Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu

Wylder's Hand

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CHAPTER I.
RELATING HOW I DROVE THROUGH THE VILLAGE OF GYLINGDEN WITH MARK WYLDER'S LETTER IN MY VALISE.

It was late in the autumn, and I was skimming along, through a rich English county, in a postchaise, among tall hedgerows gilded, like all the landscape, with the slanting beams of sunset. The road makes a long and easy descent into the little town of Gylingden, and down this we were going at an exhilarating pace, and the jingle of the vehicle sounded like sledge-bells in my ears, and its swaying and jerking were pleasant and life-like. I fancy I was in one of those moods which, under similar circumstances, I sometimes experience still—a semi-narcotic excitement, silent but delightful.

An undulating landscape, with a homely farmstead here and there, and plenty of old English timber scattered grandly over it, extended mistily to my right; on the left the road is overtopped by masses of noble forest. The old park of Brandon lies there, more than four miles from end to end. These masses of solemn and discoloured verdure, the faint but splendid lights, and long filmy shadows, the slopes and hollows—my eyes wandered over them all with that strange sense of unreality, and that mingling of sweet and bitter fancy, with which we revisit a scene familiar in very remote and early childhood, and which has haunted a long interval of maturity and absence, like a romantic reverie.

As I looked through the chaise-windows, every moment presented some group, or outline, or homely object, for years forgotten; and now, with a strange surprise how vividly remembered and how affectionately greeted! We drove by the small old house at the left, with its double gable and pretty grass garden, and trim yews and modern lilacs and laburnums, backed by the grand timber of the park. It was the parsonage, and old bachelor Doctor Crewe, the rector, in my nonage, still stood, in memory, at the door, in his black shorts and gaiters, with his hands in his pockets, and a puckered smile on his hard ruddy countenance, as I approached. He smiled little on others I believe, but always kindly upon me. This general liking for children and instinct of smiling on them is one source of the delightful illusions which make the remembrance of early days so like a dream of Paradise, and give us, at starting, such false notions of our value.

There was a little fair-haired child playing on the ground before the steps as I whirled by. The old rector had long passed away; the shorts, gaiters, and smile—a phantom; and nature, who had gathered in the past, was providing for the future.

The pretty mill-road, running up through Redman's Dell, dank and dark with tall romantic trees, was left behind in another moment; and we were now traversing the homely and antique street of the little town, with its queer shops and solid steep-roofed residences. Up Church-street I contrived a peep at the old gray tower where the chimes hung; and as we turned the corner a glance at the 'Brandon Arms.' How very small and low that palatial hostelry of my earlier recollections had grown! There were new faces at the door. It was only two-and-twenty years ago, and I was then but eleven years old. A retrospect of a score of years or so, at three-and-thirty, is a much vaster affair than a much longer one at fifty.

The whole thing seemed like yesterday; and as I write, I open my eyes and start and cry, 'can it be twenty, five-and-twenty, aye, by Jove! five-and-thirty, years since then?' How my days have flown! And I think when another such yesterday shall have arrived, where shall I be?

The first ten years of my life were longer than all the rest put together, and I think would continue to be so were my future extended to an ante-Noachian span. It is the first ten that emerge from nothing, and commencing in a point, it is during them that consciousness, memory—all the faculties grow, and the experience of sense is so novel, crowded, and astounding. It is this beginning at a point, and expanding to the immense disk of our present range of sensuous experience, that gives to them so prodigious an illusory perspective, and makes us in childhood, measuring futurity by them, form so wild and exaggerated an estimate of the duration of human life. But, I beg your pardon.

My journey was from London. When I had reached my lodgings, after my little excursion up the Rhine, upon my table there lay, among the rest, one letter—there generally *is* in an overdue bundle—which I viewed with suspicion. I could not in the least tell why. It was a broad-faced letter, of bluish complexion, and had made inquisition after me in the country—had asked for me at Queen's Folkstone; and, *vised* by my cousin, had presented itself at the Friars, in Shropshire, and thence proceeded by Sir Harry's direction

(there was the autograph) to Nolton Hall; thence again to Ilchester, whence my fiery and decisive old aunt sent it straight back to my cousin, with a whisk of her pen which seemed to say, 'How the plague can I tell where the puppy is?—'tis your business, Sir, not mine, to find him out!' And so my cousin despatched it to my head-quarters in town, where from the table it looked up in my face, with a broad red seal, and a countenance scarred and marred all over with various post-marks, erasures, and transverse directions, the scars and furrows of disappointment and adventure.

It had not a good countenance, somehow. The original lines were not prepossessing. The handwriting I knew as one sometimes knows a face, without being able to remember who the plague it belongs to; but, still, with an unpleasant association about it. I examined it carefully, and laid it down unopened. I went through half-a-dozen others, and recurred to it, and puzzled over its exterior again, and again postponed what I fancied would prove a disagreeable discovery; and this happened every now and again, until I had quite exhausted my budget, and then I did open it, and looked straight to the signature.

'Pooh! Mark Wylder,' I exclaimed, a good deal relieved.

Mark Wylder! Yes, Master Mark could not hurt *me*. There was nothing about him to excite the least uneasiness; on the contrary, I believe he liked me as well as he was capable of liking anybody, and it was now seven years since we had met.

I have often since thought upon the odd sensation with which I hesitated over his unopened letter; and now, remembering how the breaking of that seal resembled, in my life, the breaking open of a portal through which I entered a labyrinth, or rather a catacomb, where for many days I groped and stumbled, looking for light, and was, in a manner, lost, hearing strange sounds, witnessing imperfectly strange sights, and, at last, arriving at a dreadful chamber—a sad sort of superstition steals over me.

I had then been his working junior in the cause of Wylder *v.* Trustees of Brandon, minor—Dorcas Brandon, his own cousin. There was a complicated cousinship among these Brandons, Wylders, and Lakes—inextricable intermarriages, which, five years ago, before I renounced the bar, I had at my fingers' ends, but which had now relapsed into haze. There must have been some damnable taint in the blood of the common ancestor—a spice of the insane and the diabolical. They were an ill-conditioned race—that is to say, every now and then there emerged a miscreant, with a pretty evident vein of madness. There was Sir Jonathan Brandon, for instance, who ran his own nephew through the lungs in a duel fought in a paroxysm of Cencian jealousy; and afterwards shot his coachman dead upon the box through his coach-window, and finally died in Vienna, whither he had absconded, of a pike-thrust received from a sentry in a brawl.

The Wylders had not much to boast of, even in contrast with that wicked line. They had produced their madmen and villains, too; and there had been frequent intermarriages—not very often happy. There had been many lawsuits, frequent disinheritings, and even worse doings. The Wylders of Brandon appear very early in history; and the Wylder arms, with their legend, 'resurgam,' stands in bold relief over the great door of Brandon Hall. So there were Wylders of Brandon, and Brandons of Brandon. In one generation, a Wylder ill-using his wife and hating his children, would cut them all off, and send the estate bounding back again to the Brandons. The next generation or two would amuse themselves with a lawsuit, until the old Brandon type reappeared in some bachelor brother or uncle, with a Jezebel on his left hand, and an attorney on his right, and, presto! the estates were back again with the Wylders.

A 'statement of title' is usually a dry affair. But that of the dynasty of Brandon Hall was a truculent romance. Their very 'wills' were spiced with the devilment of the 'testators,' and abounded in insinuations and even language which were scandalous.

Here is Mark Wylder's letter:—

'DEAR CHARLES—Of course you have heard of my good luck, and how kind poor Dickie—from whom I never expected anything—proved at last. It was a great windfall for a poor devil like me; but, after all, it was only right, for it ought never to have been his at all. I went down and took possession on the 4th, the tenants very glad, and so they might well be; for, between ourselves, Dickie, poor fellow, was not always pleasant to deal with. He let the roof all out of repair, and committed waste beside in timber he had no right to in life, as I am told; but that don't signify much, only the house will cost me a pretty penny to get it into order and furnish. The rental is five thousand a-year and some hundreds, and the rents can be got up a bit—so Larkin tells me. Do you know anything of him? He says he did business for your uncle once. He seems a clever fellow—a bit too clever, perhaps—and was too much master here, I suspect, in poor Dickie's reign. Tell me all you can make out about him. It is a long time since I saw you, Charles; I'm grown brown, and great whiskers. I met poor Dominick—what an ass that chap is—but he did not know me till I introduced myself, so I must be a good deal changed. Our ship was at Malta when I got the letter. I was sick of the service, and no wonder: a lieutenant—and there likely to stick all my days. Six months, last year, on the African coast, watching slavers—think of that! I had a long yarn from the viscount—advice, and that sort of thing. I do not think he is a year older than I, but takes airs because he's a trustee. But I only laugh at trifles that would have riled me once. So I wrote him a yarn in return, and drew it uncommon mild. And he has been useful to me; and I think matters are pretty well arranged to disappoint the kind intention of good Uncle Wylder—the brute; he hated my father, but that was no reason to persecute me, and I but an infant, almost, when he died, d— him. Well, you know he left Brandon with some charges to my Cousin Dorcas. She is a superbly fine girl. Our ship was at Naples when she was there two years ago; and I saw a good deal of her. Of course it was not to be thought of then; but matters are quite different, you know, now, and the viscount, who is a very sensible fellow in the main, saw it at once. You see, the old brute meant to leave her a life estate; but it does not amount to that, though it won't benefit me, for he settled that when I die it shall go to his right heirs—that will be to my son, if I ever have one. So Miss Dorcas must pack, and turn out whenever I die, that is, if I slip my cable first. Larkin told me this—and I took an opinion—and found it is so; and the viscount seeing it, agreed the best thing for her as well as me would be, we should marry. She is a wide-awake young lady, and nothing the worse for that: I'm a bit that way myself. And so very little courtship has sufficed. She is a splendid beauty, and when you see her you'll say any fellow might be proud of such a bride; and so I am. And now, dear Charlie, you

have it all. It will take place somewhere about the twenty-fourth of next month; and you must come down by the first, if you can. Don't disappoint. I want you for best man, maybe; and besides, I would like to talk to you about some things they want me to do in the settlements, and you were always a long-headed fellow: so pray don't refuse.

