



adelma von vay



Caroline Corner

TWIXT WILL AND FATE & THE SLINKENEMIRK FAMILY

Two Stories in one Volume

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Affectionately dedicated to my Dear Mother.

Prispevki k odkrivanju zgodovine ezoteričnih tradicij - v izvorniku

TWIXT WILL AND FATE

I

THE grand old Castle von Rosenstein, which dates from the chivalrous feudal times, remains a relic of the bold Crusaders and their exploits in the Holy Land. Of the original structure, little is standing to tell of the splendours that had once been its inheritance; indeed, saving the rococo facade, the crumbling ruins of a gateway or two, and the ivy-grown shell of a battlemented tower, nothing is there now left to speak of the glory and honour that had been invested in its pompous title and estates. The subterranean dungeons, that of yore were serviceable and of great [2] renown as underground prisons and dread abodes of the captured enemy, are now converted into the more modern and less fearful use of ice-holds and wine-cellars; whilst the new building, founded upon a plan similar in style and architecture to its predecessor, and occupying the same site, is already past the days of youth, and fast emerging into the reverence accorded to old age.

Situated as it is in the luxuriant province of the Rhingau — its noble exterior shaded by clambering wild flowers and trailing vines, and perched high upon the precipitous edge of a rugged promontory that overhangs the winding river — a picture idealistic in conception and perfect in execution it presents to the beholder, and is pointed out to tourists as the scene of many a legend and marvel of days long gone by. A source of interest to the lovers of antiquity, a special delight to those of romance and chivalry, each and every passenger in the busy steampackets plying their way to or from the city of Cologne lends an attentive ear to the oft-repeated tales, weird and fancifully embellished, as told by the enthusiastic guide, whose [3] *repertoire* is inexhaustible concerning the courage and stability of his 'Vaterland.'

One evening, many years ago, at the close of summer, or commencement of autumn, the interior of the fine old Schloss was brilliantly illumined with a variety of lamps; gay music and glad voices resounded throughout the sumptuous apartments, echoing and re-echoing, again and again, aye, even unto the utmost spire of the tallest minaret, or penetrating to the low and gloomy vaults wherein all sound was lost in a feeble and far-away sigh, like that of the wind mourning her dead after a fierce and disastrous storm.

An assemblage of noble and illustrious guests had met together in order to celebrate the betrothal of the young and lovely Countess Eleanore and her cousin, the gallant Prince Ferdinand von Guldenkranz. Vain would it be to attempt to describe the revelry and mirth that was being indulged in; still more useless to endeavour to put into language the beauty and grace that blended harmoniously and well with the intellect and valour personified in these sons and daughters of Germany. Yet for neither quality could [4] one amongst the multitude be found to outrival or even compete with the youthful couple who had but just plighted their troth and exchanged vows of constancy and all-enduring love. Who, gazing upon the sweet countenance, or having once hearkened to the gentle voice of the one, and being acquainted with the wide-spread deeds of daring and magnanimity of the other, would wish to surpass them in the position to which they had attained by their individual worth and merit — far eclipsing any that the chance of birth or fortune can ordain — upon the pinnacle of popular favour and regard?

Ah! they were indeed a favoured couple! It really seemed as if Heaven had set an especial price upon that youth, that maiden, — else why, from the hour of birth to this very even, had the presiding genius of each permitted nought but prosperity and happiness to colour their every undertaking? Why had a herald of peace preceded to remove any stumbling-block that might beset their path, and clear away the thorns and briars, lest they should be subject to the pricks and stings that to the generality of [5] humankind are inevitable in the pursuance of their earthly pilgrimage? No! such things as discomfort, failure, disappointment, unrest, and the thousand and one 'ills that flesh is heir to,' had as yet steadfastly avoided close contact with these young people, who, moreover, living as they had done in quietude, had not been harassed by the usual ghastly attendants upon success — envy, hatred, and malice.

Their names were held in high repute — in almost sacred veneration by the less-educated and superstitious villagers, who were indomitable in the belief that immense fortune would accrue from a simple 'Guten Tag' of the handsome Prince Ferdinand; and after a visit from 'Die gelinde Rosenstein' — as they loved so well to call the countess, after the ancient custom — the pretty, mountain-sheltered cot or quaint wooden hut was considered to be under a sort of charm: for a week to come no evil whatever could enter its portals, no harm approach the indwellers, no crosses arise 'twixt them and propitious fate. Such was the peasant's belief, and in such he or she retained an implacable faith. [6] Whether any cause had ever arisen to engender doubt, we will not venture to discuss: sufficient is it to assert that no rumour to such an effect would have met with approval or encouragement if set afloat; and as for disputing the ability of their gifted 'fraulein,' in cases of sickness or distress, as magical healer and instant consoler, they would no more have dreamed of so doing than of stubbornly refusing to sing the praises of their Fatherland, after having engaged in the dance when work was over and long since forgotten.

Whilst the Countess Eleanore dispensed a wealth of comfort to the relief of her less fortunate brethren, and in her own fair hands brought food and clothing for the hungry and poor, the Prince Ferdinand von Guldenkranz was equally as prolific in his generosity of heart and nobleness of mind and will:

‘Erect and firm he stood among his kind,
All gentleness and might.’

Such is a brief epitome of the characters borne by these young people, and a dim outline of their surroundings, with the estimation in which they were held. More, it is now of no consequence to state, save, perhaps, that [7] riches, beauty, and love, all were theirs; and though but this evening their vows had been publicly plighted, yet, in effect, a mutual interchange had long since been made, when they had wandered together down the mountain passes, through the purple laden vineyards, and by the pearly stream of the dear old Rhine, as they had been wont to do as children — she listening with similar rapture, but, ah! not half so sweet an intentness, to the stories of fairy-lore and legends of fascinating interest connected with each decaying fortress, that *he alone* was capable of telling to her infantine delight. Those had been happy days! so happy, so careless!

How sweet it is to linger in fancy over the reminiscences of the past, even though its wraiths do elicit a long, long sigh! O youth! spring-time of life! what season can be compared unto thee for deep and thorough enjoyment? Then are earth’s trials vapid and flitting! the sunbeams of April are too radiant to permit of a continuance of gloom! Ominous clouds glide noiselessly away, or, should they remain, a bright and glowing sun will penetrate and eclipse their sombre dark-[8] ness; and again is the mirage of an Eden reflected upon our smiling planet from the spiritual spheres beyond, and the young heart bounds in gladness, forgetful of all save present delights!

Within the walls of the home of the Countess Von Rosenstein, compliments, congratulations and expressions of solicitude were being lavishly bestowed that evening. Friends eagerly gathered round to vie with one another in praise of flowery phraseology and apparent depth of meaning; the loving cup, at the conclusion of the ceremony of betrothal, had been passed round, and a banquet was about to be held, when toast upon toast would be drunk to the lifelong happiness of the matchless couple. Arrayed in a robe of diaphanous white that the artists adore, with no ornaments excepting a garland of pure roses encircling her lofty brow, and her silken hair loosely flowing like a mantle of burnished gold, enshrouding her fair shoulders, Eleanore, standing silently, timidly, yet with implicit confidence, beside her *fiancé*, her slender hand resting upon his iron arm, looked, in the words of the poet, as if [9] ‘the crown of happiness were placed upon her young life.’ So oft she had dreamed of this! For many years past this had provided food for reveries by day and by night, and now was the vague musing of her early youth fulfilled in reality: no longer was it idealistic that she pressed the broad band of gold to her lips; no longer was she wasting her time in idle speculations, or keeping awake in the still hours of night when all were wrapt in slumber, for the purpose of thinking and conjuring up a romance in which she played the part of Ophelia to the gallant Von Guldenkranz’s Hamlet.

‘This is the end,’ she was contemplating, as with far-away gaze she recalled those visionary flights of imagination. ‘This is the end! for Ferdinand is mine, and I am his betrothed bride! How many times I have longed for this! And now — ah! I am sorry that it should end! Can the future ever be so pleasant as the dear uncertain past?’

And with this, an involuntary sigh uplifted her bosom; yet she was not dissatisfied, nor could she assign a sufficient reason [10] for the gloomy apprehension that weighed upon her spirit, and which, notwithstanding firm resistance, would not be controlled, but continued to gnaw and torment when most she had cause to rejoice.

‘Dear Ferdinand, ’tis ungrateful to thee! still, I cannot help it! Is it that some wicked spirit is haunting and hovering near me, reviving that foolish fancy in vivid distinctness before my understanding, whispering within my ear, and inventing suspicions, hideous and untrue; or is it that she, my guardian angel, disapproves? *Ach!* no! that cannot be! What then? Folly, delusion? *nothing* more? And I have not strength to contend against its baneful influence, and am a victim to the senseless wanderings of my own imagination? No! no! I feel it is not *that!* Oh! Ferdinand! may I — *dare* I confide this new feeling to thee? Thou, with thy powerful intellect and mighty strength, could give me relief, yet — Wilt thou listen and — not deride; for *that* I could not bear!’

So sadly profound, and full of melancholy earnestness, became the limpid violet eyes of the young countess, as these thoughts im- [11] pressed themselves upon her receptive brain, that her betrothed, observing the unusual sadness, remarked, in an undertone, as he pressed a cool white hand within his own:

‘Mein Liebchen, let us leave this heat and excitement to enjoy a quiet walk in the open air. Thou art looking wearied just now, and almost unlike thyself. Come, Eleanore, my beloved one.’

And as she, acquiescing with the shadow of a smile, stepped forth from the crowded apartment, teeming with fashion and splendour, into the cool atmosphere that fanned and played lightly upon the broad stone terrace, her gaze unconsciously turned in the direction of a certain planet shining in the vast firmament of heaven, and cold steely fingers clutched at her heart, bidding her instinctively to shrink and hide her head behind the protecting shoulder of her lover.

A glorious expanse lay open before them: the moon o’erhead, with her soft opalescent beams, bathed the whole scene in a haze of phosphorescent effulgence; the peaceful river was transformed as by an enchanter’s wand into a stream of molten silver, wending its [12] placid way between the sandy shores, whereon, in lofty eminence, towered the clinging ruins of castles that had survived their gallant defenders, to tell the truth of history for themselves; the neighbouring forests, standing out in bold prominence, their autumnal tints now lost, yet gaining power of attraction in their weird illumination and the hush of night — each oak, pine and linden with outstretched branches appearing as the spectre of some departed warrior returning to guard the home of his birth and earliest recollection. Beyond the luminous halo that encircled fair Dian, queen of the lamp-lit heavens, myriads upon myriads of stars bespangled the azure sky, and their diamond eyes were reflected again and again in the ripples of the water, that might have served in olden times as a mirror of wondrous divination and prophetic augury, so limpid and deep it was.

Ancient fortresses, situated upon steep precipices and supported by craggy rocks, commanded an imposing view of numerous, picturesque valleys. Here and there a light in the window of some cottage in one of the tiny [13] hamlets that crouched at the foot of the vineclad mountains, as though seeking protection in their magnitude and might against the supernatural foes in whom the peasant-folks devoutly believe and live in dread of — the gnomes, sprites, elves, sylphs, salamanders and undines which are supposed to haunt the elements, holding midnight carousings, and casting direful spells upon those

unfortunates whose pasture lands serve to set up a fairy ring. Even as the lovers stepped out on to the terrace, the moon emerged from behind the solitary purple cloud, and, bearing in her majestic train flakes of transparent vapour, in honour to them, perhaps in token of the satisfaction of celestial witnesses, a flood of translucent glory illumined the path that they trod.

‘What a magnificent night!’ exclaimed the prince, in his fervour pausing as though transfixed by the truly imposing view.

‘A magnificent night!’ echoed the countess, in accents hushed, so deeply was she impressed with the beauty of the scene before her; then, continuing in a strain that was the embodiment of her thoughts in outspoken [14] language, and scarce heedful of a presence other than her own: ‘See, the moon, the fair, gentle moon, so soft, so kind, shining full upon us, imparts her light and sympathy to us; and beyond, the angels rejoice, peeping down upon us mortals with their million bright eyes. They smile upon us. See, how their eyes twinkle with gladness! *They* are our best friends, those who have gone before and have put off the garment of flesh for an unfading raiment of spirit birth — a heavenly and incorruptible robe! They are true, and never forget! No, though they be billions of miles away, they can and *do* see us at times. I feel it, I *know* it! She is there, my mother whom I scarce remember in earth-life; yet she does not forget me, and she is pleased at what has been done this evening, and that makes my heart lighter. We ought indeed to be happy, dear Ferdinand!’

‘We ought, and we *are*, dearest; who could be otherwise? Have we not youth, health, honour, and above all love, which makes a paradise of earth! More should we ask for? *could* we crave? I, at least, am content, for in possessing you, Eleanore, I [15] possess all that my better self requires — all that my soul demands! You, my beloved, are to me what sunshine and dew are to an opening blossom: its beauty and inward merit would wither and die undeveloped were it not for light and nourishment; so would the higher faculties of my nature have stunted and perished ere they had had a chance to bloom, had not thy intuitive sympathy and tact strengthened and tended them in early growth. I feel every impulse of my soul entirely changed when in thy presence, and shudder when I think what I might have been without thine ennobling influence, my lovely Rosenstein! Happy! Ah! let me recall the words of our noble poet-hero:

“What is there higher for us in this world
That’s left untasted in our hallow’d wishes?
Can life afford a moment of *more* bliss!”

