibber like apes. They have neither voice, nor figure, nor talent, nor grace. But, forsooth, because some fine dame has smiled upon them, or they are backed by a nobleman's patronage, they can crow it over the rest of us like a cock upon his dunghill, and we, who have the talent and the gifts, may rot like rats in our holes!"

"Shame! shame! shame!" cried an admiring chorus.

"Look at me!" thundered the young man, his eyes flashing. "Who dares say I cannot act? Have I not held spellbound, hanging on my lips, whole houses of beauty and fashion? Have I lost my skill or cunning? Has my voice or has my grace departed from me? Wherefore, then, do I sit here idle and hungry, whilst men not fit to black my boots hold the boards and fill their pouches with gold? Why such injustice, I say?"

A chorus of indignation again arose; but out of the shadows came a deep voice.

"The answer is easy, friend Lionel; arrogance and drink have been the cause of your downfall. How could any manager continue to engage you? How many times has it happened that you have come to the theatre sodden with drink? How many representations have you spoiled by your bestial folly? They were patient with you. Oh yes, they were very patient; for they knew your gifts and recognized them. But you met friendly rebuke or warning with haughtiness and scorn. You would listen to no counsel; you would heed no warnings. The end should have been plain to you from the beginning, and you would not mend your ways. I told you how it needs must be; and now the time has come when you see it for yourself. Worse men are put in the parts that you excelled in, because they can be depended upon. No drunkard can ever become great. Put that in your pipe and smoke it, Lionel Field."

At the sound of this new voice, speaking out of the shadows of the ingle-nook, a great hush had fallen upon the room. Grey leaned forward to obtain a

view of the speaker, and the firelight played upon the striking features and iron-gray hair of a very remarkable-looking old man of leonine aspect, whose voice was of that penetrating quality which makes itself heard without being raised; and it was plain that something in the personality of the man lifted him above his fellows, for all listened in silence whilst he spoke, and even the arrogant young actor looked for the moment abashed.

"Who is it?" whispered Grey to the man next him; and the answer came readily, though spoken in a cautious whisper.

"His name is Jonathan Wylde. Once he, too, was a famous actor; but long illness crippled his limbs, and he has fallen into poverty. He is always called the Old Lion, and methinks the name suits him well. He is a very lion for courage, else would he not dare to rebuke Master Lionel Field. For he is one who is ready with his fist, or with knife or bludgeon, and it is ill work meeting him when he is in his cups."

Grey looked with interest and attention at the old man in the shadows; but he was leaning back again, and spoke no more. The talk surged round him again from the rest; they spoke of the plays that were being enacted at the various theatres, and of those who were playing the various rôles. Some of them stood up and rolled forth bits of Congreve's witty and sparkling dramas, and disputed as to whether the "Old Bachelor" or the "Way of the World" were his happiest effort; whilst some declared that the "Double Dealer" was the best of all. They talked excitedly of the revival at Drury Lane of Farquhar's "Love and a Bottle," which had scored such a success some fourteen or fifteen years previously. And there were some who lauded and some who depreciated Colley Cibber and his "Careless Husband" and "Love's Last Shift," which were favourites throughout the town.

It was a new world to Grey; but he listened with a certain fascination, for the drama had always attracted him, and he watched the gestures of the actors and listened to their mouthing periods with something between wonder and amusement. He could understand that these men had been failures. Only Lionel Field appeared to have any true histrionic gift, and the cause of his downfall was plain to be read after the speech of the "Old Lion." From time to time, as the light flickered upon the striking face in the ingle, Grey caught a fine-lipped smile upon it, and once or twice he thought the old actor's eyes met his in a gleam of humour. But of that he could not be sure—it might be but the trick of the firelight; and presently wearied nature asserted itself, and the young man passed from drowsiness to actual sleep, and knew nothing more till a sharp grip upon his arm roused him to a sense of his surroundings.

It was the tapster who thus shook him; and when he opened his eyes, Grey saw—or thought, at least—that the room was empty. What the time was he had

no idea; but it must be late, and he rose hastily to his feet with a muttered apology at having overstayed the closing time.

At that moment there emerged out of the shadows of the ingle-nook a bent figure, dignified even in its infirmity, and the voice which Grey had heard before spoke in quietly authoritative accents.

"Bring hither coffee and a dish of eggs for two. The wind and rain yet howl around the house. This gentleman will sup with me ere we go home. Go and serve us quickly, for we have both a good stomach, and would eat ere we depart hence."

The tapster vanished quickly to do the bidding of the guests, and Grey turned a wondering glance upon the Old Lion, whose face, framed in its shaggy gray hair, looked more leonine than ever, the bright eyes shining out of deep caverns from under bushy brows, the rugged features full of power, not unmixed with a curious underlying ferocity. But the glance bent upon Grey was kindly enough.

"Sit down, young man; I would know more of you. I have a gift for reading faces. I have marked yours ever since you entered this room. Tell me your name. Tell me of yourself, for you were not born to the state to which you have now fallen."

"My name is Grey," was the ready answer. Grey had dropped his title and patronymic with his fallen fortunes, and used his mother's name alone. "My father was a country gentleman. I was gently reared, and was at one time a scholar at Oxford, where I dreamed many dreams. Afterwards I travelled abroad, returning to find my father dead and my home in the hands of a kinsman to whom it was mortgaged by my father. The small fortune I received I squandered foolishly in a few weeks of gay living with young bloods of the town. I wakened from my dream to find myself well-nigh penniless, disgusted alike with myself and those I had called my friends. I have ever been something ambitious. I misdoubt me I am a fool; but I did think that I might win laurels upon the field of literature. I have never lost the trick of rhyming, and jotting down such things as pleased my fancy, whether in prose or in verse. Do I weary you with my tale?"

"No, sir—far from it. Let me hear you to the end. I did see you take forth a roll of paper from your breast as you came in. That action, together with your face, told me much. You have the gift of a creative fancy. You have written a poem or a play."

"Neither the one nor the other, but a romance," answered Grey, the colour flushing his face as it flushes that of a maiden when the love of her heart is named by her. "I scarce know how to call it, but methinks it savours more of a romance than of aught besides. When I was rudely awakened from my pleasure-loving life, saw the folly and futility thereof, and desired to amend, I did take a quiet

lodging high up in a building off Holborn, and there I did set myself to the task, and right happy was I in it. I had a score of gold pieces still left me, and my needs I did think modest; though, looking back, they seem many to me now. The weeks fled by, and my work reached its close. When my romance was finished, my money was all but spent. For the past week or more I have been seeking a publisher for it. In my folly I did think that it would bring me gold as fast as I wanted. My eyes have been rudely opened these last days."

The Old Lion nodded his head many times.

"You made a mistake in seeking a publisher, young sir. You should first have sought a patron."

Grey's face flushed slightly, and he hesitated before he spoke.

"Others have said the same to me; but there are difficulties. I have not learned to go cap in hand to cringe for patronage to the great ones of the earth." But, as Grey saw a slight smile flicker in the old man's eyes, he added rather hastily, "And then I desire not to be known and recognized by those whom I did know in my former life. There is scarce an antechamber in those fine houses where patrons dwell where I might not meet the curious and impertinent regard of those who would know me again. That I will not brook." And now Grey's eyes flashed, thinking of Lord Sandford, and how he would chuckle to hear how low his rival had fallen. "No; if I am to succeed at all, I must needs do so without a patron. If I fail, there is one resource left. Able-bodied paupers are sent to the wars. I can go thither and fight."

Again a smile flickered over the Old Lion's face; but the tapster was entering with the smoking viands, and the gleam in Grey's eyes bespoke the wolf within him.

"Set to, my friend, and make a good meal. When we have cleared the trenchers, you shall come with me to my lodging. I would hear the end of your tale; but that can wait till after supper."

CHAPTER XI. THE LION'S DEN.

"Welcome to the Lion's Den!" spoke the man Wylde, as he threw open the door of a room which he had unlocked, and kicking a smouldering log upon the hearth, evoked a cheery blaze, by the aid of which he lighted a lamp that swung over a

table littered with books, papers, and quills.

Grey stepped within the threshold, and looked about him with curious eyes. The house they had entered a few minutes before was a tall and narrow one in Harpe Alley, leading from Shoe Lane. It was not an old house, for it came within the area of the great fire of fifty years back, and had been rebuilt, like the whole of the surrounding buildings, with greater speed than discretion. Grey had once come across Sir Christopher Wren in his other life, and had talked with him of the short-sighted policy observed in the rebuilding of the city. The great architect declared that had his plans been carried out, London would have been the finest city in the world: but the haste and false economy of the citizens and city companies had thwarted his plans, and the old lines of narrow and crooked streets were kept as before, to the cost of succeeding generations.

This house had been hastily run up, like those surrounding it, and the tempest from without rattled and shook the walls and windows as though to drive them in. But the room itself, though no more than an attic, bore an air of comfort very pleasant to the eyes of the homeless Grey, whose own quarters only contained the barest necessities of life; for there were some rough shelves full of books in one corner, and a rug before the fire gave a look of comfort to the place. Two armchairs of rude pattern, but furnished with down cushions, seemed to invite repose; and everything was scrupulously clean, even to the boards of the floor.

"A poor thing, but mine own," spoke the Old Lion, with his grim smile, as he motioned to Grey to take one chair, and he himself pulled up the other. "I have dwelt here two years and more now, and I have not been unhappy; albeit I never thought to end my days in a garret, as belike I shall do now."

"Fortune has been hard upon you," spoke Grey earnestly. "You have the gifts and the powers; it is cruel that your limbs should have become crippled."

"We must take the rough and the smooth of life as we find it," answered the other. "I have had my moments of rebellion—I have them still; but I seek the consolations of philosophy; and I have never yet wanted for bread or shelter. But there be times when the future looks dark before me. Those who remember me, and pity my misfortunes, drop away one by one. I lacked not for patrons at the first. When I could not longer tread the boards, I was oftentimes engaged to make men laugh or weep at some gay rout at a nobleman's house. Then, too, my jests and quips were in request at gay supper-parties, and I was paid to set the table in a roar, which in all sooth was not difficult when the wine-bottle was going round and round. Oh, I knew gay times for many a year after my stage career closed. But patrons have died off one by one. I am more crippled than I was, and the young wits are pushing to the front, whilst the Old Lion has been crowded out. My pen still serves me in a measure. I can turn an epigram, or write a couplet,

or even make shift to pen a sonnet that lacks not the true ring. Grist yet comes to the mill, but more and more slowly. There come moments when I wonder what will be the end of the Old Lion's career—the poorhouse, or a death by slow starvation in some garret!"

"No, no," cried Grey almost fiercely; "that would be shame indeed. Surely, if nothing better turn up, there must be places of refuge for fallen genius. Have not almshouses been built, again and again, by the well-disposed for such men as sickness has laid aside? You smile, but in sooth it is so."

"Ay, and how many are there to claim the benefits of pious founders? Yet no matter. I brought you not here to talk of my troubles, but of yours. That romance of which you speak—"

"It would seem the world cares little for such things. I did hear the same tale everywhere. Was it a pamphlet I had to give them, a lampoon upon some great man, an attack against the Tories, the Whigs, the Dissenters? If so, they would read it; for there was great eagerness amongst the people to read such things, and no matter what side was attacked, there were hundreds eager to buy and to read. But a romance—no; that was a mistake altogether. A writer of successful pamphlets might perhaps find readers for a merry tale, or even a romance; but for an unknown aspirant to fame—no, that was another matter. No one would buy it; no one would even read it; though there were one or two who took it and glanced through some pages, praised the style and the easy flow of words, and advised me to take to pamphleteering, promising that they would read anything like that."

"That is it, that is it!" cried the Old Lion, rising and pacing up and down the room with his halting stride. "Write a filthy lampoon, a scurrilous libel, a fiery diatribe against any great or notable man, and all the world will read and set themselves agog to know the writer. Look at Swift, with his 'Tale of a Tub;' look at De Foe, with his crowd of pamphlets—men of talent, I do not doubt or deny, but full of gall and bitterness. Yet they are read by all the world. Fame, if not fortune, has come to them, and fortune will doubtless follow. The late King, they say, would have made Swift a bishop. The Queen will not: his ribald wit disgusts her; but he has admirers and patrons everywhere. It is the bold and unscrupulous who flourish like the grass of the field. True poetry and literary beauty are not asked, or even desired. A pen dipped in gall is a pen dipped in gold in these days of party strife. And the genius that wields not this bitter pen sits in dust and ashes, asking bread, and that well-nigh in vain."

"How should I write these party diatribes—I who know little of their cries? Whig or Tory, Tory or Whig—what care I? The Tory of one Parliament is the Whig of the next. Have not Lords Marlborough and Godolphin gone over to the Whigs? The Queen herself, they say, is changing slowly."

"Nay, the Queen herself will never change!" cried Wylde, with an emphatic gesture. "The Duchess has changed, and she seeks to use her influence with the Queen to make her change also, and give up her Tory advisers altogether. But she will not succeed. The Queen may be timid and gentle, but she has all her father's tenacity and obstinacy. Let my Lady of Marlborough look to it! She may strain the cord to breaking point. Already they say that the new favourite, Mrs. Masham, is ousting her kinswoman, the Duchess, from the foremost place in the Queen's affections. Favourites have fallen ere this through too great arrogance. The victories of Ramillies and Oudenarde, and the successes that have followed, make the Duke the idol of the nation and the favourite of the Queen yet; but the day may come when this may change, and then the high Tories may come in once more with a rush."

"I should be sorry for the Duke to lose favour," spoke Grey thoughtfully. "I did see him once, and had speech with him after the battle of Ramillies, and a more gracious and courtly gentleman it has never been my lot to meet."

Suddenly the Old Lion's eyes flashed fire.

"You have seen and had speech with the Duke on the field of Ramillies? You saw the battle, or something of it? Speak! Tell me all! I must hear this tale. It may mean much to us both."

"In sooth it is little I can tell you of the battle, for I was in the thick of it myself. It was by accident that my servant and I came upon the rival armies; and another happy accident gave me the chance of doing a small service for the Duke. After the battle, when we were hard by Louvain, he called me to him, and spoke many gracious words. I would fain hope that some day I may see him again."

"You had speech with him? You saw his manner and his port? Tell me—show me—how did he carry himself?"

Grey rose to his feet, laughing. He humoured the whim of the old actor. He was not lacking in the histrionic gift, and threw himself into his part with good will. He uttered quick commands, as though to his officers; he threw out his arms, as though directing one man here, another there. He recalled numbers of words spoken by the General, and these he reproduced faithfully and with an excellent imitation of Marlborough's polished, courteous, yet commanding air. Then he let his face soften, and addressed the old man as he himself had been addressed, with words of thanks and with promises of friendship. Finally, throwing off the mask, he broke into a laugh, and was astonished at the eager change which had come upon the Old Lion.

"Boy!" he cried, with a new access of energy, "I trow I see for both of us a way to fame and fortune."

Grey's eyes lighted as he eagerly asked his meaning.

"That is soon told. Have you heard how, after the victory of Blenheim, none

could be found to hymn the praises of the great General till the poet Addison was introduced to notice, and penned his immortal lines? Now, since the victory of Ramillies, I have burned with desire to show the world by somewhat more than verse alone the power and genius of England's mighty soldier. See here!"

The old man rose and crossed to his table, where he fetched from a drawer a scroll covered with writing, which he put in the hands of his companion. Grey saw that it was a dialogue cast in dramatic form, and though he could not read it then and there, he could see, by casting his eyes over it, that there were many very fine periods in it, and that it was filled with descriptive passages of some great battle, and the energy and glory of the General in command. He raised his eyes inquiringly to the impassioned face of the author, which was working with excitement.

"See you not something of the form? It is a dramatic interlude. It should be played upon the stage during the intervals of the play. Time sits aloft, aged and grim, his scythe in his hand, his hour-glass beside him, and he speaks of the decay of mankind—that the world's greatness is vanishing, its men of genius growing ever fewer and fewer. That is my part. I take the *rôle* of Time. To him then enters one in the guise of youth—one in the flush of manhood's prime—one who has seen great and doughty deeds, and comes to rehearse the same in the ears of old Time, to bid him change his tune, to tell him that giants yet live upon the earth. This youth comes with songs of victory; he speaks of what he has seen; he describes in burning words and glowing colours that last great fight wherein England's General put to flight the hosts of the haughty monarch of France. For months has this been written; for months have I gone about seeking the man to take the part of youth and manhood. But I have sought in vain. All those whom I would have chosen have other work to do, and did but laugh at me. Those who would gladly do my bidding, I will none of. You saw how they did mouth and rant to-night, thinking to show their talent, when they only displayed their imbecile folly. But here have I found the very man for whom I have long waited. You have youth, beauty—that manly beauty which transcends, to my thinking, the ephemeral loveliness of woman; you have the gift; you have seen the great hero: you have caught the very trick of his words and speech. Oh, I know it! Once did I hear him address the House of Lords, and when you spoke I seemed to see and hear him again. The great world of fashion will go mad over you. We shall draw full houses; we shall succeed. I know it! I feel it! The Old Lion is not dead yet! He shall roar again in his native forest. Say, boy, will you be my helper in this thing? And in the gains which we shall make we will share and share alike."

It was a very different sort of fame from anything Grey had pictured for himself, and for a moment he hesitated; for he realized that were this dramatic sketch to take hold of the imagination of the town, and draw fashionable audi-

ences, he could scarcely avoid recognition, disguise himself as he might. But as against this there was the pressing need of the moment. He was well-nigh penniless; his romance seemed likely to be but so much waste paper. He was hiding now even from Dick, who periodically visited London to see him, lest the honest fellow should insist upon maintaining him from his own small hoard. Here was an opening, as it seemed, to something like prosperity; and the alternative of being drafted into the army as a pauper recruit was scarcely sufficiently attractive to weigh in the balance. Moreover, there was something so earnest and pathetic in the glance bent upon him by the Old Lion that he had not the heart to say him nay, and he held out his hand with a smile.

"I will be your helper; and as for the gains, let them be yours, and you shall give me what wage I merit. The play is yours, the thought is yours: it is for you to reap the harvest. I am but the labourer—worthy of his hire, and no more."

The compact was sealed, and the old man then insisted that Grey should take his bed for the night, as he must sit up and remodel his play upon lines indicated by the young man, who had seen the field of Ramillies and the disposition of troops. Grey furnished him with sundry diagrams and notes, and left him perfectly happy at his task, which would doubtless occupy him during the night, whilst the weary guest slumbered peacefully upon the humble bed in the little alcove beyond the larger room.

When Grey awoke next morning, the sun was shining; a frugal but sufficient meal was spread upon the table; a fire was blazing cheerily upon the hearth; and there was the Old Lion, with his manuscript before him, muttering beneath his breath, and throwing out his hand in telling gesture, making so fine a picture with his leonine face and shaggy mane of hair that Grey watched him awhile in silence before advancing.

"Good-morrow, and welcome to you, my son," was the greeting he received. "I have had a beautiful night. The muse was hot upon me. The rounded periods seemed to flow from my pen without effort. Let us to breakfast first; then shall you read what I have written, and together we will amend it, if need be. But first shall you remove hither from that unsavoury lodging of which you did speak. Here is money: pay your reckoning, and bring hither any goods and chattels you may value. We must dwell together these next weeks. We will work hard, and before the week closes I will have some manager here to listen to our rendering of this scene. We will have the world crowding to see and hear us yet!—King Fortune, I salute thee, and I thank thee from my heart that thou didst send this goodly youth to me, and didst prompt my heart from the first to take note of him and seek his friendship."

The removal of Grey's simple belongings took but little time, and lucky did he feel himself to be able to call this comfortable abode his home. A small

attic upon the same floor of the house made him a sleeping chamber at very small cost, and his days were spent in the sunny south garret, which was called the Lion's Den; and there they studied, and wrote, and rehearsed this eulogy upon the Duke, and the prowess of the English arms, the old man introducing here and there allusions and innuendoes which Grey scarcely understood, but which Wylde declared would bring down thunders of applause from the house—as, indeed, proved to be the case.

Grey had a faint misgiving at the first that no manager might be forthcoming to admit the dialogue to his boards; but there the old actor knew his ground. He succeeded in inviting two of the most successful managers to listen to a performance in the attic, without the accessories which would add much to the effect upon the stage; and even so the scene proved so telling, the acting of the Old Lion was so superb in its quiet dignity, and Grey (who had learned and studied patiently and diligently) went through his part with such spirit, such power, such dramatic energy, that even his instructor was surprised at his success, and the managers exchanged glances of astonishment and pleasure.

It was just the sort of piece to catch the public favour at this juncture. Marlborough was still the idol of the nation, and might be expected home some time before the winter closed—perhaps before Christmas itself. The nation was discussing how to do him honour, and would flock to see a piece wherein his praises were so ably sung.

"With a wig such as the Duke wears, and with military dress, Mr. Grey could be made to look the very image of the great General," cried one.

"He has something the same class of face—handsome, regular features, grace of action and bearing. He does but want to be transformed from fair to dark, and his acting of the Duke will bring down veritable thunders of applause from all."

And then began a gratifying rivalry as to terms, in which the Old Lion sustained his part with dignity and firmness. Both managers desired to secure this interlude for their respective theatres, and at the last it was settled that the performance was to be given two nights a week at Drury Lane, and two at Sadler's Wells, the astute old actor retaining the right to make his own terms at private houses upon the two remaining nights of the working week. The costumes were to be provided by the managers, but were to be the property of the actors, who would undertake to replace them should any harm befall them at private representations.

When these matters had been satisfactorily settled, and certain other details arranged, the great men took their leave in high good humour; and the Old Lion, shaking back his mane of shaggy hair, grasped Grey by the hands, his eyes sparkling in his head.

"Your fortune is made, young man! your fortune is made! You will never need to fear poverty again. What life so grand as that of the man who can sway the multitude, make men laugh or weep at his bidding, hold them suspended breathless upon his lips, move them to mirth, or rouse them to the highest realm of passion? Ah, that is life! that is life! Have I not tasted it? Do I not know? And that life lies before you, my son. I will be your guide and mentor; you have but to use patience and discretion, and with your gifts and with your person you shall hold all men in thrall. Ay, and you shall write, too—Cibber shall find a rival. Men shall sing your praise. The world shall lie at your feet. And I shall see it—I, who have found and taught you, who have discerned your powers with pen and tongue. I shall be content. I ask nothing better of fortune. Ah, my son, it was indeed a providence which made our paths to cross!"