'Dear Charlie, ever most sincerely,

'Your old Friend,

'MARK WYLDER.

'P.S.—I stay at the Brandon Arms in the town, until after the marriage; and then you can have a room at the Hall, and capital shooting when we return, which will be in a fortnight after.'

I can't say that Wylder was an old *friend*. But he was certainly one of the oldest and most intimate acquaintances I had. We had been for nearly three years at school together; and when his ship came to England, met frequently; and twice, when he was on leave, we had been for months together under the same roof; and had for some years kept up a regular correspondence, which first grew desultory, and finally, as manhood supervened, died out. The plain truth is, I did not *very* much like him.

Then there was that beautiful apathetic Dorcas Brandon. Where is the laggard so dull as to experience no pleasing flutter at his heart in anticipation of meeting a perfect beauty in a country house. I was romantic, like every other youngish fellow who is not a premature curmudgeon; and there was something indefinitely pleasant in the consciousness that, although a betrothed bride, the young lady still was fancy free: not a bit in love. It was but a marriage of convenience, with mitigations. And so there hovered in my curiosity some little flicker of egotistic romance, which helped to rouse my spirits, and spur me on to action.

CHAPTER II.
IN WHICH I ENTER THE DRAWING-ROOM.

I was now approaching Brandon Hall; less than ten minutes more would set me down at its door-steps. The stiff figure of Mrs. Marston, the old housekeeper, pale and austere, in rustling black silk (she was accounted a miser, and estimated to have saved I dare not say how much money in the Wylder family—kind to me with the bread-and-jam and Naples-biscuit-kindness of her species, in old times)—stood in fancy at the doorway. She, too, was a dream, and, I dare say, her money spent by this time. And that other dream, to which she often led me, with the large hazel eyes, and clear delicate tints—so sweet, so *riante*, yet so sad; poor Lady Mary Brandon, dying there—so unhappily mated—a young mother, and her baby sleeping in long 'Broderie Anglaise' attire upon the pillow on the sofa, and whom she used to show me with a peeping mystery, and her finger to her smiling lip, and a gaiety and fondness in her pretty face. That little helpless, groping, wailing creature was now the Dorcas Brandon, the mistress of the grand old mansion and all its surroundings, who was the heroine of the splendid matrimonial compromise which was about to reconcile a feud, and avert a possible lawsuit, and, for one generation, at least, to tranquillise the troubled annals of the Brandons and Wylders.

And now the ancient gray chapel, with its stained window, and store of old Brandon and Wylder monuments among its solemn clump of elm-trees, flitted by on my right; and in a moment more we drew up at the great gate on the left; not a hundred yards removed from it, and with an eager recognition, I gazed on the noble front of the old manorial house.

Up the broad straight avenue with its solemn files of gigantic timber towering at the right and the left hand, the chaise rolled smoothly, and through the fantastic iron gate of the courtyard, and with a fine swinging sweep and a jerk, we drew up handsomely before the door-steps, with the Wylder arms in bold and florid projection carved above it.

The sun had just gone down. The blue shadows of twilight overcast the landscape, and the mists of night were already stealing like thin smoke among the trunks and roots of the trees. Through the stone mullions of the projecting window at the right, a flush of fire-light looked pleasant and hospitable, and on the threshold were standing Lord Chelford and my old friend Mark Wylder; a faint perfume of the mildest cheroot declared how they had been employed.

So I jumped to the ground and was greeted very kindly by the smokers.

'I'm here, you know, *in loco parentis*;—my mother and I keep watch and ward. We allow Wylder, you see, to come every day to his devotions. But you are not to go to the Brandon Arms—you got my note, didn't you?'

I had, and had come direct to the Hall in consequence.

I looked over the door. Yes, my memory had served me right. There were the Brandon arms, and the Brandon quartered with the Wylder; but the Wylder coat in the centre, with the grinning griffins for supporters, and flaunting scrolls all round, and the ominous word 'resurgam' underneath, proclaimed itself sadly and vauntingly over the great entrance. I often wonder how the Wylder coat came in the centre; who built the old house—a Brandon or a Wylder; and if a Wylder, why was it Brandon Hall?

Dusty and seedy somewhat, as men are after a journey, I chatted with Mark and the noble peer for a few minutes at the door, while my valise and *et ceteras* were lifted in and hurried up the stairs to my room, whither I followed them.

While I was at my toilet, in came Mark Wylder laughing, as was his wont, and very unceremoniously he took possession of my easy-chair, and threw his leg over the arm of it.

'I'm glad you're come, Charlie; you were always a good fellow, and I really want a hand here confoundedly. I think it will all do very nicely; but, of course, there's a lot of things to be arranged—settlements, you know—and I can't make head or tail of their lingo, and a fellow don't like to sign and seal hand over head—*you* would not advise that, you know; and Chelford is a very good fellow, of course, and all that—but he's taking care of Dorcas, you see; and I might be left in the lurch.'

'It is a better way, at all events, Mark, than Wylder *versus* Trustees of Brandon, minor,' said I.

'Well, things do turn out very oddly; don't they?' said Mark with a sly glance of complacency, and his hands in his pockets. 'But I know you'll hold the tiller till I get through; hang me if I know the soundings, or where I'm going; and you have the chart by heart, Charlie.'

'I'm afraid you'll find me by no means so well up now as six years ago in "Wylder and Brandon;" but surely you have your lawyer, Mr. Larkin, haven't you?'

'To be sure—that's exactly it—he's Dorcas's agent. I don't know anything about him, and I do know you—don't you see? A fellow doesn't want to put himself into the hands of a stranger altogether, especially a lawyer, ha, ha! it wouldn't pay.'

I did not half like the equivocal office which my friend Mark had prepared for me. If family squabbles were to arise, I had no fancy to mix in them; and I did not want a collision with Mr. Larkin either; and, on the whole, notwithstanding his modesty, I thought Wylder very well able to take care of himself. There was time enough, however, to settle the point. So by this time, being splendid in French boots and white vest, and altogether perfect and refreshed, I emerged from my dressing-room, Wylder by my side.

We had to get along a dim oak-panelled passage, and into a sort of *oeil-de-boeuf*, with a lantern light above, from which diverged two other solemn corridors, and a short puzzling turn or two brought us to the head of the upper stairs. For I being a bachelor, and treated accordingly, was airily perched on the third storey.

To my mind, there is something indescribably satisfactory in the intense solidity of those old stairs and floors—no spring in the planks, not a creak; you walk as over strata of stone. What clumsy grandeur! What Cyclopean carpenters! What a prodigality of oak!

It was dark by this time, and the drawing-room, a vast and grand chamber, with no light but the fire and a pair of dim soft lamps near the sofas and ottomans, lofty, and glowing with rich tapestry curtains and pictures, and mirrors, and carved oak, and marble—was already tenanted by the ladies.

Old Lady Chelford, stiff and rich, a Vandyke dowager, with a general effect of deep lace, funereal velvet, and pearls; and pale, with dreary eyes, and thin high nose, sat in a high-backed carved oak throne, with red cushions. To her I was first presented, and cursorily scrutinised with a stately old-fashioned insolence, as if I were a candidate footman, and so dismissed. On a low seat, chatting to her as I came up, was a very handsome and rather singular-looking girl, fair, with a light golden-tinted hair; and a countenance, though then grave enough, instinct with a certain promise of animation and spirit not to be mistaken. Could this be the heroine of the pending alliance? No; I was mistaken. A third lady, at what would have been an ordinary room's length away, half reclining on an ottoman, was now approached by Wylder, who presented me to Miss Brandon.

'Dorcas, this is my old friend, Charles de Cresseron. You have often heard me speak of him; and I want you to shake hands and make his acquaintance, and draw him out—do you see; for he's a shy youth, and must be encouraged.'

He gave me a cheerful slap on the shoulder as he uttered this agreeable bit of banter, and altogether disconcerted me confoundedly. Wylder's dress-coats always smelt of tobacco, and his talk of tar. I was quietly incensed and disgusted; for in those days I *was* a little shy.

The lady rose, in a soft floating way; tall, black-haired—but a blackness with a dull rich shadow through it. I had only a general impression of large dusky eyes and very exquisite features—more delicate than the Grecian models, and with a wonderful transparency, like tinted marble; and a superb haughtiness, quite unaffected. She held forth her hand, which I did little more than touch. There was a peculiarity in her greeting, which I felt a little overawing, without exactly discovering in what it consisted; and it was I think that she did not smile. She never took that trouble for form's sake, like other women.

So, as Wylder had set a chair for me I could not avoid sitting upon it, though I should much have preferred standing, after the manner of men, and retaining my liberty.

CHAPTER III.
OUR DINNER PARTY AT BRANDON.

I was curious. I had heard a great deal of her beauty; and it had exceeded all I heard; so I talked my sublimest and brightest chit-chat, in my most musical tones, and was rather engaging and amusing, I ventured to hope. But the best man cannot manage a

dialogue alone. Miss Brandon was plainly not a person to make any sort of exertion towards what is termed keeping up a conversation; at all events she did not, and after a while the present one got into a decidedly sinking condition. An acquiescence, a faint expression of surprise, a fainter smile—she contributed little more, after the first few questions of courtesy had been asked, in her low silvery tones, and answered by me. To me the natural demise of a *tête-à-tête* discourse has always seemed a disgrace. But this apathetic beauty had either more moral courage or more stupidity than I, and was plainly terribly indifferent about the catastrophe. I've sometimes thought my struggles and sinkings amused her cruel serenity.