Answer me that, sweet Eleanore!

‘True, true; and yet — and yet — thou hast not finished. Nay, Ferdinand; ’tis too beautiful to omit:

“Here happiness is transient as the day,
On high, eternal as the love of God!”

[16] What inspiration is this! So tender, yet so powerfully *true*. But thy feelings carry thee away, dear Ferdinand; I would not have thee attribute half to me! Have *I* not as much, nay, fifty times more, to thank *thee* for? What should *I* have been without *thee*? Who taught me my letters, the simple, yet the most difficult, A B C? Who did delight to while away an idle hour in recounting legend after legend from a never-ending supply of imaginative lore? Who *would* hold my pony’s reins, and always persist in guiding its footsteps down the steep mountain paths, fearful lest it stumble, and with its burden fall?

Who would oft-times bear the blame, when utterly blameless, for my escape? Who would willingly forfeit plaything or luxury for “the little Rosenstein,” and at any moment forsake companions and pleasure at the caprice of a golden-haired mädchen? Again, who *would* bring fresh flowers and ripe fruits, and be *most* anxious and constant, when I lay ’twixt life and death? more than all others soothing my sufferings, and lessening my pain! Whose hand was it that *would* bathe my fevered [17] brow? Whose gentle touch that acted like a magical wand upon my delirious brain? Whose soft, cool palm — softer and cooler than any woman’s, Ferdinand — stayed the burning heat and brought ease and rest to the wearied eyelids? Whose voice does most unite in harmony with mine to the accompaniment of my sweet guitar? Whose noble deeds have so often of late reached my ears? Whose name is held in high esteem by all our fatherland? And now that honours, wealth, dignity, an illustrious patrimony of an ancestry renowned for their greatness of heart and mind — all are included in that golden crown which you wear, dear Ferdinand — are heaped upon him, and many grander, prouder, fairer than I, and, alas! far, far more deserving, would but too readily share such rank and title — who is he, that has remained faithful through the long, long years, and still longer months of absence? ’Tis he, my Ferdinand, my protector, instructor, companion, adviser and lover in one! What, then, should *I* have been without *thee*? An ignorant, undeveloped, loveless being. But hark! that cry! — hah! ’tis only some [18] one singing! it thrilled through me like — like the shriek of one in pain or — Stay! I do not recognise ———’

‘No, dear Eleanore, it is the Baroness D’Enfers; she has a marvellous voice — unequalled, I believe, in compass,’ answered the prince, slowly pacing the circular walk with his betrothed leaning confidently upon his arm.

‘Ah! *your* friend, Ferdinand. You did not tell me she was such a beauty — wonderful singer?’ continued the countess, still retaining a nervous tremor, the effect that that singular voice had produced upon her sensitive organism.

‘No, did I not? Ah! we have had so much to say and so *little* time to say it in, dearest,’ the lover fondly asserted, stooping to imprint a lingering kiss upon the fair golden head by his side. ‘But why do you say *my* friend? The Baroness Nathalie was rather an acquaintance of my family, so I understand — I know very little of her,’ he pursued.

‘Indeed? Oh! I — I am not sorry,’ interposed his companion hesitatingly, yet with eager earnestness. [19] Von Guldenkranz laughed.

‘Not sorry, and why, *miene* Liebe? Why should it affect *you*, either way?’

‘I — I scarcely know; but — —’

‘But — what? Come, no secrets *now*, Eleanore!’ gravely interrupted the prince, wishful to set any petty jealousies at rest at once and for ever.

‘But I do not, I *cannot* like her! I have tried for your sake, dear Ferdinand, but — Can I have seen her before to-day?’ interrogated the young girl, suddenly pausing in her promenade, and fixing her regards penetratingly upon her *fiancé*.

‘Have you seen her before? Certainly not — at least, I suppose not, else you would have remembered; *she* would, at any rate, and *I* should, for do I not treasure each item of my Rosenstein’s confidence and

never forget? But what makes you ask that question, Eleanore?’ cross-questioned Ferdinand von Guldenkranz, drawing the little hand still farther through his arm, and gazing into the fathomless depths of a pair of dark blue eyes that deepened and dilated at his loving glance.

[20] ‘Fancy! nothing more; perhaps it was in a dream after all — very probably. Think no more about it, Ferdinand, and — and do not mention it again, please. I would rather try to forget it! it was unpleasant!’ was the whispered rejoinder.

‘Nonsense, Eleanore! What reason, what justice ——’ commenced the prince with firmness.

‘Ferdinand!’

The name was pronounced in a tone of such piteous supplication that the assumed sternness was immediately relinquished, and in his own persuasive and caressing manner he went on:

‘Forgive me, love, I meant not to be unkind, only it is my desire that you should withhold no secret thought from me. Anything, no matter how trivial, that causes you one passing pang of uneasiness distresses me also, such sympathy exists between us. Your nature repels this Baroness D’Enfers; I have felt it — known it, before you told me so! She is not a woman I much care for, yet is she not after all rather deserving of pity than aversion? She was sold, Eleanore, [21] sold in early youth to a husband she abhorred — a man old enough to be her grandfather, and wicked as he was old and rich! If she be not all that can be admired, is it to be wondered at, poor creature? But all this, sweet countess, you were ignorant of; what then is the cause of this — this ——’

‘Stay, Ferdinand! I am sorry, so sorry! Poor woman! I *do* pity her, and will strive to be just, to be kind, to like, nay *love* her! She must need affection, consolation, and sympathy! Sold to a man wicked and old! Sold for gold! Oh! horrible! horrible! Heaven have mercy upon her, poor baroness! If only I had known before I spoke! Can I make amendment *now*, thinkst thou, my Ferdinand?’

‘It is already made, my beloved! Ere thou cravedst forgiveness, that forgiveness was given by a Power higher than that of mortal, Eleanore — an All-seeing, All-wise, All-merciful God, who searches the inmost recesses of our hearts and fathoms the profoundest secrets of our lives! Nought can be hidden from Him, and He in exchange gives peace to the troubled spirit, rest to the wearied [22] mind, relief to the afflicted, and consolation to the sorrowing; for one and all are His children, and He careth for the least as much, perhaps more, than the greatest amongst His family upon earth.’

‘Ferdinand! this from *thee*? Is it — is it that thou suspecteth me of — of — withholding something from thee? Oh! believe me, I wish, I *long* to — to ——’

‘Nay, dearest. I suspect nothing of *thee*! Thou art too good, too pure, far above suspicion, meine gelinde Rosenstein! But thou art sad to-night? I perceive it at first glance beneath the covering of those gentle smiles! Tell me, Eleanore, tell me *all*, mein Liebchen, if thou wilt! Let me, and me alone, be the recipient of all thy joys, all thy troubles, my own betrothed, my beautiful bride!’ tenderly answered the prince, placing his arm around the young girl, and gazing with love-laden eyes upon the beaming countenance that reflected the full tide of his affection in all its radiance, and purified from earthly defilement.

‘Many, many thanks, dearest Ferdinand! Would that I were only more deserving of [23] such infinite goodness! Now listen, and I will tell my little secret, of which I know thou art so jealous. It has been my custom, during thy absence, as thou art aware, to come here in quietude and dedicate an hour to

meditation and dreams of thee — the pleasantest hour of the whole twenty-four! Last evening, our betrothal-eve, remember, after the Angelus had been sounded and all was rapt in solemn silence, the silence of prayer, I could not rest, so nervous and anxious I felt, so I stole away from my aunt and cousins and came to enjoy a quiet undisturbed reverie, allowing my thoughts freewill to dwell intent upon thee and the happy future before us. Ah! my beloved, what more agreeable theme could there be! The night-birds soon awakened and sang loud and clear, and the lindens rustled so gleefully, and the breezes fanning my cheek whispered music in my ear. In dreaming thus, my spirit seemed to grow light, and soar away to the regions beyond this our material earth, until in fancy I beheld thee: not as thou art *now* — exalted, spiritualised, with a halo encircling thy brow, and the [24] laurels of peace in thine hand, instead of this jewel-wrought sword. Thou wert a prince still, but not as *we* understand — the princely son of a heavenly king; a warrior, but not a slayer of men, an upholder of truth divine, a champion in a holy cause! And by thy side *I* stood; ah! so radiant, so happy I looked! No single thought was there in the breast of the one that the other did not share. Two lives, yet one in purpose, one in aim! Two souls, yet one in principle, one in design! Two individualities, yet one in affinity, one in aspiration! A duality, yet a unity in the higher faculties and attainments of the immortal being! Such were we in relationship to one another! Lovers still, yet was our love purified and in its essence strengthened and rendered sublime, imperishing, ever blooming, in freshness and growth surpassing, day by day, and year by year, throughout the vast ages of eternity! A lovely vision it was, dear Ferdinand, but to repeat the words of our hero-poet:

“Here happiness is as transient as the day:”

so was this but of short duration. How [25] well it recurs to me now! The atmosphere suddenly became charged with a heavy thick mist, which spread rapidly along the valley of the Rhingau. Beyond, the air was clear and pure, whilst here below we were fast enveloping in an ugly shroud of rising gloom and clammy moisture. Yet little should I have troubled concerning this, had not a dismal apprehension fallen upon my soul. A foreboding that I could not comprehend tore me away from my pleasant reverie, and poisoned my blissful dreams with doubts and fears. Claspings my hands thus upon the stone rampart, I gave myself up to silent prayer for the space of a few seconds, then, drawing a letter — thy last — from my bosom, I pressed it fervently to my heart, gaining strength from its contact, calmness and soothing from some indescribable influence which it possessed. How long it was that thus I sat, oblivious to all around, deaf and dumb to all, save thee, I know not; suffice it that I awakened with a sigh from my day-dream, and there, in unequalled brilliancy, glistened the star — my star! Thou wilt remember old Nurse [26] Grüntz apportioning to each our ruling planet, and cautioning us as to the various aspects ere we undertake some task or journey?

‘Ah! those were happy days. I remember as though ’twere but yesterday! Poor old Nurse Grüntz, could she but witness her life’s hope realised, how glad she would be, Eleanore.’

‘*Could* she? thou sayst! God’s mercy will permit that she shall! His angels will draw aside the veil, and she, dear soul, will look down from her spirit-home and smile upon us. Else how could she be at rest in uncertainty as to the orphan-child whom she loved so well? How could I, her foster-child, rejoice, even in *thy* affection, knowing not that she is still living and cared for — participating in our happiness, and glorying in each deed of unselfishness and charity?’

‘Yes, my star, fair Venus, gazed deep, deep into my eyes, yet, in all its brightness, it did not dazzle, but appeared to grow, expand and enlarge, until it could have swallowed up a triplicity of moons, and gained in every dimension so that the eye could not [27] fathom its vast extent, but travelled on and on as through millions and billions of miles — on, on — at a lightning speed, past cities of surprising splendour, scenes of infinite magnificence, oceans of boundless circumference, forests, mountains, waterfalls, precipices, stately mansions and rich abodes, gardens filled with flowers of supermundane loveliness, rocky eminences and verdant pasture-lands, grandeur and simplicity interblending harmoniously, and beasts of the wild woods couching in repose by the side of our own pet lambs — all were in unison *there*, Ferdinand. I was allowed to pass by unnoticed, as though they were not aware of my presence. I heeded little, for I was on one purpose bent; these beautiful scenes made scarce any impression on me; I was absorbed in my search. Presently, in my flight, a vague reminiscence dawned upon me of having been in some way familiar with the objects that surrounded me, and in one sweet, gentle-looking lady I felt I could recognise my mother, and myself in the tiny babe by her side. Then pictures of childhood, with thee and Nurse Grüntz, passed in rapid sue- [28] cession before me. I fain would have bid them stay, but no! not for a moment more — onward, onward, until a vision presented itself; a vision as we stand now, and upon our fingers we wore these broad bands of gold. But suddenly a dusky cloud arose between thee and me, which grew denser and still more dense, and so large that it encompassed my path and forbade my love for thee. I trembled, and an icy chill thrilled my frame, whilst a fueling took possession of me that *something*, I knew not *what*, was concealed within that black cloud. To turn either to the right hand or left was impossible! I was transfixed, and before me in awful contiguity a — *man*, I suppose, though I had almost said a fiend — stepped forth. In perfect silence he stood before me — ach! at the very reminiscence the perspiration starts to my forehead, and my hair is dank with fright! Put thine arm around me, Ferdinand; hold me securely. I cannot — yet, I *must* go on! Oh! but to give some faint idea of his hideousness — his wicked face and evil eyes; his distorted countenance; his hunchback and loosely-hanging limbs; his long, bristling [29] eyebrows of iron-grey; his unshapely head and protruding jaw; his cruel, rapacious lips and fang-like teeth; his outgrowth of ugliness from an ingrowth of sin. And, withal, the fascination, the insidious allurement that was enshrined in those treacherous eyes. Nearer and nearer he came, never for a moment transferring his searching gaze, that pierced into my heart of hearts, reading by its own ghastly light the secret of my affection for thee, and laughing in fiendish mockery at all that was pure therein. At first I struggled, rebelled, and fought hard against this dominant obsession, but, alas! what availed it? — what availed puny strength, *my* feeble will against one ten thousand times superior in might! I felt all resistance vain — indeed, all power of resistance left me; a sensation of numbness overcame me, and my soul seemed to go out to him until my personality merged into his. Not a wish did he entertain but I was informed of it even as it entered his mind; not a desire but that I concurred in — unwillingly enough, heaven knows — not a command but that I felt compelled to obey; nevertheless, an abhorrence such as I have never endured, a detestation [30] and repugnance such as I hope never to experience for fellow mortal, I then experienced for that — thing of evil, that black spot upon my life’s path. And yet, spite of all, I was becoming his slave, and as my glazed eyeballs followed each dilation and contraction of the pupils of his, a curious revulsion of feeling overcame me, and that loathing that had previously battled so fruitlessly was now become dormant at the wave of his hand, and, strange to relate, a sensation of perfect rest and tranquillity came in its stead. Sleep stole upon me, or rather a dreamless trance, and when I awakened, no dark cloud was between us — we stood as we do now,

thou with thy right arm protectingly around me, and the scenery around appearing bright and glorious as it does this evening; in fact, this is but a realisation in each minutia of last night's fairy vision. Such is my story, Ferdinand; it is pleasant to feel, to that all *will* end well. But oh! folly though it may be, with what venomous fangs has it not gnawed at my heart-strings throughout this, my betrothal day! A dream, thou wilt say; perhaps so; yet in the telling of a [31] dream — a terrible dream — how little can the hearer understand and appreciate the fearful sensations and agony indescribable to the dreamer, the shades of which survive and haunt with singular pertinacity, when, had it been of normal origin, all would have long since passed away.