Grey smiled, and was silent. The life of an actor was not the life of his ambition, and he doubted if it would enthrall him as it had enthralled the Old Lion. But it would be at least a new experience. He was ready and willing to make trial of it. As matters now stood with him, he had scarce a choice. He would go through with this thing that was planned, and with the future he would not immediately concern himself.

So he smiled back at the old man, and took his hand, saying simply,—

"I am well pleased that I have acquitted myself to your liking. I will seek to do you credit in the eyes of the world."

CHAPTER XII.

TRIUMPH.

Grey gazed at himself in astonishment. His fear of the eyes of quondam friends vanished into thin air. Scarce would he have known himself. That others would know him, he could not believe. He had had no idea of the transforming properties of one of the great flowing wigs of the period; but when his own brown curls were covered and hidden beneath this mass of perfumed hair, his brows darkened and the skin of his face olive-tinted, his figure padded and arrayed in full military finery such as the Duke of Marlborough was wont to wear, he could almost believe that he saw that great warrior before his eyes, so cunningly had the artificers wrought. He looked younger than the General, but that was intended—an impersonation of youth and manly beauty and war-like prowess. This was

what the author of the interlude aimed at, and this Grey looked to perfection, as he stood habited in the garments in which he was to appear before the public.

The Old Lion, himself transformed into an excellent presentment of Father Time, stood gazing at the young man with glowing eyes, directing the attendants to give a touch here or there to accentuate any point he wished brought out. Satisfaction beamed from every feature of his face. He seemed to see the town at his feet. In a week's time all London would be ringing with the fame of Jonathan Wylde.

It was just the sort of artificial scene likely to catch the popular taste. There was a rage for semi-mythological representations—dryads and nymphs and mermaids at the water theatre, Cupids and Psyches and heathen or classical deities at other places, whilst stilted and absurd allusions to Arcadian joys, nectar and ambrosia, spicy breezes of Paphos, or Hymen's seductive temples, fell trippingly from the tongues of every dandy with any claim to be a man of fashion, and were echoed in simpering accents by the ladies to whom this flowery nonsense was addressed.

The setting of the dramatic interlude had been carefully arranged. Father Time, with his flowing white beard, his scythe leaning against him, and his hour-glass at his feet, was seated aloft at one side of the stage overlooking a dim and vague expanse, which was supposed to represent the earth. There was something very majestic in the aspect of the old actor, whose name many still remembered, and a burst of applause followed the rise of the curtain. Curiosity was raised to a high pitch by the gossip already excited in dramatic circles, and the house was crowded to the ceiling with breathless and eager spectators.

The Old Lion delivered his harangue with all the fire and dignity for which his acting had been celebrated in past years. Seated upon his throne, surveying, as it were, the world, the crippled limbs no longer hampered him. A few telling gestures of the brown and skinny hand, the play of facial expression, the thunder or the melting pathos of his rich voice—these were all the aids he needed, and he used them with excellent effect. The audience sat spellbound. The young bloods even shrank and quailed and exchanged shamefaced glances as Father Time launched his thunders of scorn at the decadence of manhood, the decay of all true chivalry, the gilded luxury, the senseless folly, the gross extravagance he beheld on all hands. Where were the men? he asked, pointing a long and skinny finger straight at the house filled to overflowing with the fashion and wealth of the town. How did the youth of the great cities show their valour now? Why, by scouring the streets at night, setting upon helpless citizens, using them shamefully, even to leaving them half dead, with eyes gouged out, in emulation of the barbarous fashion of the Indian tribes, after which these gallants were not ashamed to call themselves. In the past men had laid down their lives to

defend their country and the liberties of the subject; now they banded together to maltreat the very men who were set to maintain law and order. Of old, womanhood was sacred, and knights went forth to do doughty deeds for the honour of their ladies, and for the upholding of all the laws of chivalry, which they held dearer than life itself. Now young gallants delighted to show their reverence for womanhood by rolling some hapless citizen's wife or daughter down a sloping street in a barrel, laughing the louder if she screamed piteously, or even swooned with fright.

Was there a man yet left in the land? Where was such to be found? And tears streamed down the face of Father Time, as he made his moan, lamenting the days which had gone by, and fearing he would never see the like again.

Then came a telling pause of deep silence. The applause, which had broken out once and again during the monologue, had been hushed into shamed stillness at the last. Murmurs of sympathy and approval rose from the many present who hated and lamented the folly and extravagances of the day, and delighted to hear them so tellingly and scathingly reprov'd. Even the young bloods themselves could not but admire the skill and power of the speaker. They recognized the truth of the indictment, and felt a sense of shame and uneasiness which no preacher in the pulpit had ever aroused—perhaps because they so seldom went to listen, and only stayed to mock.

And then the silence was as suddenly broken by a tumultuous burst of amazed applause. A second figure had stepped upon the stage—tall, graceful, alert, instinct with strength and manly beauty; and a thundering shout went up from all the house,—

”The Duke! The Duke!”

Paying no heed to the tumult of applause, the Youth went slowly forward towards the throne upon which sat Father Time, and to him he made a deep obeisance. Then amid the breathless hush of the house began the animated dialogue betwixt the twain, wherein the Youth did strive to show that manhood was not yet dead, and to call to the notice of Father Time the things which he had seen, and which were yet taking place upon the face of the globe.

Then after a good deal of discussion, in which telling phrases were dropped on both sides, which evoked roars of applause and approval, the young man was called upon to tell of those great acts of which he spoke. Whereupon came Grey's great speech, descriptive of the battle of Ramillies, and the superb generalship and dauntless personal courage of England's great General.

The audience hung spellbound upon the words and gestures of the speaker. A breathless hush told of the effect produced. To those who had known the Duke, it seemed as though he himself were recounting the story of his victory. To those who had not, it was still a marvellous and soul-stirring oration, as though the

strictures lately passed upon manhood by Father Time were in some sort swept away, and England's honour vindicated by this young champion, who represented the nation's idol.

The thing was an unqualified success. Behind the scenes the two actors were received with warm congratulation scarcely tinged by jealousy. Old Wylde was greeted by many a friend who had not troubled to recognize him during his days of eclipse; and in addition to the ovations from managers and actors, scores of men, and even of fine ladies, crowded round behind the scenes to shake hands with the heroes of the night, and satisfy their curiosity by gazing at them at close quarters.

This part of the business was little to the taste of Grey, who desired nothing so little as any recognition by former acquaintances. He saw one or two faces that he knew, but no one came near him to whom he remembered having spoken in his past life. He retained his heavy wig and military dress as he talked with those pressing round him. But as soon as he was able he disengaged himself from the crowd, and ordering a coach to be called, he and his comrade drove home together, weary but exultant.

"I told you how it would be!" spoke the Old Lion, as they stood together in their upper chamber, smiling at the remembrance of the scene just passed through. "I knew I had but to find the right man, and our fortune would be made! You were fine, boy; you were fine! I had reckoned upon you; yet one never knows how it will be till the moment comes. Some are struck with stage-fright, and blunder and trip, till all illusion vanishes. Others mouth and strut through pure terror of the myriad eyes bent upon them, and bring down ridicule and contempt upon their heads. But I had confidence in you, and my confidence was not misplaced. We have taken the town by storm this night; and as we have begun, so shall it be to the end."

Certainly it seemed as though this prediction were to be fulfilled, for every performance was crowded to the utmost limit of the two theatres; and the extraordinary resemblance of the young actor—whose name was quite unknown to the world—to the great Duke of Marlborough was the talk of the whole town, and raised an immense curiosity, which spread through all classes.

Grey called himself Edward White upon the playbills, and was thus known to the theatre managers, who could give no information about the young man save that he was a pupil of the old actor Wylde, who had written the piece, and cast it especially for himself and his *protégé*. When it was urged that the young man must have known the Duke, else how could he so accurately reproduce his tricks of voice and speech and manner, they drily shook their heads, saying that of his past history they were ignorant, but that as an actor they were satisfied with his capacity, and were struck by his similarity in figure and bearing to the

great General.

The talk spread through the town, the theatres filled to overflowing, and crowds flocked behind the scenes nightly to get speech with the successful actors.

It was perhaps a week after the first performance, and Grey was just meditating the possibility of escape from the attentions of the fashionable mob, when a loud and resonant laugh broke upon his ear, and his face flushed deeply beneath its olive tinting.

Lord Sandford made his way through the crowd about him, and in a moment the two were face to face.

Grey had of set purpose taken up a station, according to his custom, in a place where the light was sufficiently bad. The passages and rooms behind the scenes were never brilliantly illuminated, and the shadows fell somewhat deeply upon his face; yet it seemed to him well-nigh impossible, as he looked full into the eyes of the man he had trusted, and who had failed him, that he should not at once be discovered.

But there was no trace of recognition in Lord Sandford's bold glance, though it rested upon his face with a shrewd curiosity.

"Good-even, sir. I have desired to see your performance ere this, but have always been hindered. A fine piece of acting as ever I saw. And yet your name is unknown to me, and I thought I knew every actor in the town and in the country."

"It is my first appearance, your lordship," answered Grey in his stage voice. "I owe my success to the kindness of Mr. Wylde. I have had no previous training. I have to thank the public for a very kind reception."

"No previous training for the boards? I can believe that, my friend. But I warrant me you have had previous acquaintance with the great world. You are no stranger to my lord of Marlborough—that I will warrant."

"I did see him once, my lord; and there are some persons whom once to see and hear is always to remember. The impression of a great personality is not easily effaced."

Lord Sandford's bold eyes were roving over Grey's face and figure in a way that was disconcerting, but he would not flinch or abase his gaze. He, at least had nothing of which to be ashamed.

"I have seen you before, Mr. White," he remarked suddenly; "I cannot yet say where or when. But you have been in my company ere this. Say, is not that true?"

"To have been in your lordship's company is surely no great distinction," answered Grey, with slightly veiled irony. "Is it not well known that Lord Sandford goes everywhere, is seen everywhere, and keeps company with all sorts and conditions of men?"

The young peer threw back his head and broke into a great laugh.

"Gadzooks, you have a ready tongue, my friend, and are not afraid to use it. Well, well, if you desire to tell me nothing, I will ask no more. Every man has a right to his own secret, though I make no pledge that I will not discover yours ere long. I have a mighty curiosity about some men's affairs, which I will gratify at my pleasure."

"Was it a threat?" asked Grey of himself, "and had he any suspicion?" He scarce thought so. He would have seen a glint of recognition in his eyes had he been known beneath his disguise. But he was glad when Lord Sandford turned away with another loud laugh, though his heart seemed to throb with a painful intensity as he heard his loud voice speaking to his companions,—

"Well, I must away to my Lord Romaine's house. My lady holds a rout to-night, and will be ill pleased if I present not myself. The Lady Geraldine will expect to see me. We must not disappoint the pretty birds. Who is for the rout, and who to stay for what fare they give us here?"

Grey turned away with his heart on fire. What meant that jesting allusion to the Lady Geraldine? Could it be that she had plighted her troth to him? What else could he expect to hear than that she would obey the wishes of her parents? If Lord Sandford were the husband chosen for her, how could she escape the fate of becoming his wife? Would she even desire to escape it? How could a pure and innocent maiden know the sort of life which he had hitherto led?

Lady Romaine's rooms were full of gay company, and a clamour of laughter and chatter rose up in a never-ceasing hum. The card-tables were crowded, and little piles of gold coins were constantly changing hands. Gay gallants fluttered hither and thither like great painted butterflies, first stopping before one fair lady and then hovering round another; taking snuff with one another; bandying jest or anecdote, quip or crank; putting their heads eagerly together over some bit of new scandal, and then going off in high glee to tell the news elsewhere.

There were a few grave politicians gathered together in one corner discussing the affairs of the day—the successful campaign on the Continent, and the possibilities of an honourable peace. There were none of the high Tories to be seen at Lord Romaine's house. He belonged to the Whig faction, and pinned his faith to Godolphin, whom he thought the finest statesman of the day. He was on friendly terms with all the men of the so-called Whig junto, and Lord Halifax and Lord Sunderland were to be seen at his house to-night, foremost amongst those who preferred quiet converse on weighty matters to the laughter and giddy talk in the larger rooms.

The Lady Geraldine had betaken herself to the inner apartment, where her father was to be found in converse with his friends. It interested her far more to

listen to the topics of the day discussed by them than to receive the vapourings of the gilded dandies, or to hear the chatter of painted dames. To her great relief Lord Sandford had not appeared at the rout, and sincerely did she hope he would continue to absent himself. Of late his attentions had become more pressing, and every day she feared to hear from her father that he had made formal application for her hand, and had been accepted.

Geraldine did not want to marry him. From the first she had shrunk from his admiration, but had not been able to satisfy herself as to whether such shrinking were just or right. She knew her mother favoured him, and that her father thought he would rise to eminence if once he could shake off the follies and extravagances of youth, and settle down to wedded life with the woman of his choice. There was something attractive in his great strength, and in the manhood which was never eclipsed even when he followed the fashion of the day in dress and talk. But whilst she was hesitating, something had come into her life which seemed quite to have changed its current; and from that time forward she had resolutely set herself against Lord Sandford's suit, and received his attentions with a coldness and aloofness which whetted his desire and piqued his vanity as nothing else could have done.

There was one face for which Geraldine looked in vain, and had looked for many long weary weeks. Why she so desired to see that face, she could scarce have told; yet thus it was. But it never came. She asked questions now and again of some young beau who had lived in Lord Sandford's world; but it was little she could learn of what she so much wished.

"Oh, Sir Grey and my Lord Sandford had a quarrel. None know the cause, but they say 'twas about a woman. I know naught of it. But they parted company; and belike he has gone off to the wars, for none of us have set eyes upon him since the day when he lost the race, and went near to lose his life."

"How was that?" Geraldine had asked with whitening lips.

Then she had heard, with sundry embellishments, the story of the race, and the suspicions which had been aroused as to whether or not a trap had been laid for the young baronet, into which he had fallen, and had only escaped severe injury by a happy chance.

Geraldine's heart had been filled with horror.

"Think you that Lord Sandford had a hand in it?" had been her whispered question, to which a careless laugh was the answer. She gathered from more than one source that his companions believed Lord Sandford quite capable of such a deed; for he had the reputation of being a man good as a friend, but bad to quarrel with, and absolutely unscrupulous when his passions were roused. None would ever answer for what he might do.

A great horror had fallen upon Geraldine at hearing this tale—a horror

which haunted her still after all these weeks. She could not forget how Lord Sandford had come upon her and Grey in the gardens of Vauxhall, and how he had spoken in a stern voice, and had carried her off with an air of mastery that she had been unable to resist. And almost immediately after this had come the quarrel—which men said was about a woman—and the disappearance of Sir Grey Dumaresq from the world which had known him. Her heart often beat fast and painfully as she mused on these things. Had he not promised her to give up that idle life, that gaming and dissipation which in their hearts they both despised? And he had kept his promise. He had broken loose from his fetters. He might now be living a life of honourable purpose elsewhere. But she had hoped to see and know more of him. She had not thought of his exiling himself altogether. True, if Lord Sandford were his foe, and such a dangerous one to boot, it were better he should be far away. And yet she longed to see him again, to hear his voice, to know how it went with him. Oft-times in the midst of such gay scenes as the one before her eyes her thoughts would go roving back to that golden summer morning when he had come to her upon the shining river; and she would rehearse in her memory every word that had passed, whilst her eyes would grow dreamy, and her lips curve softly, and her whole face take an expression which was exquisite in its tenderness and purity.

"Good-even, Lady Geraldine! I trust that your thoughts are with your poor servant now before you, who has been chafing in sore impatience at the delay in presenting himself here."

She raised her eyes, and there was Lord Sandford standing before her; and they seemed almost alone, for no one was near, the group of politicians having moved farther away towards the doorway commanding the larger suite.

She rose and made him the sweeping curtsy of the day; but he possessed himself of her hand, and carried it to his lips.

"I pray you treat me with none such ceremony, sweet lady. We may surely call ourselves something more than acquaintances, after all that has passed betwixt us. I may safely style myself your friend, I trow. Is it not so, Lady Geraldine?"

There was something almost compelling in the glance he bent upon her. There was a ring of mastery in his words, despite the gentleness he strove to assume. She felt it, and she inwardly rebelled, although she gave no sign.

"Friendship, I trow, my lord, doth mean something very near and intimate and sacred. I scarce know myself at what point an acquaintance doth become a friend. I would that all true and noble-hearted men and women would honour me by their friendship, for I prize not any other."

He looked at her searchingly, wondering what she meant, and if she were levelling any taunt at himself. The thought was like the sting of a lash upon

his skin, and a flush rose slowly to his brow, out his voice was steady as he answered,—

"I care not how intimate and near and sacred such friendship be, provided it be vouchsafed to me, madam. I have not been thought by those who know me to be a bad friend; but it would ill become me to sing mine own praises to win the regard of the woman who is queen of my heart."

It was the first time he had spoken quite so openly, and Geraldine's fair, pale face flushed beneath his ardent gaze. What she would have answered she never knew; he held her gaze almost as the snake holds that of the bird it has in thrall. Yet, all the while, her heart was rebelling fiercely, and her vague doubts and misgivings were changing rapidly into a very pronounced fear and distrust and loathing.

But ere she had time to think what she should say, or he to make further protestations, a great rustling of silken skirts was heard, and in rushed Lady Romaine in a state of her usual artificial excitement and animation.

"Ah, my lord, there you are! They did tell me you had come. And it is said that you have been to see the representation of which all men are talking—the dreadful old Father Time, who says such horrid things, but is put to shame by a wonderful youth who is as like the Duke of Marlborough as though they were cast in the same mould. Tell me, is this so? What is it like, this performance? I have been dying to see it, yet never have done so. Tickets are scarce to be had—and such a price! All the town is flocking. Tell us truly, is it such a wonderful thing, or is it just something for empty heads to cackle over?"

"It is well enough," answered Lord Sandford carelessly, wishing the ogling lady farther at this moment. "The acting is good, and the piece not bad; there is power and wit in it, as all may hear, and it lacks not for boldness neither. But 'tis the resemblance of the young actor to the great Duke which is the attraction to the populace. I went to speak with him after all was over, to see if the likeness was as great close at hand as it seems on the stage."

"And is it so?" asked the lady breathlessly.

"No; the features in no way favour the Duke's, save that both are handsome and regular. But the carriage, the action, the voice—these are excellent. The fellow must have known his Grace in days gone by. But no man knows who he is nor whence he comes. He calls himself Edward White; but none know if that be his name or not."

A sudden flush mounted to Geraldine's face, and faded, leaving her snow-white. A thought had flashed into her mind; it set her heart beating violently. White! How often had he said to her, "Would I were white as thou!" He had gifts; she had told him of them. He had seen and known the Duke, and was tall and comely to look upon; and she had heard him speak with his voice and manner

as he told her of their meeting. Everything seemed whirling in a mist about her. She was recalled to herself by hearing her mother exclaim, in her shrill, eager tones,—

”Then, by my troth, we will have them here, and see for ourselves what they can do, without the crowding we should suffer at the theatre. We will engage them for the first night they can come.”

CHAPTER XIII. THE HERO OF THE HOUR.

Grey’s heart was beating to suffocation as he put the finishing touches to his toilet. The Old Lion sat beside the fire in his costume of Father Time, bending forward to the blaze, but giving vent from time to time to a hollow cough, which at a less all-engrossing moment might have caused Grey some uneasiness. But to-night his head was filled with other thoughts. He was about to start for Lord Romaine’s house. The representation of ”Time and the Youth” was to be given there before a large and fashionable assembly. *She* would be there! That was his first thought. She would watch the performance. He might even be able to pick her out from crowded audience, and feast his eyes upon her pure, pale beauty. At least for an hour he would be near her. That alone was enough to set his heart beating in tumultuous fashion. She would be there. At Lord Romaine’s own house it was impossible it should be otherwise. Their eyes might meet; and though she would know him not—better that she should not, indeed—he would gaze upon those features which were dearest to him out of all the world. And whether for weal or woe, Grey knew by this time that the love of his whole being was centred in Lady Geraldine Adair, though he was schooling himself to the thought of seeing her and knowing her to be another man’s wife. To him she could only be as a star in the firmament of heaven—as a benignant influence guiding him to higher and nobler paths. That was how he must ever learn to regard her, for her world and his were poles asunder. And what had he to offer to any woman—he whose future lay all uncertain before him, and whose fortunes were yet in the clouds?

A message from below warned them that the coach which was to convey them to Lord Romaine’s house was now at the door.

”You are tired, sir,” spoke Grey, suddenly waking from his reverie and turn-

ing to the old man, who rose with an air of lassitude which his strong will could not entirely conceal; "I fear me you are not quite yourself to-night. This constant acting is something too great a strain upon you."

"Ay, my boy, I am growing old," answered the other, with a note of pain in his voice; "I feel it as I never felt it before. My triumph has come just a little too late. I am too old to take up the threads of the past again. The Old Lion has risen once again to roar in the forest, but he must needs lay him down soon in his den—to die."

Over Grey's face there passed a quick spasm of anxiety and pain.

"Nay, nay; say not so. I have never heard you speak in such vein before. What ails you to-night, dear master?"

"No matter, boy, no matter; heed not my groanings," answered Wylde, assuming more of his usual manner, though he held tightly to Grey's arm as they descended the stairs. "I have been somewhat out of sorts these last few days, and you know how they did tell me at the theatre that my voice was not well heard the other night—"

"Ah, but you had that rheum upon you. It is better now. Yesterday your notes rang forth like those of a clarion."

"Ah yes, that may be; but what has happened once may chance again. Boy, did you observe a gray-headed man standing in the slips and watching my every action, his lips following mine as I spoke my part?"

"I did. I thought he seemed to know every word by heart himself. He had the face of an actor, methought."

"He is one, and a favourite with the people—Anthony Frewen is his name. He and I have held many an audience spellbound ere now. What think you he was there for?"

"Nay, I know not, save to watch and learn and admire."

"Ay, truly, to watch and learn, that he may step into Father Time's part, should the day come when I can hold my throne no longer."