Bella ma stupida!—I experienced, at last, the sort of pique with which George Sand's hero apostrophises *la derniere Aldini*. Yet I could not think her stupid. The universal instinct honours beauty. It is so difficult to believe it either dull or base. In virtue of some mysterious harmonies it is 'the image of God,' and must, we feel, enclose the God-like; so I suppose I felt, for though I wished to think her stupid, I could not. She was not exactly languid, but a grave and listless beauty, and a splendid beauty for all that.

I told her my early recollections of Brandon and Gylingden, and how I remembered her a baby, and said some graceful trifles on that theme, which I fancied were likely to please. But they were only received, and led to nothing. In a little while in comes Lord Chelford, always natural and pleasant, and quite unconscious of his peerage—he was above it, I think—and chatted away merrily with that handsome animated blonde—who on earth, could she be?—and did not seem the least chilled in the stiff and frosted presence of his mother, but was genial and playful even with that Spirit of the Frozen Ocean, who received his affectionate trifling with a sort of smiling, though wintry pride and complacency, reflecting back from her icy aspects something of the rosy tints of that kindly sunshine.

I thought I heard him call the young lady Miss Lake, and there rose before me an image of an old General Lake, and a dim recollection of some reverse of fortune. He was—I was sure of that—connected with the Brandon family; and was, with the usual fatality, a bit of a *mauvais sujet*. He had made away with his children's money, or squandered his own; or somehow or another impoverished his family not creditably. So I glanced at her, and Miss Brandon divined, it seemed, what was passing in my mind, for she said:—

'That is my cousin, Miss Lake, and I think her very beautiful—don't you?'

'Yes, she certainly is very handsome,' and I was going to say something about her animation and spirit, but remembered just in time, that that line of eulogy would hardly have involved a compliment to Miss Brandon. 'I know her brother, a little—that is, Captain Lake—Stanley Lake; he's her brother, I fancy?'

'*Oh?*' said the young lady, in that tone which is pointed with an unknown accent, between a note of enquiry and of surprise. 'Yes; he's her brother.'

And she paused; as if something more were expected. But at that moment the bland tones of Larcom, the solemn butler, announced the Rev. William Wylder and Mrs. Wylder, and I said—

'William is an old college friend of mine;' and I observed him, as he entered with an affectionate and sad sort of interest. Eight years had passed since we met last, and that is something at any time. It had thinned my simple friend's hair a little, and his face, too, was more careworn than I liked, but his earnest, sweet smile was there still. Slight, gentle, with something of a pale and studious refinement in his face. The same gentle voice, with that slight, occasional hesitation, which somehow I liked. There is always a little shock after an absence of some years before identities adjust themselves, and then we find the change is not, after all, so very great. I suspect it is, rather, that something of the old picture is obliterated, in that little interval, to return no more. And so William Wylder was vicar now instead of that straight wiry cleric of the mulberry face and black leggings.

And who was this little Mrs. William Wylder who came in, so homely of feature, so radiant of goodhumour, so eager and simple, in a very plain dress—a Brandon housemaid would not have been seen in it, leaning so pleasantly on his lean, long, clerical arm—made for reaching books down from high shelves, a lank, scholarlike limb, with a somewhat threadbare cuff—and who looked round with that anticipation of pleasure, and that simple confidence in a real welcome, which are so likely to insure it? Was she an helpmeet for a black-letter man, who talked with the Fathers in his daily walks, could extemporise Latin hexameters, and dream in Greek. Was she very wise, or at all learned? I think her knowledge lay chiefly in the matters of poultry, and puddings, and latterly, of the nursery, where one treasure lay—that golden-haired little boy, four years old, whom I had seen playing among the roses before the parsonage door, asleep by this time—half-past seven, 'precise,' as old Lady Chelford loved to write on her summons to dinner.

When the vicar, I dare say, in a very odd, quaint way, made his proposal of marriage, moved thereto assuredly, neither by fortune, nor by beauty, to good, merry, little Miss Dorothy Chubley, whom nobody was supposed to be looking after, and the town had, somehow, set down from the first as a natural-born old maid—there was a very general amazement; some disappointment here and there, with customary sneers and compassion, and a good deal of genuine amusement not ill-natured.

Miss Chubley, all the shopkeepers in the town knew and liked, and, in a way, respected her, as 'Miss Dolly.' Old Reverend John Chubley, D.D., who had been in love with his wife from the period of his boyhood; and yet so grudging was Fate, had to undergo an engagement of nigh thirty years before Hymen rewarded their constancy; being at length made Vicar of Huddelston, and master of church revenues to the amount of three hundred pounds a year—had, at forty-five, married his early love, now forty-two.

They had never grown old in one another's fond eyes. Their fidelity was of the days of chivalry, and their simplicity comical and beautiful. Twenty years of happy and loving life were allotted them and one pledge—poor Miss Dorothy—was left alone, when little

more than nineteen years old. This good old couple, having loved early and waited long, and lived together with wonderful tenderness and gaiety of heart their allotted span, bid farewell for a little while—the gentle little lady going first, and, in about two years more, the good rector following.

I remembered him, but more dimly than his merry little wife, though she went first. She made raisin-wine, and those curious biscuits that tasted of Windsor soap.

And this Mrs. William Wylder just announced by soft-toned Larcom, is the daughter (there is no mistaking the jolly smile and lumpy odd little features, and radiance of amiability) of the good doctor and Mrs. Chubley, so curiously blended in her loving face. And last comes in old Major Jackson, smiling largely, squaring himself, and doing his courtesies in a firm but florid military style, and plainly pleased to find himself in good company and on the eve of a good dinner. And so our dinner-list is full.

The party were just nine—and it is wonderful what a row nine well-behaved people will contrive to make at a dinner-table. The inferior animals—as we see them caged and cared for, and fed at one o'clock, 'precise,' in those public institutions provided for their maintenance—confine their uproar to the period immediately antecedent to their meal, and perform the actual process of deglutition with silent attention, and only such suckings, lappings, and crunchings, as illustrate their industry and content. It is the distinctive privilege of man to exert his voice during his repast, and to indulge also in those specially human cachinnations which no lower creature, except that disreputable Australian biped known as the 'laughing jackass,' presumes to imitate; and to these vocal exercises of the feasters respond the endless ring and tinkle of knife and fork on china plate, and the ministering angels in white chokers behind the chairs, those murmured solicitations which hum round and round the ears of the revellers.

Of course, when great guns are present, and people talk *pro bono publico*, one at a time, with parliamentary regularity, things are different; but at an ordinary symposium, when the garrulous and diffident make merry together, and people break into twos or threes and talk across the table, or into their neighbours' ears, and all together, the noise is not only exhilarating and peculiar, but sometimes perfectly unaccountable.

The talk, of course, has its paroxysms and its subsidences. I have once or twice found myself on a sudden in total silence in the middle of a somewhat prolix, though humorous story, commenced in an uproar for the sole recreation of my pretty neighbour, and ended—patched up, *renounced*—a faltering failure, under the converging gaze of a sternly attentive audience.

On the other hand, there are moments when the uproar whirls up in a crescendo to a pitch and volume perfectly amazing; and at such times, I believe that anyone might say anything to the reveller at his elbow, without the smallest risk of being overheard by mortal. You may plan with young Caesar Borgia, on your left, the poisoning of your host; or ask pretty Mrs. Fusible, on your right, to elope with you from her grinning and gabbling lord, whose bald head flashes red with champagne only at the other side of the table. There is no privacy like it; you may plot your wickedness, or make your confession, or pop the question, and not a soul but your confidant be a bit the wiser—provided only you command your countenance.

I don't know how it happened, but Wylder sat beside Miss Lake. I fancied he ought to have been differently placed, but Miss Brandon did not seem conscious of his absence, and it seemed to me that the handsome blonde would have been as well pleased if he had been anywhere but where he was. There was no look of liking, though some faint glimmerings both of annoyance and embarrassment in her face. But in Wylder's I saw a sort of conceited consciousness, and a certain eagerness, too, while he talked; though a shrewd fellow in many ways, he had a secret conviction that no woman could resist him.

'I suppose the world thinks me a very happy fellow, Miss Lake?' he said, with a rather pensive glance of enquiry into that young lady's eyes, as he set down his hock-glass.

'I'm afraid it's a selfish world, Mr. Wylder, and thinks very little of what does not concern it.'

'Now, *you*, I dare say,' continued Wylder, not caring to perceive the *soupçon* of sarcasm that modulated her answer so musically, 'look upon me as a very fortunate fellow?'

'You are a very fortunate person, Mr. Wylder; a gentleman of very moderate abilities, with no prospects, and without fortune, who finds himself, without any deservings of his own, on a sudden, possessed of an estate, and about to be united to the most beautiful heiress in England, *is*, I think, rather a fortunate person.'

'You did not always think me so stupid, Miss Lake,' said Mr. Wylder, showing something of the hectic of vexation.

'Stupid! did I say? Well, you know, we learn by experience, Mr. Wylder. One's judgment matures, and we are harder to please—don't you think so?—as we grow older.'

'Aye, so we are, I dare say; at any rate, some things don't please us as we calculated. I remember when this bit of luck would have made me a devilish happy fellow—*twice* as happy; but, you see, if a fellow hasn't his liberty, where's the good of money? I don't know how I got into it, but I can't get away now; and the lawyer fellows, and trustees, and all that sort of prudent people, get about one, and persuade, and exhort, and they bully you, by Jove! into what they call a marriage of convenience—I forget the French word—you know; and then, you see, your feelings may be very different, and all that; and where's the good of money, I say, if you can't enjoy it?'

And Mr. Wylder looked poetically unhappy, and trundled over a little bit of fricandeau on his plate with his fork, desolately, as though earthly things had lost their relish.

'Yes; I think I know the feeling,' said Miss Lake, quietly. 'That ballad, you know, expresses it very prettily:—"Oh, thou hast been the cause of this anguish, my mother?"'

It was not then as old a song as it is now.