'I have not wearied thee, my Ferdinand? Didst thou but realise the relief I now enjoy, didst thou but experience one quarter of the ease which comes with the disburdening of this, my *only* secret from thee, thou wouldst comprehend a trifle of thy inestimable worth to me!'

And the soft golden head of the young Countess von Rosenstein bent to receive the warm kisses of her lover as he clasped her fondly to his breast, and held her within the protection of his brave and powerful arms.

'Sweetest Eleanore! safe, safe within my embrace, who can, who *dare* molest thee, when I am nigh?'

'Ah! when thou art nigh. But how soon, how *very* soon, we must part.'

'Would'st thou have me remain, Eleanore? Only say so, and ——'

[32] 'Nay, duty will call thee; go, go dearest, and pray for me as I shall pray for *thee*. May holy angels guard and guide my Ferdinand, and keep him good and true. Even so must thou pray for me, and in the end, all will be well!'

Two slender white hands encircled the prince's braided sleeve, and a girlish face looked up earnestly into that of the handsome Von Guldenkranz. Bending until his lips reached her smooth, transparent brow, he murmured, in accents so fond:

'I will, my Rosenstein. May the great God Himself protect His beautiful child, and keep her pure and lovely as she is now.'

A brief silence ensued; then, continuing, he said: 'Thou art cold, dearest; let us return within. The song has ceased; I hear the clatter of plates; surely the banquet is about to commence. Thou wilt be missed, my beloved. Come, let us away.'

'True! I was forgetting all but thee, so happy I feel. Hach!'

A shrill cry escaped her lips, and her fingers closed tightly around the arm of her betrothed.

[33] 'What *now*, mein Liebchen?' inquired the prince.

'Nothing. A pair of dark eyes — handsome eyes — looked straight into mine from yonder window. It was curious in the moonlight, that is all. Scarcely a fancy *this* time, dear Ferdinand.'

So saying, the young girl laughed joyously, and briskly ran along the terrace, pursued by her *fiancée*, the Prince Ferdinand Von Guldenkranz.

II.

[34] FEARFUL thunder-storm was raging in the valley of the Rhingau. Tremendous claps of thunder rent the air, and in their vehemence seemed to shake the foundations of the crags and eminences.

The usually placid, mirror-like waters now roared and heaved and danced tumultuously, lashing their pebbly shores, and dashing the crystal spray o'er the huge hanging precipices with gigantic force and fury. Rumbblings in the overcharged atmosphere, now distant, now near and nearer still, till close overhead; then one stupendous crash, leaping from peak to peak, from fortress to fortress, past village and village, vale and [35] vale; the mountain-tops crowned with dense volumes of purple cloud, that bursting, flooded vineyard and garden with a rushing stream, propelled by a mighty whirlwind down the narrow passes. Scarcely had the deafening noise lessened in its flight, than lightning, vivid and forked, again illumined the appalling darkness with a fierce and unearthly glare that somewhat resembled the light of wicked triumph in an evil eye. Giddily it gleamed, as though in taunting mimicry, and in its every turn and twist a million spirits of the elements seemed to grin and glory in this their work. Dizzily it glistened and pounced in demoniacal delight upon aught that chanced to come in its way.

Ancient, sturdy oaks, graceful lindens, and tall poplars and pines fell victims to its cruel revelry; life for them was bereft of all joyousness for evermore; bare and leafless they might stand and wither away, or await the woodman's axe to mercifully hew them down. The fiery flash extinguished, once more all was wrapt in impenetrable darkness, whilst from afar might be heard the low grumbling, [36] already acquiring force and energy to peal forth in treble might, and hurl the broken crested rocks and flagstaves, awnings and weathercocks, in reckless profusion into the agitated depths of the infuriated river.

A terrible night! a frightful storm! Dwellings, alike of rich and poor, were securely fastened, and the occupants endeavoured to suppress, so far as they were able, the shrieking wind in the chimneys and the noise of the tumult without. The stately castle maintained a stern inflexibility worthy of its ancient renown, its inmates gathering together in the spacious dining-hall and regaling themselves with high-feasting and songs to keep out the disturbing influences that were abroad; but still the princely owner was ill at ease, for he dreaded the morrow's dawning on a wrecked and ruined vintage, which meant many tens of thousands loss to him. The peasant's home stood sheltered at the base of the rocky steeps, but he hearkened to the wild tempest without, and he knew but too well the direful sound; so he called his wife and young ones, bidding them have no fear and join in songs of thank- [37] fulness that they were comfortably housed and not condemned to wander abroad that fierce, unrelenting night; but the peasant likewise was ill at ease, for *he* dreaded the morrow's dawning on a wrecked and ruined vintage, which, for *him*, meant no work and a winter's excruciating poverty!

In the midst of the elemental distraction, one solitary individual dared to brave storm, thunder and lightning, wind and rain. What were all these to *her*? As naught, compared with the passion then raging in her breast! — a fire fierce and tormenting, exciting, inebriating, maddening! Firmly clutching the large black-hooded cloak closely around her, she pursued her way with a steady, even gait, neither fearing nor caring, seemingly, by the determined step and resolute cast of features which relaxed not nor winced at the amazing violence of the raging storm. Now and again a short ironical laugh was borne along by the shrieking wind; at these times a kind of lurid glitter flashed in her handsome dark eyes, which she turned full upon the lightning, and apparently caused it to writhe and wriggle beneath the gaze that dared to scorn its [38] power. The whirlwind attacked, but was fain to desist: simple

contempt was its only adversary, and, as we all are aware, that in its simplicity is hardest of all to oppose. Huge splashes of rain fell in great force, but it was also accounted as naught; indeed, it was rather refreshing, and a face wondrously beautiful was held up uncovered as it was to catch the pelting shower. Onward, onward, neither wavering nor pausing to bestow a glance behind — onward, without faltering; intent, and regardless of everything but the one all-absorbing purpose. Three miles thus.

‘Will this infernal fury last?’ she asks herself. ‘Heaven grant it may, or — I may be outdone! The key — the coins — ah! Safe! Why dost thou not ease me of my treasures, fierce tumult? Ha! Ha! thou dost not often meet with such an adversary — one so fair and yet so invulnerable! How dost thou like it? Say, how is’t with thy strength now, that cowers before weak woman? Is’t in honour, submission, or wrath, that thou lendst me thy wicked aid this night? Poor fool! thou hast outwitted thyself this time! — ha! ha! — thou hadst not known, thy [39] opponent, surely! Who but Nathalie D’Enfers would venture out on such a night? Who? thou echost wildly. None, save one like myself — a woman in delirium, infuriated with jealous love, burnt up with hatred, consumed with passion, and love that will not brook unrequital, torturing indifference, blasting ingratitude, unappreciation! Bah! — The bag of gold — out of sight of rapacious regards. And now I’ve done with thee, darkness and storm, thou hast served my purpose and well. Ha! ha! I bid thee adieu! ’Twill be late when I return — late, therefore safe. Expend thy anger and begone, or do duty to another such as I — adieu!’

A fair, jewelled hand was put forth from the cloak, and passed along the rocks until a hollow in a declivity was discovered, sufficiently large to enable a full sized person to crawl in a recumbent posture into the interior. An abrupt angle cut off all direct advance, and to one uninitiated it would appear that further ingress terminated here, but such was a fallacy, as the strenuous persistence of this intruder was sufficient to prove. In the tomb-like darkness that sur- [40] rounded her, not an object was to be discerned, and the route had to be continued by the sense of touch instead of sight; however, familiarity rendered the task easy. Arrived at a certain point, a small golden key, that hung like a charm from her graceful throat, was inserted in a chink, and upon turning, a door instantly flew open from within at her magical touch. A circular, damp-smelling cavern met her accustomed vision: on the right an archway conducted into an inner cave, from the interior of which gleamed the rays of a dimly-burning lamp which alone served to dispel what would otherwise have been utter and complete darkness. Closing the door noiselessly after her entrance, the woman crept stealthily on tiptoe and peeped, unperceived, into the next chamber. A man, old, weazened, dwarfed and deformed, knelt in front of a pile of blazing faggots in an open brazier, with vessels of divers shapes and sizes, crucibles, censers, and utensils of weird appearance and curious workmanship beside him, from some of which steam curled in rings and wreaths far up to the rugged roof. In a grotto to [41] the left a heterogeneous collection of articles lay in reckless discord and singular inharmony — globe and egg-shaped crystals, compasses, magnets, quadrants, books upon books, diagrams, metals, jewels, knots of ribbon, orders of merit and honour, curling locks of soft golden hair, fancy baubles, souvenirs, costly gems set as amulets, talismans and charms, images, mythological deities, rosaries, crucifixes — indeed, an indiscriminate medley heaped together in careless profusion. Upon the walls symbolical emblems and fantastic signs, figures and cabalistic characters were rudely engraven, in, to the novice, unintelligible meaning. Thereon was depicted a full chart of the heavens for a certain time, with the houses — an astrological term — apportioned and the planets presiding over each; the aspects which they bore in relation to one another, and the divers influences that were thereby exercised. Complete and accurate

as was the whole, and intricate as must have been the calculation, yet was there in effect not a single clue whereby to offer an introduction to its solution. Mystical hieroglyphics met the gaze on every [42] side, yet in no instance was a translation or interpretation to be found to the all-pervading enigma.

The very air, close and musty, bore with it the breath of hidden mystery, and well stocked as the cave was with articles of modern and domestic use, still were these calculated to mystify the inquisitive beholder rather than enlighten.

For some minutes the intruder stationed herself out of view, and watched with intentness the countenance and movements of the individual within, as he crouched upon the naked earth, and leaning forward upon the palms of his hands, alternately blew the embers into a fierce flame, and muttered some indistinguishable words in a monotone, meanwhile carefully skimming the surface of the contents of the vessels. Already the atmosphere was beginning to reek with the fumes of incense and herbs gathered from the mountain, already the physiognomy of the operator commenced to shine with greedy delight in the anticipated result of his work, and as he gained impetus to continue the performance and oft-repeated incantation, [43] a wild, lurid glare illumined and enlarged his glassy eyes, and the bristles of his low sloping brow stood perpendicular, whilst both nostrils opened wide, and his entire nature seemed to revel in the forthcoming effect. Meanwhile the spectator looked on equally as pleased, equally as indifferent to all else save the action and expression of the other occupant of this abode of mystery. In her eyes, likewise, was reflected a savage, joyous light, similar to that of a hungry beast of prey when about to pounce upon a hapless wanderer; and though the rain-water fell from her cloak in pools upon the uneven ground, she heeded it not, nor even was cognisant of its occurrence as she stood with a firm smile irradiating her handsome features, and her slender fingers laid protecting upon the treasures concealed at her breast.