A violent fit of coughing here interrupted the old man's words, seeming to give a point to his speech that otherwise it might have lacked.

Grey supported him tenderly whilst the paroxysm lasted; but he sat aghast, thinking what might be coming upon his master and friend. If, indeed, he were to be laid aside by illness, how could the successful dramatic interlude be carried on, save by another actor? And did it not look as though theatre managers were foreseeing this contingency, and preparing for it?

"Could they, indeed, supersede you, sir?" he asked at length. "Have they the right to do so, since the thing was written by you? Must they not rather wait for you to take up your part again, should the cold seize upon you, and for a time render you unfit for your part?"

"Nay, nay, they will not do that; and they have purchased the rights to produce the piece as long as they will. I could not complain. I could only submit." He stopped and drew his breath rather hard, and then broke out with something of his old fire: "But what matter? what matter? It is nature's law! The old must give way to the young. I have lived my life. I have shown men what I can do. I have aroused me from sleep, and shone like a meteor in the sky ere my long eclipse shall come. I am content. I ask no more. Let Elisha take up the mantle which falls from Elijah. My work will be remembered when the hand that penned it is dust."

Grey was almost horrified by these words. It seemed to him as though the Old Lion were almost making up his mind to some approaching calamity; and at the thought of losing his one friend, the young man's heart stood still. He had become greatly attached to Wylde; but he knew that amid those of his own profession he had many enemies. Nor had he been many weeks amongst actors before he had learned the jealousies and emulations that burned so fiercely amongst them, and how eagerly every vacant place was snapped up by one of a crowd of eager aspirants. Who knew but that somebody might even now be studying his part of the Youth, ready to step into his shoes should any untoward event occur to incapacitate him? He had constantly seen the handsome but unsteady Lionel Field hanging about the theatre, and once or twice he had come to see them in their lodgings, and had asked the Old Lion to speak a good word for him, declaring that he had resolved upon turning over a new leaf, and becoming steady and sober again. Grey remembered now how many questions he had put about the Duke of Marlborough, asking how Grey had become so well acquainted with his person and voice and gestures. These he himself had imitated, not without success, for the young man had considerable natural gifts, and far more training than Grey could boast, although he had won so great success through the close instructions of an able master.

The young man knew perfectly by this time that Wylde was somewhat feared in dramatic circles for his keen criticisms, his autocratic temper, and his scathing powers of retort. He knew, likewise, that he was regarded as something of an interloper—a man who had risen suddenly into notice by what might be called "back-stair" influence. Grey was fully aware himself that he had served no apprenticeship to his present calling, that he had stepped into success simply and solely through a series of happy accidents. He could not wonder that to others he should seem to be something of an impostor and a fraud. Whilst under the Old Lion's immediate patronage, nobody dared to flout or insult him; but he was sometimes conscious of an undercurrent of hostile jealousy directed against him, which increased with his increasing popularity with the public. He could not doubt that if some mischance were to befall him or his patron, his fall would be

acclaimed in many circles with delight, as making room for another to fill his vacant place. And Grey, looking at the hollow cheeks and the gaunt frame of the Old Lion, hearing from time to time his painful coughing, began to fear that he, indeed, would not long be able to face the world or fight his own battle; and doubtful, indeed, did he feel of his own power and ability to fight that battle for himself single-handed.

[image]

The hero of the hour (page 251).

These fears and misgivings, however, though somewhat dismal at the moment, were all driven away as the carriage rolled under the archway of Lord Romaine's house, and he found himself at his journey's end, and so close to the object of his heart's desire.

The actors were not, of course, taken into any of the thronged drawing-rooms; the day for the reception of dramatists as honoured guests at the houses of the nobility was not yet. They were, however, respectfully conducted to a small apartment and offered refreshments, which they partook of sparingly, and then conducted through the garden to a large temporary structure, which Lady Romaine had insisted on having run up, so that she might invite a very large audience to her house for the occasion.

There was a well-arranged stage for the actors, and the scenery, such as it was, had been well painted, in imitation of that at the theatres; Father Time's throne was a very fine erection, and all the arrangements were excellent. The old man seemed to throw off his lassitude as he made his observations, and the fire came back to his eyes and the power to his voice. Grey forgot his uneasiness in the excitement of the moment, and in the realization of where he was and who might at any moment appear before his eyes, and he was resolved that this representation should be the finest which had ever been seen heretofore.

In the grand reception-rooms of the Countess, Geraldine stood apart as one who dreams. She saw the throng of fashionable persons assembling; she heard delighted exclamations about the wonders of the little theatre which all had heard of. It had been brought from Spring Gardens, and the moving of it had been quite a small excitement for the fashionable world, who declared that Lady Romaine was the cleverest and most delightful of women, and that it was quite too charming to be able to witness this representation, of which all the town was talking, without the crush and fatigue of attending the theatres.

Geraldine heard as in a dream all this hubbub and clatter. She herself was as

eager as any to witness the dramatic interlude, but from a motive different from that of the rest of the world. There was an unwonted flush upon her cheeks, a brilliance in her dreamy eyes. Many persons, who had scarcely noticed her before, or had passed her by with the epithet, "a maid of ice," "a snow-queen," now regarded her with greater attention, and said one to another that the Lady Geraldine was a more beautiful creature than they had fancied before.

Lord Sandford, pushing his way through the throng towards her, felt a peculiar thrill of triumph run through him as his eyes dwelt upon her face.

"She is a splendid woman—just fit to be the future Lady Sandford, the mother of those who shall come after me! My wooing shall not last much longer. I know the mind of her mother, and though her father promises nothing, he wishes me well. He will not have her coerced, nor would I. She must come to me willingly; but come she shall. She has no mind towards marriage, as other maids and damsels. Better so, better so. I would not have my mistress one of those whose ears are greedy for the flattery of all the world—one who looks upon each man as he appears in the light of a possible suitor. No, I would have my white lily just as she is—pure, spotless, calm, cold. It is for me to kindle the fire, for me to unlock the heart; and I will not grumble if the task be something hard, for better is the prize for which we have toiled and sweated, than the one which drops into our hands at the first touch."

So thinking, he pushed his way till he stood by Geraldine's side, and met the clear, steady glance of her eyes.

"Fair lady, I give you greeting. You are not going to absent yourself from the representation this night? We never know in our garish world where the Lady Geraldine will appear, or what places she will illumine with the light of her countenance. I rejoice to see you here to-night."

"I have a great desire to see this spectacle of which I have heard so much," answered Geraldine quietly; "I would fain have gone to the theatre, if so be that my mother had not arranged this representation here. I have heard of the Old Lion of the stage, though never have I seen him. There is something grand in the story I have heard of his talent, his early successes, and his bravely endured eclipse and poverty. I am right glad he has lived again to taste success and the plaudits of the people."

Lord Sandford laughed at her earnestness.

"You are a philanthropist in sooth, Lady Geraldine, to interest yourself in the affairs of such persons as these."

"Are they not of our own flesh and blood, my lord?" she asked.

"Faith, I know not, and I care not! At least, they are not of our world, which is more to the point in these days."

Geraldine turned away with a look upon her face which roused the hot

blood of Lord Sandford; he was not used to scorn.

"Lady Geraldine," he began; but a sudden stir and as sudden a hush in the great rooms brought his words to an abrupt stop. The Duchess of Marlborough herself was making her formal entry, and there was almost the same respect paid to her as though royalty itself were appearing. They were only waiting for her to troop through the covered way into the theatre; and Geraldine, taking advantage of the movement and the confusion incident to this, escaped from Lord Sandford, who would have given her his arm, made her way rapidly downstairs by a private way, and took up a position in the theatre where he was quite unable to get near her.

She had decided beforehand where she would sit—near to a side-door into the garden, which, standing half-open, let in a current of cool air into the heated place. It had been warmed beforehand, and was dimly lighted by a number of small lanterns overhead, such as were used in the gardens of Vauxhall and Ranelagh.

Her heart was beating almost to suffocation as the curtain went up, and she saw the often-described figure of Time upon his throne. But it was not of his rounded periods nor his telling gestures that she had been dreaming; and though she listened and watched with a sense of fascination, she knew that she was waiting—waiting—waiting for the next actor, with a sense almost of suffocation in her throat.

Why had she thought this thing? Why had it seemed to her no impossibility that Sir Grey Dumaresq, vanished utterly from his old world, should be masquerading now in this part of the Youth? She could not have answered even to herself these questions, yet her heart was all in a tumult. Had he not once said to her, as he plucked a white rosebud and gave it her, "Why was my name not White instead of Grey? Then it would be like unto you"? Was that enough to build upon? Hardly, but yet she could not help it. Did not men speak of his grace, dignity, manly beauty? and did not many say of him that his face seemed familiar in some sort, yet none could say who he was? And now a thunder of new applause rent the air. For a moment her vision grew dim and she could not see. Then it cleared, and her heart gave a great bound. Clear silver tones fell upon her ear, and the ring of a voice that she knew. His face for the moment was turned away. He was addressing himself to Father Time; but as he turned towards the house and gazed full upon the audience sitting in spellbound silence, the foot-lights fell full upon his face, and she knew him!

She knew him—that was enough! What he said or did, she knew not—cared not. She sat with her gaze fastened full upon him. She recked not why that alone seemed enough. A strange trance that was half dream fell upon her. She gazed, and gazed, and gazed.

"Good lack, but the fellow is the very mirror of my husband! I had not believed it, had I not seen it with mine own eyes." The voice of the Duchess was clearly heard above the clarion notes of the actor. She was not one to hush her tones, and she was not a little astonished by the performance. Pleasure, gratification, and surprise were all written upon the hard but handsome features of the Queen's favourite; and every now and again she would tap her long ivory fan with some vehemence upon the back of the seat in front, and would exclaim aloud,—

"Vastly good! Vastly well done! Faith, but he is a pretty fellow, and knows what he is about. I must have speech with him. I would learn more of this. Beshrew me, but the Duke must see this when he returns!"

This loud-voiced praise could not but reach the ears of the actors, and they could not fail to know who it was that spoke. All knew that the Duchess was to be present, as a special mark of good will and condescension, and that she should speak such open praise seemed to set a seal upon the success of the entertainment. Lady Romaine could scarce contain herself for delight.

Geraldine still sat as in a maze of bewildered happiness. It was not till just as the performance was closing that she was awakened from her trance, and that somewhat rudely. The last words of the interlude were being spoken. Father Time and the Youth were standing together making their last speeches to the audience, and she was gazing with all her eyes into the face of one whom she alone out of all the company had recognized, when one of the lanterns overhead, insecurely fastened, burnt its way loose, and fell flaring and blazing upon the light train of her dress. Instantly she was in a blaze. The flames shooting up made a glare all over the house, and a hundred piercing shrieks attested the terror of the ladies at the sight.

But one had seen even before the flames shot up. Already the young actor had leaped like a deer to the floor of the house; in a moment he had reached the side of the lady. He had caught up in his hands a great rug which was picturesquely flung over the throne of Father Time, and before any other person in the room had recovered presence of mind sufficient to stir, he had the flaming figure wrapped round in this rug, and had borne it out through the half-open door into the safety of the grassy garden without, where, laying his burden down upon the ground tenderly, despite his haste, he was quickly able to stifle the flames and extinguish the last spark.

He bent over her, his face white and ghastly in the moonlight.

"You are not hurt—say you are not hurt!"

"I think not; you were so quick—so quick. How can I thank you?"

Her eyes looked into his; it was just one moment before the people came rushing out upon them in a frantic crowd. But that moment was their own.

They looked into each other's eyes, and a thrill passed from heart to heart that never could be forgotten. Out rushed Lord Romaine, frantic with anxiety; out followed a motley crowd—some weeping, some gasping, some exclaiming, some even laughing in hysterical excitement. Grey stood up suddenly, and slipped away like a wraith in the moonlight.

Lord Romaine bent tenderly over his daughter, who was struggling to her feet, still encumbered by the folds of the great rug. She was dishevelled, her dress was torn and burnt, she held the folds of the covering wrap about her still; but her voice was only a little tremulous as she clung to her father's arm.

"I am not hurt; no, I am sure I am not. The hot breath of the fire just scorched for a moment; but then it was crushed out.. Please send the people away. I do not want to be stared at. I am not hurt. Please take me in, and let me go to my own room."

"Bless me, but what a pretty kettle of fish!" cried a loud and imperious voice. "Let me see the child and be sure she is all safe. Ha, there you are, my pretty white bird! A nice scare you gave us all wrapped about in a ring of fire like—who was the woman?—Brynhild, or some such outlandish name. But it was a fine ending to the drama. We have not quite lost our heroes yet. My faith, how he leaped down! He must have seen it before any of the rest of us. Well, well, well; it is a good thing that his fine show of bravery was not all in words. He is a mettlesome youth, and deserves the praise of the town. He will be more the hero of the hour than ever. Where is the boy? I would have speech of him myself."

The Duchess looked about her; but no one like the Youth was to be seen. He had vanished altogether; but, doubtless, he would be somewhere on the place, and could be fetched to receive the thanks of the parents and the compliments of the Duchess.

It was too cold to stand out in the moonlight, and there was a general move towards the house, Geraldine still clinging to her father's arm, avoiding the shrill questions, comments, and congratulations of the company, and shrinking back especially when Lord Sandford would have approached.

"The luck was not for me to-night," he said; "nevertheless, give me the chance, Lady Geraldine, and you shall see what I will do. But that actor chap shall not lose his reward for his promptitude. I will see to that."

She started as though she had been stung.

"My lord, do not insult him!"

He stared at her in amaze; but she slipped away and vanished like a wraith. He strode moodily about the rooms, joining in the general inquiry after the young actor whom the Duchess had sent for; but the servants came back after some time to say that the young man could not be found. He seemed to have disappeared

into thin air.

CHAPTER XIV. FICKLE FORTUNE.

Grey had a double reason for his rapid disappearance from the scene of his recent exploit. For one thing, he had recognized amid the audience assembled by Lady Romaine to witness the performance quite a number of men whom he had known with more or less intimacy in the former days, and whom he now desired to avoid. He knew that both his flowing wig and his fine clothes had received some injury from the fire, and moreover he quickly felt that his hands and one of his arms had suffered from the flames. If he were to be taken possession of by friendly or compassionate persons, to have these matters looked to, there was no end to the possible complications which might arise. The sensitive pride of the young man of gentle birth rose in arms against being unmasked in the midst of old associates. He pictured the laugh with which Lord Sandford would make the discovery that the youthful baronet, his whilom friend, was playing upon the boards of the theatre for a livelihood. That was a thing he could not and would not endure. And he had fled hastily from the coming crowd, so soon as he had been assured that Lord Romaine was on the spot to take care of his daughter.

Again, he was frightened by the intensity of his own feelings. When he held Geraldine in his arms, and when their eyes met, and he knew himself recognized, the flood of emotion which surged over him had well-nigh mastered him and led him into some wild act of folly. He had had much ado to stay the burning words which rushed like a torrent to his lips. He dared not trust himself to look again upon Geraldine's fair face. He was frightened at the immensity of the temptation which had assailed him to break into some wild declaration of love.

But when he had reached the waiting coach which was to convey him and his companion back to town, his thoughts were directed into quite another channel by the frightened faces of the servants who stood by.

"You had better get Master Wylde home without delay," spoke one, "and have a leech for him. He was taken with bleeding at the mouth almost as soon as he left the stage. He has only spoken once, and that was to ask for you. He should be got to bed as quick as may be, and kept there till he is better."

With a pale and anxious face Grey threw himself into the coach where the

Old Lion was sitting, leaning back feebly against the cushions, his face ghastly, his hand holding to his mouth a kerchief stained and spotted with blood. In a great fright the young actor bade the man drive fast, and stop on his way at the residence of one of the many physicians, or quacks, who drove so brisk a trade in these times, each having some wonderful nostrum of his own for the cure of all ills under the sun, and some of them thriving so mightily that they drove four or six horses in their coaches, and had lackeys in scarlet and silver lace running beside them and distributing small leaflets, in which the wonders their master had performed were set forth.

Grey had heard of some of these men, and that they performed wonderful cures; and he cared not what he paid, at that moment, so that his master and friend might be relieved and healed.

With no small trouble he got him up the stairs to their attic, and put him to bed. But more than once the hacking cough brought back the dreaded bleeding; and by the time that the leech arrived, pompous and haughty, and none too well pleased at being summoned from the convivial gathering of friends whither he had betaken himself, he looked more like a corpse than a living man.

Grey was in a fever of anxiety, and listened with earnest heed to the words of the leech, and his instructions for the relief of the patient. He bought every suggested medicament, regardless of the cost, and made no hesitation in handing the exorbitant fee demanded by the great man for his valuable services. He cared for nothing, so that his master should recover; and the leech, finding that gold was plentiful in this humble abode, and rather interested in the discovery that he was attending the actor whose Father Time had made such talk in the town, really began to take some interest in the case, and to put forth his best skill; so that before very long the death-like hue of the patient's face changed to something more natural, and the hemorrhage was for the time being checked.

"He must be kept perfectly quiet. On no account must he exert his voice, or leave his bed, or take any liberties. Nature must be humoured, my dear sir; nature must be helped and aided. She is a kind mother to her obedient and reasonable children, but she has many a rod for the backs of those who despise her warnings. Our worthy friend has been tendering a deaf ear to her counsels; therefore has she chastened him somewhat severely. But let him show himself mild and docile under her rod, and it may be that she will restore him to favour again, and that the world will once more pay to him its tribute of admiration and praise."

So saying the leech took his departure, promising to come at any hour of the day or night that he might be sent for; and Grey was left alone with his patient, who had been soothed off to a quiet sleep by a draught administered. And it must be said in justice to these men—half physician, half quack—who flourished at this time, that some of their remedies were of no small value when properly applied.

They used herbs and concoctions brewed from the leaves and roots of plants far more freely than has since become fashionable. Many purchased their nostrums from old women, who went forth into the fields and lanes, and distilled from their spoil mixtures which they regarded as remedies of infallible potency. Much ignorance prevailed as to the action of these simples upon the human body; but many of them were of no small value in sickness, and when used in cases where it chanced to be the thing required, worked wonders in rapid healing, and became at once the favourite elixir of the moment amongst those who had known of the cure.

So the Old Lion was at least soothed to quiet sleep, and in the warm atmosphere of the attic his breathing was sensibly relieved. Grey was able now to strip off his own finery, rather aghast at the sorry state of his coat, the total destruction of his costly ruffles, and the singed condition of his wig.

"These must be made good quickly, or I shall not be fit to appear on the boards on Monday night," he mused, as he looked at them. Luckily as this was Saturday night, he felt as though there were breathing time before him. "I must send word to Mr. Butler of what has befallen. Anthony Frewen, or some other, must needs play Father Time for a score of performances at least, I fear me. It will be a loss: I shall earn but the half of what was given us before. Still it will suffice to keep us, and I trust and hope that it will not be long ere he recover, to take his place once more."

A troubled look came over Grey's face as he looked towards the bed, and noted the patient's sunken cheek and cavernous eyes. He wondered that he had not before seen how thin and shrunken the old man was getting; but there was always so much fire about him that it deceived even those who saw him oftenest and loved him best.

"It has been too much for him," mused Grey, as he sat beside the fire, pain of body and anxiety of mind precluding all thought of sleep. His hands were becoming increasingly painful, and he had forgotten to ask the leech for any medicament for them. However, he applied linen rag steeped in oil; and the burning smart lessened somewhat, though he had no disposition to seek sleep.

"It hath been too much for him—the triumph, the adulation, the excitement of taking again his old place before the world. It meant so much to him, this play. It was like the child of his old age. It brought him his final triumph; but it took much out of him also. The fires of life blazed up too fiercely. Now they seem sinking down to ashes. Heaven grant that we may feed them yet, that he may recover him of this sickness. Yet will he ever be able to face the world again as heretofore? It is hard that his trumpet voice should be taken—the last of those attributes which made him the idol of the stage. Oh, it has been hard how one thing has followed another with him! Some men seem born to success and

triumph, whilst others with equal gifts and powers are doomed to misfortune and sorrow.”

Grey fell into a reverie of a sombre nature. “Was he fated to be one of those luckless mortals, ever falling lower and lower in fortune’s favour, till perhaps a pauper’s grave should at last close over him?”

“What has life given me heretofore? A good old name, which I may not use for very pride; an estate so burdened and crippled that it is none of mine, save in name. I have had my days of glory and happiness; but what lies before me now? If my master dies, or lies sick and helpless, what will become of us in the future? I may play the part of the Youth with Anthony Frewen or some other till the world tires of it; but what then? Shall I join the crowd of cringing, hollow-eyed men, crowding the taverns and the stage doors of the theatres, and begging for some inferior part upon the boards? Shall I go vaunting my powers, or chaffering my wares in a market already overstocked, that wants none of me? No. Whatever happens, I will have none of that. I have tasted of the life, but it hath no charms for me. Rather would I gird my sword upon my thigh, and go forth as a soldier in foreign lands; and, indeed, were I alone in the world, methinks I would hesitate no longer, but offer myself for this.”

As he spoke, his eyes turned to the bed where the old man lay, and a softer look came over his face.

“I cannot leave him. With him I must stay till he recover, or till he die. He took me in in my hour of need. To desert him in his would be base beyond all words. I will play the part of son to him so long as he needs me; and for his sake will I go through my part as before, though without him the joy will be gone. But it will bring us the needful gold; and we are not without our hoard, as it is. Truly my master was wise when he decided not to leave these rooms—not to live like rich men on the strength of our earnings. We have sufficient gold laid by against a rainy day. Ere that is spent, doubtless there will come some change to our fortunes.”

But with the dawn of another day Grey found himself in very sorry plight. Great blisters had risen over his hand and arm, and the fingers were so swollen and painful that he could scarcely move them. He was forced to contrive a sling in which to carry his left hand and arm, and he could only just use his right sufficiently for the needful attendance upon the sick man, and that not without considerable pain. He began to feel feverish and weak himself from the effects of pain and shock.

It began to come over him with more and more conviction that he himself would be unfit to appear upon the stage on the morrow. And as soon as the morning light had fully come, he sent the servant of the house wherein they lodged to the rooms occupied by Mr. Butler of the Drury Lane theatre management, asking

him to come at once to see him upon a matter of importance.