Wylder looked sharply at her, but she did not smile, and seemed to speak in good faith; and being somewhat thick in some matters, though a cunning fellow, he said—

'Yes; that is the sort of thing, you know—of course, with a difference—a girl is supposed to speak there; but men suffer that way, too—though, of course, very likely it's more their own fault.'

'It is very sad,' said Miss Lake, who was busy with a *pâté*.

'She has no life in her; she's a mere figurehead; she's awfully slow; I don't like black hair; I'm taken by conversation—and all that. There are some men that can only really love once in their lives, and never forget their first love, I assure you.'

Wylder murmured all this, and looked as plaintive as he could without exciting the attention of the people over-the-way.

Mark Wylder had, as you perceive, rather vague notions of decency, and not much experience of ladies; and thought he was making just the interesting impression he meditated. He was a good deal surprised, then, when Miss Lake said, and with quite a cheerful countenance, and very quickly, but so that her words stung his ear like the prick of a bodkin.

'Your way of speaking of my cousin, Sir, is in the highest degree discreditable to you and offensive to me, and should you venture to repeat it, I will certainly mention it to Lady Chelford.'

And so she turned to old Major Jackson at her right, who had been expounding a point of the battle of Vittoria to Lord Chelford; and she led him again into action, and acquired during the next ten minutes a great deal of curious lore about Spanish muleteers and French prisoners, together with some particulars about the nature of picket duty, and 'that scoundrel, Castanos.'

CHAPTER IV.
IN WHICH WE GO TO THE DRAWING-ROOM AND THE PARTY BREAKS UP.

Wylder was surprised, puzzled, and a good deal incensed—that saucy craft had fired her shot so unexpectedly across his bows. He looked a little flushed, and darted a stealthy glance across the table, but no one he thought had observed the manoeuvre. He would have talked to ugly Mrs. W. Wylder, his sister-in-law, at his left, but she was entertaining Lord Chelford now. He had nothing for it but to perform *cavalier seul* with his slice of mutton—a sensual sort of isolation, while all the world was chatting so agreeably and noisily around him. He would have liked, at that moment, a walk upon the quarter-deck, with a good head-wind blowing, and liberty to curse and swear a bit over the bulwark. Women are so full of caprice and hypocrisy, and 'humbugging impudence!'

Wylder was rather surly after the ladies had floated away from the scene, and he drank his liquor doggedly. It was his fancy, I suppose, to revive certain sentimental relations which had, it may be, once existed between him and Miss Lake; and he was a person of that combative temperament that magnifies an object in proportion as its pursuit is thwarted.

In the drawing-room he watched Miss Lake over his cup of coffee, and after a few words to his *fiancée* he lounged toward the table at which she was turning over some prints.

'Do come here, Dorothy,' she exclaimed, not raising her eyes, 'I have found the very thing.'

'What thing? my dear Miss Lake,' said that good little woman, skipping to her side.

'The story of "Fridolin," and Retzch's pretty outlines. Sit down beside me, and I'll tell you the story.'

'Oh!' said the vicar's wife, taking her seat, and the inspection and exposition began; and Mark Wylder, who had intended renewing his talk with Miss Lake, saw that she had foiled him, and stood with a heightened colour and his hands in his pockets, looking confoundedly cross and very like an outcast, in the shadow behind.

After a while, in a pet, he walked away. Lord Chelford had joined the two ladies, and had something to say about German art, and some pleasant lights to throw from foreign travel, and devious reading, and was as usual intelligent and agreeable; and Mark was still more sore and angry, and strutted away to another table, a long way off, and tossed over the leaves of a folio of Wouverman's works, and did not see one of the plates he stared at so savagely.

I don't think Mark was very clear as to what he wanted, or, even if he had had a cool half-hour to define his wishes, that he would

seriously have modified existing arrangements. But he had a passionate sort of obstinacy, and his whims took a violent character when they were crossed, and he was angry and jealous and unintelligible, reminding one of Carlyle's description of Philip Egalité—a chaos.

Then he joined a conversation going on between Dorcas Brandon and the vicar, his brother. He assisted at it, but took no part, and in fact was listening to that other conversation which sounded, with its pleasant gabble and laughter, like a little musical tinkle of bells in the distance. His gall rose, and that distant talk rang in his ears like a cool but intangible insult.

It was dull work. He looked at his watch—the brougham would be at the door to take Miss Lake home in a quarter of an hour; so he glided by old Lady Chelford, who was dozing stiffly through her spectacles on a French novel, and through a second drawing-room, and into the hall, where he saw Larcom's expansive white waistcoat, and disregarded his advance and respectful inclination, and strode into the outer hall or vestibule, where were hat-stands, walking-sticks, great coats, umbrellas, and the exuviae of gentlemen.

Mark clapped on his hat, and rifled the pocket of his paletot of his cigar-case and matches, and spluttered a curse or two, according to old Nollekins' receipt for easing the mind, and on the door-steps lighted his cheroot, and became gradually more philosophical.

In due time the brougham came round with its lamps lighted, and Mark, who was by this time placid, greeted Price on the box familiarly, after his wont, and asked him whom he was going to drive, as if he did not know, cunning fellow; and actually went so far as to give Price one of those cheap and nasty weeds, of which he kept a supply apart in his case for such occasions of good fellowship.

So Mark waited to put the lady into the carriage, and he meditated walking a little way by the window and making his peace, and there was perhaps some vague vision of jumping in afterwards; I know not. Mark's ideas of ladies and of propriety were low, and he was little better than a sailor ashore, and not a good specimen of that class of monster.

He walked about the courtyard smoking, looking sometimes on the solemn front of the old palatial mansion, and sometimes breathing a white film up to the stars, impatient, like the enamoured Aladdin, watching in ambuscade for the emergence of the Princess Badroulbadour. But honest Mark forgot that young ladies do not always come out quite alone, and jump unassisted into their vehicles. And in fact not only did Lord Chelford assist the fair lady, cloaked and hooded, into the carriage, but the vicar's goodhumoured little wife was handed in also, the good vicar looking on, and as the gay good-night and leave-taking took place by the door-steps, Mark drew back, like a guilty thing, in silence, and showed no sign but the red top of his cigar, glowing like the eye of a Cyclops in the dark; and away rolled the brougham, with the two ladies, and Chelford and the vicar went in, and Mark hurled the stump of his cheroot at Fortune, and delivered a fragmentary soliloquy through his teeth; and so, in a sulk, without making his adieux, he marched off to his crib at the Brandon Arms.

CHAPTER V.
IN WHICH MY SLUMBER IS DISTURBED.

The ladies had accomplished their ascension to the upper regions. The good vicar had marched off with the major, who was by this time unbuckling in his lodgings; and Chelford and I, *tête-à-tête*, had a glass of sherry and water together in the drawing-room before parting. And over this temperate beverage I told him frankly the nature of the service which Mark Wylder wished me to render him; and he as frankly approved, and said he would ask Larkin, the family lawyer, to come up in the morning to assist.

The more I saw of this modest, refined, and manly peer, the more I liked him. There was a certain courteous frankness, and a fine old English sense of duty perceptible in all his serious talk. So I felt no longer like a conspirator, and was to offer such advice as might seem expedient, with the clear approbation of Miss Brandon's trustee. And this point clearly settled, I avowed myself a little tired; and lighting our candles at the foot of the stairs, we scaled that long ascent together, and he conducted me through the intricacies of the devious lobbies up stairs to my chamber-door, where he bid me good-night, shook hands, and descended to his own quarters.

My room was large and old-fashioned, but snug; and I, beginning to grow very drowsy, was not long in getting to bed, where I fell asleep indescribably quickly.

In all old houses one is, of course, liable to adventures. Where is the marvellous to find refuge, if not among the chambers, the intricacies, which have seen the vicissitudes, the crimes, and the deaths of generations of such men as had occupied these?

There was a picture in the outer hall—one of those full-length gentlemen of George II.'s time, with a dark peruke flowing on his shoulders, a cut velvet coat, and lace cravat and ruffles. This picture was pale, and had a long chin, and somehow had impressed my boyhood with a singular sense of fear. The foot of my bed lay towards the window, distant at least five-and-twenty-feet; and before the window stood my dressing-table, and on it a large looking-glass.

I dreamed that I was arranging my toilet before this glass—just as I had done that evening—when on a sudden the face of the portrait I have mentioned was presented on its surface, confronting me like a real countenance, and advancing towards me with a look of fury; and at the instant I felt myself seized by the throat and unable to stir or to breathe. After a struggle with this infernal garotter, I succeeded in awaking myself; and as I did so, I felt a rather cold hand really resting on my throat, and quietly passed up over my chin and face. I jumped out of bed with a roar, and challenged the owner of the hand, but received no answer, and heard no sound. I poked up my fire and lighted my candle. Everything was as I had left it except the door, which was the least bit open.

In my shirt, candle in hand, I looked out into the passage. There was nothing there in human shape, but in the direction of the stairs the green eyes of a large cat were shining. I was so confoundedly nervous that even 'a harmless, necessary cat' appalled me, and I clapped my door, as if against an evil spirit.

In about half an hour's time, however, I had quite worked off the effect of this night-mare, and reasoned myself into the natural solution that the creature had got on my bed, and lay, as I have been told they will, upon my throat, and so, all the rest had followed.

Not being given to the fear of *larvae* and *lemures*, and also knowing that a mistake is easily committed in a great house like that, and that my visitor might have made one, I grew drowsy in a little while, and soon fell asleep again. But knowing all I now do, I hold a different conclusion—and so, I think, will you.

In the morning Mark Wylder was early upon the ground. He had quite slept off what he would have called the nonsense of last night, and was very keen upon settlements, consols, mortgages, jointures, and all that dry but momentous lore.

I find a note in my diary of that day:—'From half-past ten o'clock until two with Mark Wylder and Mr. Larkin, the lawyer, in the study—dull work—over papers and title—Lord Chelford with us now and then to lend a helping hand.'