Presently the inner cave became dense with the vapours arising, and almost insufferable from their oppressive perfumes. No longer did it avail to endeavour to penetrate the thick clouds which suffused the patient and attentive operator; no longer was it bearable to one less initiated than a bold [44] hierophant of magical rites and ceremonies; moreover, no longer was it deemed expedient, for even upon this daring intruder an insidious sensation of quiescence was slowly creeping. Agreeable and entrancing was the feeling, fascinating the dreamy languor, and soothing the calm passivity that was stealing gradually and imperceptibly upon her. The intelligent flash of those midnight eyes was vanishing, to give place to a soft and yielding loveliness; the riveted interest which was therein expressed a moment ago, was now transforming into a fixidity of absorbent intentness and reverence for him, who previously had been a theme of curiosity, yet by no means adoration. The moving atmosphere was ravenously imbibed, and seemed to bring with it a delirious pleasantness which caused the recipient to forget all else and willingly resign herself to its overpowering might. From amidst the wreathing fumes curious reptiles appeared to dance, writhe, and wriggle, to whisk hither and thither, leaving a fire-track behind them, and filling the cavern with peculiar lights and strange noises. Green, yellow, [45] red, and blue, with scaly skins and talons long and sharp, unearthly forms and grotesque appearances—no two alike, yet one similarity running throughout, that of wild unreason, reckless nonunderstanding. Another draught, and these mad, meaningless shapes dispersed. In their stead a far-off vision arose in panorama before the intoxicated senses of the beholder; at first far-distant, diminutive, and indistinct, confused and shadowy, vacillating and wavering; now clearer, now almost obliterated; no sooner steady than once more shivering, fading fast. Another draught, more pungent than the last, and the

scene was laid open in vivid minuteness before her. A warm gleaming sun shedding its tender rays upon the loose-hanging tresses of burnished gold that crowned the head of a fair gentle maiden, as with upturned face and eyes suggestive of confidence, trust, and infinite love, she met the regards of one handsome and nobly formed, who was repeating in accents of deepest affection the oft-spoken confession and vows of eternal fidelity — such was the picture. With a start and a stifled cry, the [46] woman struggled to free herself from this obsessing influence; a dominant will was summoned, and an ardent contest ensued.

She fancied those spectral fiends were mocking her now, so great was the din and clamour that resounded in her ears. Piercing shrieks, fierce yells, and savage howlings beset her distorted imagination, while around nought but grinning objects, hideous and revengeful, leered upon her in awful menace. The conflict was equal for a time; finally reason triumphed, and the woman returned to consciousness in full possession of her faculties and the import of her mission. Her first thought was to feel anxiously for the burden which she held at her bosom. Reassuring herself of its safety, she then stepped forward and startled the absorbed operator by addressing him in the following manner:

‘Ha! ha! good-even, Père Anselme, what evil wouldst thou have *now*? How much longer will thy wicked old eyes delight in the scorching fury of the vapours that arise from those heated pots? A sage occupation, surely, for one of *thy* wondrous skill and [47] attainments! But come, I have brought thee something of more import than any that can only involve thee in ——’

‘Silence, woman! Remember thou art in my power! — knowst thou not ——’ began the dwarf, starting to his feet at her first syllable, with an angry scowl upon his brow, and instantly covering the contents of the vessels from inquisitive view.

‘Knowst I not? ha! ha! What reason for aught but perspicuity between us? I know *all*, mon père, and if I be in *your* power, even so are you in mine; so have a care, or — or — it may go hard with thee, good father! Truth *is* hard, stubborn, and disagreeable at times; we all must have found it so, and to its galling fetters even *thou* must bend in patient submission; yet ——’

‘Stay! ere thou proceedest — one word — What cause have I for belief? — answer me *that!*’

‘The contents of those brazen vessels, and ——’ the remainder was hissed triumphantly within the ear of the infuriated dwarf, who shot a look of intense hatred upon the [48] magnificent creature, who in her majestic height towered in regal beauty over the spare and shrunken form that writhed and winced again beneath the sting of her venomous tongue.

‘Enough! What wouldst thou, madam? Command, it is for me to obey!’

With this he would fain have gallantly touched her soft white hand, but it was wisely withdrawn, on pretence of disencumbering herself of her dripping disguise.

‘So, so! very good! Thou hast oft-times triumphed over the weak, Père Anselme, and art doubtless cognisant of the agreeable sensation, but didst ever triumph over the great, the powerful? Not as the world comprehends — yonder baubles are a gauge of *that*; but the great, the powerful in mind, in *will!* I should advise thee to try, to cultivate, and for the future not to be daunted by weak woman! But to business, time flies. Thou hast not forgotten the — the ——’

‘No! go on,’ interrupted the misshapen species of humanity, wringing the moisture from his sweat-bedewed hands.

[49] ‘Tis well! nor have I! favour begets favour! I have a commission for thee, *bon père*, one that will be to thy taste, or I deceive myself, and will practise thee in the graces which become thee so well! It will need all thy skill, the full play of gallantry, but the reward will be great, for *thee* as well as *me*, and the occupation for *thee*, at least, pleasant, as thou wilt assuredly agree upon beholding the fair object. See I take this! ’tis all I could procure, yet ’twill probably be sufficient. Ha! snatched so greedily? its charm is already at work.’

So saying, this woman had taken from the folds of her bosom a flimsy lace handkerchief, emblazoned at each corner with an auriol of roses, surmounted by a coronet worked in crimson silk, and presented it to her host of the cave, who grasped it with avidity, and commenced to inhale the faint aroma which was still emitted from the fancy gewgaw.

For some minutes tomb-like silence prevailed, then, by motioning one finger — which might be more properly designated a claw — the dwarf signified his desire to be alone; which desire was immediately understood and [50] put into action by the woman retiring behind the natural partition, and there remaining with one eye employed in the scrutiny of all that was to follow.

Stationing himself in a recess, wherein the light from the lamp and brazier could least penetrate, the dwarf crouched upon the naked earth, and holding his head between both hands, so poised it as to concentrate his gaze upon the oval-shaped crystal before him, which was regarded with unflinching attention, and at intervals breathed upon and magnetised by mesmeric-passes, whilst the occult operator continued to ravenously inhale all that could be gathered from the piece of fine muslin pressed firmly now to his temples, now to his heart, until, with a sigh, he calmly lay back and appeared to revel in the vision which opened to his view.

‘Well — what result? Hasten — what success? Speak, man!’ exclaimed the impatient woman, approaching, and demanding in a voice of command that would not brook circumlocution, as she flung back her wealth of auburn hair from off her bare shoulders.

‘A nymph of loveliness! an angel of light! [51] What grace! what symmetry of limb and perfection of form! What locks of unalloyed purity, unadulterated gold! Gold — gold — what is gold compared with such a one? *Sacré!* how is’t I cannot touch her, cannot get near her? Some influence forbids! Yet I must — I must — she shall be mine! She shall be my strength, my power, my genius. She shall read for me the hearts of men, and govern them with their own follies. She shall raise, for my edification, the veil of futurity, and by means of her intuition I shall learn more than would be possible in twenty years’ toil and suffering. Her lovely eyes shall close to this outward expression, and open to reveal to me supernatural splendours, and warn me of any danger that may encompass my path. *Hach!* that man! curse him! I’ve seen him before; it’s he, who haunts me night and day — waking or sleeping his face is always near. He touches her! Stand off, she is mine! Aha! she shall — she *shall* be mine! What is thy sword to *my* will, poor fool? Ha! ha! thy happiness is at an end! Go, take *her* — Nathalie [52] D’Enfers, *she* loves thee. Take her; thou needst not fear, her husband is ——’

‘*Peste!* cease that folly! Be sane, and obey my commands. Continue — this maiden — what more?’

‘Ah, yes — she is a maiden — pure and lovely, robed in virgin white, with a crown of roses on her fair youthful head. A slender chain encircles her swan-like throat, and from it hangs — *Plague!* cannot see — it scorches my eyeballs! it dazzles my senses and distracts my brain! I reel! I stumble — I — ah! *Grand Dieu!* ’tis gone! ’Twas an amulet; but she has given it to him — her betrothed — the youth who now whispers in her ear. She answers — hark! hush! she says:

“No, my Ferdinand, I cannot part with it; ’tis my charm, the talisman that guards me from harm. Never have I shown it to anybody but you; never has it left my person for one moment till now. Return it quickly — I am in danger, I fear!”

‘*Ach! Teufel!* she has gone! All has passed away! he has saved her! saved her *this* time, but, yes! she *must* be mine! Her [53] fresh young life will give new birth to mine; from her sweet lips will I gain strength and energy, even as the bee extracts honey from the fairest floweret. In her smile will I find my sunshine; in her breath my balmy breeze; in her voice my genius of all music; in her presence my elysium of happiness, my paradise, my heaven! But *he* — the youth — in him shall I — *must* I — meet my fate? The fiends defend me — No! He shall be vanquished, and that accursed figure on yonder wall shall be proved to lie! woe be unto it! The time has come when we have met! Years upon years have I striven to alter the plan, the course of those evilly-disposed malignants, but — in vain! Yet, the combat but begins. Gird thy loins, brave warrior, unsheath thy sword, brace well thy nerve and skill. Thou art about to enlist in a strange contest now, my gallant youth. Thine honour — thy love — thy soul’s peace is at stake.’

‘Bah! ’tis enough; awaken to self and work. Instant operation is necessary — prepare! and ere the morrow’s sun has sunk low down into the west, much shall have been [54] accomplished. That maiden *shall* be thine. That *man* — at thy peril thou harm’st him, Anselme — I love him — dost thou hear, vile one? I *love* him, and he must — he *shall* be brought under submission to my will. It is for thee to accomplish. Work, and great will be thy reward. Money — gold —!’

‘Money! gold! what are they? Behold these coffers laden — hundredweights, tons of the dross! Worthless to me *now* — I want *more*. My appetite for such is appeased. Flesh and blood — innocent and undefiled — *that* is the reward for me! Keep thy golden coins, woman; *they* are fit offerings for that *other* work, not for *this* — this is a labour of love. Doubt me not; thy commands shall be obeyed, and she shall be mine — *he* shall be thine! Ha! ha! ha! ha!’

The money-bag was only too readily restored to its hiding-place, and re-enveloping herself in the huge cloak and hood which had been worn throughout the storm, and was still saturated with moisture, the Baroness D’Enfers, for she it was, prepared to take [55] her departure, fairly satisfied with the result of her visit.

‘Good-night, then, holy father, and forget not thy promise, also, that we are friends — sworn allies. Favour begets favour, honour begets honour! Play *me* not false, or by the host of demons thou shalt dearly rue it! Good-night, and may the spirits of thy innocent victims never haunt and torment thy slumbers! — ha! ha!’

‘Good-night, fair madam! And may the returning shade of thy late spouse not molest thee in thy lonely midnight walk! — ha! ha!’

The door was rapidly pulled to, but not before the harsh chuckle of the dwarf reached the ears of the retreating woman, and something there was in that well-known voice which grated more than usually upon her that night.

The storm had ceased, and the stars glistened brilliantly from out the fathomless infinitude of sphere beyond sphere. The wind was stilled, a calm spread all around, and the tranquil river now lay in quiet slumber, dreaming again of her legends old. [56] The pines and lindens were stripped of their beauties of summer-time, and stood silently guarding the Rhine with their brawny branches wide outstretched in solemn and weird protection. Little pools here and there alone remained to tell of the late furious tempest, and, strange to relate, although this woman had trodden her way, fearless and bold, in the height of the angry tumult, yet did she now shrink and tremble involuntarily, and her gait was uneven, less certain, often unsteady and inclined to vacillate, as she wended her way homewards in the solitary stillness of night. Looking to the right, then to the left, before, behind, drawing the disguise closer around, pausing at some trivial sound, cowering behind the shelter of a stone or tree, at sight of some disturbed bird or harmless beast; then proceeding rapidly for a while, glowing with fierce heat, unenviable fancies distracting her incensed imagination, and lending a supernatural horror to the unusual feelings that beset her, she almost shrieked in agony at times. So wildly had her mind been wrought upon, that she could scarce discredit [57] that a phantom pursued her—sped close by her side; and its breath well-nigh choked, as she fancied she felt it scorching her livid cheek. There was a phantom, as the sequel will prove.

III.

[58] THE morrow arose fair and calm. Fresh and invigorating was the clear sharp atmosphere after the night's tempestuous work. Nature seemed to have reawakened from her angry passion, and was clothing herself in her brightest and gladdest of raiment. The verdant plains, the village greens, the sheltered groves and shady vales, together with the purple-laden vineyards, put on the cheerfulest of aspects, and smiled in thankfulness that the storm was over before much harm had been accomplished.

Within the gardens of the grand old Castle von Rosenstein, a small party were assembled, chatting over the doings and [59] revelries of the previous evening. Listlessly employed with divers articles of fancy design, the ladies presented a glowing picture, as, robed in delicate costumes of varied style and hue, they were indiscriminately disposed beneath the awning of trellised vine or twining creeper. By their sides, or reclining humbly at their feet, were stationed the young, the brave, the dauntless sons of the glorious Fatherland, no longer wearing that stern inflexibility of features which spoke of an indomitable determination and 'courage courageous unto the end,' but unbending to the genial influence that prevailed, and even in their soft tones and gentle caressing accents not one whit losing the manliness and dignity which characterise their race; rather serving to prove the words of the immortal bard:

'Tis always the spirit most gallant in war
That's fondest and truest in love.'

Beauty, wit, valour, talent — all were impersonated in this nobly-born assemblage; yet, again, in no respect could a couple be found to outrival — nay, equal — the valiant [60] Prince Ferdinand von Guldenkranz and his betrothed countess — Eleanore von Rosentein.

Glancing around, more than ever did the lover appreciate and value his '*gelinde Rosenstein*,' as he loved to call her. What face could be compared with hers in its softness and spirituality? In whose eyes but his Eleanore's was enshrined such a divine light of love? such a depth of tenderness? such soothing comfort and angelic sweetness? Whose countenance but hers was subject to such irradiation — sublime at times, when beaming with inspiration? From whose kind lips, save those of the young countess, was such relief, such rest and tranquil satisfaction, to be gained in the hour of distress, remorse, or despair?