Mr. Butler was part proprietor of the theatre, and the practical stage manager, and he listened with great interest and concern to Grey's tale, looking earnestly at the sick man muttering to himself upon the bed, but taking no notice of what went on about him, and bending over him not untenderly, to see if could elicit some response. But the Old Lion unclosed his dim eyes for a few moments, looked into his face, and then turned restlessly and began the mutterings as before, interrupted sometimes by fits of coughing, which left him visibly exhausted, although there was no return of the hemorrhage.

"I have had my fears of this," spoke Mr. Butler, turning back to Grey. "He is scarce fit for the strain of the past weeks. He uses himself up too fast. The fires burn within too fiercely; and his long illness, though seeming only to cripple his limbs, has told upon him. I have feared it might be so, therefore we are not altogether unprovided."

"I know," answered Grey quietly. "I was going to say as much. Anthony Frewen has the part of Father Time at his fingers' ends. He can play it for Mr. Wylde till this illness be overpassed."

"That is true. I am glad you should know. He is ready at any time to take the part. It will be for him a great opportunity. But it would be well for you to rehearse with him ere appearing before the public. Shall we arrange for this to-morrow forenoon? As for this dress, it must be given at once into the hands of tailor and perruquier. But there should be no difficulty in having it repaired in time. A few guineas will set that matter to rights."

"At my cost," answered Grey promptly. "Let that be understood. It is in the bond; though I shall be grateful if you will see to the matter for me. As for the rehearsal, and even the performance to-morrow and the next few nights, I am not certain if I myself shall be able to go through my part. See here!" and Grey drew from the sling his maimed and stiffened hand, showing even a greater extent of injury in the daylight than he had observed before. His white face and drawn brows showed that he was suffering considerable pain; and Mr. Butler whistled in dismay.

"This is serious," he said, with a look of perplexity on his face.

"Yet methinks there is a way out of the difficulty," spoke Grey, with some eagerness. "Could you find and send to me the young actor Lionel Field, who has lodgings somewhere in these regions, for he comes and goes at the theatre, and has visited us often, albeit he has never told me where he dwells?"

"I could find the fellow, doubtless," was the answer; "but do you know your man? A fellow sober one day, drunk the next, upon whom no reliance can be placed, though his talent is considerable, and he has caught the public taste before now."

"Ay, and adversity has something sobered and tamed him," answered Grey eagerly. "I have a sort of liking for the fellow, though he has a jealous feeling towards me, in that I have stepped into a place without serving apprenticeship thereto. But believe me, he could act this part of mine. I am sure of it. He has studied it, I know. He has sat many a time in that chair whilst I have been going through my paces before my master. I have seen him watching and following all. Send him hither to me. I will undertake that he shall be ready to act for me till I am my own man again. Let him have the chance. I am sure he will remain sober. He has been steadier for long; and this, he knows, may give him just that lift for which he has been waiting and longing. It may be the beginning for him of better things; and since we are much of the same height, and he is only something broader and more stoutly built, there will be little trouble with the dress. Let him play the Youth for one week at least in my place, and I will give my time to my sick friend yonder, and let my injured hands recover their strength and suppleness."

The manager had been studying Grey's face with some attention. He saw that it would be impossible for the young man to act for some days to come. There was a look of fever about him, and the state of his hands was quite prohibitive. He spoke with a note as of warning in his voice.

"Do you know what it is that you would do?" he asked. "Have you heard the tale of the countryman who warmed a viper at his hearth, which afterwards did him to death?"

"The fable I know," answered Grey with a smile, "but I do not see the application in the present."

"Perchance you may have reason to understand it, if you do as you purpose towards Lionel Field. A man consumed by vanity and envy is not the safest wearer of one's discarded shoes."

"But is there any other?" asked Grey. "I know of none."

"No, nor I, i' faith. We have feared that the old man might break down—he has been growing so gaunt and hollow-eyed of late; but we had never thought of such a thing as the Youth failing us. We have no substitute for you, Mr. White. If you fall ill, the interlude must cease; and it were pity too, for it still draws us crowded houses."

"No, it need not cease," spoke Grey with energy. "Send me only Lionel Field this day, and I will undertake that by to-morrow forenoon he shall be fit for the rehearsal with Anthony Frewen in the theatre. Let him take my place till I am ready to fill it again. He will do it better than I, with these maimed hands, and with my heart so full of anxious fears for Mr. Wylde."

"Then so be it," answered the manager, with audible relief in his tones. He had no wish to withdraw the piece whilst it was still so high in favour. No one

knew how soon the capricious public might tire of it; but for the moment, with the Duke of Marlborough the popular idol, and expected home week by week, nothing that gave him praise and honour could fail to catch the popular taste. The house filled double as full on those nights on which Time and the Youth were to appear as it did on the others. Grey knew this, and would not for the world have had the performances to cease on his account. He had no petty jealousy of an understudy. He simply desired that a man he had come to pity sincerely should have the chance he so coveted; and when Lionel Field stood before him, flushed, excited, filled with strenuous desire to succeed—to fill the part as ably as it had been filled before—Grey's only desire was to help him to this end.

It was a strange day that was passed in that upper chamber. On the bed lay the sick man, for the most part lying in the lethargy of weakness, but from time to time rousing up, watching with sudden feverish eagerness the actions of the young men, and occasionally in whispering tones giving some fragment of keen criticism or dramatic suggestion. At the other end of the room stood Lionel, going through his part again and yet again, with an unwearied energy and with increasing grip and power; whilst Grey, white-faced and exhausted, but still bent on the task before him, sat beside the fire watching, listening, instructing, rising every now and again to show how a certain trick of manner or of voice must be managed, to recall the great Duke to those who knew him. The master was in earnest; the pupil was eager and resolved to excel. Lionel had never lacked talent. What he had lacked was the power of self-restraint, whilst vanity had led him into the snare of thinking himself invaluable. A bitter lesson had followed, and he had learned wisdom by experience. His chance had now come to him most unexpectedly. He meant to use it well. He was grateful to Grey for selecting him at this juncture. He did not consciously meditate doing him an ill turn, but he resolved in his heart that this opportunity should be used to the uttermost. It would bring him once more before the public which once had favoured him. He would take care he did not sink into obscurity again.

It was dusk before he left with his part perfect, and everything learned that Grey could teach him. As his footsteps clattered down the wooden stairs, Grey sank back exhausted into his chair, closing his eyes in utter lassitude. It was more than an hour before he moved, and then nothing but the necessity for giving food to Wylde would have roused him.

The Old Lion was awake now, and his breathing, though very rapid, was somewhat easier. He was excessively weak; but the quiet day spent in the warm attic and without any exertion on his part had not been without effect, and there was more comprehension in the gaze now bent upon Grey's face than he had seen there since the previous night, when the old man had been taken suddenly ill.

"What is the matter, boy, and what have you been doing all day? Who was that went out at dusk? Methought it looked like young Lionel Field."

"It was he, sir. He came to learn—or rather to perfect—the part of the Youth. You and I are to take a week's holiday, and enjoy a rest together. Your cough is too bad for you to go abroad, and I have burnt my hands and must needs get them healed ere I step the boards again. Anthony Frewen and Lionel Field will take our places for the nonce; and after we are restored to our former health, and strength, the public will welcome us back the more gladly for our absence."

The Old Lion's eyes flashed suddenly from beneath their heavy lids. He half raised himself in his bed.

"I shall never tread the boards again. My acting days are done. I murmur not. I have had my heart's desire. I can now depart in peace. But you, boy—you! Why have you given up the place that was yours? I hear the knell tolling for you too. Not for your life—nay, you will live after these limbs are laid in the grave; but for your triumph—for your fame. You have given up your birthright to the supplanter. You will never take your rightful place again—never—never!"

Grey smiled at the sorrowful intensity with which these words were spoken. He laid the old man down, and spoke to him soothingly.

"Nay, do not fear; do not let such thoughts trouble you. I have seen Mr. Butler. All will be well. My place will be kept for me till my return. When I am able for it, I shall play the 'Youth' again; and we will live upon the proceeds till you are hale and strong; and then you shall write a great play which shall hold the whole world captive and enthralled. But now trouble not yourself of these matters. Only rest, and all will be well."

"Well, well; yes, for me all will soon be well," was the old man's dreamy answer. "But for you, my son—for you, what will befall? Fickle Fortune did smile at you; but her smile has changed to a frown. The open door is closing in your face, and where will you find another?"

Grey smiled and answered not. At the present moment he was too worn out in mind and body even to care what the future might hold.

CHAPTER XV. DARK DAYS.

For above a fortnight things went very strangely for Grey in that upper room

which had been for so long his home. The Old Lion was very ill—dangerously ill for many days; and though the leech was called in several times, and sometimes gave a medicine which brought relief, it was little his skill availed, and the tender nursing of the young man was undoubtedly the means under Providence whereby the sick man's life was saved.

But Grey himself was suffering from severe prostration, from an intermittent fever, and from much pain from his burns, which were slow to heal and made his task of nursing very difficult.

Nevertheless he would let no one else rob him of this labour of love; for none could soothe the sick man as he could, and if left to other care, he always became restless and feverish.

As for the world without, that was altogether blotted out from Grey's thoughts. He never even heard of the return of the Duke of Marlborough from his glorious campaign of victory; he never knew of the grand procession through the streets from Whitehall to Guildhall, and thence to the Vintners' Hall, where the victor of Ramillies was feasted by the civic authorities, after the standards taken at the great battle had been flaunted through the streets and acclaimed by a huge and enthusiastic crowd.

All this, if he heard rumour of it, passed through his brain unheeded. He did not even know that the Duke attended a performance at Drury Lane of "Time and the Youth," and laughed and applauded the representation, in which so much subtle flattery had been introduced. Always eager for popular applause, the Duke was not a little delighted by the ovation he received in his own person, and in the words of the interlude itself, which were cheered to the echo by a house crowded to suffocation. Afterwards the actors were summoned before him, and each received a purse of gold from the hands of the Duchess. And she told the Duke how that the young actor had been so brave and prompt in the saving of the life of her favourite, Lady Geraldine, at the private performance of the piece a short while back. So great a lady as the Duchess could not be expected to note any difference in the actors of the interlude, and none explained her error, for what did it matter? Anthony Frewen and Lionel Field were drawing just as well as the original pair had done, since the enthusiasm for the Duke was increasing with his presence in England. They asked lower terms for their services, and they gave none of the trouble that the Old Lion had done by his autocratic demands and his hasty temper. The managers of both theatres were well content with matters as they were, and congratulated themselves that nothing more had been heard of their former employés. Wylde's uncertain health would render his re-engagement a matter of some difficulty, if not of impossibility; and Anthony Frewen had openly declared that he would act only with Field. They had studied together. They understood each other, and they wanted no "interloper" coming

between them.

This was in substance what Grey heard when, after three weeks of anxiety and watching, he found that their exchequer was almost empty, and realized that he must bestir himself again to earn the needful weekly sum to enable them to live comfortably, and provide the wherewithal for the sick man's needs. His hands were now almost well. He had discarded his sling and could use his arm freely. The fever had left him somewhat weak, but he believed he had power to take his part without any fear of failure, and he sought out the friendly stage-manager, Mr. Butler, to tell him as much. Little did he anticipate the answer he received.

The matter was fully and kindly explained; but there seemed no hesitation about the decision.

"I am sorry—very sorry—Mr. White. But what are we to do? Frewen and Field are both old stage favourites. Their return has been hailed with approval in many quarters. They have acted all this time together, and Frewen declines to act with any other. It is possible that he fears in you a rival; for there is a dash and a divine afflatus (if I may use the phrase) in your acting which is lacking in that of Field. Talent is always ready to be jealous of genius. It may be that the matter lies in that nutshell. However this may be, these are the facts. These two mean to do well; they refuse to be separated, and therefore—"

"I understand," answered Grey quietly. "It is quite right, I suppose. For myself I care little, but for Mr. Wylde I have my regrets. After all, it is his piece that is filling your pockets. Has he no claim upon you for that? I know not what the law may be; but can you suffer him to be in want whilst his genius is bringing you such success?"

"Well, well, well, we will see what we can do. I am sorry, very sorry, that you ever gave up your part. Oh, I know it was inevitable. You were not able for it; and you showed magnanimity in your instruction of another. But it was a mistake on your own part—the countryman and the viper—did I not warn you? A man of more worldly wisdom would have done differently."

"If you will only see that Mr. Wylde lacks not for the necessaries of life, I care nothing for my own loss," answered Grey with perfect truthfulness. "I am young and strong; I have the world before me. But whilst he is ill I cannot leave him; and if I lose my post here, how can I hope to support him through the bitter winter now upon us? I can face destitution for myself, but it were shame to let him suffer."

"Well, well, he shall not starve; we will do something for him. I promise you that. But it was a thousand pities that you did not receive the purse of gold from the hands of the Duchess last week. That would have set you on your feet for some time to come; and, after all, it was for you it was really meant. Field should be made to divide it."

"No, no," answered Grey, with sudden haste and imperiousness; "I touch no gold that I do not earn." And when he heard the story of the performance at which the Duke had been present, he rejoiced greatly that he had not played the "Youth" that night. He felt as though the eagle eyes of the Duke would have penetrated his disguise; and how could he have met the victor of Ramillies again in the garb of an actor, winning his bread on the London boards?

There was a curious strain of pride in the young man's nature. Although his short dramatic career had been so successful, he shrank with the deepest distaste from recognition by any of his former friends. He hated the very thought that the name of Grey Dumaresq should be linked with that of the actor of the "Youth."

In the same way he had always abstained from making any use of the token of favour bestowed upon him by the Duke of Marlborough as a pledge of friendship. He always carried the ring about his person, hung round his neck by a silken cord. But although he knew it would win for him the patronage of the great Duchess, whose influence with the Queen, if not the paramount power it once was, was still very great, he had never been able to make up his mind to use it. He had not learned how to present himself as a suppliant for favour. He felt that he had talent. He desired to see that talent recognized and rewarded. But to go about seeking for a patron to push him into notice was a thing he had never brought himself to do. Whilst living with the Old Lion he had rewritten his romance, and had made of it a very delicate piece of workmanship, which might well win him fame if he could but get it taken up. But hitherto he had been too busy to think much about the matter. The romance must wait his greater leisure. Now, however, turning away from the theatre feeling very certain that his dramatic career had closed as suddenly as it had opened, he began to realize that something must be done to keep the wolf from the door; and his thoughts instinctively turned to his pen with a certain joy and pride. For therein lay more real delight to him than in the plaudits of assembled crowds. If he could win fame in the realms of literature, he would with joy say farewell to his brief career as actor.

Walking thoughtfully along, he almost ran into two men who were strolling arm in arm along the pavement. Stopping short from the recoil, he looked at them, and saw that they were Anthony Frewen and Lionel Field—the very two whose amicable partnership had ousted him from his hoped-for employment. But there was no rancour in Grey's heart. Already his facile and eager mind had turned to other themes. He would have held out his hand in fellowship to his quondam pupil; but the young actor's face had suddenly flushed a deep crimson, and he pulled his companion down a side alley, laughing loudly, and affecting not to have seen the other. Plainly, he feared reproaches and recriminations, and was stung by the goad of an uneasy conscience.

Grey smiled a little as he pursued his way.

"It is something strange," he mused, "how that a man can never forgive one whom he has injured! Had I supplanted him, he might have swaggered up to demand explanation or redress, and we might even have made it up again; but since he has injured me, he will have none of it. I am henceforth to him an outcast."

Grey was not disposed at once to return home, to encounter the keen eyes and perhaps the burst of righteous indignation which no doubt his news would awaken within the breast of the Old Lion. That Wylde had had some fears of what the event had justified, Grey was aware. He knew the emulations, jealousies, and small cabals of the theatre, and how a young actor, raised by lucky chance to a post of eminence, is suspected and plotted against by others as an interloper. His own reputation and Grey's brilliant success had served them in good stead so long as he was able to retain his own place; but now that his influence was withdrawn, and Grey had shown himself not indispensable, the thing which he foresaw had come to pass; and the young man regretted it more for his master's sake than for his own, save for the immediate difficulty of seeing where the daily necessities of life were to come from.

But at least he had obtained a promise that something should be done for the old man, and he could surely fend for himself.

He was walking northward along the frost-bound road. A spell of bitter weather had succeeded the torrents of rain which had characterized the earlier part of the winter. Icicles hung from the eaves, and the water was frozen in the gutters and puddles. The sun hung like a red ball in the clear frosty sky, and there was a biting keenness in the air which made rapid motion a necessity.

Grey was not depressed, though he was grave and thoughtful. He walked on rapidly, one thought chasing another through his brain. Had it not been for the necessity of taking care of his old friend, he would have liked well enough to walk all the way to Hartsbourne, to see old Jock and faithful Dick, from whom the recent almost impassable state of the roads had sundered him. During the days of his extreme poverty Grey had hidden himself even from Dick. But with brighter times he had written to his faithful henchman; and once the latter had visited him at his new abode, and had accompanied him to the theatre to watch the performance there, which had filled him with pride and joy at his master's triumph, albeit he felt a pang of pain to see him reduced to such a method of earning his bread.

That was the last time they had met, for the constant rains had made the roads well-nigh impassable. But the frost had come as a friend to travellers, and Grey felt sure that Dick would not be long in availing himself of the changed conditions for a visit to town. It might be indeed that they would meet one an-

other, if only he persevered in his walk. He wanted news of Don Carlos—now his one valuable asset. Much as it went against him to sell his beautiful horse, he brought himself to contemplate it as a possibility. As a poor man in London, the creature was of little use to him, and there were a score of wealthy young bloods who had offered again and again to purchase the horse at his own price. The strained shoulder had entirely recovered. The creature was as sound as ever. Perhaps—perhaps—Grey had got as far as that, when he suddenly heard himself hailed in rapturous tones as "Master! master!" and there was Dick racing to meet him at the top of his speed.

But the honest fellow's face was troubled; and scarce had Grey time to greet him ere the evil news was out.

"He is stolen, master—he is stolen! Don Carlos is gone! Oh, it has been foul play from first to last! We had kept him so safely, Jock and I. The old skinflint had no notion of his being there. He grazed out of sight of the house, and at night was never brought in till after dark. But that one-eyed Judas must have discovered the secret at last, and told his master. We never suspected it; but I will wager it was so. Then they played this scurvy trick on me. They said the old man was dying. The doctor must be fetched at all cost. I and my nag, who paid our board, were known to be living with old Jock. I galloped off to Edgeware for the leech, and Jock was kept within doors, making hot large quantities of water, never allowed for a moment outside the brew-house, where stood the great copper filled with water. I rode away gleefully enough, for I had no fears for the old man's life, though of course I would not have him die for lack of succour. I found the leech, and bade him ride back with me full speed; but we had both been long making the journey, for the roads were like troughs of mire, and the beasts flagged sorely when urged. We were forced to let them pick their way as they could, and so it was well-nigh dusk ere we arrived. He went up to the sick-room, and I to groom down my jaded horse and fetch in Don Carlos. When I went for him to the far paddock, he was gone! The rails were down. There was abundant trace of trampling hoofs and footprints of men. He had given them trouble; but they had him at last. The horse was stolen!"

Grey listened in silence. He felt somewhat as did the patriarch Job when one after another the messengers of evil tidings came with their words of woe. He scarce heard all that Dick was saying now—whom he suspected of being in complicity with his unscrupulous kinsman in this matter. But one name arrested his attention, and he stopped to ask a quick question.

"Lord Sandford! What said you of him?"

"Why, master, as I was telling you, when I began to make inquiry here, there, and everywhere, I heard that my Lord Sandford had been seen as near as Edgeware, and that he had been asking something about a horse. More I cannot

find out; but it is enough for me. There is devilry in the matter, and Barty Dumaresq and Lord Sandford are both mixed up in it. I have come to town to see you first, and then to get some knowledge of his lordship's stables, and I'll wager I'll find out before very long where the Don is hidden away."

Grey's eyes flashed with anger. Was it possible that this man should sink to plotting a common theft? Or was it his kinsman who had stolen the horse, and sold him for a great sum to the young nobleman, who had always coveted the creature? This was most probably the truth, for the recluse of Hartsbourne had plainly feigned illness to get Dick and Jock out of the way. The whole thing was a dishonourable conspiracy, and he could only hope that Lord Sandford's part in it had been merely that of purchaser. If he had stooped to plot a theft with the old miser, he would be a worse and a meaner villain than Grey would willingly believe, since it was already the talk of the town that he would wed with the Lady Geraldine Adair so soon as the spring-tide should come.

Master and man discussed the matter for some time, and Grey agreed that Dick should carry out his plans, and report to him of the result at intervals. It was above a week since the horse had vanished; but the state of the roads had prevented the man from attempting the walk to London before, and he did not desire to be burdened with his own horse, as he knew not where he might have to lodge, or what was likely to turn up.

"Our fortunes are at a low ebb just now, good Dicon," said Grey as they parted. "You have but a few gold pieces left, and our exchequer is almost bare. But we must hope that Dame Fortune, who has shown a frowning face of late, will treat us to some of her smiles again. For the world is a harder place than once I thought it, and life a sorer struggle."

"But you have the Duke's token still, sir?" spoke Dick eagerly. "You need not despair whilst that remains. They say he is in London now. Why not take it boldly to him, and remind him of yourself and his promise? They say he has a kindly heart, as well as a gracious manner."

"I believe that is true," answered Grey with a smile. "Yes, why not go to him? Why not? Ah, Dicon, I would that life looked as simple to me as it does to you. But perhaps—perhaps— Who knows what may next betide? At least, so long as the token remains, I have still a card to play; and who can tell but that the last card shall take the trick and win the game?"

The sunlight had faded by the time Grey reached the attic, and the fire had burnt itself out to a handful of ashes. Wylde was turning restlessly upon his bed, coughing more than he had done of late; and Grey reproached himself with his long absence, though he quickly had things comfortable and bright again. But the old man must needs hear of his journey to the theatre; and though he professed himself in no wise astonished, it was plain that the blow struck home.

His *protégé* had been set aside for another. They ceased to regard him as a power. He was laid upon the shelf, and another had stepped into his place. His word carried no weight. No one cared whether he lived or died. He had brought success and prosperity by his talents to others, but he was to be left to die in obscurity and want. Ah well, better men than he had been treated just so. He desired of Grey to leave him to die alone, and to go forth and make his own way in the world that had no room for a feeble and broken man whose work was done.