Lawyer Larkin, though he made our work lighter—for he was clear, quick, and orderly, and could lay his hand on any paper in those tin walls of legal manuscripts that built up two sides of his office—did not make our business, to me at least, any pleasanter. Wylder thought him a clever man (and so perhaps, in a certain sense, he was); Lord Chelford, a most honourable one; yet there came to me by instinct an unpleasant feeling about him. It was not in any defined way—I did not fancy that he was machinating, for instance, any sort of mischief in the business before us—but I had a notion that he was not quite what he pretended.

Perhaps his *personnel* prejudiced me—though I could not quite say why. He was a tall, lank man—rather long of limb, long of head, and gaunt of face. He wanted teeth at both sides, and there was rather a skull-like cavity when he smiled—which was pretty often. His eyes were small and reddish, as if accustomed to cry; and when everything went smoothly were dull and dove-like, but when things crossed or excited him, which occurred when his own pocket or plans were concerned, they grew singularly unpleasant, and greatly resembled those of some not amiable animal—was it a rat, or a serpent? It was a peculiar concentrated vigilance and rapine that I have seen there. But that was long afterwards. Now, indeed, they were meek, and sad, and pink.

He had an ambition, too, to pass for a high-bred gentleman, and thought it might be done by a somewhat lofty and drawling way of talking, and distributing his length of limb in what he fancied were easy attitudes. If the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel, so are the elegances of a vulgar man; and his made me wince.

I might be all in the wrong—and was, no doubt, unreasonable—for he bore a high character, and passed for a very gentlemanlike man among the villagers. He was also something of a religious light, and had for a time conformed to Methodism, but returned to the Church. He had a liking for long sermons, and a sad abhorrence of amusements, and sat out the morning and the evening services regularly—and kept up his dissenting connection too, and gave them money—and appeared in print, in all charitable lists—and mourned over other men's backslidings and calamities in a lofty and Christian way, shaking his tall bald head, and turning up his pink eyes mildly.

Notwithstanding all which he was somehow unlovely in my eyes, and in an indistinct way, formidable. It was not a pleasant misgiving about a gentleman of Larkin's species, the family lawyer, who become *viscera magnorum domuum*.

My duties were lighter, as adviser, than I at first apprehended. Wylder's crotchets were chiefly 'mare's nests.' We had read the draft of the settlement, preparatory to its being sent to senior counsel to be approved. Wylder's attorney had done his devoir, and Mr. Larkin avowed a sort of parental interest in both parties to the indentures, and made, at closing, a little speech, very high in morality, and flavoured in a manly way with religion, and congratulated Mark on his honour and plain dealing, which he gave us to understand were the secrets of all success in life, as they had been, in an humble way of his own.

CHAPTER VI.
IN WHICH DORCAS BRANDON SPEAKS.

In answer to 'the roaring shiver of the gong' we all trooped away together to luncheon. Lady Chelford and Dorcas and Chelford had nearly ended that irregular repast when we entered. My chair was beside Miss Brandon; she had breakfasted with old Lady Chelford that morning, and this was my first meeting that day. It was not very encouraging.

People complained that acquaintance made little way with her. That you were, perhaps, well satisfied with your first day's progress, but the next made no head-way; you found yourself this morning exactly at the point from which you commenced yesterday, and to-morrow would recommence where you started the day before. This is very disappointing, but may sometimes be accounted for by there being nothing really to discover. It seemed to me, however, that the distance had positively increased since yesterday, and that the oftener she met me the more strange she became. As we went out, Wylder enquired, with his usual good taste: 'Well, what do you think of her?' Then he looked slily at me, laughing, with his hands in his pockets. 'A little bit slow, eh?' he whispered, and laughed again, and lounged into the hall. If Dorcas Brandon had been a plain woman, I think she would have been voted an impertinent bore; but she was so beautiful that she became an enigma. I looked at her as she stood gravely gazing from the window. Is it Lady Macbeth?

No; she never would have had energy to plan her husband's career and manage that affair of Duncan. A sultana rather—sublimely egotistical, without reverence—a voluptuous and haughty embodiment of indifference. I paused, looking at a picture, but thinking of her, and was surprised by her voice very near me.

'Will you give me just a minute, Mr. De Cresseron, in the drawing-room, while I show you a miniature? I want your opinion.'

So she floated on and I accompanied her.

'I think,' she said, 'you mentioned yesterday, that you remembered me when an infant. You remember my poor mamma, don't you, very well?'

This was the first time she had yet shown any tendency, so far as I had seen, to be interested in anything, or to talk to me. I seized the occasion, and gave her, as well as I could, the sad and pretty picture that remained, and always will, in the vacant air, when I think of her, on the mysterious retina of memory.

How filmy they are! the moonlight shines through them, as through the phantom Dane in Retzch's outlines—colour without substance. How they come, wearing for ever the sweetest and pleasantest look of their earthly days. Their sweetest and merriest tones hover musically in the distance; how far away, how near to silence, yet how clear! And so it is with our remembrance of the immortal part. It is the loveliest traits that remain with us perennially; all that was noblest and most beautiful is there, in a changeless and celestial shadow; and this is the resurrection of the memory, the foretaste and image which the 'Faithful Creator' accords us of the resurrection and glory to come—the body redeemed, the spirit made perfect.

On a cabinet near to where she stood was a casket of ormolu, which she unlocked, and took out a miniature, opened, and looked at it for a long time. I knew very well whose it was, and watched her countenance; for, as I have said, she interested me strangely. I suppose she knew I was looking at her; but she showed always a queenlike indifference about what people might think or observe. There was no sentimental softening; but her gaze was such as I once saw the same proud and handsome face turn upon the dead—pale, exquisite, perhaps a little stern. What she read there—what procession of thoughts and images passed by—threw neither light nor shadow on her face. Its apathy interested me inscrutably.

At last she placed the picture in my hand, and asked—

'Is this really very like her?'

'It is, and it is *not*,' I said, after a little pause. 'The features are true: it is what I call an accurate portrait, but that is all. I dare say, exact as it is, it would give to one who had not seen her a false, as it must an inadequate, idea, of the original. There was something *naïve* and *spirituel*, and very tender in her face, which he has not caught—perhaps it could hardly be fixed in colours.'

'Yes, I always heard her expression and intelligence were very beautiful.
It was the beauty of mobility—true beauty.'

'There is a beauty of another stamp, equally exquisite, Miss Brandon, and perhaps more overpowering.' I said this in nearly a whisper, and in a very marked way, almost tender, and the next moment was amazed at my own audacity. She looked on me for a second or two, with her dark drowsy glance, and then it returned to the picture, which was again in her hand. There was a total want of interest in the careless sort of surprise she vouchsafed my little sally; neither was there the slightest resentment. If a wafer had been stuck upon my forehead, and she had observed it, there might have been just that look and no more. I was ridiculously annoyed with myself. I was betrayed, I don't know how, into this little venture, and it was a flat failure. The position of a shy man, who has just made an unintelligible joke at a dinner-table, was not more pregnant with self-reproach and embarrassment.

Upon my honour, I don't think there was anything of the *roué* in me. I own I did feel towards this lady, who either was, or seemed to me, so singular, a mysterious interest just beginning—of that peculiar kind which becomes at last terribly absorbing.

I was more elated by her trifling notice of me than I can quite account for. It was a distinction. She was so indescribably handsome—so passively disdainful. I think if she had listened to me with even the faintest intimation of caring whether I spoke in this tone or not, with even a flash of momentary resentment, I might have rushed into a most reprehensible and ridiculous rigmarole.

In this, the subtlest and most perilous of all intoxications, it needs immense presence of mind to conduct ourselves always with decorum. But she was looking, just as before, at the miniature, as it seemed to me, in fancy infusing some of the spirit I had described into the artist's record, and she said, only in soliloquy, as it were, 'Yes, I see—I *think* I see.'

So there was a pause; and then she said, without, however, removing her eyes from the miniature, 'You are, I believe, Mr. De Cresseron, a very old friend of Mr. Wylder's. Is it not so?'

So soon after my little escapade, I did not like the question; but it was answered. There was not the faintest trace of a satirical meaning, however, in her face; and after another very considerable interval, at the end of which she shut the miniature in its case, she said, 'It was a peculiar face, and very beautiful. It is odd how many of our family married for love—wild love-matches. My poor mother was the last. I could point you out many pictures, and tell you stories—my cousin, Rachel, knows them all. You know Rachel Lake?'

'I've not the honour of knowing Miss Lake. I had not an opportunity of making her acquaintance yesterday; but I know her brother—so does Wylder.'

'What's that?' said Mark, who had just come in, and was tumbling over a volume of 'Punch' at the window.

'I was telling Miss Brandon that we both know Stanley Lake.' On hearing which, Wylder seemed to discover something uncommonly interesting or clever in the illustration before him; for he approached his face very near to it, in a scrutinising way, and only said, 'Oh?'

'That marrying for love was a fatality in our family,' she continued in the same low tone—too faint I think to reach Mark. 'They were all the most beautiful who sacrificed themselves so—they were all unhappy marriages. So the beauty of our family never availed it, any more than its talents and its courage; for there were clever and witty men, as well as very brave ones, in it. Meaner houses have grown up into dukedoms; ours never prospers. I wonder what it is.'

'Many families have disappeared altogether, Miss Brandon. It is no small thing, through so many centuries, to have retained your ancestral estates, and your pre-eminent position, and even this splendid residence of so many generations of your lineage.'

I thought that Miss Brandon, having broken the ice, was henceforth to be a conversable young lady. But this sudden expansion was not to last. Ovid tells us, in his 'Fasti,' how statues sometimes surprised people by speaking more frankly and to the purpose even than Miss Brandon, and straight were cold chiselled marble again; and so it was with that proud, cold *chef d'oeuvre* of tinted statuary.

Yet I thought I could, even in that dim glimpse, discern how the silent subterranean current of her thoughts was flowing; like other representatives of a dynasty, she had studied the history of her race to profit by its errors and misfortunes. There was to be no weakness or passion in her reign.