Whose hand but hers would readiest offer consolation and aid? Whose pulse beat fastest in heated anxiety, and whose heart well-nigh burst at the record of some tale of woe and need, save hers? Beautiful women were there in abundance, youth and beauty combined; but in *her* was a something beyond the outward expression of loveliness of face [61] and form! — a something dwelling within, that would occasionally assert its superiority over the corporeal clay, and shine forth in divine illumination as an illustration of a holier and beatified state beyond this preparatory existence of earth. A *new* life? Nay, merely a continuance of this, without the burdensome impediments which beset us here, and with the addition of surroundings sympathetic and in accord with our spiritual development and eternal advancement. Never had the prince been so impressed as he was now with the good fortune that had fallen to his lot; and as he bent to speak in tenderest accents to the beloved of his heart and soul, he inwardly thanked the Providence who had bestowed such a blessing upon his life.

'Dearest Eleanore, how happy we are! Would that we never might part! But thou wouldst not have me forsake duty, love? Say, wouldst thou have me remain, or go when my country calls?

'Go, dear Ferdinand — go! Stay not for me when duty, honour, our Fatherland calls! Yet, *ach!* 'twill be so lonely, so sad without [62] thee, my best and only love; and perils may beset thee, and thy Rosenstein know it not! 'Tis hard — 'tis cruel, when we *might* be so happy together!' was the half-relenting response.

'Thou wouldst not have me go, Eleanore? Only say, and ——'

'No! no! I do not — I *will* not say so; 'tis selfish, 'tis wrong! Go, my Ferdinand. The God in heaven will watch between thee and me when we are absent from one another! Why need we fear? Do thy duty. I will strive to do mine, for thy dear sake, and all will be well in the end — in the *end*, remember, Ferdinand! Stay! my talisman — take it; it will guard *thee* from harm — evil cannot approach thee while this is worn near thy heart. 'Tis charmed — a family relic — yet I offer it to thee, my love, my *all!* Keep it, treasure it, and all will be well!'

Saying which the young girl unfastened the golden chain around her throat, and with the jewelled trinket suspended therefrom, presented both to her *fiancé*, who, smiling perhaps at the superstition, was not [63] loath to accept it and impress a fervent kiss upon it for its late owner's sake.

'I will always wear it, my darling — wear it and think of thee. Truly indeed has it kept thee pure and free from danger; so may its charm extend to me, my fair genius, thou guiding star of my life!'

Von Guldenkranz took one slender white hand, and fain would have pressed it with lover's ardour, but it was snatched away, and an expression of scornful indifference replaced the old light of confidence

and love which had before beamed o'er the entire countenance, and illumined the features as those of a mythical pythoness under inspiration.

'Eleanore! Eleanore!'

This name was uttered in a tone of mingled astonishment and pain, but a short, hard laugh was the only answer, and in the young countess's eyes there gleamed an unnatural lustre that fell shallow and cold upon her lover. Then, shooting a second glance of scorn upon the injured prince, she turned aside with a hasty movement, as though in pursuit of some much-prized object, leaving [64] her betrothed in amazement and strange doubt, with the chain of gold and trinket still in his hand, yet cruelly disturbed at heart, and utterly disinclined to join in the gaiety and joyousness of his friends.

To be alone, to think awhile, to watch, and endeavour to obtain some clue; perhaps she was already beginning to rue having plighted her troth? Yet scarcely so, for but a moment ago, and —

'Good day, *mon prince*, how is it you are so ungallant as to sit idly speculating upon some unfathomable problem, when we ladies are *ennuyées* of gossip, and longing for some inspiring anecdotes of chivalry and humour? Come, arouse yourself. Apropos, what was the theme that has proved of such absorbing interest to you, *cher prince*? Pray confide in me — your mother's friend; maybe I can afford some clue — who knows?'

'Thanks — many, many thanks, dear baroness! You are ever ready to offer sympathy, but in *this* instance I —'

'You would rather not make a *confidante* of me? *Très bien* — that is sufficient; it is not my nature to intrude, especially in *affaires du coeur* — ahem!'

[65] 'True, true, pardon me, madame, you misunderstand. I would not offend —'

'No offence, good prince,' put in the wily woman, with one of her studied smiles. 'But since you are engaged in so *serious* and *secret* a meditation, I will not impose my presence upon you any longer — *Au revoir, mon prince*.'

'Nay, do not leave me; that would be unkind, and I should be certain of having given offence, though, believe me, dear baroness, without intent. Far too well do I appreciate the motive that induced your offer — indeed, since you wish —'

'Not at all! *I wish*? what reason have I to entertain any interest whatever in your — love and jealousies!'

The last was spoken in almost a whisper, and though the dark handsome eyes of the speaker were lowered upon the sandy soil, yet the eager glance of her companion was not permitted to pass unobserved.

'Forgive me. No, I did not mean — I spoke rashly, illogically — but all this time you are standing, madame. I cannot offer you a seat, may I offer you my arm? I feel an [66] apology is necessary; let us walk on, if — if — you have no objection? It will afford me much pleasure, I can assure you, to engage in converse with one so fair and talented.'

The Baroness Nathalie D'Enfers laughed pleasingly at this piece of *galanterie*, and gazed deep into the prince's eyes, as she accepted the proffered arm, with a neatly turned compliment in exchange.

'Ah! this above all places in the world is befitted for mutual understandings! To what waters but these can we unburden our heavy breasts, ease our aching hearts! What ripples but these would bear our

wild regrets far away to the vast ocean and sink for ever into the bottomless pit of infinitude? What soothing whispers like unto these? What so lasting? What so *true*? What a lesson we might learn from this ever-flowing old stream, that tells no tales — only listens and gives relief! Superstition has accorded to it many weird and fanciful powers — need we enter the portals of romance and ideality to endow it with a charm, when it possesses that one great and all-combining charm of fidelity — [67] unwavering constancy? Surely not! In the knowledge — the *proof* of such faithfulness, are not included balm for every wound — solace for each heart-pang? Human kind are subject to change — circumstances vary, and with them affections. Alas! what is deemed sacred to-day, to-morrow may be scorned. Such is mortal! a creature of foibles — evanescent, rarely trustworthy! Even the one we love — on whom we lavish our soul's wealth — is liable to change, to prove undeserving, untrue, should certain conditions occur! But thou, O Rhine! art ever the willing recipient of another's woe — an earnest sympathiser! a never-failing friend! Who is like unto thee? Concerning the youngest, the loveliest of thy daughters, a dismal presentiment o'er shadows the love-dream with ghastly, gloomy doubt! Ay — *doubt*, the precursor of coming ill, of impending sorrow, disappointment, and life-long misery! Thou knowst well the tale, dear Rhine! Thy sons how oft have come to repeat it in anguish beside thy translucent waters, with bowed heads and broken hearts that were wont to be held impregnable [68] against the enemy, now bent beneath the weight of inconstancy and shattered into ten thousand splinters! But what ails you, *mon prince*? I had almost forgotten I was not alone — foolish, foolish!

'Stay. You know — *all*? Of course you must — your words ——'

'I know *all*, good prince, and from the bottom of my heart I pity — *pity* you,' replied his companion with a gasping sob.

'Then there is a foundation for — for my apprehensions, my doubts? Answer me, for the love of heaven — is, there — is there ——'

'There is a foundation,' was the lowly-murmured answer.

'God in heaven have mercy upon me — have mercy upon *her*, for she will — she *must* suffer for this!' and with this the brave prince bowed his head in his hands, and burning tears scorched his eyes, but would not flow to his relief.

For some few moments neither ventured to break the sacred silence; then, abruptly seizing the richly-gemmed fingers and pressing them passionately, Von Guldenkranz — manlike in his impetuosity — poured forth the [69] burden of his grief, and imploringly beseeched his companion to listen, advise, and render assistance, comfort, relief. They had by this time wandered into a thickly-wooded grove, out of view of the gardens and the gay party therein assembled — she leading, he blindly, madly following.

Stealthily raising her magnificent eyes, full of fire and fascination, to rivet them unflinchingly upon those of the prince, a crimson flush suffused the usually colourless hue of the Baroness's marble-like cheek, which beautified her countenance with an intensity of feeling that had never been beheld thereon before. Always handsome, Nathalie D'Enfers now appeared surpassingly, overwhelmingly so, and Ferdinand Von Guldenkranz, as he stood retaining one small white hand in his, was thinking: 'What a glorious creature! What a marvellous woman! And such a one, a man — a husband — could treat

harshly — unkindly! What a wretch he must have been! a villain of the deepest dye! Poor thing! how beautiful she is!’

An hour passed by, and still they lingered — so much they found that *must* be said; one [70] thing leading on to another — another to another — and that other to still another; so on until a history of her life — a sad, heartrending category of trials, troubles, cruelties, shattered hopes and blighted affections — was imparted to the gallant prince, whilst he, in turn, was not slow to place implicit trust and confidence in this woman, who had so freely granted to his care and keeping the burning mystery that had well-nigh consumed her being, and had gnawed remorselessly and with fangs of ravenous avidity at the tender chords of a gentle and yielding nature. Again and again expressions of horror and aversion burst involuntarily from the lips of the attentive listener.

Huge beads of perspiration broke out upon his brow, and his right hand clutched eagerly at the sword by his side, while his features betrayed even more than the words the indignation which he felt.

Such cruelty, such cowardice, such coldblooded indifference to a woman! and *such* a woman! A ruthless tyrant — a base scoundrel that husband must have been! What suffering had she not undergone? Fearful to [71] contemplate! shocking to conceive! maddening to consider when beholding the beautiful, love-inspiring victim, who in the very reminiscence oft shuddered and drew closer to her companion, as though yearning for sympathy and seeking protection from him! Ay, a noble woman, nobly planned, with an intellect far, far beyond the generality of her sex! Commanding, compelling respect, strong-willed and powerfully-minded, yet with a woman’s heart still! Yes, and in that one possession lay the greatest charm of all! *That* it was that cried for the protection she now sought; *that* it was that called forth manly strength and insisted upon his voice softening to murmured accents as he bent his tall, majestic figure, to place an arm shelteringly around the agitated form of the beautiful, distressed Nathalie D’Enfers; these thoughts deeply impressed upon his mind meanwhile.

‘*Pauvre madame!* how I pity you! how can I explain in language half what I experience? — the disgust, the indignation, the incensed anger, the — the desire to avenge! the ——’

‘Nay, dear prince, say not so — he is dead! [72] Let all be forgotten and — forgiven! Your sympathy is — is sufficient. Ah! Ferdinand, when trouble, disappointment, unfaithfulness come with the full and crushing weight of anguish upon thee, remember *me* — I also have suffered — remember *pauvre Nathalie*, she who made *you* her confidant — her love!’

This last word died away in a whisper; nevertheless, the prince half imagined, half *hoped* what it was, and being no more than a mortal and a *man*, felt gratified in the fact of a lady so talented, handsome, and much sought after, bestowing her best — her *only* affection upon him, who was in years fit to be called her son.

‘Promise me this, Ferdinand — ’tis not much for *thee*, but all — everything to *me*.’

‘I promise! I will ever remember thee, Nathalie! Heaven have mercy upon us both!’

Another long and earnest gaze from a pair of soft dark eyes, then a smile of exquisite tenderness o’er spread the countenance, and a woman’s head drooped upon his shoulder, inviting the kiss which was given, and for a few seconds they remained thus — his warm [73] breath fanning the uncovered tresses of her bronzen hair, that reflected innumerable lights in the golden sunshine, and in the shade might have been pronounced a purple black.

What further arrangements and binding engagements might have been entered into we cannot undertake to suppose — so strangely things are brought about — had not the sound of approaching voices and glad laughter brought one at least of the actors to his normal senses, and explained to him that he had been absent from his *fiancée* — for she *was* his betrothed, though she might prove untrue — more than an hour and a half. Barely had they time to completely recover themselves, ere the foremost of the intruders, perceiving them, cried, whilst hastening in their direction:

‘Oh! here they are — the runaways! What! Prince Ferdinand and — Madame la Baronne D’Enfers! Where is our Rosenstein, *mein prinz*?’

‘Eleanore? where? why, with *you*, fair countess, I suppose — I left her —’ began the prince awkwardly.

‘You *left* her!’ repeated the ladies in [74] chorus, in a tone of admonition and astonishment; ‘you *left* her!’

‘Yes — that is we — I got tired of sitting and gossip, and — was taking a stroll.’

‘Hem! Hem! with an engaging companion — eh, my cousin?’ interposed one who herself had had designs on Von Güldenkrantz’s hand, if not his heart.

‘Pooh! pooh! nothing of the sort. Madame la Baronne was likewise suffering from *ennui*, I believe, and — —’

‘Followed our brave prince’s example,’ put in the last-mentioned lady with careless nonchalance.

At this the majority of the party joined in a significant laugh, and the angry flush that dyed Von Güldenkrantz’s cheek, together with the vivid flash that shot through his eye, by no means served to restore equanimity, nor quell the tide of inquisitive suspicion.

The Baroness Nathalie D’Enfers preserved an absolute silence; either she was beyond caring for such trivialities, or she had a motive in permitting things to remain as they were; at any rate, she pursued her occupation [75] of gathering wild flowers and carefully arranging them, without so much as a change of expression upon her handsome face, much less a remark in further explanation from her chiselled lips, which were closed and locked in a smile of complete satisfaction.