Grey soothed him as well as he was able, but he could not find much to say that was hopeful or encouraging. He dared not speak of any promise of help from the theatres, lest the old man should wrathfully refuse to receive alms, where justice was denied. So he represented that there was still money left in their purse, which was in a measure true; but the funds were so excessively scanty that in a few days they would be quite exhausted. And when the old man at last passed into slumber, Grey went carefully over all his possessions, which had increased somewhat of late, and carefully detached from his clothing any ornaments which might be sold for small sums to eke out their subsistence till something should turn up. For it was evident that Wylde must not be left long by himself, as this day's experiment had proved. And how was Grey to obtain any sort of paid work, were he to be tied to this attic and to almost constant attendance upon his old friend and master?

How the next days passed by Grey scarcely knew, for the Old Lion had a relapse, medicines had to be obtained, together with food such as his condition required; and although a small sum of money had been sent by Mr. Butler, with an intimation that the same amount should be paid weekly for the present, it had soon melted away, and there came a night when Grey had not so much as a penny left in the purse, and he himself was almost faint for want of food.

But the old man lay sleeping peacefully; the fire burned clear and bright. The night was fine and cold, and Grey slipped forth into the streets, wrapping himself well up in a voluminous cloak belonging to his friend, which completely disguised him.

A strange desperation seized him, and he cared not what he did. He entered tavern after tavern, singing a roundelay in one, telling a story in another, reciting a speech or a part of a dramatic scene in another, and once going through the whole dialogue of "Time and the Youth," taking both parts himself, but so changing his aspect from moment to moment that his audience was electrified, and silver coins as well as coppers were his portion on this occasion.

He had now enough for two days' needs. He had supped well, and now must return home. He felt as though he had passed through a strange black dream; but he had learned how at a pinch the next day's wants might be supplied—at least until he had been the round of all the taverns and coffee-houses,

and men were tired of him. But he would not think of that yet.

He, Sir Grey Dumaresq, had sunk to playing the buffoon in pot-houses, to earn coppers from the idle sots who frequented such places. He laughed aloud as the thought presented itself to him thus. Dame Fortune had proved a sorry shrew so far as he was concerned. Was there any lower turn in her wheel that he must presently experience?

He had wandered some distance from home, since after having supped he had been fired to try his luck at some of the more fashionable resorts of the day; and his last performance had been given at a coffee-house in one of the better localities, though for the life of him he could not exactly tell where he was.

It was long since he had walked in these wider streets, and the night, though starlight, was very dark. Suddenly a sound as of blows and cries wakened him from his reverie. Instinctively he started to run in the direction whence they came, and almost directly he met some fellows wearing livery fleeing helter-skelter, as for dear life, from a band of young Mohawks or Scourers, as they termed themselves, who made the terror of the town at night. In the distance there was still some tumult going on, and Grey, half guessing the cause, rushed onward, not heeding the pursuit he passed. A lamp dimly burning over a house showed him the outline of one of those chairs in which ladies of fashion were carried to and fro from house to house. Plainly the liveried servants in charge of the chair had been chased away, and its occupant was now at the mercy of the half-drunken young bloods against whom Father Time had inveighed so eloquently.

Grey understood in a moment, and with a cry of rage and scorn he flung himself into the heart of the fray, intent upon the rescue of the lady in the chair, whoever she might be.

CHAPTER XVI. A NIGHT ADVENTURE.

The all-important Duchess of Marlborough had taken one of her sudden and somewhat vehement and exacting likings for the Lady Geraldine. This was a matter of no small gratification to Lord and Lady Romaine, notwithstanding the fact that the mother felt some jealousy and vexation that her daughter should have been singled out for this distinguished lady's favour, whilst she herself was

entirely passed over. Still she was woman of the world enough to accept the situation with philosophy. She always declared freely that the Duchess bored her to death, and that she would never be able to put up with her temper and her autocratic ways. But she was glad enough to let Geraldine visit at Marlborough House whenever an invitation (or rather summons) came for her; and Geraldine herself was glad and thankful to go, for here at least she was safe from the unwelcome and ever more pressing attentions of Lord Sandford. And above and beyond this, her parents were disposed to treat her with more respect since she had been "taken up" by the Queen's favourite. When she begged of her father not to make any promise to Lord Sandford regarding the disposition of her hand, he laughingly consented to wait awhile; for in his heart he began to wonder whether his beautiful daughter might not do better for herself. Lord Sandford's reckless expenditure was becoming the talk of the town, and unless he had larger reserve funds to draw upon than were known, he might possibly find himself in awkward straits. In the house of the Duchess, Geraldine might possibly meet admirers with more to recommend them or at least with prospects more sound and secure. It is true that Lady Romaine still upheld her favourite Sandford's suit as warmly as ever; but Lord Romaine was quite willing to accede to his daughter's request, and to let things take their own course without bringing matters at once to a climax. Lord Sandford was not to be dismissed; but Geraldine was not to be coerced.

It was natural that the girl should welcome with pleasure and gratitude a friendship which brought her immunity from what promised to become something very like persecution. Her occasional visits to Marlborough House formed the brightest spots in her present life.

If the Duchess were proud, capricious, autocratic, and uncertain in temper, as her detractors declared, at least she possessed warm and deep feelings, and could be infinitely agreeable and kindly when she chose. To Geraldine she was uniformly gentle and sympathetic. Perhaps she already felt that she had passed the meridian of her days of power. The kinswoman, Abigail Hill (now Mrs. Masham), whom she had first introduced to the Queen, was rapidly rising in royal favour, and seemed likely to prove not only a rival, but a supplanter. It had not come to that yet; and the return of the Duke, covered with glory and honour, averted for a while the calamity already overshadowing her. But so clever and astute a woman could not be altogether blind to the Queen's waning affection; and perhaps the consciousness of her own faults and shortcomings, and her unguarded temper, helped at this juncture to soften the asperities of this rough but sterling nature, and disposed her to take pleasure in the sincere and undisguised affection and admiration of this beautiful girl.

Geraldine on her part took great pleasure in the society of one who held in

a semi-masculine contempt the follies, frivolities, and buffooneries of the present day code of manners. Of men and women alike, the Duchess spoke with hearty scorn, her eyes flashing and her lips curling in a fine contempt. Her influence at Court had always been on the side of gravity, decorum, and what the fashionable dames and gallants called "dullness." She and the Queen were at one in all these matters, as they were at one in their ideas of conjugal fidelity and the sacredness of the marriage bond. The Queen was as devoted to her weak-minded husband as the Duchess to her victorious lord. Both held in detestation the laxity which prevailed in the world of fashion, and neither cared for the criticisms passed upon the dullness of the Court, so long as its virtue was preserved untainted.

Geraldine, sickened by what she saw and heard at the gay routs to which she had been taken in her mother's train, felt the solemn stately gravity of the Duchess's house as a haven of rest. She spent her time during her visits in the private apartment of the great lady, where the latter came and sat whenever she had leisure to do so, writing short notes to her husband, to be dispatched by special couriers, or talking of him and his triumphs, or the prospects of the war or of parties at home, to one who was eager to learn and ready to take a keen and intelligent interest in all, and whose sincere admiration and affection, expressed rather in looks and little unconscious actions than in words, seemed to soothe and refresh her not a little, accustomed as she was to full-mouthed flatteries to her face, and the scheming of jealousy behind her back.

With the return of the Duke came a break in these pleasant visits. But the break was not final in any sense of the word, and Geraldine received many little affectionate notes, expressing a hope of seeing more of her when they could escape from attendance at Court, and enjoy a season of privacy in their own house. At first it was necessary for the Duke to be constant in his attendance at Whitehall or Kensington Palace, and the Duchess went with him. But a day came at last when Geraldine was summoned to Marlborough House, to spend the afternoon with the Duke and Duchess, and to remain through the evening with the latter, as the Duke had to attend a meeting of friends at Lord Halifax's house, and the Duchess desired to keep the girl, asking that her chair might not be sent for her until eleven o'clock.

Geraldine was pleased and excited by this prospect; for as yet she had never seen the Duke at close quarters, though from all she had heard of him from his wife and others she felt as though he were familiar to her, and her admiration for him was very great. She had heard of his weakness where money was concerned, and she knew that he had more than once changed sides in his politics, and even in his loyalty. But those were days of change and confusion, when it was often difficult to see the way clear before one, and when the outlook varied so continually with changes of dynasty and of foreign and domestic policy

that a perfectly consistent and straightforward walk in life was a thing almost impossible of achievement. The girl was not disposed to criticise him or suspect him of overmuch self-seeking. Still less so when the charm of his personality was brought to bear upon her. She well understood all she had heard respecting his powers of fascination, and felt that she could have listened for ever to the music of his voice, watching the changing expressions of his handsome, mobile features, and the graceful telling gestures of his beautiful white hands.

They enjoyed a little quiet dinner in their private apartments, almost unattended by servants. And it was as they sat with wine and dried fruits before them, awaiting the moment when the Duke must take his leave, that he suddenly addressed his wife,—

"Ha, Sarah! There is a question I have wanted to put a hundred times, but ever when it sprang to my lips the moment was not favourable. Tell me, has a young gentleman of prepossessing appearance ever presented himself to you with my amethyst ring as token of his good faith? I did surely tell you of the narrow escape I had at the battle of Ramillies, and how that I was saved and helped by the timely assistance of a gallant young English traveller."

"You did, my good lord; and I have greatly desired myself to see and to thank this young gentleman for the service rendered. You did warn me that you had bidden him come to me, if in need of any favour or influence. A warm welcome should have been his at any time, but he has never presented himself."

"Let us hope, then, that he has prospered without our aid," spoke the Duke. "He did tell me somewhat of himself, and I do remember how that I thought his future something uncertain. But the details of his story have escaped my memory, and I fear even his name is not clearly remembered. It was Grey—the Christian name—that do I recollect; for he said it was that of a kinsman of his whom I had overthrown at Sedgemoor in the days of the rebellion in the west. Grey, Grey—yes, that is clear; but for the rest—"

"Could it have been Sir Grey Dumaresq?"

Geraldine's was the voice which broke in here. They turned and looked at her. Her face was flushed: her eyes were bright. The Duke smiled as he made instant reply.

"Grey Dumaresq—that was the name. Say, fair lady, is this man known to you? I would fain renew my acquaintance with him, and show him some token of gratitude."

"I know not where he is now," answered Geraldine. "For a while he was dwelling with Lord Sandford, as his friend and comrade. But they say that they had some quarrel. Strange stories were told of them. And Sir Grey disappeared—no man knows whither. Many whispers and rumours have gone forth concerning him, even to the one which said that he had taken the part of the Youth in the

representation you did witness, your Grace, at the theatre.”

”It was not Grey Dumaresq whom I did see afterwards,” spoke Marlborough quickly. ”I do not forget faces. I should have known him instantly. That report could not be true.”

Geraldine’s face was changing colour every moment; her breath came thick and fast. Heretofore she had spoken no word of this matter, which had been on her mind night and day for long. Now an impulse of speech came over her.

”Ah, but the actors have changed,” she said. ”I did hear from our servants that the old man who played Father Time was taken ill the very night that they played at our house; and your Grace doth know,” turning to the Duchess, ”how that my dress caught fire, and how that the young actor did spring down and extinguish the flames, escaping away ere we could call him back to thank him. It was then that I made sure. I had suspected it before; but when I saw his face so near, I could not doubt. It was he.”

”Extraordinary!” exclaimed the Duke. ”How could things have come to such a pass with him? Why had he not sought you out, and told of his adversity? To be sure, many a gentleman born to fortune falls upon evil days, sometimes through no fault of his own. But with my token—well, there was no need for this. I must consider what should be done. Have you seen him since, Lady Geraldine?”

”Nay; and he has not been acting of late. Two strangers, or rather two other actors, have been playing the parts since that night. I did ask of my mother leave to send and seek him out, that we might at least give him thanks for the service rendered me; but she would not believe I had recognized him aright—she said it was but my fantasy; and for the rest, if the man wanted a guerdon, he had but to come and ask for it. Hence, nothing has been done.”

”Well, ’tis a strange story; and yet, as I saw that representation at the theatre, I did say within myself that some eye-witness of the battle of Ramillies must have planned and written it. We will think and speak more of it anon. Stranger things have befallen ere this. It would please me well to befriend a gallant and chivalrous youth, too proud or too noble to ask favours for himself. I told him he had something of the poet in him. He may have a career before him yet. Well, sweetheart, I must needs be going now; but I will return ere midnight, and Lady Geraldine will beguile the hours of my absence.”

He rose, and kissed his wife with a lover-like devotion which sat gracefully upon him, and which to Geraldine seemed in no wise ridiculous, notwithstanding the fact that this couple had grown-up children, married themselves. It was a beautiful thing, she thought, to see how their love survived, and grew in depth and intensity. She was able to speak of the Duke, when he had gone, in terms which brought smiles of pleasure to the wife’s face.

It was a happy evening for Geraldine; for the flame of hope leaped up in

her heart, and she felt as though something bright and beautiful had come into her life. The Duke had shown interest in the subject of the young actor, who had saved her from injury on the night of the performance at their house. He did not gibe at her half-formed fancy. On the contrary, he seemed disposed to examine for himself the possible truth of the tale. He would seek out Grey—for Grey, she knew, it was. He would raise him out of obscurity and poverty into the position to which he was born. There seemed no end to the possibilities of good fortune which might come to him with the favour and gratitude of the Duke. The girl passed a happy, dreamy evening, these fancies weaving themselves into a background for her thoughts, whilst she talked with the Duchess of the Duke's magnificent reception, of the palace of Blenheim being erected at the cost of the nation for a residence for him, and of the honours to which he was likely to attain through his genius and the favour of her Majesty.

She was in the same happy frame of mind when she got into her chair shortly before midnight; for the Duchess kept her talking till past the time arranged, and it never occurred to her to be afraid of the darkness of the ill-lighted streets. She had her bearers—her father's liveried servants. And, after all, the distance to traverse was not so very great.

She had not proceeded far, however, before she was aroused from her pleasant reverie by the sounds of shouts, yells, and hurrying steps. She felt her own bearers break into a run, and the chair swayed from side to side in a fashion that was alarming. Something struck sharply against the panels, then a shower of missiles seemed to rattle against its side. Her own men yelled aloud in fear or pain, and next moment the chair seemed to be heavily dropped, and the air was rent with sounds of strife, the fall of weapons, and cries of pain and terror. There was no mistaking what had happened. She was the object of some attack from the street bullies; but whether by a luckless chance or by premeditation and design, the frightened girl could not guess. The thought of Lord Sandford and his unscrupulous ways flashed into her mind, and a shudder ran through her frame. She could see little or nothing of what was going on without. Her breath had dimmed the window-panes; there was scarcely any light in the streets. Never was any creature more helpless than a lady shut into one of the cumbersome chairs of the period. She could by no means get out, or even let down a window from within; and before many minutes had elapsed, the girl was perfectly certain that her bearers had run wildly away to save their own skins, and that she was left to the mercy of one of the lawless bands of street marauders, the terror of the helpless old watchmen, powerless to cope with them, the scandal of the whole town.

For a moment it seemed as though pursuers and pursued had alike left her alone, and she made at that juncture a frantic but useless effort to escape from her

prison. Then roars of laughter and the trampling of feet assured her that her foes were coming back, and she closed her eyes and set her teeth, and, clasping her hands, tried to frame a few words of prayer, for she knew not what next would betide her. A hand seemed fumbling with the chair. In another moment it would be thrown open. But ere that moment had arrived a new sound arose. More footsteps came tearing along—a fierce voice—shouts of derision—more blows—more oaths—cries of pain and anger—fierce threats—savage recriminations. What was going on? Had some one flown to the rescue? Oh, when would the horrid scene end? These men were capable of doing to death any single or unarmed man who tried to stand between them and their brutal pastimes.

But what was this? Another sound! The roll of wheels—a commanding voice that she knew ringing through the darkness of the night, dominating all other sounds.

"It is the Duke—the Duke himself!" cried Geraldine, falling back almost fainting on the cushions; but the next minute lights were flashing round her, then the head of the chair was lifted off, and she saw the Duke himself bending towards her, his face full of concern and anxiety.

"What! The Lady Geraldine! Then, indeed, I come in good time. Are you hurt, sweet lady? Answer quick! For these villains shall not escape so easily, if you are."

"No, no, I am not hurt; but I fear me some one is who came to my rescue. I heard him shout to them to stop their coward play. They were about to look inside the chair, but they all turned upon him with shouts of derision and fury. I trow he gave them blow for blow, for I heard them yell and swear the fiend was in him. Oh, I fear me they must have been too many for him, and that he has been injured in my defence. Pray, your Grace, let your people see to it. I might have been grossly ill-treated but for his opportune arrival."

"There is a young man lying in the roadway here, your Grace," spoke one of the servants, "his clothes half torn from his back, his head bleeding, and his arm broken. I think he is not of that band we dispersed, for I saw one of them deal him a kick and swear a lusty oath at him as they ran off."

"Oh, it is my preserver—I know it is!" cried Geraldine, with tears in her eyes. "Ah, your Grace will know what to do."

"Why, put him into the coach, and take him home," spoke Marlborough at once, his well-known humanity towards his wounded soldiers extending instantly to this injured citizen, who had risked perhaps life itself on behalf of law and order, and in defence of some unknown victim. "And as for you, Lady Geraldine, you must likewise return with me. I cannot suffer you to be abroad with these bands of ruffians prowling the streets. I will send a message to your father's house, and your dispersed servants will doubtless find their way home in time.

Lord Romaine shall know you safe; but you must return with me to-night."

Geraldine was only too thankful to do so. The very presence of the great Duke, calm and fearless, dissipated her fears and gave her confidence. She saw him superintend the lifting of the injured and unconscious man into the coach, heard him give directions to the servants to drive direct to Marlborough House, and then he himself took up his position beside her chair, and walked with it till they entered the hall of his great house, where she was suffered to alight, to be met by the Duchess (to whom a messenger had been hastily dispatched), and embraced by her with a motherly solicitude of which Lady Romaine would have been quite incapable.

"My dearest girl, what a terrible fright has been yours! Oh, how I rejoice that no hurt has come to you! I should never have forgiven myself for detaining you so long. Ah! and what have we here? Poor creature! he surely is not dead! What a ghastly object! Come away, dearest; it is no sight for you. What? He came to your rescue? One against a band? No wonder he has been roughly handled. Oh, he shall be well tended; I warrant you that. Yes, let him be carried into yonder ante-room. He shall have his wounds washed and dressed, and we will hear his story later. Geraldine, my love, what ails you? What do you see that you should look like that?"

For Geraldine's eyes, fixed upon the face of the wounded man being carried into the hall under the personal direction of the humane Duke, had grown fixed and glassy, and every drop of blood had ebbed from her face, leaving it of a marble hue.

As the sense of the Duchess's questions penetrated to her senses, the girl grasped her by the hand and whispered in tones of unrestrainable emotion,—

"It is he! it is he! And he has laid down his life for me!"

"It is who? What mean you, child? Do you know the—the gentleman?" asked the Duchess, perplexed and bewildered in her turn.

Geraldine's grip on her hands was firmer and faster.

"It is he of whom we were speaking but this evening. It is Sir Grey Dumaresq himself."

With an exclamation of amaze, the Duchess stepped forward to get a better view of the white and blood-stained face. She saw now that, despite his torn and muddy garments, his lack of all the fine adjuncts of the man of fashion, even to the falling wig, so essential to the equipment of the "gentleman" of the day, it was no low-born personage who had been carried into their stately house. Something of the refinement of the young man's face and features could be distinguished even in the midst of the disfiguring wounds and bruises and mire stains. She grasped her husband by the arm, and whispered in his ear,—

"Husband, look well at yonder man, for Geraldine declares it to be Sir Grey

Dumaresq, of whom we were speaking but a few hours back. What a strange thing, if it be!"

Marlborough bent over the young man, less with the intent of identifying him at the present moment as of ascertaining the extent of his injuries, and whether life yet remained whole in him. Experience on the battlefield had given him considerable powers of discerning these things, and he knew that the bludgeons and rapiers of the young bloods of London streets could do as deadly work as the bullets and sword-thrusts of actual battle.

Opening the young man's vest to ascertain whether the heart still beat, he saw something sparkling lying within, and the next moment had uttered a quick, sharp exclamation of astonishment.

Beckoning to his wife to approach, he held up the token—the amethyst ring which he himself had given to the stranger who had risked so much for him upon the field of Ramillies.

"Then Geraldine is right!" cried the Duchess in great excitement. "It is Grey Dumaresq; he is found at last."

CHAPTER XVII. IN THE HOUSE OF THE DUKE.

When Grey became next aware of any sensation, it was of a throbbing pain in his head, which gradually asserted itself and dissipated the black cloud of unconsciousness which had blotted out for the moment time and space and memory itself. He had no desire to open his eyes; but in a faint and feeble fashion he began to wonder what it was that had happened, and what was the cause of this pain. Gradually he felt also a strange powerless numbness in one of his arms, which he was unable to move. Also he felt that he was reposing on something very soft, with a scent of lavender in his nostrils, and a warmth and comfort to his body that went far to atone for pain in some of his members.

He heard the fall of coals in the grate; he knew that he was lying between smooth linen sheets; his soothed senses seemed to take in an atmosphere other than that of the attic which had so long been his home. He thought of Hartsbourne; it almost seemed as though he were back there once more. He decided that either this was a dream, or else that all which had gone before was one. Perhaps he was, in truth, a boy, and had been dreaming of manhood's struggles,

manhood's crosses. Perhaps when he awoke, it would be to find his mother bending over him, and to hear of some boyish escapade in which he had hurt himself. Such things had been in the past, and might be again; but sleep overtook his drowsy brain ere he had reasoned matters out.

How long he slept he knew not; but suddenly he woke with a mind more clear. The events of the previous evening came back to him sharply defined—the emptiness of their treasury; the urgent need upon him to obtain food and money; the shifts to which he had been reduced in so doing; and last of all, that race towards some lady's chair, attacked by street ruffians; the short, sharp tussle round it, and the rain of blows which had stretched him senseless in the gutter.

Yes, he remembered it all now, and could account for the pain in his head and arm. But what had befallen him since, and where was he now? As these questions asserted themselves, Grey opened his eyes; and what did he see?