The princess by this time was seated on the ottoman, and chose to read a letter, thus intimating, I suppose, that my audience was at an end; so I took up a book, put it down, and then went and looked over Wylder's shoulder, and made my criticisms—not very novel, I fear—upon the pages he turned over; and I am sorry to say I don't think he heard much of what I was saying, for he suddenly came out with—

'And where is Stanley Lake now, do you know?'

'I saw him in town—only for a moment though—about a fortnight ago; he was arranging, he said, about selling out.'

'Oh! retiring; and what does he propose doing then?' asked Wylder, without raising his eyes from his book. He spoke in a sort of undertone, like a man who does not want to be overheard, and the room was quite large enough to make that sort of secrecy easy without the appearance of seeking it.

'I have not an idea. I don't think he's fit for many things. He knows something of horses, I believe, and something of play.'

'But he'll hardly make out a living that way,' said Wylder, with a sort of sneer or laugh. I thought he seemed put out, and a little flushed.

'I fancy he has enough to live upon, without adding to it, however,' I said.

Wylder leaned back in his low chair, with his hands stuffed in his pockets, and the air of a man trying to look unconcerned, but both annoyed and disconcerted nevertheless.

I tell you what, Charlie, between you and me, that fellow, Stanley, is a d——d bad lot. I may be mistaken, of course; he's always been very civil to me, but we don't like one another; and I don't think I ever heard him say a good word of any one, I dare say he abuses you and me, as he does everyone else.'

'Does he?' I said. 'I was not aware he had that failing.'

'Oh, yes. He does not stick at trifles, Master Stanley. He's about the greatest liar, I think, I ever met with,' and he laughed angrily.

I happened at that moment to raise my eyes, and I saw Dorcas's face reflected in the mirror; her back was towards us, and she held the letter in her hand as if reading it, but her large eyes were looking over it, and on us, in the glass, with a gaze of strange curiosity. Our glances met in the mirror; but hers remained serenely undisturbed, and mine dropped and turned away hastily. I wonder whether she heard us. I do not know. Some people are miraculously sharp of hearing.

'I dare say,' said Wylder, with a sneer, 'he was asking affectionately for me, eh?'

'No; not that I recollect—in fact there was not time; but I suppose he does not like you less for what has happened; you're worth cultivating now, you know.'

Wylder was leaning on his elbow, with just the tip of his thumb to his teeth, with a vicious character of biting it, which was peculiar to him when anything vexed him considerably, and glancing sharply this way and that—

'You know,' he said, suddenly, 'we are a sort of cousins; his mother was a Brandon—a second cousin of Dorcas's—no, of her father's—I don't know exactly how. He's a pushing fellow, one of the coolest hands I know; but I don't see that I can be of any use to him, or why the devil I should. I say, old fellow, come out and have a weed, will you?'

I raised my eyes. Miss Brandon had left the room. I don't know that her presence would have prevented his invitation, for Wylder's wooing was certainly of the coolest. So forth we sallied, and under the autumnal foliage, in the cool amber light of the declining evening, we enjoyed our cheroots; and with them, Wylder his thoughts; and I, the landscape, and the whistling of the birds; for we waxed Turkish and taciturn over our tobacco.

CHAPTER VII.
RELATING HOW A LONDON GENTLEMAN APPEARED IN REDMAN'S DELL.

I believe the best rule in telling a story is to follow events chronologically. So let me mention that just about the time when Wylder and I were filming the trunks of the old trees with wreaths of lingering perfume, Miss Rachel Lake had an unexpected visitor.

There is, near the Hall, a very pretty glen, called Redman's Dell, very steep, with a stream running at the bottom of it, but so thickly wooded that in summer time you can only now and then catch a glimpse of the water gliding beneath you. Deep in this picturesque ravine, buried among the thick shadows of tall old trees, runs the narrow mill-road, which lower down debouches on the end of the village street. There, in the transparent green shadow, stand the two mills—the old one with A.D. 1679, and the Wylder arms, and the eternal 'resurgam' projecting over its door; and higher up, on a sort of platform, the steep bank rising high behind it, with its towering old wood overhanging and surrounding, upon a site where one of king Arthur's knights, of an autumn evening, as he rode solitary in quest of adventures, might have seen the peeping, gray gable of an anchorite's chapel dimly through the gilded stems, and heard the drowsy tinkle of his vesper-bell, stands an old and small two-storied brick and timber house; and though the sun does not very often glimmer on its windows, it yet possesses an air of sad, old-world comfort—a little flower-garden lies in front with a paling round it. But not every kind of flowers will grow there, under the lordly shadow of the elms and chestnuts.

This sequestered tenement bears the name of Redman's Farm; and its occupant was that Miss Lake whom I had met last night at Brandon Hall, and whose pleasure it was to live here in independent isolation.

There she is now, busy in her tiny garden, with the birds twittering about her, and the yellow leaves falling; and her thick gauntlets on her slender hands. How fresh and pretty she looks in that sad, sylvan solitude, with the background of the dull crimson brick and the climbing roses. Bars of sunshine fall through the branches above, across the thick tapestry of blue, yellow, and crimson, that glow so richly upon their deep green ground.

There is not much to be done just now, I fancy, in the gardening way; but work is found or invented—for sometimes the hour is dull, and that bright, spirited, and at heart, it may be, bitter exile, will make out life somehow. There is music, and drawing. There are flowers, as we see, and two or three correspondents, and walks into the village; and her dark cousin, Dorcas, drives down sometimes in the pony-carriage, and is not always silent; and indeed, they are a good deal together.

This young lady's little Eden, though overshadowed and encompassed with the solemn sylvan cloister of nature's building, and vocal with sounds of innocence—the songs of birds, and sometimes those of its young mistress—was no more proof than the Mesopotamian haunt of our first parents against the intrusion of darker spirits. So, as she worked, she lifted up her eyes, and beheld a rather handsome young man standing at the little wicket of her garden, with his gloved hand on the latch. A man of fashion—a town man—his dress bespoke him: smooth cheeks, light brown curling moustache, and eyes very peculiar both in shape and colour, and something of elegance of finish in his other features, and of general grace in the *coup d'oeil*, struck one at a glance. He was smiling silently and slily on Rachel, who, with a little cry of surprise, said—

'Oh, Stanley! is it you?'

And before he could answer, she had thrown her arms about his neck and kissed him two or three times. Laughingly, half-resisting, the young man waited till her enthusiastic salutation was over, and with one gloved hand caressingly on her shoulder, and with the other smoothing his ruffled moustache, he laughed a little more, a quiet low laugh. He was not addicted to stormy greetings, and patted his sister's shoulder gently, his arm a little extended, like a man who tranquillises a frolicsome pony.

'Yes, Radie, you see I've found you out;' and his eye wandered, still smiling oddly, over the front of her quaint habitation.

'And how have you been, Radie?'

'Oh, very well. No life like a gardener's—early hours, work, air, and plenty of quiet.' And the young lady laughed.

'You are a wonderful lass, Radie.'

'Thank you, dear.'

'And what do you call this place?'

'"The Happy Valley," *I* call it. Don't you remember "Rasselas?"'

'No,' he said, looking round him; 'I don't think I was ever there.'

'You horrid dunce!—it's a book, but a stupid one—so no matter,' laughed Miss Rachel, giving him a little slap on the shoulder with her slender fingers.

His reading, you see, lay more in circulating library lore, and he was not deep in Johnson—as few of us would be, I'm afraid, if it were not for Boswell.

'It's a confounded deal more like the "Valley of the Shadow of Death," in "Pilgrim's Progress"—you remember—that old Tamar used to read to us in the nursery,' replied Master Stanley, who had never enjoyed being quizzed by his sister, not being blessed with a remarkably sweet temper.

'If you don't like my scenery, come in, Stanley, and admire my decorations. You must tell me all the news, and I'll show you my house, and amaze you with my housekeeping. Dear me, how long it is since I've seen you.'

So she led him in by the arm to her tiny drawing-room; and he laid his hat and stick, and gray paletot, on her little marquetrie-table, and sat down, and looked languidly about him, with a sly smile, like a man amused.

'It is an odd fancy, living alone here.'

'An odd necessity, Stanley.'

'Aren't you afraid of being robbed and murdered, Radie?' he said, leaning forward to smell at the pretty bouquet in the little glass, and turning it listlessly round. 'There are lots of those burglar fellows going about, you know.'

'Thank you, dear, for reminding me. But, somehow, I'm not the least afraid. There hasn't been a robbery in this neighbourhood, I believe, for eight hundred years. The people never think of shutting their doors here in summer time till they are going to bed, and then only for form's sake; and, beside, there's nothing to rob, and I really don't much mind being murdered.'

He looked round, and smiled on, as before, like a man contemptuously amused, but sleepily withal.

'You are very oddly housed, Radie.'

'I like it,' she said quietly, also with a glance round her homely drawing-room.

'What do you call this, your boudoir or parlour?'

'I call it my drawing-room, but it's anything you please.'

'What very odd people our ancestors were,' he mused on. 'They lived, I suppose, out of doors like the cows, and only came into their sheds at night, when they could not see the absurd ugliness of the places they inhabited. I could not stand upright in this room with my hat on. Lots of rats, I fancy, Radie, behind that wainscoting? What's that horrid work of art against the wall?'

'A shell-work cabinet, dear. It is not beautiful, I allow. If I were strong enough, or poor old Tamar, I should have put it away; and now that you're here, Stanley, I think I'll make you carry it out to the lobby for me.'

'I should not like to touch it, dear Radie. And pray how do you amuse yourself here? How on earth do you get over the day, and, worse still, the evenings?'