‘If our Rosenstein is not here, where can she be?’ was the next question, which no one was competent to answer.

‘Possibly she has returned to the castle. I will go and see,’ said Prince Ferdinand, only too eager to offer any excuse to get away from the feminine gibes and side-glances.

There was not one amongst them who did not nourish pangs of acute jealousy that she had not been chosen as his bride in preference to the Countess Rosenstein; consequently, all were prepared to fling out their annoyance in petty spiteful attacks now, when opportunity presented itself.

‘Madame, the prince returns to the Schloss,’ spoke up the most daring of the sex, as a final sting; but the sharpness was blunted by a ready and able retort, and Nathalie D’Enfers, to render the repartee [76] complete, fastened for one moment the full fascination of her splendid eyes upon a certain nobleman, who thereupon stepped forward, and bowing low before this syren of womankind, proffered an arm, which was accepted with her best grace and most insidious of smiles.

‘Surely,’ pondered this man of high birth, intellect, and distinction, ‘surely this woman is superior to the rest of her kind! What intelligence! what beauty! what grace! Happy the man who could call such a woman by the sacred name of wife! And she singled out *me!* — *me* out of all the rest! Lucky fellow, by Jupiter! How the other fellows will envy!’

‘A wicked, designing creature! Did I not always suspect as much? She must be expelled from the ranks of society, erased from the list, henceforth and for ever,’ contemplated the feminine element of blue blood.

The castle, the gardens, the woods — all were searched, yet the young countess was still missing. A blank, an awe fell upon the guests that they could not shake off, and as [77] for the Prince Von Guldenkranz, his face was blanched, and his general appearance betrayed the mental alarm which had taken possession of him. His friends, remarking the singular effect that this little episode was having upon him, offered words of encouragement and hope. The baroness, in particular, was profuse in lending aid and assurance that all would be well in the end.

‘Some frolic of our dear young countess — nothing more — she will return in good time, never fear, *mon prince.*’

But hour after hour dragged on, and still no signs of the Countess Eleanore. What could have become of the Rosenstein?

The servants had been sent hither, thither, in search of their youthful mistress, yet no trace of her could be forthcoming.

The daylight paled, and the shades began to draw in, the sun sinking to rest in a sumptuous bed of crimson and gold, and Ferdinand Von Guldenkranz grew frantic, recalling to mind her strange behaviour towards him — her betrothed — and the still stranger light that glazed her limpid violet [78] eye, as, turning scornfully from him, she fixed her gaze as though upon some far-distant and imperceptible object in the east, which drew her with magnetic and irresistible attraction.

This was the interpretation he put upon it now, very different from that that his impetuous jealousy had conjured up before.

‘All resources have been exhausted! What, oh! what more can any of you suggest, my friends?’ he wildly cried, continuing to pace the floor, wringing both hands in an excess of misery, and scarcely able to endure much longer the strain upon his overwrought feelings.

‘All?’

It was Nathalie D’Enfers who echoed that monosyllable in interrogation, though she herself was imperceptible behind the crimson hangings, and her voice only reached the sensitive ear of the one for whom it was intended.

‘All? The Rhine — the Rhine!’

‘*Hack!* what is that? Something whispers close to my ear — the Rhine! the Rhine! My God! can it be possible? *Hélas!* It [79] might — it may. The Rhine! the Rhine! the river must be dragged! She is there — dead — a corpse at the bottom of its waters, my sweet Rosenstein, my beautiful, beautiful bride! Heaven help me, or I shall sink beneath my load of grief! To the river! Come, my friends — waste not a single moment. Stay! detain me not — I must be the one to rescue her — her corpse from the accursed

waters. Eleanore! Eleanore! if thou art dead, let me die also. 'Tis fate! cruel, cruel fate, and there is no God, or He would be more merciful! He would not permit that thou, *meine Geliebte*, so young, so fair, so beloved, shouldst perish! Hasten, then, to the Rhine — the Rhine — the Rhine!

A conflict was being enacted between physical strength and inward emotion. Beyond the mere probability of such a disaster, there was a haunting, indomitable fear that would not permit of ease, but inflamed his excited mental condition, and was making terrible havoc of the calm and sound judgment which characterised Prince Ferdinand. Verily, indeed, was it a marvel then to all [80] present when, after giving utterance to these last words in broken gasps, and a frenzy of seemingly uncalled for alarm, ere he gained the entrance-hall of the castle, a pallor, like that of death, spread over his countenance, whilst beads of sweat broke out upon his forehead, and matted together the fair waving curls. No sooner did the Count von Ehrenglänz grasp his sleeve than the prince fell back into his friend's protecting arms.

A shocking dismay took hold of each, upon witnessing that bold herculean form, now helpless as any child, those powerful limbs hanging loosely from their joints, useless, apparently lifeless; the lips, naturally full and red, now a bluish-grey, and the eyes half opened, transfixed in a glassy, meaningless stare.

'Is he dead?' This was the thought that flashed like electricity through the brains of the onlookers. Had the action of the heart suddenly ceased? Such cases had been known, even amongst the most robust and athletic of men.

But no! Von Güldenkrantz was *not* dead! No sooner had despatches been sent in all [81] directions for medical aid, than the life-like appearance returned to his features and his limbs recovered their elasticity and strength. Eagerly accepting the draught of clear spring water the instant he was again himself, even the last vestige of anxiety, which had been apparent in each line and curve of his face, no longer was visible, but in its stead a bright gleam of hope that made his handsome countenance more handsome still, and shine with the light of inspiration, as, starting to his feet, and addressing his numerous attendants, he said:

'Dear friends, trouble no more! I have had a dream, and she is safe, alive and well. Our Rosenstein lies beneath the Felsenhöhe, cold, her garments saturated and dripping with dew; she sleeps, a strange abnormal sleep. Not a moment must be lost! danger threatens her, I feel it; and are we not in time, God alone knows what may be the result! A couple of horses saddled and equipped for a journey — who will accompany me?'

'I — I — I!' many voices chorussed, strangely enough, ready to acquiesce in so [82] singular an expedition. At any other time it would have been scouted and tabooed as extravagant — maniacal — but circumstances, perhaps, at any rate *something*, compelled them to speak, and forced that speech to be in the affirmative, no matter how reason might afterwards rebel. Not one amongst the number dared to breathe a syllable in opposition to the fanciful scheme, though, at heart, many were sceptical as to its use, and not a few chagrined at their readiness to comply; still, even these assisted in putting it into execution with right good-will and intent, if little or no faith. One there was, and one only, who ventured to cast ridicule upon the proposition, and, that failing, to throw impediments in the way of its accomplishment.

A fire was raging within the breast of the Baroness D'Enfers, and every second heaped fuel and agony thereon. Could but some delay — but an hour's delay — be brought about, and all, for her, would be well, her mind at rest for ever, the stumbling-block which obstructed her path be removed, and she should have her own way simply and entirely for the future. All else had worked [83] in unison for her accommodation; throughout life her clear penetration and firm determination had been masterful in the execution of whatever she had taken in hand. Ambition, selfish vagaries, trivial or important, had always been supported by luck, and success in every undertaking had been the finale. Surely the genius of fortune would not desert her *now*? But, spite of all, she shuddered as she watched the Prince Ferdinand von Guldenkranz, accompanied by two faithful friends, pass out of the courtyard, and so on down the mountain-side.

* * * * *

That day had dawned more bright, more glorious for the recluse within the cavernous rocks than for many a long and anxious year, though, true enough, he was unenlightened to the fact of the warmth and gladness imparted in the rays of the autumnal sun, and was utterly ignorant of the beauty in which fair nature had arrayed her graceful form to charm and captivate the eye of mortal.

What to him did it avail if the earth were appearing refreshed the meadows more verdant, [84] and the woods and dales revived after last night's tempest, appalling while it lasted, yet beneficial in effect? What to him whether the sun shone, the winds howled, the river lay tranquil, or stormed and splashed in gigantic fury? All seasons were alike to him — all weathers the same. His home was safe, his treasures secure; he himself was invulnerable to atmospheric strife and contentions. His world was within his mind, and his mind was absorbed in one great theme, of which his surroundings might give a feeble idea, but could never convey one tenth of the magnitude of the stupendous project understood by the originator alone. Thinking, conceiving, pondering, contriving, experimenting, failing, but to commence again and again; persevering, persisting with undaunted energy, unwavering faith, surely such a worker was deserving of success! Alas! Père Anselme! *L'homme propose, mais Dieu dispose!*

Thus had this man spent the greater portion of his life; his earlier history was unknown, for never did he in any particular allude to it. If remembered it was doubtless [85] one of two things — either too sacred or too venturesome a subject to be openly spoken of. He called himself *un reclus*, and would fain have had it believed that he held no intercourse whatever with the outside world; but whether each individual who came to consult this oracle of occult lore accredited his statement we cannot undertake to say. However, to judge from the medley of relics indiscriminately heaped in the corner, one might conclude that the wise Anselme was not permitted to pursue his avocations in strict retirement — far from it; also, that these avocations were not perpetually on the same solemn and incomprehensible theme as the curious diversity — semi-comical, semi-profane, and wholly at variance — might suggest. What relationship could exist between yonder richly-jewelled cuirass and the wreath of faded laurels? The cowl and the tiny infant's shoe by its side? Golden chains and a fragment of coarse homespun cloth? The dark, sinister portrait, chastely enamelled, and a ringlet of auburn hair? Closely inscribed documents on parchment, yellow with age, and a few hastily-written lines expressive of [86] vows unbroken — love that could never die? Seemingly none at all, yet, to him who could turn and twist and bore into the hidden mysteries, a near kindred, a close and binding affinity, which, when

studied and made his own, to wield as he chose, heaped power supernal upon his name, and caused him to be held in veneration and awe by the legion of his victims.

But we must not omit to mention there was one, who, by countercharge, had contrived to ransack the archives of the past, and by that means station herself on the self-same pinnacle of might and majesty as the learned Anselme himself — this was Nathalie D'Enfers.

Having, *in extremis*, been compelled to have recourse to this wizard of the mountains, and having accepted his favours as abettor and coadjutor in a grave and wicked design, which was carried out through his intervention to the strict letter, the truth made itself unpleasantly distinct to the perceptions of the baroness that she was in the power of an untrustworthy and iniquitous man.

She therefore immediately set her wits to [87] work, and paused not until she had become the possessor of a store of information which she, in turn, could hold as a threat in exchange for that secret that he shared of hers. Thus were they quits, and, as such, hated yet respected, loathed yet esteemed, one another. A singular couple! so wide apart in some things, so closely allied in others!

After a night passed in unremitting preparation, fasting, abstemiousness, and constant application to the introductory accomplishment of a fresh procedure, the issue of which was as anxiously anticipated by the operator as the designer and suggester herself, the following noon found all in readiness for active work, and the dwarf, rising from the crouching position which he had retained for upwards of nine hours, glanced around with a leer of satisfaction at the result of his skill and unflinching perseverance.

Half-clothed as he was in soiled and tattered garments, that emitted a pungent and over-powering effluvia, from having absorbed a curious compound of fumes wreathing in vapour from the several utensils which had been replenished again and again [88] without intermission, a harsh chuckle escaped his dry, protruding lips, his nostrils expanding wide and wider still, and his glassy eyes starting from their sockets, while his shaggy brows were elevated until they appeared as bristles, thick and wiry, when he perceived, with scarcely human rapture, the effect produced.

Before proceeding, he once more ventured on a scrutiny around; standing intent for some minutes before the symbolical map, or horoscope engraved on the rugged wall of the inner cave.

'Accursed Fate! I despise thee! I challenge thee! I scorn thee! What though thy saturnine aspects do affect! what though malignant influences do beset! The native *will* triumph! he must — he *shall*! The house of mourning must put off her grim garb! the evil square must be transformed into a triangular figure! and Jupiter must gain sway over the destiny of the native, and put to flight the opposing influences! The moon must change her node, the planets their positions, or prove themselves to lie, and science but an empty name! *Plague*! The [89] yellow-haired Mars must drop the sword and fall a victim this time to his own prowess. His bride, the beautiful Venus, must relinquish her lover for a nobler, grander cause, and, if needs be, O powers of the occult! shall be offered up a sacrifice to the fulfilment of my vows. Yes, yes, a thousand times yes; only wait — wait ye gods — wait, and be prepared to overthrow what has cost the native years upon years of research; then, an ye not prove correct, begone! thou shalt not stay longer to disgrace my hidden palace with thy bare black lies and cruel raillery! Destiny, thou sayst! Well, 'tis Destiny, then. I scorn and jeer! the native challenges his fate — so prepare!

With this the dwarf gave utterance to a wild yell, which echoed fiercely within the bowels of the earth, and was borne down lower and lower into the regions beyond our ken, and there died away in a long, piercing wail.

Within the cave all was dark save for the smouldering embers in a brazen urn, that within its immediate vicinity cast a yellowish-green light, containing an aroma of divers [90] kinds of eastern herbs blended with a certain chemical preparation. With a delicate muslin handkerchief steeped in a powerful narcotic, tightly binding his temples, and seated upon a low tripod immediately in front of a small mirror over-hung with silken curtains, the sole occupant of this abode of mystery, rod of polished steel in hand, gave himself up to the performance of the great work which would afford himself as well as another such infinite gratification.