He was lying in one of those huge canopied beds in which our ancestors delighted. He lay deep in a nest of down, fair linen sheets and silken coverlets were spread over him, and crimson curtains were drawn round three sides of the bed. He saw lace ruffles upon the night-robe in which he lay, and the air was charged with an aromatic fragrance which might haply proceed from a mixture of drugs and perfumes. But it was not upon these matters that Grey's attention was concentrated, but upon a quiet figure seated at a small table beside a brightly-blazing fire, his eyes bent fixedly upon the pages of a roll of manuscript spread open before him, and illumined by the soft radiance of a cluster of wax tapers set in a rich silver candlestick of many branches. This man was attired in a flowing dressing-gown (as we now call such a garment) of richly-embroidered silk, fastened at the throat with a jewelled clasp, and bound at the waist by a girdle of golden cord. The falling hair from the ponderous wig served in part to veil the face, which was turned slightly away from the bed; but as the reader moved to turn the page, and to trim one of the candles with the silver snuffers, his face was fully revealed to Grey, and the young man uttered an exclamation of astonishment, striving to start up in bed as he did so.

"The Duke himself!"

The words were scarcely articulate, for his tongue was dry and his voice sounded hoarse and strange in his own ears; but at the sound of it the Duke rose quickly from his seat, and came forward towards the bed with a pleasant smile upon his face.

"Ah, my young friend, so you have come to your senses. That is well—that is very well. Nay, nay; seek not to move. You must needs remain quiet awhile, to mend you of your hurts; but I trust they are of no very serious nature, and that you will soon be sound and whole."

"But, your Grace, how come I here? What means it that I find myself in

such a place as this? I surely am not dreaming. It can be none other but the great Duke of Marlborough himself!"

"And wherefore not," questioned the Duke, smiling, "since it was hard by my house that you were felled by ruffians, and in defence of a lady who had but lately left my doors? So now the mystery is explained; and we meet again, Grey Dumaresq, not on the field of battle this time, albeit you, who escaped without a scar or scratch at Ramillies, lie wounded here at Marlborough House. And right glad am I to welcome you within my doors; for it was but a few hours earlier that I was speaking of you with my wife, and wishing that I might meet you once more."

"Your Grace does me too much honour," spoke Grey in bewildered accents, "to bring me to your house, to sit up by my side—"

"Tush! That is but the habit of an old campaigner. My couch woos me not as it does other men. I am used to little sleep and hard days. I live something too soft when I reach this land. Besides, yonder scroll absorbed me. For that you are responsible, my friend. Did I not tell you when first we met that you had the face of a poet? And for me there is stronger attraction in the poetry of prose than in that which expresses itself in rhyme and metre, which has a fashion of halting, like a horse whose legs begin to fail him, and who changes his feet or stumbles ever and anon."

The colour swept over Grey's pale face. He remembered now that the packet containing his romance was buttoned up tightly in the breast pocket of the outer coat which he wore that day. Doubtless, it had fallen out when they took off his clothes, and there it lay spread out upon, the table, more than three parts read by the Duke himself.

"I ask no pardon for my boldness in thus scanning your romance," proceeded the great man kindly, "albeit I did open the packet with intent to discover if it might contain your place of abode, so that I might send word to your friend where you were and what had befallen you. Now wherefore this start and up-raising? Did I not tell you it behoved you to lie still? Must I call the physician from his slumbers to repeat his orders himself?"

"I crave your Grace's pardon," answered Grey, sinking back upon his pillows; "but your words did bring back to me the remembrance of a sick old man, dependent upon me for tendance and care. When I left him, I knew that for many hours he had all that he did need beside him. But if I am long detained from his side, he must needs suffer lack and hurt."

"Nay; but I will see that he does neither. Tell me only where he may be found, and I will send a trusty messenger to do all that is needful, and make arrangements for his comfort during the time which may elapse before you can return."

So Grey gave the needful information, and the Duke issued some orders to his servants in the outer room, returning to the bedside with a face expressive of a kindly curiosity and wonder.

Sitting down at the bedside, and entering into friendly talk with the young man, it was not difficult to draw from him a full and detailed account of all that had betided since they first met upon the field of Ramillies, and Grey had gone back to his native land to see what fortune had in store for him there.

The Duke made an excellent and sympathetic listener. He was sincerely interested in this young man. He owed him a personal debt of gratitude. Both he and his wife suspected that Lady Geraldine Adair, her favourite, was more than a little attracted by young Sir Grey Dumaresq, whom she had admitted to have met more than once during his brief career as a gentleman of fashion and the friend of Lord Sandford. They had seen self-betrayal in her face last night when he was carried in senseless, and she knew that he was her unknown preserver, who had diverted the attack of the young street ruffians from her chair, and had thus given time for the Duke's carriage to come up; and it had recalled to their minds and hearts the memory of their own young courting days, when John Churchill was paying his addresses to Sarah Jennings, and they could see and think of nothing but each other and their love. That Grey Dumaresq had fallen upon evil times there could be no manner of doubt, and that his fortunes were at the lowest ebb was manifest; yet the Duke, as he listened to the tale, was revolving many matters in his mind, and only spoke to lead the young man on by some well-timed question to express himself with more freedom and detail.

As for Grey, when once the ice had been broken, he had no desire for reserve. There was a strange sense of comfort and relief in pouring out his tale into sympathetic ears. The only matters he held back were his suspicions of others—firstly, those respecting his kinsman, and any possible hand he might have had in hastening his father's death; and secondly, those concerning Lord Sandford and his possible treachery towards himself. It seemed to him unfair to speak of unproven suspicions of crime or evil plotting to one so high in station as the Duke of Marlborough, whose smile or frown might mean so much to those who merited it. But of all else he spoke with frank freedom and unreserve; and at the last, when his tale was told, he saw the kindly gaze of the Duke bent upon him with shrewd searching inquiry.

"And so, Grey Dumaresq, you came actually to know the lack of food; and yet you bore upon your person all the while the token I had given you, telling you that you had but to show the same to my wife, and she would find means of rewarding you for the service done to her husband."

"I had had my reward in your Grace's favour and kindness," answered Grey with quiet dignity; "I prized that token as a thing most precious. Yet I never

desired to use it as a means of gain. I will not say I never thought of it," he added, after a moment's pause, his colour slightly rising as he spoke; "and perchance had matters gone so with my old friend Jonathan Wylde that privation or starvation nearly threatened him, I might e'en have swallowed my pride, and become a suppliant for favour. But I should have fallen in my own esteem had I been forced to such a step. It may be pride—false pride—haughtiness of spirit—I know not; but in the days of my prosperity I would not seek to curry favour by making capital out of something which I desired to retain as a pleasant memory. And when poverty had fallen upon me, and I had dropped my name and my title, and was known only as a poor actor, living in obscurity and poverty, how could I hope to be admitted to the presence of the Duchess? How could I desire to parade my fallen fortunes before the eyes of her train of servants? Your Grace had called me friend—that was my reward."

With a smile the great man slowly shook his head. Although a love for money amounting to greed was his own besetting sin, he could admire disinterestedness and honourable pride in others. He knew that had Grey played his cards well, seeking only personal advancement and place, he might by this time have risen, through the influence of the Duchess, into some position which would have secured him ease and affluence. He knew that in his place he would not have scrupled to do this, nor would nine-tenths of the men of the day. Although he smiled at the romantic folly and chivalrous scruples of the youth of poetical temperament, he could yet admire those highly unpractical qualities which had gone near to bring him to ruin.

"Well, my young friend," he said at last, "there must be an end of this masquerading in rags and tatters. I shall make it my business to bring your case before the Queen herself. I trow that you have been scurvily treated by your kinsman, and that that matter requires investigation. In addition to this, no man with that book in his hands," and he pointed to the roll upon the table, "should lack for daily bread. There should be a fortune in it, or in the hands of the man who owns the brain that conceived and the hand that penned it. See here, Sir Grey. The Queen is not exactly a critic of literature or a patron of all genius, but she has a love for what is pure and beautiful and simply true. I warrant that yonder romance will go home to her heart. My wife shall take it and read it to her this very afternoon, when she is to be in attendance upon her Majesty. When that has been done, take my word for it, you will have half the publishers of the town crowding cap in hand to crave the favour of bringing it out for the world to read. Oh, you need not blush, like a young mother when her firstborn babe is praised! I trow I know a good book when I see it; and that is one which will mightily please her Majesty, since it sings the praise of pure love and chivalrous fidelity, and all those virtues which seem well-nigh out of date, but which the

Queen would fain see restored as in the bygone days of knights-errant and King Arthur's Round Table."

"I was told that there was no sale nowadays for aught but scurrilous libels and bitter lampoons, or at best for political pamphlets treating of subjects of which I know naught."

"Ay, men love garbage, when they can get it; and the strife of bitter tongues is entertaining to those who would fain believe all that is bad of their fellows. Yet are there enough pure and loving souls left in this great Babylon to appreciate such work as yonder; and when once her Majesty's favour has been shown to it and its writer, you will see how these same publishers will change their tone. Every aspirant to literary fame needs a patron, and your patron shall be the Queen."

It was almost too wonderful for belief. Grey was not sure still that he did not dream. And after he had swallowed the draught which his host mixed and held to his lips, he quickly fell into a sound slumber from which even dreams were banished. But when he woke again the sun must long have been up, and surely he was again dreaming; for here was Dick himself, clad once more in the livery of a well-to-do servant, standing at his bedside with a tray containing a light but savoury breakfast.

"Dicon! Why, will wonders never cease? Man alive, how came you here?"

"Why, if you will but sit up, and let me give you of this broth which has been specially prepared for you, I will gladly tell you all. Master, my dear master, I trow that all our troubles are ended now!"

"If I could be sure I were not dreaming, good Dicon, belike I might say the same; but my head is so bewildered, I know not what to believe. Yet it is good to see your honest face again, even in a dream."

"Faith, I am no dream, master, and my tale can soon be told. I came into the town soon after dawn, to tell you I had discovered Don Carlos in Lord Sandford's stables at St. Albans, where he keeps the beasts he uses for racing and such like. And no sooner had I stepped into a tavern not so far from here for a pot of ale and crust of bread, when I did hear that all the town was ringing with the tale of how young Sir Grey Dumaresq, who had disappeared mysteriously not long since had risked his life not far from Marlborough House in beating off a gang of Mohawks from besetting and perhaps injuring the Lady Geraldine Adair, who was returning homewards after an evening spent with the Duchess. Nay, master, what ails you? You are white as a ghost. Lie down again, and let me fetch the leech."

"Nay, nay, good Dicon; 'tis but a passing qualm. Heed it not. So it was the Lady Geraldine who was in that chair?"

"Yes; and there is no knowing what might have befallen her, but for the timely arrival of Sir Grey. That is what all the town is buzzing about. Well, when

I heard that, I thought I would make bold to present myself here, and lay claim to be your servant. And who should come to speak with me but the Duke himself, who even remembered having seen my face that day at Ramillies! I vow he did talk with me for hard upon an hour; and I did tell him—oh, I told him everything that I could think of—things I have not yet dared to speak to you, my master. I have told him what Jock Jarvis and I do think of old Barty at Hartsbourne, and what I think of my Lord Sandford, and how he did first seek to cause you to break your neck, and then robbed you by foul means of your horse—the horse that carried his Grace so bravely through the battle of Ramillies. Oh, I saw how his eyes flashed. I trow he will have a rod in pickle for my Lord Sandford yet! He is a noble and knightly gentleman; and when he had heard all I had to say, he did call me an honest fellow; and he gave me some gold pieces, and sent me out with one of his servants to get me a livery such as it became Sir Grey's servant to wear. And he told me to come back to wait upon you, my master, for that he and her Grace were about to go to Whitehall to attend upon the Queen this afternoon and evening; and I warrant they will tell a tale to her Majesty which will put a spoke in some fine gentleman's wheel."

Grey lay back upon his pillows breathless with wonder and excitement; but it was excitement of that joyful kind which acts rather as a tonic upon the system than as a deterrent to recovery. He sent Dick away to make inquiries about the Old Lion; and as the man went out, the Duke's physician entered and examined the wound upon Grey's head and the condition of the broken arm, which he had skilfully set, and ended by permitting his patient, after other two hours of quiet rest, to leave his bed for a few hours to sit in the adjoining room for a while under the care of his servant.

"Had you been like too many of our young gallants, full-blooded, heated with wine, softened by gluttony and rich living, these injuries might have involved blood-letting and other severe remedies. But your temperate life and meagre living of late tell in your favour now. You need heartening up and strengthening by good food and a little old wine carefully administered, and you will soon cease to feel any ill effects. I congratulate you heartily on the occasion which has brought you once again into the notice of the Duke, who can be a stanch and true friend, as I have reason to know."

When Dick returned to him he was laden with fine clothing, such as Grey had been wont to wear, and which the man spread out with an air of pride and delight that was good to see.

"See there! The Duke's own clothes—those he wore some few years since, when he was something slimmer than now. He bade his man look them out for you, seeing that your own garments were all torn and mud-bespattered—"

"Ay, and of fustian, in lieu of cloth, and silk, and velvet," added Grey, as he

looked smilingly at the rich clothing before him. "Well, well, Dicon, when one comes suddenly into the midst of an enchanted palace, one must take the good the gods provide. But tell me of Mr. Wylde. Have you learned aught concerning him?"

"Why, truly yes. I saw the messenger who had been to him; and at the sight of the Duke's livery the whole house was astir, and not a creature there but will wait hand and foot upon the old man till other arrangements for him can be made. The fellow saw him and gave him news of you, and he was right well content. He said he should lack for nothing; and the man did leave with the host two gold pieces sent by his Grace, and told him that he would have to answer to the Duke if aught went amiss with him. After that you need have no fear."

Grey's last anxiety thus set at rest, he seemed to have nothing left to wish for. He drowsed away another hour in peaceful dreamy fashion, and felt fully equal to the fatigue of being dressed by Dick, and walking with the help of his arm into the adjoining room—a pleasant sunny apartment, on the table of which stood a great bowl of pure white snowdrops, at which Grey gazed with an infinite delight; for the sight of white flowers always brought back to his mind one particular face and form, and the very thought of his nearness to her last night set his heart beating tumultuously within him.

He was lying back luxuriously in a deep armchair, beside the glowing heat of the fire. The sunlight filtered in through the great mullions of the window, and the light seemed to concentrate itself upon the whiteness of the flowers near at hand. Dick had retired into the inner room to set his master's things in order there. Grey was alone—alone with his bewildering thoughts of happiness to come, scarce knowing how much of all he had heard could be true, or what would be the outcome.

Had he slept as he sat there musing? What was that sound somewhere in the room? He lifted his head and looked round. A tall, slender, white-robed figure was standing outlined against the rich tapestry of the wall behind. He had not heard the door open or the arras lifted. But she was there; and somehow he was not astonished. It seemed only natural to see her, the golden shafts of sunlight seeming to cling to her, and to follow her as she came slowly forward with that inimitable grace of movement he knew so well.

For one moment he sat spellbound, and then struggled to his feet, holding out his hands.

In a moment she was beside him, holding them—holding them fast; for he was weaker than he knew, and he swayed a little, a mist before his eyes. Then he was back in his chair, and she was standing over him. She was holding something to his lips. He drank, and his senses cleared.

"Forgive me," she said; "I should not have come yet; but I so longed to thank

you myself, and to be assured that you had not suffered too much in my service.”

”I could not suffer too much in such service,” he answered. ”And from my heart I thank you for coming. I have been so hungry for the sight of you, Geraldine.”

”And I too,” she answered in the lowest whisper, as she just touched his hair lightly with her hand.

CHAPTER XVIII. ”GOOD QUEEN ANNE.”

Sir Grey Dumaresq bent the knee before the little upright figure in the great carved chair, and the courtiers and ladies pressed one upon the other, as far as etiquette permitted, to get a sight of a personage who, for the moment, was all the talk of the town.

In her gentle, rather thin and high-pitched voice the Queen spoke, and a deep hush fell upon the great room.

”Rise, Sir Grey. I have sent for you here, inasmuch as I have heard much of your story from both the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough, my very good friends; and I have desired to see you, and to hear somewhat of many matters from your own lips.”

”Your Majesty has but to speak, and I will answer.”

”I hear that you did first encounter his Grace of Marlborough upon the field of Ramillies, and that you did there render him no small succour in a moment of personal peril.”

”It was my good fortune, madam, to possess a horse of great courage, and strength, and mettle; and when the Duke was for the moment surrounded by a party of the enemy, and had to force his own horse to a perilous leap, which caused him to fall and become useless, I was able, being close at hand, to mount him upon my good steed, which carried him through that day, which his own genius and courage has rendered for ever glorious.”

”How came it that you did adventure yourself into the heart of the danger, not being a soldier, or having any call to risk your life in the cause?”

”Madam, I am an Englishman, and every true-born Englishman is called to adventure himself wherever he may by happy chance be able to serve his country. That is my excuse for being where perchance I had no right to be, save the right

of which I have spoken, and of which I pray that your Majesty will not rob me. To serve his Queen and his country must needs be the desire of every man worthy the name, be he soldier or be he none."

A smile played over the pleasant countenance of the Queen. The pale, handsome face, the graceful bearing, the courtly address of the young man, pleased her well. Simply attired, without any of the extravagances of frippery which distinguished so many courtiers, and with his own curly brown locks floating round his head, his appearance was striking and prepossessing enough. To be sure, the Queen could resent any too great easiness in dress amongst her courtiers; and when one of her ministers, coming in haste, had appeared before her in a small wig, such as gentlemen used at their toilets, rather than in full dress, she had remarked to her ladies that she supposed his lordship would present himself in his night-cap next! But there was nothing slovenly in the rich plainness of Grey's attire; and he looked so much the poet and the dreamer, with the pallor of illness still upon him, and that slimness of figure partly due to privations now past, and partly to his active and temperate life, that the Queen regarded him with increasing favour, and a smile of decided approval was his reward.

"Well and bravely spoken, my young knight. And let me in my own person thank you for the service rendered that day to one who has been, and still will be, I doubt not, his country's most able defender. Had aught befallen the Duke on the field of Ramillies, a glorious victory would have become, I cannot doubt, a fearful defeat. France would have swept the Netherlands with her victorious armies, and there would have been none with genius and power to roll back the tide of battle. Wherefore England herself owes you a debt of gratitude, Sir Grey, which must not be forgotten."

"Madam, I have been richly repaid already for any poor service of mine—first by the gracious favour of the Duke, and now in still fuller measure by these words from your Majesty. Had fortune not so far favoured me that I was close at hand at the moment, I cannot doubt but that a score of others would have done what I was favoured by doing. To serve the man who serves his country so well is its own reward."

"Ah, my young friend, it is easy to see you were never bred up in courts," spoke the Queen, with a smile for Grey, and a quick searching glance round at the knots of courtiers and gentlemen filling the room. At this most of them shrank back, a little abashed at her look and her words. Shameless place-hunting was all the fashion of the day; and for any man to make light of service rendered, and to desire no reward, was a thing almost unheard of.

But after having just launched this shaft, the Queen said no more on that subject. She was by nature timid and gentle, and though not lacking in wit or in a quiet penetration, which was not always appreciated by those about her, was

for the most part an indulgent mistress, not disposed to overmuch blame even where she saw weakness.

"And I hear more of you than this, Sir Grey. You are not only a man of prompt action, but you are also a dreamer and a poet. I have read with pleasure your romance of pure chivalry, and I would that we could find in these degenerate days more knights and gentlemen, more spotless maidens and virtuous women, such as those of whom your pen delights to tell, and my ears delight to hear."

The young man bowed low, the crimson flush, which praise of his courage had not evoked, dyeing his cheek now that the child of his brain and hand was praised. The Queen continued graciously,—

"I have heard the whole romance, and its beauty touches my heart, and pleases also those amongst my ladies and gentlemen as are best able to appraise the merits of such poetic work. I desire, Sir Grey, that you will dedicate the tale to me, as one who has read and approved it, and would desire it to be widely known and read in the land. To be a patron of all true and beautiful art is the privilege of rulers, and therefore do I give this charge to you. I desire that such a story as you have conceived and penned should be circulated amongst my faithful subjects. They will learn from it loyalty, love, purity, and singleness of heart, and surely no nation can thrive or excel in which these virtues be absent."

A little buzz of amaze and gratulation went round the room as the Queen spoke thus. The young man's fortune as a writer was assuredly made. A second Philip Sidney had suddenly come to light. All the world would delight to honour the man approved of royalty.

Grey himself was speechless. Such a eulogy was altogether unexpected and bewildering. If Dame Fortune had, in the past, showed an unkind face towards him, surely she was atoning for her frowns by the most gracious of smiles now.

Perhaps the young author's confused and blissful silence pleased the Queen more than any florid words of gratitude such as she was used to hear. She spoke again, still in her most gracious and kindly way.

"Moreover, Sir Grey, I have heard somewhat of your history from his Grace of Marlborough, and it doth appear to me that you have been scurvily treated with respect to your rightful inheritance, the manor of Hartsbourne, which, though your property, you are debarred from enjoying. I have made strict inquiry into this matter, and have sent down special commissioners to seek speech with your kinsman now in possession, and to make some settlement with him for the restitution to you of the estate. It is not fitting that one to whom the country and its Queen owe a debt of gratitude should be ousted from his inheritance either by the cunning craft of a greedy miser, or for lack of means to satisfy a creditor and release his lands from debt. From what hath been told me, I misdoubt that unscrupulous means have been employed to oust you from possession

and enjoyment of your house and lands. But whether or not this be so, it is not fitting that things should longer continue as now. Sir Grey Dumaresq of Hartsbourne Manor must live upon his hereditary acres in becoming style. That fiat hath already gone forth. England's Queen and people will have it so. It were shame to both if the preserver of her great General should go unrewarded."

Grey, overwhelmed by the magnitude of the grace bestowed upon him, could only sink upon his knees before the Queen, murmuring some confused but heartfelt words of gratitude and loyalty. The royal lady gave him her hand to kiss, and looked smilingly upon him.