'Very well—well enough. I make a very good sort of a nun, and a capital housemaid. I work in the garden, I mend my dresses, I drink tea, and when I choose to be dissipated, I play and sing for old Tamar—why did not you ask how she is? I do believe, Stanley, you care for no one, but' (she was going to say yourself, she said instead, however, but) 'perhaps, the least in the world for me, and that not very wisely,' she continued, a little fiercely, 'for from the moment you saw me, you've done little else than try to disgust me more than I am with my penury and solitude. What do you mean? You always have a purpose—will you ever learn to be frank and straightforward, and speak plainly to those whom you ought to trust, if not to love? What are you driving at, Stanley?'

He looked up with a gentle start, like one recovering from a reverie, and said, with his yellow eyes fixed for a moment on his sister, before they dropped again to the carpet.

'You're miserably poor, Rachel: upon my word, I believe you haven't clear two hundred a year. I'll drink some tea, please, if you have got any, and it isn't too much trouble; and it strikes me as very curious you like living in this really very humiliating state.'

'I don't intend to go out for a governess, if that's what you mean; nor is there any privation in living as I do. Perhaps you think I ought to go and housekeep for you.'

'Why—ha, ha!—I really don't know, Radie, where I shall be. I'm not of any regiment now.'

'Why, you have not sold out?' She flushed and suddenly grew pale, for she was afraid something worse might have happened, having no great confidence in her brother.

But she was relieved.

'I *have* sold my commission.'

She looked straight at him with large eyes and compressed lips, and nodded her head two or three times, just murmuring, 'Well! well! well!'

'Women never understand these things. The army is awfully expensive—I mean, of course, a regiment like ours; and the interest of the money is better to me than my pay; and see, Rachel, there's no use in lecturing *me*—so don't let us quarrel. We're not very rich, you and I; and we each know our own affairs, you yours, and I mine, best.'

There was something by no means pleasant in his countenance when his temper was stirred, and a little thing sometimes sufficed to do so.

Rachel treated him with a sort of deference, a little contemptuous perhaps, such as spoiled children receive from indulgent elders; and she looked at him steadily, with a faint smile and arched brows, for a little while, and an undefinable expression of puzzle and curiosity.

'You are a very amusing brother—if not a very cheery or a very useful one, Stanley.'

She opened the door, and called across the little hall into the homely kitchen of the mansion.

'Tamar, dear, Master Stanley's here, and wishes to see you.'

'Oh! yes, poor dear old Tamar; ha, ha!' says the gentleman, with a gentle little laugh, 'I suppose she's as frightful as ever, that worthy woman. Certainly she *is* awfully like a ghost. I wonder, Radie, you're not afraid of her at night in this cheerful habitation. *I* should, I know.'

'A ghost *indeed*, the ghost of old times, an ugly ghost enough for many of us. Poor Tamar! she was always very kind to *you*, Stanley.'

And just then old Tamar opened the door. I must allow there was something very unpleasant about that worthy old woman; and not being under any personal obligations to her, I confess my acquiescence in the spirit of Captain Lake's remarks.

She was certainly perfectly neat and clean, but white predominated unpleasantly in her costume. Her cotton gown had once had a pale pattern over it, but wear and washing had destroyed its tints, till it was no better than white, with a mottling of gray. She had a large white kerchief pinned with a grisly precision across her breast, and a white linen cap tied under her chin, fitting close to her head, like a child's nightcap, such as they wore in my young days, and destitute of border or frilling about the face. It was a dress very odd and unpleasant to behold, and suggested the idea of an hospital, or a madhouse, or death, in an undefined way.

She was past sixty, with a mournful puckered and puffy face, tinted all over with a thin gamboge and burnt sienna glazing; and very blue under the eyes, which showed a great deal of their watery whites. This old woman had in her face and air, along with an expression of suspicion and anxiety, a certain character of decency and respectability, which made her altogether a puzzling and unpleasant apparition.

Being taciturn and undemonstrative, she stood at the door, looking with as pleased a countenance as so sad a portrait could wear upon the young gentleman.

He got up at his leisure and greeted 'old Tamar,' with his sleepy, amused sort of smile, and a few trite words of kindness. So Tamar withdrew to prepare tea; and he said, all at once, with a sudden accession of energy, and an unpleasant momentary glare in his eyes—

'You know, Rachel, this sort of thing is all nonsense. You cannot go on living like this; you must marry—you shall marry. Mark Wylder is down here, and he has got an estate and a house, and it is time he should marry you.'

'Mark Wylder is here to marry my cousin, Dorcas; and if he had no such intention, and were as free as you are, and again to urge his foolish suit upon his knees, Stanley, I would die rather than accept him.'

'It was not always so foolish a suit, Radie,' answered her brother, his eyes once more upon the carpet. 'Why should not *he* do as well as another? You liked him well enough once.'

The young lady coloured rather fiercely.

'I am not a girl of seventeen now, Stanley; and—and, besides, I *hate* him.'

'What d—d nonsense! I really beg your pardon, Radie, but it *is* precious stuff. You are quite unreasonable; you've no cause to hate him; he dropped you because you dropped him. It was only prudent; he had not a guinea. But now it is different, and he *must* marry you.'

The young lady stared with a haughty amazement upon her brother.

'I've made up my mind to speak to him; and if he won't I promise you he shall leave the country,' said the young man gently, just lifting his yellow eyes for a second with another unpleasant glare.

'I almost think you're mad, Stanley; and if you do anything so insane, sure I am you'll rue it while you live; and wherever he is I'll find him out, and acquit myself, with the scorn I owe him, of any share in a plot so unspeakably mean and absurd.'

'Brava, brava! you're a heroine, Radie; and why the devil,' he continued, in a changed tone, 'do you apply those insolent terms to what I purpose doing?'

'I wish I could find words strong enough to express my horror of your plot—a plot every way disgusting. You plainly know something to Mark Wylder's discredit; and you mean, Stanley, to coerce him by fear into a marriage with your penniless sister, who *hates* him. Sir, do you pretend to be a gentleman?'

'I rather think so,' he said, with a quiet sneer.

'Give up every idea of it this moment. Has it not struck you that Mark
Wylder may possibly know something of you, you would not have published?'

'I don't think he does. What do you mean?'

'On my life, Stanley, I'll acquaint Mr. Wylder this evening with what you meditate, and the atrocious liberty you presume—yes, Sir, though you are my brother, the *atrocious liberty* you dare to take with my name—unless you promise, upon your honour, now and here, to dismiss for ever the odious and utterly resultless scheme.'

Captain Lake looked very angry after his fashion, but said nothing. He could not at any time have very well defined his feelings toward his sister, but mingling in them, certainly, was a vein of unacknowledged dread, and, shall I say, respect. He knew she was resolute, fierce of will, and prompt in action, and not to be bullied.

'There's more in this, Stanley, than you care to tell me. You have not troubled yourself a great deal about me, you know: and I'm no worse off now than any time for the last three years. You've *not* come down here on *my* account—that is, altogether; and be your plans what they may, you sha'n't mix my name in them. What you please—wise or foolish—you'll do in what concerns yourself;—you always *have*—without consulting me; but I tell you again, Stanley, unless you promise, upon your honour, to forbear all mention of my name, I will write this evening to Lady Chelford, apprising her of your plans, and of my own disgust and indignation; and requesting her son's interference. *Do* you promise?'

'There's no such *haste*, Radie. I only mentioned it. If you don't like it, of course it can lead to nothing, and there's no use in my speaking to Wylder, and so there's an end of it.'

'There *may* be some use, a purpose in which neither my feelings nor interests have any part. I venture to say, Stanley, your plans are all for *yourself*. You want to extort some advantage from Wylder; and you think, in his present situation, about to marry Dorcas, you can use me for the purpose. Thank Heaven! Sir, you committed for once the rare indiscretion of telling the truth; and unless you make me the promise I require, I will take, before evening, such measures as will completely exculpate me. Once again, do you promise?'

'Yes, Radie; ha, ha! of course I promise.'

'Upon your honour?'

'Upon my honour—*there*.'

'I believe, you gentlemen dragoons observe that oath—I hope so. If you choose to break it you may give me some trouble, but you sha'n't compromise me. And now, Stanley, one word more. I fancy Mr. Wylder is a resolute man—none of the Wylders wanted courage.'

Captain Lake was by this time smiling his sly, sleepy smile upon his French boots.

'If you have formed any plan which depends upon frightening him, it is a desperate one. All I can tell you, Stanley, is this, that if I were a man, and an attempt made to extort from me any sort of concession by terror, I would shoot the miscreant who made it through the head, like a highwayman.'

'What the devil are you talking about?' said he.

'About *your danger*,' she answered. 'For once in your life listen to reason. Mark Wylder is as prompt as you, and has ten times your nerve and sense; you are more likely to have committed yourself than he. Take care; he may retaliate your *threat* by a counter move more dreadful. I know nothing of your doings, Stanley—Heaven forbid! but be warned, or you'll rue it.'

'Why, Radie, you know nothing of the world. Do you suppose I'm quite demented? Ask a gentleman for his estate, or watch, because I know something to his disadvantage! Why, ha, ha! dear Radie, every man who has ever been on terms of intimacy with another must know things to his disadvantage, but no one thinks of telling them. The world would not tolerate it. It would prejudice the betrayer at least as much as the betrayed. I don't affect to be angry, or talk romance and heroics, because you fancy such stuff; but I assure you—when will that old woman give me a cup of tea?—I assure you, Radie, there's nothing in it.'

Rachel made no reply, but she looked steadfastly and uneasily upon the enigmatical face and downcast eyes of the young man.

'Well, I hope so,' she said at last, with a sigh, and a slight sense of relief.

CHAPTER VIII.
IN WHICH CAPTAIN LAKE TAKES HIS HAT AND STICK.

So the young people sitting in the little drawing-room of Redman's farm pursued their dialogue; Rachel Lake had spoken last, and it was the captain's turn to speak next.

'Do you remember Miss Beauchamp, Radie?' he asked rather suddenly, after a very long pause.

'Miss Beauchamp? Oh! to be sure; you mean little Caroline; yes, she must be quite grown up by this time—five years—she promised to be pretty. What of her?'