Stertorous breathing, at rapid and irregular intervals, presently reverberated throughout the caverns, whilst the lower portion of the dwarf's face — the only part discernible — was much convulsed. Spasms, contortions, shudders, caused him to start, groan, tremble, and occasionally to attempt to tear the bandage from his head; then succeeded a choking, painful to witness, until the entire physiognomy was changed from its usual pallor to a purple-grey hue. This was but of short duration, and at its termination the limbs fell into repose, and an expression of rest pervaded the whole countenance. Sleep, abnormal and profound, had stolen upon him, [91] and for some time — a quarter-of-an-hour, perhaps — he was nought but a nonentity, as one annihilated, body and mind alike dead, or rather stunned in trance.

The appearance was that of death — the living man but as a corpse, with the peculiar ghastliness appertaining thereunto, and the faint stifling atmosphere which is borne along in the train of the grizzly phantom surrounding his person; whilst a clammy cold perspiration oozed from every pore, and the fixity of features, rigidity of limbs, lividness of complexion, imperceptible breathing, and feebleness of heart and pulse, all gave evidence in favour of the grand dissolution having taken place. Just then, life did indeed hang upon a thread — the silver cord which binds the corporeal man and the soul together was slender and stretched to its utmost extent, yet did it in nowise fail to restore conscious individuality.

With a long and thorough shiver the spirit succeeded in re-entering or reacting upon its tenement of clay — in other words, sensibility, life returned, and the dwarf awakened, passed his hands transversely along either [92] side of his body from the heart upwards, drew a heavy sigh as of relief, and was once more himself. The blood recommenced its energetic course in the veins, the arteries swelled and glowed in full current; nature, in fact, reasserted her rights, and reinstated herself with renewed vigour and strength. Still the cave was suffused with the aromatic fumigations dispensed by the swaying censers suspended from above the smouldering furnace; still the curling wreaths of smoke continued to ascend spirally, until lost in the darkness beyond; still the damp bandage was allowed to retain its position around the temples of the master of occultism — and still the solemn silence of the tomb prevailed, and no sound without could possibly break upon it.

In due time the dwarf arose from his three-footed stool, withdrew the silken hangings, and discovered the magic mirror — clear and bright, without a flaw or blemish upon its surface — set in a frame of polished ebony, and, in size and appearance, bearing a resemblance to the harvest-moon at its fullest and most brilliant epoch. Stooping, so that [93] his breath mystified the crystal, a muttered incantation was pronounced upon it, thrice repeated; then, drawing both hands by mesmeric passes in downward

motion, yet without actual contact, the globe was charged with a sufficiency of magnetic fluid, and only needed the application of that steel rod to its meridian, after which the operator sank back into his former seat, and gazed, with earnestness and absorption of mind, upon the crystal. In a few minutes the previous brightness began to wane; a speedy twilight seemed to set in, which soon developed into the darkness of night, illumined by a multitude of electric lights, like stars in the firmament of heaven, and the bulk and capacities of the mirror were lost in the depth and magnitude of its proportions and the expanse contained therein.

Never for a single instant was the penetrating orb of the magician turned from its direction, and although a glassy film glazed the upturned eyeball, yet was the sight, the inner vision, opened, and what to many might have appeared but an ordinary ball of transparent crystal now became, to the [94] clairvoyant, a kind of *camera obscura*, wherein was assembled a party of gay and radiant mortals — the young, the beautiful, the brave, indolently enjoying the warm sunshine of a fresh autumn morning.

Apart from the rest, one couple was eagerly sought and found. A thrill shot through the dwarfs frame when he again beheld, in vision, the charms of the fair Rosenstein, and by her side, with one hand laid caressingly upon the flowing tresses of rich gold, stood one equally as noble, equally as deserving. But upon *him* a shudder of aversion was cast; an expression of hatred, combined with terror, o'er spread the countenance of the man Anselme as his gaze fell upon the impersonation of 'the flaxen-haired youth' of yonder horoscope; and for a second or two the picture shivered and was about to disappear altogether, when rising, the whole performance of breathing upon the mirror, pronouncing an incantation, and vehemently willing or evoking the scene to appear in more clear and lasting aspect was repeated.

The blood of the operator was cool now, [95] and this time, at sight of the robust and handsomely-built individual who unconsciously possessed such an unusual and intense influence, not a nerve quivered, not a muscle relaxed, only a vice-like set of the mouth could have betrayed the mental condition had another been there to witness the effect. These two figures stood out in bold prominence, the others becoming dim and indistinct, and then gradually fading away, whilst the lovers — for that they were lovers was easily discernible — remained in rapt attention the one to the other, revelling in the glories of their blissful dream. They were engaged in a murmured *tête-à-tête*, the bent of which was the old, old theme, and utterly unworthy, so considered the clairvoyant at least, of following; so, preferring another course, he endeavoured to force his thought, his will, far away, to whisper a single word within the maiden's ear. But *one* word, 'twould be enough! yet something forbade it! When in close contiguity a repellent influence impeded its accomplishment, and notwithstanding much effort and loss of vitality, that difficulty could not be surmounted, that [96] repulsion overcome! Presently the young and lovely girl unfastened the chain of gold which encircled her slender throat, and with the jewelled trinket, placed both into the hand of her betrothed. A suppressed cry of joy caused the pulse of the dwarf to throb frantically, and the heart to bound tumultuously, while from his lips escaped the words:

'Now — *now* is my time! she feels my power! she turns from her lover, she scorns! she spurns him! Ha! ha! she succumbs! she succumbs to my will! He, the "flaxen-haired youth," writhes beneath her cruel glance — he casts one long, sad look upon her and is gone — that accursed talisman in his hand — and she is mine! Love! what is its might to that of the will? Let maniacs rave of the power of love, whilst sane men act and triumph by the will! Ha! ha! she is mine! she is mine!'

With this the mesmerist started to his feet, and darting to the entrance of the outer cave, commenced to extend his arms at full length in waving motion, as though to draw some person or thing towards him, his eyes gloating [97] over the success thus far achieved; his system at each repetition losing an abundance of magnetic force, yet by no means begrudging the loss which was considered well spent in the accomplishment of such a work.

She comes, she approaches nearer and nearer, step by step, slow, yet sure; a somnambule, yet *seemingly* conscious and herself; her own will subdued, obsessed by another more powerful than her own. Attracted as the needle is to the magnet, so is she to the goal which, spite of all, she must attain. Cross influences render her progress hard; more energy, a double supply of force is infused by the operator, and again she moves onward, onward, with eyes riveted upon an indiscernable *something* before her, and her mind in a state of abnormal quietude passive quiescence. At this the dwarf Anselme's features beam with exhilaration and wild delight. But by-and-by his strength waxes less, and still less, until, alas! he struggles, and struggles *in vain!* His limbs fall helpless by his sides, and a frothy foam rushes from his mouth and nostrils; a sickly faintness takes possession of him, [98] until, with a half-groan, half-muttered curse upon his lips, he staggers, and rolls to the earth; still conscious, yet powerless, helpless as an infant, and anathematising this the denouement of his contemplated success.

'*Teufeln!* all is over! my work is spoilt, when about completion! The influence remains, but my power of will is exhausted! No more to-day, yet, to-morrow! to-morrow, fresh strength, a longer sleep, an extra narcotic, a more vigorous will, and she *shall* be mine! Sleep on, sleep on, rest as thou art, my Rosenstein, beneath the Felsenhöhle, there thou art safe, and to-morrow thou art *mine!*'

IV.

[99] TELL me again, dearest Eleanore, thou lov'st me! I do delight hearken to thy sweet voice, and when the time comes — as come it *will* — when we must part, what pleasure shall I not derive from conjuring up in fancy, and repeating again and again these happy, happy hours that we have spent together on this battlemented terrace o'er looking the grand old Rhine! Now that the guests have taken their departure, each day I grow to know and appreciate my Rosenstein more and more! fresh charms, new graces I discern in my beloved one's rare mind and gentle, loving nature. All this will only make it more hard — more cruel to say "farewell!" nevertheless, [100] I shall go strengthened, well armed, and ennobled by the pure influence which thou hast breathed upon me! Only tell me again this evening, *mein Liebchen*, that thou lov'st me, and wilt be true!

Prince Ferdinand Von Guldenkranz took the golden-crowned head in both his hands, and searched deep and tenderly into the inmost heart of his beautiful betrothed, and right well did he know that the truth, and nothing but the truth, was expressed in her lowly-articulated response.

'Ferdinand, I love thee! and by the star in Heaven — the ruler of my destiny — I will be true!'

"Tis enough, Eleanore! Thank God, I can brave all perils, trials, sufferings *now!* May holy angels rejoice, and bless my darling ——'

'And guard and guide my Ferdinand,' murmured a soft, sweet voice.

A long, long silence followed this: the young lovers were hand to hand, heart to heart, and soul to soul; wrapt in pleasant commune, though outwardly no word was exchanged between them.

[101] *Their* love was beyond outward expression — it was a spiritual affinity — a mutual sympathy — a supermundane attraction — stronger and more lasting than any passion — fervid frenzy, mad infatuation, or the fiery fascination which consumes and destroys, intoxicates, with its baneful and gross influence, and far from ennobling, drags downwards into the mire of sensualism.

Yet for them as for others shadows hovered near, and in the height of this calm happiness a messenger arrived with summons to call the gallant Prince away from the arms of his betrothed — from the sacred presence of his tutelary divinity — and though it caused him a sharp and bitter pang, he whispered fondly:

‘In the cause of duty, *meine Geliebte*,’ and with one long, lingering kiss imprinted upon lips cold and lifeless — he was gone! And the fair Countess fell in a swoon upon the cold stone terrace, the tears scorching her eyeballs but refusing to flow, and her heart transformed into a huge block of lead weighing upon her bosom.

Not trusting himself to cast a look behind, after having once torn himself away, Von [102] *Güldenkrantz* paused not until he found himself without the gates of the castle, mounted upon his favourite steed, and about to obey the call of duty that urged him to waste not a moment but accede to the behest specified in but a few simple words, yet, alas! how painfully did each syllable cut to the heart, with a wound more deep, more agonising than any sword-thrust! — so much harder to bear is a blow to the affections, the finer feelings of humanity — than to the corporeal envelope which contains them!

Many retainers were assembled in the courtyard to take leave of the Prince, for his kind and courteous manner had long since gained their respect and goodwill. Many had volunteered their services as attendants — in place of the faithful servant who had been permitted to attend the death-bed of an aged parent, residing in one of the Tyrolese villages — but these considerate and well-meant offers were each and all declined with true appreciation of their good intent, and genuine expressions of thanks spoken in that warmth and geniality which Ferdinand Von *Güldenkrantz* alone was accredited of possessing.

[103] A *true* soldier is fearless! especially of the darkness of night and the probability of encountering a band of Black Forest robbers! Ha-ha! Good-night, my men; good-night and as he dashed dauntlessly along the sloping, winding pathway, his laugh was caught up by the breezes that were beginning to stir the waters into a restless, troubled motion beneath the even tranquillity of the surface, and borne along to the terrace of the *Schloss Von Rosenstein*, where lay the form of its lovely young mistress in a deathlike catalepsy, afterwards penetrating to the subterranean vaults and dungeons, dying away in a faint and hollow wail, like the piteous cry of some spectre returning to the prison which it had been doomed to occupy in earth-life prior to meeting an untimely and pitiable fate. So blank and weird it sounded that the servants shuddered and were afraid: the more pious amongst them signing themselves with the symbol of the cross, and muttering a short, fervent prayer; whilst the Prince himself — courageous and bold as ever man was — shivered in melancholy apprehension of — *he knew not what!*

[104] The night was chilly, and large, purple-black clouds ominously obscured the heavens. Not a solitary star was perceptible, and either his senses were deceiving him, or an exceptional silence

prevailed — an unnatural gloom enshrouded the scene that lay open before him, and was imparting some of its morbid moroseness to his thoughts and sensations, which, spite of all efforts to quell by means of calm reason and sound judgment, acted, nevertheless, upon his nerves to a strange and unaccountable degree.

‘Psha! what folly!’ he reiterated to himself. ‘Am I becoming fanciful through the effete indulgence that I have been luxuriating in these past few days? A Sybarite, whimsical and fastidious! unfitted for the stern realities and duties consistent with manliness and the position to which nature has assigned me! Away such trivialities! Let me forget those hours of happiness — short-lived moments of bliss! — forget the poem, and remember only the prose! Aye, even thou, my Eleanore, must be put aside, and in thy fair stead must my sword be ever at hand to defend the weak, uphold the truth, and fight for liberty!

[105] Honour — glory — manhood — compels,’ and with this Von Guldenkranz raised a small trinket, attached to a chain of gold around his neck, and pressed it fervently to his lips, then smiling, restored it to its hiding-place beneath his braided vest, and setting the spurs lightly, pursued his way with renewed courage, though not altogether an untroubled mind.

Darker and colder, more dismal and lonely the road became. The villages and hamlets had long since been passed, still he rode on — on — the horse neither faltering nor stumbling, but following the route with vigour, elasticity and dexterity that was marvellous, considering the gloom abroad and the occasional stubble and growth of underwood which obstructed the path.