"Sir Grey," she said gently, "had you come hither to the Court at once on your return, boasting of what you had done, displaying the Duke's token, and seeking fame and fortune for yourself, belike I should have thought but little of the matter. I am for ever hearing the petitions of those seeking great things for themselves—seeking place, preferment, emoluments, with or without desert. Had you come thus, you had been lost in a crowd. I perchance should scarce have heard your name. But you have asked nothing for yourself. You endured hardship, privation, misery; you thought not scorn to win your bread—and the bread of another who had befriended you—by following a humble vocation. With that in your possession which would have at least placed you above want, you faced want itself rather than stultify your noble act by seeking to trade upon it. You rather sought to win the fame you merit by using those great gifts of poetry and art which it hath pleased God to bestow upon you. Therefore are you different from others; therefore hath your story touched the heart of your Queen; therefore is her favour won, in that she can value a man who seeks and asks nothing for himself, but rather desires that the glory of a noble deed shall be its own reward."

Again she tendered her hand, which Grey kissed in deepest reverence and gratitude. Then at a sign from the Duchess, who had all this time been standing behind the Queen's chair, he rose and made a deep inclination.

"I thank your Majesty a thousand times," he said in a very low voice. "I have no words in which to tell my gratitude, but I pray Heaven that in the future I may have the opportunity to show how deep and true that gratitude is."

"Deeds, and not words, will be your motto through life, I take it, Sir Grey; and in such fashion shall you best please your Queen and serve your country."

Then Grey found himself, he scarce knew how, in the outer room, thronged by courtiers and nobles and gentlemen, all eager to make his acquaintance, all agog to hear such parts of his story as were yet unknown to them, and above all eager to read the book of which it had pleased the Queen to speak in such high praise. To these worthies Grey was already a rising star, and they longed to bask in the light of his rays.

Quietly and courteously Grey replied to direct questions and to the advances showered upon him by the Court; but he disengaged himself as quickly as he could, and was glad to find himself in the coach which had brought him, and on his way to Marlborough House, where he was still a guest. For although he had quickly mended from his hurts, his hosts would not hear of his returning to his old quarters; and the Old Lion had been equally insistent on this point when Grey visited him, which he did on the first opportunity, to tell in person his marvellous tale.

"Nay, nay, my boy; you are now Sir Grey Dumaresq, and your life will run in different grooves. I did guess from the first that you were not what you seemed, and ever have I hoped that you would be restored to your rightful position in the world. As for me, I am well content. I have no lack of tendance—thanks to the liberality of the Duke, and to that wonderful personal visit he did pay me, which has raised me to a pinnacle of glory in the eyes of all men here. It contents me well to know that I am not forgotten, that you still have kindly thought to spare for the Old Lion. But for us to dwell beneath the same roof would not now be fitting or seemly. So think of that no more."

"When I have a roof of mine own I shall think of it much," spoke Grey with quick decision; "but for the nonce I am naught but a guest beneath that of the hospitable Duke. Well, let it remain so in the present; but for the future I make no pledge."

It was more than a week now since those words had been spoken, but they recurred to Grey's mind as he was driven homewards through the sunny streets. Hartsbourne! The name seemed to thrill in his ears like a clarion note of joy. Hartsbourne—his own old home—so well-beloved, so fair! Could it be possible that he would be master there again? The thought filled him with a sense akin to intoxication. The blood mounted to his head; he almost laughed aloud in his joy. Hartsbourne and its revenues his own! His romance published, and bringing him gold as well as fame! What might he not accomplish? How often had he dreamed in bygone years of what he would do for the restoration and adornment of the beautiful old house, and how he and his mother would live there in peace and happiness! True, that last part of the dream could not be realized now. His mother lay sleeping beneath the churchyard sod. Her eyes beheld, he doubted not, fairer sights than these. But yet, must his dream be altogether without fulfilment? Was there none other—nearer, dearer, if possible, than a mother—who might be the sharer of his joys? Had he not read something dazzling, wonderful, well-nigh unbelievable, in one pair of sweet eyes whose light seemed shining on him now? His lips had not dared to frame as yet either question or protestation; but did they not understand each other? His heart beat high with rapture. Perfect love had cast out fear. He knew that they belonged to each other for time and for eternity.

And now what hindered him from taking her to his heart, and telling her that he had loved her from the first moment of their meeting?

The Duke sat in his private closet, where he transacted his more important business, and Grey stood before him, having been summoned thither from his own apartments. He was received with a pleasant smile, and bidden to be seated.

"Well, my young friend," questioned the Duke, who, having been absent from home for a few days, had not seen his guest in private just recently, "and how has the world been serving you? And how goes the matter of the book?"

"Ah, I must tell you of that. I had, as your Grace did warn me, quite a levee of publishers desiring to issue it, each with some tempting offer as to payment. But I did as you bade me, and referred the matter to Mr. Poysner, by whose advice, I told them, I should be guided. And, in sooth, methinks he hath advised well; for not only have I received a handsome sum in gold already for the work, but I shall receive more according to the sale; and it is even now being printed as fast as the presses can work. Her Majesty is to have the first copy, bound with the choicest skill that can be brought to bear upon such work. Other choicely-bound volumes are to be reserved for my friends, after which it will be sold to the public; and already they say that the book is being eagerly asked for. Truly the word of a Queen and the patronage of the great are mighty factors in the world of letters!"

"As men of letters are fast learning, my young friend," replied the Duke with a smile. "Genius without a patron is like (as some wag remarked not long since) 'Paradise Lost' without the devil! It falls flat and unfruitful on unheeding ears. But now for another matter of import to yourself. Have you had news from Hartsbourne since her Majesty did speak to you anent that matter?"

"No, my lord; I have heard nothing. My servant Dick was sent thither by request to answer certain questions made by her Majesty's messengers, but he hath not yet returned, and I know nothing of what has transpired there."

His face expressed a keen desire for information, and the Duke at once satisfied this wish.

"Something strange has happened there which simplifies matters not a little. Your kinsman, Mr. Dumaresq, when questioned by the Queen's Commissioners as to his rights and position there, showed a number of papers which seemed on the face of them fair and right; but his uneasiness was manifest, and awoke suspicion. Also it was not clear that he possessed all the rights he claimed over the estate, or that Sir Hugh had signed all the papers; for upon some the writing of the name looked to practised eyes little like his. The more Mr. Dumaresq was questioned, the more uneasy did he become. So they left him that day, saying that they would come again on the morrow and finish the inquiry. By that time

your man Dick had arrived, and he with an old man upon the place had long talk with the messengers that night in the old man's room. It seems as though Mr. Dumaresq or his servant must have had some way of listening to what passed. A terrible suspicion was broached that your father's end was hastened by foul means. This was a point which the Commissioners declared must be thoroughly investigated later. They went away, but on the morrow returned—to find Mr. Dumaresq dead in his bed. His servant said he had been subject to seizures of late, and that agitation had probably caused the attack. Old Jock Jarvis and your man Dick are, however, strongly of opinion that he precipitated his own end by the use of perhaps the very same drug which he is suspected of having employed in your father's case. Be that as it may, the man is dead, and he has died without a will, so that whether or not he was ever legally entitled to what he so long held, you are now absolute master of Hartsbourne and all its revenues, without the need of any action or interference upon the part of the lawyers of the Queen."

Grey stood like one in a dream. He could scarce take in the meaning of it all. He had known that Hartsbourne was to be restored to him—he had had the Queen's word for that—but he had expected vexatious delays, complications, and difficulties. He had not dared to let himself hope to escape these. And now the Gordian knot had been cut—cut in a rather terrible fashion, perhaps, but still effectually cut. He was absolute master of his own again. He could ride to Hartsbourne and take possession so soon as his kinsman was laid to rest in the grave, where all enmity and all unhallowed secrets are buried. He had not found his tongue to express his feelings before the door opened and a secretary glided in and whispered something into the Duke's ear.

"He comes in good time," spoke Marlborough; "let him enter at once. Probably he brings news of the matter in hand."

Grey looked up, and behold there was Dick, travel-stained and bespattered with mud, but with a glowing, eager face, evidently full of news.

"Well, sirrah," spoke the Duke, smiling, "so you have come post haste with news. What wonderful tidings do you bring?"

The man made his semi-military salute, first to the Duke and then to his master. He needed no further encouragement in order to unburden himself of his tale.

"May it please your Grace, and you, my master, I have news of a wonderful discovery made by Jock and myself at Hartsbourne at dawn to-day. We have had our eye sharp upon old Judas, as we call Mr. Barty's wall-eyed Peter; and we have known right well that he has been up to some trick of his own ever since his master died. He has been prowling like a wild beast all about the house. We have heard him knocking and even sawing, when he thought himself alone there. It was old Jock to whom the thought first came. 'The old man has some secret

hoard; and Judas knows of it, but not the place. He is looking for it, trying to find it ere he is turned out. Well, that is a game that two can play at. You and I will look too, Dicon.' That is what old Jock said. Whilst Mr. Dumaresq was buried, and his man must for decency's sake go and stand beside the grave, we searched the house from basement to garret; but we had no more luck than Judas had."

"But you have had luck ere this, honest fellow; I see it in your eyes," spoke Marlborough with a laugh. "Come, let us know what you found, and what is the value of the treasure."

"It was to me the thought came," spoke Dick, with honest pride. "I was lying awake at night puzzling and pondering, when suddenly I remembered that first and only night you spent there, master, and how that you saw the old man suddenly appear behind your bed with a shining knife in his hand, and that he vanished ere you could grapple with him, and it seemed more like a vision than a reality. But I sprang from my bed, and I roused old Jock, and I yelled in his ear, 'Man, man, I know where the treasure is hid! Behind the wall of the tapestried guest-chamber, where my master slept, and where the wall did move from behind the bed head, and let his foe steal upon him unawares!'"

"Good thought!" ejaculated Grey excitedly; "and was it so?"

"We rose and dressed, and made our way into the house and up to the bed-chamber, and a tough job we had. And, my master, you must pardon us for the havoc we have made of woodwork and panelling; for the trick of the opening we could not find till all had been hewn away. But when it was at last laid bare, we saw the spring, and then the wall swung inwards with a noiseless, ghostlike motion, and within was a secret chamber well-nigh filled with coffers, some containing jewels—Dumaresq jewels, I doubt not—some gold pieces, some silver vessels. We did not open all. We had found enough. Master, there are the savings of years—the revenues of the broad lands which were paid to him—stowed away in yonder chamber. Oh, I can almost forgive him his villainies, now that all hath come to you! It is all there: it is all safe. We did pack Judas off with his wages and his belongings, and his master's clothes, which, I trow, none will grudge him; and we did get in a few trusty fellows from the place who hate Barty and long to see Sir Grey reigning at Hartsbourne again. And having made all safe, and the house in charge, under Jock, of these trusty lads, I did take horse forthwith to bring the news to my master, and here am I."

"And you shall not lose your reward, my trusty Dicon," spoke Grey with fervour; "for the love and trust of a loyal heart is worth more than treasure and

gold.”

CHAPTER XIX. LOVE'S TRIUMPHING.

”Mother, I cannot. I have tried—in all truth, I have. But it is all of no avail. I cannot love Lord Sandford. I cannot be his wife.”

”You could be his wife very well, if you chose obstinate girl; and as for loving him—poof!—love matters little when there is wealth and title, broad lands, and all that heart can desire into the bargain. You put me out of all patience with your mincing ways and disdainful airs. What more do you want than Lord Sandford offers? Does a countess's coronet not satisfy you? Do you desire to be a duchess, and take precedence of your own mother?”

And Lady Romaine brought her ivory fan down upon her daughter's shoulder with a tap that was almost like a blow. Tears of vexation and disappointment stood in her eyes. In her hand held an open letter, across the bottom of which the word ”Sandford” could be easily read, traced in a large and firm hand.

Before Geraldine had found words in which to reply, Lady Romaine had burst out again more petulantly than ever.

”To think of all the trouble I have been at with you! Do you think I want a great lumbering girl, looking ten years older than her years, and with all the affectations of a Quaker—horrid people!—in her gait and dress and speech, for ever in my train? Do you think it is pleasant for me to hear men laughing at your prim ways and silly scruples, and wondering where you learned them? Do you know what they call you behind your back? ’Mistress ”No, I thank you, sir.” Faugh! it makes me sick. Who are you, to hold up your opinions against the whole world? It makes me blush with shame and anger. And then, when I have gotten you a suitor in one of the best known nobles of the gay town, and reckon to have you off my hands and in the keeping of a husband who will know how to deal with your airs and graces, you must needs turn stubborn as a mule, and refuse his offer. Lard! it makes me sick to think I should have such a daughter.”

”I am very sorry that you are vexed, mother,” answered Geraldine quietly, ”but my father does not seem greatly to desire the match with my Lord Sandford. He did speak of it to me awhile back, but of late I have heard nothing anent the matter from him.”

"Tush, girl! your father is no judge in such matters. He is wrapped up in politics, and has no thought to spare for other things more close at home. And because, forsooth, Lord Sandford finds the Court too dull for him, and is seen there but seldom, your father must needs think lightly of him. As though half the gayest and most fashionable of the younger nobility did not eschew the deadly dullness of the Queen's presence-chamber! Why, I should die of boredom in a week had I to dance attendance on her Majesty. Lord Sandford shows his good sense by staying away. Oh to hear the tales some of them tell! Saints preserve me from the like!"

Geraldine answered no word. She hoped that she had now blown herself out. Not to her mother could she speak of those tender, wonderful, beautiful thoughts and hopes and feelings which had lately come into her life. In her heart of hearts she knew herself beloved of Grey Dumaresq—knew that it would not be long ere he declared himself. She had heard also rumours of what the world was saying about him—that his name was becoming known to all men, and that he was regarded as one who would rise to eminence and prosperity. But it was not for these things that she loved him. Her heart had been his long before—almost before she knew it herself—in the days of his poverty and obscurity, when she dreamed of him, rather than thought consciously, wondering whither he had gone, and what he was doing, and whether he was holding fast to the resolutions he had made. She knew how her heart had leaped at sight of him in the guise of the Youth—how he had flown to her rescue before all others when peril menaced her. Then her eyes had been opened to the love which had sprung up all unknown in her heart; but she had lost him once more, only to find him again in the unknown champion who had risked his life, without knowing for whom he did it, in the dark streets of London some few weeks back now. Since then she had seen him but once, and their words had been few, but their eyes had spoken more eloquently than their lips, and she knew that she had only to possess her soul in patience, and that all would be well. The Duke and the Duchess were her friends: that would be enough, and more than enough, for her father. As for Lady Romaine, she had always been the warm advocate of Lord Sandford's suit, and being ignorant of what was passing elsewhere, jealous of her daughter's friendship with the Duchess, wrapped up in her own trivial round of vanity and pleasure, imagined that the only way of getting rid of the incubus of this grave and stately daughter was by marrying her off-hand to the only suitor whom the girl had ever tolerated for a moment. Therefore this absolute refusal on Geraldine's part, and the indifference of Lord Romaine, who had merely told her he would not have the girl forced to any such step against her will, awoke in her a chagrin and vexation which were hard to bear, and which vented themselves in positive tears of passion and pain.

"Then you shall give the man his dismissal yourself, you minx, you obstinate hussy!" cried the enraged lady at last, flinging down the letter upon the table. "He says he will come to hear his fate to-morrow evening, and I vow I will have no hand in the telling of the tale of your shilly-shally and folly. Here have you been leading him on all these months—"

"Mother, that is not true," spoke Geraldine, rising to her feet and flashing one of her strange, earnest glances full upon her mother's face; "I did never lead him on. I did never encourage him. I did but obey your strict injunctions to speak with him, to make his acquaintance, to try if so be that I might learn to return the affection with which he professed to honour me."

"And was that not enough to encourage him, in one who played the prude or the vixen so well in other quarters?" fumed Lady Romaine. "That you, who chose to send away every other man who addressed compliments to you with a flea in his ear—that you should suffer him to attend upon you, and seem to take pleasure in his converse—was not that enough? Why make yourself the talk of the town with him, to send him away now?"

The injustice of this accusation caused the girl's cheek to flame; but she retained her self-control, and answered gently: "Methinks you are hard to please, mother; for whether I send men away or listen to them awhile, I am always in the wrong. I did but do your bidding in the matter of Lord Sandford, and I do not deny that I found him oftentimes an interesting talker, and that for a while I was willing to regard him as a friend. But then, as I came to know more and to hear more, my opinion was forced to change. I fear me that Lord Sandford himself did change, and for the worse. Nevertheless, I would not judge him; only this I say—that I cannot and I will not marry him."

"Then go your own way and die a spinster, soured with your own tempers and megrims!" cried Lady Romaine in a towering passion, as she swept from the room, her high heels clattering on the polished floor, her draperies making an angry hissing, like that of a snake disturbed. "I wash my hands of you from this time forth. Give Lord Sandford his dismissal yourself, and lose me one of my best and most useful friends. That is always the way with daughters. Young vipers they should be called!" And having now reached the door, Lady Romaine passed out and banged it hard behind her, as a further mark of her displeasure.

Geraldine, left alone, took up the letter and read it. It contained a definite proposal for her hand, was written to her mother (always Lord Sandford's friend and ally in this), and asked leave for the writer to present himself upon the following evening to learn his fate. The girl raised her eyes with a start, for it was upon the following day that the Duke and Duchess had invited themselves to dine with Lord and Lady Romaine, and to bring with them a guest whom they desired to present afresh to their hosts. Lady Romaine had shrugged her shoulders

and professed to be bored at the prospect, though in reality somewhat gratified at the idea of entertaining such illustrious guests. Her lord had been undisguisably gratified, and believing the invitation in some sort due to his daughter, had regarded her with increased favour. But as Geraldine revolved the situation, it seemed to her a strange and rather dangerous complication that Lord Sandford should appear upon that very night; for was it not said that he and Sir Grey Dumaresq had quarrelled bitterly, and that the former had even sought to compass the life of his friend?

Geraldine went to seek her father, but he was not to be found. Her mother refused her entrance into her rooms, and the girl was forced to await the result of the following evening without communicating her vague fears to any one. After all, who would be likely to heed them, and what could she say? It was only the vaguest rumours she had heard; the rest was but her own intuitions, which others would never consider.

"Sir Grey Dumaresq, let me present you to my daughter, Lady Geraldine Adair, whom you will perhaps lead to the dinner-table when the time comes."

So spoke Lord Romaine, his face beaming with gratification and pleasure. The Duke and Duchess had arrived, the last of the select company invited for that day, and the Duke had held a short, low-toned conversation with his host, which had brought many gratified smiles to the face of his interlocutor. Now Geraldine's hand was within that of the young baronet, and her voice trembled a little as she said to her father,—

"Sir Grey and I have met before."

"Ah yes; I believe that is so. But Sir Grey's appearance was something too brief and meteor-like that last time. Now I hope he comes as a fixed star to shine steadily in the sky. If all we hear be true, his brilliance will add a lustre to the times in which he lives."

"You do me too much honour, sir," answered Grey a bow; but there was no time for more, for the company was already moving, and Geraldine's hand was upon his arm, and the delicate fragrance which seemed always to cling about her brought a strange intoxication to his senses, which made speech at the first difficult to him.

Perhaps she shared this feeling, for she was silent too; but the delicate flush upon her face, and the soft shining of her eyes, enhanced her beauty to an extent which made many marvel that they had not observed it before. Now and again the eyes of the undeclared lovers met in a quick, eloquent glance; but for a while they did not directly address one another, for the table was silent, listening to the words of the Duke, who was addressing his host, and discussing with him some

matter of general interest. It was only later on, when the hum of talk became more dispersed, that Geraldine was able to say in a low voice,—

"I have heard of the success of your book. It has made my heart glad and happy. I did read some or it ere it went to the Queen. I thought it more beautiful than I can say."

"It should be beautiful, in all sooth, fair lady," answered Grey in a very low voice, "for the thought of it was inspired by the looks and words of one who is of all living creatures the fairest, the purest, the most precious. If my poor work meets with success in the world, it will be due not to any skill of mine, but to the goodness of two gracious ladies, one who inspired and the other who approved its motive."

Geraldine's face burned; there was a great joy in her heart. She could not misunderstand the look he bent upon her. Could it indeed be true that she had had any part or lot in this matter? The thought was bewildering, unspeakable. She sat as one in a dream. She heard him tell softly the tale of those strange events which had brought him unexpected wealth and prosperity. She realized that the time of trial and poverty and struggle was over, and that the sun of success was shining in his sky, and her heart was glad within her. Yet she rejoiced to think that he had faced privation and poverty bravely, and had sought by no unworthy way to mend his broken fortunes. She had trusted him and loved him in the hour of darkness: she was not ashamed to admit it now; she was proud and glad that it had been so.

Later on in the evening they found themselves together and alone in the little room at the far end of the reception suite, where they could talk undisturbed and unheard. It was sweet with the scent of violets, and the soft light of the wax candles in silver sconces illumined it only dimly. He closed the door, and let the curtain fall across it, and then he held out his uninjured hand to her. The broken arm, though mending fast, was still in a sling.

"Geraldine! my beloved!"

She went straight to him then, like a bird to its nest. No protestations were needed between them. They loved each other, and they knew it.

How long they had been alone, they did not know—time flies so quickly at times like these. It seemed but a few minutes to them, though it might well have been an hour, when the handle of the door was turned, and the curtain drawn back. Geraldine uttered a little cry of startled amaze. It was Lord Sandford who hail entered, and she had forgotten his very existence!

Had her mother, in one of her spiteful moods, told him that he would find her here? It was not impossible; and the girl's face grew a little white, for Lord Sandford's rapier dangled at his side, as was indeed the fashion of the times, and he was a man upon whose hot passions nobody could absolutely reckon. Strange

stories had been told of him before this.

The young Earl stood for a moment framed in the doorway, his powerful face set in lines the meaning of which it were hard to read aright. Grey had risen and stood close to Geraldine, his eyes fixed vigilantly upon the massive figure of the man who had once been his friend. To the girl it seemed as though their eyes met, and glanced one against the other, like the blades of duellists in a preliminary pass. Her breath came thick and fast. She felt the anxious, tumultuous beating of her heart.

Lord Sandford was the first to break the tense silence.

"Lady Geraldine, I came hither to-night to receive an answer to the offer of marriage which I sent to you through your mother, Lady Romaine. Is this the answer you have prepared for me?"

He looked straight at the girl, and then at Grey, with a wide, unabashed gaze that did not shrink or falter. Grey made one step forward, and spoke in low, quiet tones.