Rachel, very flushed and agitated still, was now trying to speak as usual.

'She *is* good-looking—a little coarse some people think,' resumed the young man; 'but handsome; black eyes—black hair—rather on a large scale, but certainly handsome. A style I admire rather, though it is not very refined, nor at all classic. But I like her, and I wish you'd advise me.' He was talking, after his wont, to the carpet.

'Oh?' she exclaimed, with a gentle sort of derision.

'You mean,' he said, looking up for a moment, with a sudden stare, 'she has got money. Of course she has; I could not afford to admire her if she had not; but I see you are not just now in a mood to trouble yourself about my nonsense—we can talk about it to-morrow; and tell me now, how do you get on with the Brandon people?'

Rachel was curious, and would, if she could, have recalled that sarcastic 'oh' which had postponed the story; but she was also a little angry, and with anger there was pride, which would not stoop to ask for the revelation which he chose to defer; so she said, 'Dorcas and I are very good friends; but I don't know very well what to make of her. Only I don't think she's quite so dull and apathetic as I at first supposed; but still I'm puzzled. She is either absolutely uninteresting, or very interesting indeed, and I can't say which.'

'Does she like you?' he asked.

'I really don't know. She tolerates me, like everything else; and I don't flatter her; and we see a good deal of one another upon those terms, and I have no complaint to make of her. She has some aversions, but no quarrels; and has a sort of laziness—mental, bodily, and moral—that is sublime, but provoking; and sometimes I admire her, and sometimes I despise her; and I do not yet know which feeling is the juster.'

'Surely she is woman enough to be fussed a little about her marriage?'

'Oh, dear, no! she takes the whole affair with a queenlike and supernatural indifference. She is either a fool or a very great

philosopher, and there is something grand in the serene obscurity that envelopes her,' and Rachel laughed a very little.

'I must, I suppose, pay my respects; but to-morrow will be time enough. What pretty little tea-cups, Radie—quite charming—old cock china, isn't it? These were Aunt Jemima's, I think.'

'Yes; they used to stand on the little marble table between the windows.'

Old Tamar had glided in while they here talking, and placed the little tea equipage on the table unnoticed, and the captain was sipping his cup of tea, and inspecting the pattern, while his sister amused him.

'This place, I suppose, is confoundedly slow, is not it? Do they entertain the neighbours ever at Brandon?'

'Sometimes, when old Lady Chelford and her son are staying there.'

'But the neighbours can't entertain them, I fancy, or you. What a dreary thing a dinner party made up of such people must be—like "Aesop's Fables," where the cows and sheep converse.'

'And sometimes a wolf or a fox,' she said.

'Well, Radie, I know you mean me; but as you wish it, I'll carry my fangs elsewhere;—and what has become of Will Wylder?'

'Oh! he's in the Church!'

'Quite right—the only thing he was fit for;' and Captain Lake laughed like a man who enjoys a joke slily. 'And where is poor Billy quartered?'

'Not quite half a mile away; he has got the vicarage of Naunton Friars.'

'Oh, then, Will is not quite such a fool as we took him for.'

'It is worth just £180 a year! but he's very far from a fool.'

'Yes, of course, he knows Greek poets and Latin fathers, and all the rest of it. I don't mean he ever was plucked. I dare say he's the kind of fellow *you'd* like very well, Radie.' And his sly eyes had a twinkle in them which seemed to say, 'Perhaps I've divined your secret.'

'And so I do, and I like his wife, too, *very* much.'

'His wife! So William has married on £180 a year;' and the captain laughed quietly but very pleasantly again.

'On a very little more, at all events; and I think they are about the happiest, and I'm sure they are the best people in this part of the world.'

'Well, Radie, I'll see you to-morrow again. You preserve your good looks wonderfully. I wonder you haven't become an old woman here.'

And he kissed her, and went his way, with a slight wave of his hand, and his odd smile, as he closed the little garden gate after him.

He turned to his left, walking down towards the town, and the innocent green trees hid him quickly, and the gush and tinkle of the clear brook rose faint and pleasantly through the leaves, from the depths of the glen, and refreshed her ear after his unpleasant talk.

She was flushed, and felt oddly; a little stunned and strange, although she had talked lightly and easily enough.

'I forgot to ask him where he is staying: the Brandon Arms, I suppose. I don't at all like his coming down here after Mark Wylder; what *can* he mean? He certainly never would have taken the trouble for *me*. What *can* he want of Mark Wylder? I think *he* knew old Mr. Beauchamp. He may be a trustee, but that's not likely; Mark Wylder was not the person for any such office. I hope Stanley does not intend trying to extract money from him; anything rather than that degradation—than that *villainy*. Stanley was always impracticable, perverse, deceitful, and so foolish with all his cunning and suspicion—so *very* foolish. Poor Stanley. He's so unscrupulous; I don't know what to think. He said he could force Mark Wylder to leave the country. It must be some bad secret. If he tries and fails, I suppose he will be ruined. I don't know what to think; I never was so uneasy. He will blast himself, and disgrace all connected with him; and it is quite useless speaking to him.'

Perhaps if Rachel Lake had been in Belgravia, leading a town life, the matter would have taken no such dark colouring and portentous proportions. But living in a small old house, in a dark glen, with no companion, and little to occupy her, it was different.

She looked down the silent way he had so lately taken, and repeated, rather bitterly, 'My only brother! my only brother! my only brother!'

That young lady was not quite a pauper, though she may have thought so. Comparatively, indeed, she was; but not, I venture to think, absolutely. She had just that symmetrical three hundred pounds a year, which the famous Dean of St. Patrick's tells us he so 'often wished that he had clear.' She had had some money in the Funds besides, still more insignificant but this her Brother Stanley had borrowed and begged piecemeal, and the Consols were no more. But though something of a nun in her way of life, there was no germ of the old maid in her, and money was not often in her thoughts. It was not a bad *dot*; and her Brother Stanley had about twice as much, and therefore was much better off than many a younger son of a duke. But these young people, after the manner of men were spited with fortune; and indeed they had some cause. Old General Lake had once had more than ten thousand pounds a year, and lived, until the crash came, in the style of a vicious old prince. It was a great break up, and a worse fall for Rachel than for her brother, when the plate, coaches, pictures, and all the valuable effects' of old Tiberius went to the hammer, and he himself vanished from his clubs and other haunts, and lived only—a thin intermittent rumour—surmised to be in gaol, or in Guernsey, and quite forgotten soon, and a little later actually dead and buried.

CHAPTER IX.
I SEE THE RING OF THE PERSIAN MAGICIAN.

'That's a devilish fine girl,' said Mark Wylder.

He was sitting at this moment on the billiard table, with his coat off and his cue in his hand, and had lighted a cigar. He and I had just had a game, and were tired of it.

'Who?' I asked. He was looking on me from the corners of his eyes, and smiling in a sly, rakish way, that no man likes in another.

'Radie Lake—she's a splendid girl, by Jove! Don't you think so? and she liked me once devilish well, I can tell you. She was thin then, but she has plumped out a bit, and improved every way.'

Whatever else he was, Mark was certainly no beauty;—a little short he was, and rather square—one shoulder a thought higher than the other—and a slight, energetic hitch in it when he walked. His features in profile had something of a Grecian character, but his face was too broad—very brown, rather a bloodless brown—and he had a pair of great, dense, vulgar, black whiskers. He was very vain of his teeth—his only really good point—for his eyes were a small cunning, gray pair; and this, perhaps, was the reason why he had contracted his habit of laughing and grinning a good deal more than the fun of the dialogue always warranted.

This sea-monster smoked here as unceremoniously as he would have done in 'Rees's Divan,' and I only wonder he did not call for brandy-and-water. He had either grown coarser a great deal, or I more decent, during our separation. He talked of his *fiancée* as he might of an opera-girl almost, and was now discussing Miss Lake in the same style.

'Yes, she is—she's very well; but hang it, Wylder, you're a married man now, and must give up talking that way. People won't like it, you know; they'll take it to mean more than it does, and you oughtn't. Let us have another game.'

'By-and-by; what do you think of Larkin?' asked Wylder, with a sly glance from the corners of his eyes. 'I think he prays rather more than is good for his clients; mind I spell it with an 'a,' not with an 'e;' but hang it, for an attorney, you know, and such a sharp chap, it does seem to me rather a—a joke, eh?'

'He bears a good character among the townspeople, doesn't he? And I don't see that it can do him any harm, remembering that he has a soul to be saved.'

'Or the other thing, eh?' laughed Wylder. 'But I think he comes it a little too strong—two sermons last Sunday, and a prayer-meeting at nine o'clock?'

'Well, it won't do him any harm,' I repeated.

'Harm! O, let Jos. Larkin alone for that. It gets him all the religious business of the county; and there are nice pickings among the charities, and endowments, and purchases of building sites, and trust deeds; I dare say it brings him in two or three hundred a year, eh?' And Wylder laughed again. 'It has broken up his hard, proud heart,' he says; 'but it left him a devilish hard head, I told him, and I think it sharpens his wits.'

'I rather think you'll find him a useful man; and to be so in his line of business he must have his wits about him, I can tell you.'

'He amused me devilishly,' said Wylder, 'with a sort of exhortation he treated me to; he's a delightfully impudent chap, and gave me to understand I was a limb of the Devil, and he a saint. I told him I was better than he, in my humble opinion, and so I am, by chalks. I know very well I'm a miserable sinner, but there's mercy above, and I don't hide my faults. I don't set up for a light or a saint; I'm just what the Prayer-book says—neither more nor less—a miserable sinner. There's only one good thing I can safely say for myself—I am no Pharisee; that's all; I air no religious prig, puffing myself, and trusting to forms, making long prayers in the

market-place' (Mark's quotations were paraphrastic), 'and thinking of nothing but the uppermost seats in the synagogue, and broad borders, and the praise of men—hang them, I hate those fellows.'