"My lord, you may receive your answer at my hands, for the Lady Geraldine Adair is now my promised wife."

"Lady Geraldine," spoke Lord Sandford, "is this the truth?"

"It is, my lord, albeit I had not meant to give you your answer in such like fashion. I thank you for the honour you have done me; but my heart is given elsewhere."

"Right!" spoke Lord Sandford, in his resonant and emphatic tones. He had dropped the curtain behind him, and now came forward several paces. His face was not easy to read, but he held his head proudly, and looked the lovers straight in the eyes. "I would not have it otherwise, Lady Geraldine; for you have chosen well. You have chosen such an one as you must needs choose. Like will seek like; virtue, fidelity, purity, and honour must fly upward, will not be dragged downward. I saw it from the first; and at the first I rebelled. I swore it should not be so. I stooped to dishonour to remove an obstacle from my path. I thought I had succeeded; but soon I knew I had not advanced my cause one whit. I was rightly served. I did wrong with open eyes. I sinned, as it were, with a cart-ropes; and I have had my deserts. I lost my friend, but I won no wife. I was outwitted, at every point. I went on hoping. I am not a man who easily gives up what my heart is set on. Up to the last I hoped to win. But yesterday, after my letter was written and dispatched, I knew that I was beaten at every point."

"Yesterday," faltered Geraldine.

"Even so, lady. I have been absent from town of late; but yesterday in the afternoon I returned. I went as usual to the coffee-house to learn the news, and I learnt it."

Lord Sandford's gaze flashed full upon Grey. He stood squarely in front of

him, and held out his hand.

"Grey Dumaresq, I did once seek to do you a great and a grievous wrong. I confess the same with shame of heart. Will you accept my hand in friendship now, and with it my heartiest good wishes for your happiness in life with the lady of your choice?"

Grey did not hesitate; his hand was in Lord Sandford's, clasping it close. All was forgotten, at that moment save the old attraction and fascination which this man had exercised upon him from the first.

"I love the lady of your choice," spoke the Earl, without the faintest shade of hesitation in his tone. "I have loved her long. I doubt me if ever I shall love another in like fashion. And because I love her with every best and truest feeling of my heart, so am I able to desire above all else in the world her best happiness. That happiness she will find with you rather than with me. I am not fool enough not to know that. If I could have won her, I would have sought to make her happy. I swear it before God! But having failed, I yet desire above all things to see her happy with the man of her choice; and I say that she has chosen wisely."

It was indeed a triumph of love. The innate strength and nobility of this man's nature had been brought out by the honest fervour of his love. He had enough greatness of soul to be able to give the right hand of fellowship to his successful rival, though he himself must forego that happiness which he had long been seeking to attain. Grey felt that in the days that were to come Lord Sandford must needs show himself in different colours from those of the past. This victory must surely be a stepping-stone on which he would rise to higher and nobler things.

Geraldine now stood before him, all shrinking over, her eyes alight with pure womanly gratitude, admiration, and affection.

"I thank you, my lord, for such good words. Forgive me if I have ever misjudged you."

"Nay, lady, you never did that; you did but appraise me too truly."

"Yet I had ever some liking for you, my lord—think it not otherwise—save when I thought, I feared—"

"Yes, yes; I know, I understand. Friendship you had for me, so long as I deserved it; but love—never. And you were right, Lady Geraldine; you were right to withhold that. Perchance if your sweet eyes, like wells of liquid light, had not seen so clearly, had not read the secrets I sought to hide, my own love might not have blazed so fiercely. It is ever the unattainable which men desire to possess. But let us think of that no more. Let us bury the past, and live anew in the future. Friendship is left to us—a friendship which, I trust, will last a lifetime." And so speaking he turned once more to Grey, and said with a smile lighting his face,—

"And shall I, for a wedding-gift, restore to you your good horse, Don Carlos,

at present in my stables at St. Albans?"

He spoke so freely and openly that Grey heard him in amaze.

"Have you Don Carlos?" spoke Geraldine, much astonished. "I did think that he was stolen from Sir Grey."

"And so think I; but I have had no hand in that business, save that I did hear something of the matter, and fearing foul play I resolved to become master of the gallant beast. Grey had disappeared, I knew not where. My evil anger had burned itself out, and I loathed myself for what I had done in the past. I thought that I might perchance make some reparation by purchasing the good horse he loved, since I heard it was to be sold, that I might keep it awhile, and restore it to its owner if kind fortune gave me the chance. It seemed to me all the amends I might ever make to the steed and his rider for the mischief I sought once to do to both. So, my friend, the horse is yours whensoever you like to lay claim to him. I restore him the more readily in that none of my people can ride him. He brooks not long a strange rider on his back. He has condescended to carry me for a brief while, but he goes unwillingly; he frets after his old master. He would win no races for a new one. So tell me only where and when to deliver him, and you shall have him so soon as you desire. I trow the old miser of Hartsbourne, who, I hear, is now dead, filched him from you by subtlety, for you would never sell your friend."

Grey, ashamed of the thoughts he had harboured against Lord Sandford in this matter, told the whole tale of the creature's disappearance; but he added, with a smile,—

"I suspect that whatever price you paid for him is lying in one of the coffers now discovered in the old house, and I will gladly buy him back."

"Nay, nay; that must not be. It is my wedding-gift to you or to your gentle lady here; and all I ask is, that upon some future day you will suffer me to visit you in your wedded home at Hartsbourne, and see Don Carlos and his master united once more."

CHAPTER XX. MERRY AS A MARRIAGE BELL.

The brilliant light of a sunny June morning was illumining the private chapel, where a marriage was being solemnized in presence of the Queen, and of certain

favoured persons connected with the Court, of whom the Duchess of Marlborough was one.

The Duke himself was in Holland, whither he had gone so soon as the army was able to leave its winter quarters. The year of victory, from which he had returned a few months before, was destined to be followed by a year of disaster to the Allies, and already the brow of the Duchess seemed somewhat clouded by care. She had her own troubles, too, at Court. The Queen's favour was distinctly waning, and the imperious temper of the Duchess knew not how to put up with what seemed to her coldness or slights. She felt the influence of Harley, and of her kinswoman and his, Mrs. Masham, gaining ground daily; and the presage of coming trouble seemed to be hanging over her now. Yet she bore herself bravely, and to-day her face was wreathed in smiles; for Sir Grey Dumaresq was her particular favourite, and had been her guest for a great part of the year, whenever he was in town; and the Queen's interest in the young man and his career and success was one of the strongest links which still bound them together.

And to-day Grey Dumaresq was to wed the Lady Geraldine, and the Queen had decreed that the ceremony should take place at an early hour in her own private chapel in Kensington Palace, that she might witness the nuptials herself; for she had been greatly pleased by the beauty and modesty and gentleness of Geraldine, who had been presented to her by the Duchess, and she desired to show her approval of the young baronet's choice by her own presence at his espousals.

Lady Romaine had forgotten her anger and jealousy against her daughter in her pride and delight at the honour bestowed upon them. It had pleased her to speak slightly of the Queen and her Court at such times as she had been uncertain of the nature of her own reception there; but now she could not boast sufficiently of the condescension and kindness of the Queen, of her intimacy with the Duchess, and of the favour in which her son-in-law-elect was held by royalty and by all the Court. The matron had even found it well to throw aside some of those frivolities and follies that hitherto had been jealously retained, as giving her favour in the eyes of the young bloods of fashion, with whom she had been wont to amuse herself. Her ready observation told her that she was derided for these by graver persons, and that at the Court they would hinder rather than help her advance to favour. With quick adaptability, she had sought to model herself upon the graver ladies surrounding the Queen, and even to emulate the Duchess of Marlborough in her stately dignity of demeanour. If she had not succeeded in this, she had at least gained much that had hitherto been lacking, and her husband and daughter rejoiced heartily in the change. If some of her admirers forsook her, she found their place taken by men of far greater standing, who regarded Lord Romaine as a man likely to be useful to his party, and paid a certain polished

court to his handsome wife. The lady began to talk politics now, to discuss the Act of Union, the Occasional Conformity Bill, and other topics of the day, with an air of interest and knowledge; and being gifted with considerable quickness and powers of assimilation and reproduction, she was soon able to hold her own, and pass for a woman of acuteness and observation.

She had found her daughter of great use to her at the first, for Geraldine was remarkably well educated, and had a very clear notion of the state of parties and the history of public movements. All her stores of information were at her mother's disposal, and so a new link had been formed between them during the months of the girl's betrothal, and instead of the mother's looking forward with delight to being rid of the incubus of a grown-up daughter, she was disposed to be pathetic over the separation and her own personal loss.

Now this was a very happy change for Geraldine, for the lack of a mother's love had been very keenly felt by her. Her face, as she stood at the altar, plighting her troth to the man she loved, was full of a wonderful happiness and joy—a different face from the grave and almost wistful one of the past; different, and yet with an enhanced beauty which riveted the eyes of all beholders, and caused the Queen to wipe her eyes with her lace kerchief as she gazed, whisper softly in the ear of one of her ladies,—

"Ah me! it is good to be young and beloved! Heaven send she may never know aught to dim that joy and that love!"

Sir Grey's happiness and joy was no whit less than that of his bride, and was written almost as clear upon his face. Bride and bridegroom were both clad in white, as became the season and the ceremony; and the young man's gleaming whiteness was well set off by the gorgeous colours of Lord Sandford's attire, as he stood beside him as his supporter and "best man." This he did by his own request, and with the ready consent of the Queen. She had been told enough of Lord Sandford to be interested in that rather remarkable personage. She had given him audience more than once, and had intrusted him earlier in the year with a special embassy to the Duke of Marlborough and Prince Eugene, which he had so ably carried out that it was whispered he was likely to obtain more such secret service errands. It was the sort of work for which he was eminently fitted, and the responsibility had sobered him and kept in check all disposition on his part to break out into any of the wild excesses with which he had been wont to amuse himself in order to while away the time. He was now setting to work to get his affairs into order. Having failed to win the fortune of the heiress, he had to turn his mind to other methods. He had sold his horses for large sums to the gilded dandies who fluttered about him, and with some heavy winnings at the card-tables he paid off a number of his debts, and began to feel like a free man. The sale of his property at St. Albans, which he no longer wanted, enabled

him to pay off a mortgage upon his ancestral acres; and with a little care and moderate luck in gaming (for Lord Sandford was not possessed of the scruples which had harassed Grey, and which were far in advance of his day), he hoped soon to retrieve the position of a man of wealth and position, which he had been inclined to fling away for the pleasures of a careless and vicious age.

His friendship with Grey Dumaresq, strangely begun, and strangely broken, was now cemented afresh, and seemed likely to last and to increase. It was by his own wish that he stood beside him on his marriage day. He had so schooled himself that he could do this without pain, and he would have grudged the place to any other, claiming his own right as being Grey's oldest available friend.

And now the brief ceremony was ended. Sir Grey and his bride came down from the steps of the altar to receive the felicitations and gratulations of their friends. The Queen kissed the bride upon her brow, wished her happiness, and presented her with a beautiful clasp of diamonds and pearls, which she took from the laces about her throat, and bade the young wife wear for her sake. Then when the royal lady had taken her departure, and the little procession had left the chapel, other friends and well-wishers crowded round, prophesying happiness and all other good things to the youthful pair. They streamed out—a rainbow-tinted bevy—into the courtyard, where coaches waited to convey them to the wedding feast at Lord Romaine's house; and this they found laid out in *al fresco* fashion beneath the trees of the beautiful old garden, which had been Geraldine's place of refuge for so long, and to which she would be half sorry now to bid farewell.

"Do you remember, sweetheart," whispered Grey in her ear, as they stood together and a little apart at the conclusion of the banquet—"do you remember that summer morning a year ago when I did hear you singing, and could not keep away?"

"Remember! Do I ever forget it as I stand here looking at the shining river? Ah dear my lord, methinks it was upon that day that my heart first did leave mine own keeping, albeit it was long ere I knew it!"

"Could we but have seen how it would be a year hence with us, how little would the clouds and darkness which followed have disturbed and troubled our peace!"

"And yet methinks, dear love, it is better not to know; for so do we learn to trust the love of our heavenly Father, and to put our faith and confidence in Him. So He leads us from darkness into light, and our hearts are filled with love and gratitude towards Him."

Grey bent and kissed her on the brow.

"You shall teach me more of your pure faith and love, my wife, that we may be one in all things."

Don Carlos was pawing the stones of the courtyard, in fretted impatience which Dick had some ado to curb. Beside him stood a light, graceful barb, bearing a lady's saddle on his back. A little in the rear were some half-dozen horses and some liveried servants. The clock in the tower of Lord Romaine's house had just struck the hour of three.

The doors were flung open wide, and forth there came a gay company of guests, all eager to speed upon their way the newly-wedded pair. These had changed their wedding finery for riding dress. Grey wore his favourite workman-like suit of fine buff, stamped in silver, with white buckskin breeches and long boots. His lady was habited in a riding-dress of white face-cloth, with lacings of golden cord, a white hat with a drooping plume, and long white gauntlet gloves. Her palfrey was snow-white too, as became the bearer of a bride; and as Grey swung her deftly to her saddle, the pretty creature curveted and pranced, as though in pride at bearing so fair a burden.

The next minute the bridegroom had leaped upon Don Carlos, and both riders were waving their hands in response to the eager clamour of gratulation and farewell which sprang to the lips of the bystanders. Smiling and waving his hat, Grey put Don Carlos at a trot, and the little procession swept out of the courtyard in all the glory of the summer afternoon, with the voices of their friends sounding gaily in their ears.

"We shall be at Hartsbourne ere the day dies, sweet wife," spoke Grey, as he looked up at the sunny sky. "You will not be fatigued by the ride, after all you have gone through? You would not rather spend a night upon the way?"

"Ah no; this is rest," answered Geraldine, as her light, mettlesome palfrey cantered gently alongside the stalwart Don Carlos. "I could ride for ever through this clear, soft sunshine, with the wind fanning our faces. Nay, nay, but we will reach Hartsbourne to-night. Have I not waited long enough to see my future home, O tyrant husband, who would not take me there before?" and a laugh sparkled in her eyes as she spoke these words, for it had always been one of their cherished jests that not till she came there as his wife should she look upon the beauties and the charms of Hartsbourne.

"Did you desire it then so much, dearest?" he asked. "It was my wish that it should be made a meet and fitting home for you ere I did bring you thither. It looked so desolate when I reached it after being long absent. I did desire to take away that air of desolation ere your dear eyes should behold it. Yet had I thought you wished it so much—"

"I wish nothing but to do your will, good my lord," she answered, with a look in her eyes that set his heart beating tumultuously within him. "And is not this worth waiting for? Can any sight of it be precious as this one will be, when my husband takes me home?"

They had distanced their servants, and were riding alone in the lane; for they skirted the great city instead of passing through it, and kept to the softer, pleasanter tracks through fields and woodlands; so he could reach forth and take her hand, and hold it in his as they rode onwards with free elastic stride.

"My beloved, my beloved, my beloved!" he replied, and his tongue refused all other words.

The glory of the summer sunset was in the sky as they breasted the last wooded ridge which hid them from the hollow in which Hartsbourne lay. The woods, shimmering in their exquisite dress of golden green, seemed to take fire from the level glory of the ruddy rays lying across them. The waving grass tossed like a restless sea of light, as the breeze played over it; and the birds in the thickets, silent during the hours of heat, now burst into liquid melody to sing to rest the dying day.

Halting at the top of the ridge, as Grey had halted there so long ago, as it now seemed to him, he pointed downwards with his whip, and there was a little quiver in his voice as he said,—

"Yonder, in that hollow, lies our home. You can scarce see it for the screen of the trees; but you will see it anon—there where the shining stream meanders and the glades of the wood open out. Come, let us leave the road, and ride through my favourite glade. So shall I show you a glimpse of your home, where to my eyes it looks the fairest."

They moved along side by side. The horses' feet made scarce a sound, sunk deep in grass and moss. The golden glamour of the beech wood encircled them, lights and shadows played hide-and-seek along the sward, flowers gemmed the hollows, and the breath of the honeysuckle was sweet to their senses as they pursued their way. The deer got up in haste at their approach, and scuttled away into deeper shadow; and squirrels and rabbits whisked hither and thither, astonished at this sudden invasion of their silvan solitude.

But the bride and bridegroom scarce exchanged a word; their hearts were well-nigh too full. The happiness was almost oppressive. Suddenly Grey paused, and, drawing her a little to the left, pointed through an opening in the trees and said,—

"There is your home, my dearest!"

She saw it then, and her heart gave a great throb. They were looking upon the west front of the gray old house, no longer lying desolate, forlorn, shut up, its windows broken or shuttered, neglect and decay everywhere. No, all that was changed now. The windows shone between their carved mullions; the creepers which curtained the walls had been cut and trained, so that they could bloom

and breathe once more, instead of hanging in vast masses, almost broken down by their own weight. The last of the sunlight gilded the tracery of oriel window and ancient carving; lay like a caress upon the smooth green of the wide terrace in front, with its clipped yew trees, its stone vases and statues, and its ancient sundial. Two stately peacocks walked up and down, uttering from time to time their strange, melancholy trumpet note. A great hound rose up from a sheltered corner, threw his head into the air, sniffed for a few moments, and then bounded towards them with a mighty baying sound.

"Our first welcome, dear heart," spoke Grey. "This is one of the guardians of Hartsbourne's treasure. Well, he must learn that he has a new and a greater treasure to guard now."

The hound knew the master well. He fawned upon him with delight; and, after having gravely sniffed at Geraldine's proffered hand, took her once and for all beneath his protection, and shared the love of his faithful heart betwixt her and her lord.

The young wife slipped from her saddle as they reached the little wooden bridge which led over the stream, and the servants coming up in a few moments took the horses round by the road, whilst husband and wife went onwards with the hound in attendance, up the sloping greensward, where flowers gemmed the borders, and roses gave forth their sweetness upon the evening air; through the gardens, already partially restored, and in time to be made yet more beautiful; towards the house which was their home, lying dim and dreamlike in the gathering twilight.

"Dear heart, we are at home. Welcome to Hartsbourne!" spoke he. And she could only lift her quivering lips to his, for she had no words in which to answer him.

And so they passed into the ancient house together, to receive the loving greetings of their retainers and servants, who all knew the master by this time, and were eager and joyfully ready to receive the bride of his choice. Old Jock was there, in the glory of his new place as house-steward, the tears of joy standing in his eyes as he kissed the hand the lady graciously extended, when she thanked him for his protestations of devotion, and told him how she had heard of his fidelity to his master. It was all so happy, so full of simple joy and good will. She read affection to her lord in every face; she saw by the flower-decked rooms and the loving care everywhere visible throughout the quaint old house how much all had desired that this home-coming should bring joy to their hearts and bespeak the welcome of loving service. That was more to her than the beauty of the things her eyes rested upon—the soft hangings, the quaint carvings, the pictures, the plenishings, the rare and costly objects which met her gaze at every turn.

"They were found in the secret chamber, most of them," Grey told her as,

after having supped, they walked hand in hand through the house, which was all lighted up for their inspection. "When and how and whence they came there, I know not. Jock declares that many are heirlooms, which must have been hidden away in some time of peril—possibly at the rising of Monmouth, or at the Revolution; some perhaps even in the civil war; others, methinks, my poor father must have won from luckless gamblers, and have sold to his kinsman, or paid over to him as interest upon debts. I know not, I cannot tell; but here they are, and all men tell me they are mine. They will serve to make a fitting setting for the priceless jewel which my house doth now enshrine; and in so doing, they and we must needs find contentment."

It would have been hard, in sooth, not to feel contentment in such environment. Grey had taken care not to destroy, but to restore, when the old house passed into his keeping once more. The old world charm hung yet upon it; nothing garish or bizarre was to be found there, as in the houses of fashionable dames such as Lady Romaine, who loved to jumble together trophies and curiosities from every part of the globe in confusion worse confounded. There was none of this lavish profusion or confusion here; but each thing looked in its own place, set off by polished panelling or dusky arras. And even the scent of rose leaves was the same as in his mother's day; and Grey whispered to his bride that he liked to think she could see them now, and share in some sort their happiness.

As they reached the end of a long gallery, which brought their wanderings almost to a close, Grey paused before the door of a certain room, and instead of turning the handle immediately, he knocked upon the panels of the door.

A deep sonorous voice bade him enter; and taking his wife's hand in his, he led her into a large, low, airy apartment, which had windows looking both south and west, where, upon a cleverly-contrived couch, running very easily upon wheels, lay an old man with a lion-like face and a mass of snow-white hair, whose hands were extended in eager yet restrained and dignified greeting.

"Welcome—thrice welcome—happy bridegroom! Methought you would not fail to come and visit me to-night!"

"Of course I should not fail, good friend; and here I bring you my wife, whom you have oft-times desired to see.—Geraldine, need I tell you that this is my friend, Mr. Jonathan Wylde, whom last you saw as Father Time with his scythe and hour-glass? Well, he has cheated both, you see, albeit he was like to be mown down once. He will remain as our honoured guest and friend so long as he is spared to us. For he did come to my aid when I was very near to desperation and despair, and we have stood shoulder to shoulder ever since."

"I know all the tale," answered Geraldine, and she knelt down and took the old man's hands in hers, bending upon him one of her sweetest glances. "It is a tale that goes to my heart, for it is hard to think even of sufferings past, where

those we love are concerned. I thank you from my heart for all you did at that time for my husband. And indeed it was (under Providence) through you that his bark reached at the last so fair a haven, and that we are here together this night."

The tears which had sprung to the old man's eyes slowly rolled down his cheeks. His happiness in seeing again the man he loved with his bride at his side was almost too much for him. Geraldine saw this, and pressed his hands gently, rising to her feet at the same time.

"Nay, nay," he answered brokenly; "I was but an instrument in the hands of Providence—a link of the chain not made by human hands."

"Yes, truly, we will think of it like that. It is God who has brought good out of evil, peace out of strife, calm out of storm for us all. To Him will we give the thanks and the praise. And now, good friend, we must bid you farewell, though only till the morrow."

He took their hands, one in each of his, and looked at them as one of the old patriarchs might have gazed upon his beloved ones.

"God bless and prosper you, my children!" he said; and they softly answered, "Amen."

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