Presently, a dense mass of forest — tall pines, sturdy oaks, and graceful lindens — frowned in awful aspect before both horse and rider, the former involuntarily shrinking at its formidable appearance, yet deriving boldness to encounter aught from the cheering voice and encouraging words of its master.

‘Press on! be brave, *mein Freund!*’ After [106] this nothing more was wanting to stimulate the action and daring of the creature which, like many of its kind, was endowed with understanding almost equal to that of the human species — perhaps surpassing in some instances. To preserve the right track was a matter of difficulty, and doubtless the prince would have failed had not the instinct of his dumb friend come opportunely to his assistance and relieved him of anxiety and further care.

On either side an impenetrable range of forest lay like an endless cavern or bottomless precipice, whilst ahead, not a streak of light relieved the darkness, not a sign of life aroused the voiceless waste, not a sound disturbed the solemn slumbers of an appalling silence! He might have been in the midst of a desert a thousand miles away from civilization and the presence of fellow-mortal — Christian or heathen — for the total deprivation of every symptom of human existence, that was but too remarkable to be ignored or overlooked, turn which way he might towards the four winds of heaven. The dampness arising from the sod mantled everything with [107] a clinging mist, developing an additional phase of unpleasantness, and causing Von Guldenkranz’s blood to stagnate in his veins and seemingly chill in its sluggish current. But this was resolutely contended against, for time was flying, and each minute was of importance — so the despatch had stated — so, with the snatch of a song — one of the old-fashioned Volkslieder — he drew his mantle around him, and forgetful of all else — the gentle Rosenstein included — pursued his course — the course of *duty* — with stubborn and unrelenting ardour.

A sharp angle in the pathway discovered an obstacle in the way. The horse affrighted, abruptly drew back as though thrust by the bridle-rein, and in its suddenness, reared a moment on its hinds, then snorting, stood immovable, while a dark figure, enveloped from head to foot in hood and cloak, extended a pair of arms wide opened and obstructing both animal and rider. In an instant the loaded revolver was pointed and cocked threateningly at the phantom-like individual, who only returned a reverberating laugh of irony that fell ominously, yet somehow [108] familiarly, upon the ears of the prince, and immediately effected the restoration of the fire-arms, whilst the horse commenced to plunge and whine, probably with impatience, possibly with an instinctive foreknowledge of evil impending his master.

‘What now? Who are you, who thus molests a traveller in the pursuit of duty? Stand aside, or — give me your name and business!’ cried Von Guldenkranz, endeavouring to pacify the agitated steed with soothing pats and caresses.

Another long laugh, harder and more piercing than the other prefaced the following rejoinder.

‘Prince Ferdinand Von Guldenkranz, think not that you are unknown to me — still less that it is gold, or your life, that I seek! The one I despise! — the *other*, ah! Fate alone will decide! tempt *her* not, *she* is true; though another, and a fair one, shall betray — betray thy love, and ——’

‘Enough! This claptrap may allure simpletons, but scarcely fitting is it for sensible folks on an errand which cannot brook delay!’ interrupted the prince petulantly.

[109] ‘Claptrap, say you, great and wise prince? Then you would demand proof, eh, sceptic? Well, well, that proof is easy of forthcoming! At midnight — it wants but two hours or less — neglect not to be — to be — ah! lest the demons of the woods should hear; bend your ear, that I may whisper — thus.’ The rest was spoken in a hushed voice; nevertheless, the words made the hearer start and exclaim in a tone half fright, half unbelief:

‘You lie! who dare to speak so? Begone, or ——’

‘*Another* proof? Is not the fair Rosenstein addicted to wandering that way? Have you forgotten the Felsenhöhe and her deep, abnormal sleep? — Moreover, the vision of her betrothal eve? — in short, that odd behaviour at times, cruel and unloverlike? — strangely at variance with affection pure and unflinching, such as *she* professes? — eh, haughty prince? answer me that!’ continued the intruder, a ring of sarcasm in her enunciation and a metallic jar in the articulation, still preserving a strict disguise.

‘True — true,’ murmured the prince in acquiescence, and more in reply to his [110] tormenting thoughts than for vocal expression. ‘Yet — yet ——’

‘You doubt *still*? Your ear once more. Nay, fear not brave soldier! shrink not from an unarmed woman who braves all for your welfare — your happiness, alas! Lower, and lower still — now listen, and doubt longer, if — you *dare*!’

So saying, a pair of soft, yet powerful arms, were flung around the horseman’s neck, and the veiled lips of the unknown uttered a short sentence within his ear, which caused his pulse to beat feverishly and his fingers to relax their hold of the bridle, while a damp perspiration suffused his brow, and a furnace raged within his breast.

‘My God! it must — it *must* be true! And she — my Eleanore — is — false!’ A groan of anguish terminated this outburst of grief, and the valiant prince felt for the next few seconds deprived alike of strength and reason — his head drooping upon his chest, and an apathetic listlessness overpowering every faculty and sensation. As a blow inflicted upon the physical form may produce instantaneous cessation of consciousness, so had [111] this shock to the finer feelings of his nature necessitated a like result, but only of momentary duration, for the next instant he was aroused by a peal of prolonged laughter that resounded demoniacally throughout the solemnity which reigned in the awe-inspiring quietude and loneliness of night.

Straining his eyes to pierce the darkness now on this side, now on that — Von Guldenkranz was willing enough then to resign the commission that he was upon, or rather the very thought of it had escaped his recollection in the more engrossing matter that had taken full possession of his brain — but in vain! Search for the incomprehensible being, who appeared by some occult means or other to be cognisant of information only known to himself and the young Countess — to whom he had sacredly plighted his troth, and of whose constancy he had never until now experienced doubts of a palpable and tangible order — search for her, the sorceress, witch, whatever she might be, proved fruitless; not a trace of footsteps even could be discerned, and the Prince Ferdinand Von Guldenkranz had to content himself and appease his [112] troubled mind as best he could, to resume his ride in undisturbed peace to the end of his journey, when upon raising the hand to unfasten his dew-laden mantle, to his amazement he found that the chain of gold was gone! the chain that his betrothed had taken from her own fair neck to present to her lover in order that he might be guarded from harm, was gone! — lost or — stolen! — which?

‘*Ach! Gott!* my good Genius has then deserted me! Woe, oh, woe, alas, for me! God in Heaven, wilt *Thou* no longer watch between me and my gentle Rosenstein? Ah! Yes — yes — the answer comes. *He* will never forsake His children — all will be well, sweet Eleanore!’

* * * * *

Half an hour after the departure of Prince Ferdinand from the Castle Von Rosenstein, the lovely young Countess, still stretched cold and rigid upon the bare stone terrace, shivered convulsively, then opening her large violet eyes with a slow and mechanical effort, fastened them in a glazed and glassy stare upon the far-away eastern horizon, though in reality being observant of nothing, in the [113] contemplation of nothing, in the comprehension of nothing. With the graceful languor of sleep she presently arose from her recumbent position, and never for a single instant permitting her gaze to wander from the before-mentioned point, she, with wondrous ease, crossed the ramparts, stepping from battlement to battlement, and finally reached the courtyard of the Schloss. Here she paused — yet maintained that steady, meaningless fixity of features, even to being compelled at times, when occasion demanded, to walk backwards — and held up her uncovered head as if to catch some undiscernible influence which was being showered upon her; then, heaving a sigh of satisfaction and repletion, she continued her flight, mounting the rope-ladder to scale the lofty fortifications, and descending with perfect safety and composure without the walls of the grand old castle, free to acquiesce to the dominant will that was acting upon her sensitive organism much as a needle is acted upon by a magnet — free to pursue her way, all unconscious to herself, as well as exempt from the opposing element of cautious protectress

or inquisitive neighbour; [114] through, unfrequented parts, favoured by the gloom of a cloudy night; through wood and vale and marsh and heather — thrusting aside the wild, interlaced vines, wading the running brooklets, clambering the mountain-side — onward, onward, like a newly-risen corpse arrayed in its winding-sheet and robe of clinging white — onward, pressing onward, spite of all obstacles, with a strange, vacant light in her eye, and a somnambulic step that hesitated not, nor considered the difficulties that beset the path, but persevered in regular, dauntless persistency towards the goal which *must* be reached — the *something* which *must* be attained, though long miles intervene and the damp dews of night render her garments heavy with moisture, and her golden locks hang dank and burdensome in their weight — though her shoes are cut and mangled, and her feet should bleed and her limbs grow stiff and ache with pain and cold — though her own strength give way, *another's* will serve in its stead, for go she *must*, unless — ah! one proviso remains, ever has remained, and ever *shall* remain — 'tis *God's* will!

* * * * *

[115] The recluse Anselme had been for some days preparing himself for the performance of a great and masterful work, by means of which he should procure an incalculable acquisition to the magnitude and extent of his power. Diligent study, constant and close application, unremitting patience, skillful care and profound thought, had at last gained their duly-earned reward, and it was with gratified pride and delight that the occultist beheld the wreathing fumes curling from the smoking crucibles into ringed columns and dispensing a pungent aroma throughout the dingy cave.

All these hours of rigid attention — self-imposed slavery — for what? A new ingredient in the shape of a common mountain herb! Now it was obtained, and to-night was to determine its result!

A similar process to that already minutely described in a former chapter was entered upon and carried out with scarcely any alteration, save that now a vermilion tint blended with the yellow-green, and the sleep into which the dwarf was thrown was more tranquil, and his countenance less distorted with [116] pangs and spasmodic convulsions. Then came the withdrawal of the silken hangings which disclosed the magic mirror, and again arose a picture upon its surface — at first dim and shadowy, but upon the application of the steel wand and the human breath, standing out in clear and definite definition.

A battlemented stone terrace surrounding a fine old castle; two individuals, both young, both beautiful, and — lovers, telling again the old, old story of vows never to be broken, hearts that could never change. A tremor thrills through the young girl's frame; her eyes involuntarily scan the heavens. Alas! *her* star is obliterated by a huge purple cloud! At this moment a cross-current agitates the picture, which interpreted means, a strange element is infused. A messenger has arrived — the bearer of sad, sad news. He, that 'flaxen-haired youth,' must away.

'Duty calls — honour demands,' with these words, and enfolding his lovely betrothed in a heart to heart embrace, he passes from out the orbit of the crystal and is seen no more, while she who is left sinks down into a lethargic swoon upon the spot where, with [117] her lover, but a moment ago she had been so happy; without a cry, with scarce a sigh, she succumbs to an overpowering obsession, and loses her own individuality in that of another.

With an irrepressible ejaculation of satisfaction, the dwarf Anselme passed his right hand in waving motion along the imaginary figure of the sleeping girl portrayed in the mirror. After each movement a slight shiver thrilled her entire system, and presently, the expression of anguish, which had previously been imprinted upon her youthful countenance, was supplanted by one of tranquil repose and calm quiescence.

Re-arranging the silken curtains cautiously and with exactness as before, after having muttered some undistinguishable words and de-magnetised the crystal by *upward* magnetic passes, the magical operator then proceeded to the midnight gloom of the innermost cave, and taking up his position so as to face direct westward, commenced to stretch forth both arms with herculean might and slowly draw them again towards his chest; at the same time exercising his will-power with tremendous energy and force, so that in a few minutes he [118] was bathed in a cold perspiration, and huge drops poured down brow and cheek. Nevertheless, he pursued this avocation with his accustomed zeal and patience. A curious spark of joy illumined his protruding eye as these thoughts flashed through his mind.

‘The magnetism has reached her — she rises from her sleep — she stands, tottering at first, now firm and fixedly; she moves with grace — she walks erect, and with eyes wide open and riveted upon — upon — haha! upon *what?* Vacancy, apparently — nothing more, so fools would have it! She falters — ah! on, on, hither — it is my will! I command you! Good! she obeys. Transverse influences interfere yet — more power, more determination, and — she shall be mine! Hah! the wall is cleared — the castle left behind. Through the wood; follow me, follow me, I say. A dark night — fate favours me, haha! Never mind the dainty satin shoe — follow, follow — onward, onward; I compel, and you *must* obey! Right! the stream is forded — I had dreaded its result! O Science! is there a limit to *thy* might? *Plague!* another has passed this way! the influence left curdles [119] my blood! Leave that path, ’tis haunted — haunted by — humph! madman that I am to shudder at fancy! what should bring *him* here! Yet, stranger still — *she*, that woman-fiend — *she*, I feel — her evil influence chills my veins — begone! ’tis nought but demons come to torment! — to spoil all! Avaunt, ye fiends and monsters! ’Tis gone, my gentle creature; all is easy now — nothing intervenes — a long, long march for thee now, fair one, yet it *must* be! Come, come, I await, I *will!*’

This continued for some short time; finally, when the last remaining strength of the mesmerist was about to be exhausted, he drew a sigh of immense relief, and his eyes started, to pierce into the unfathomable darkness of the subterranean passages which branched out from the cave, though indiscernible within.

‘Ah! one more outpouring of the magnetic fluid, and she is mine! mine! mine! But hark! what sound is that? I tremble, I shake with fear! *Sacré diable!* that I should waver now — *now*, when she is — is — Voices! so help me, ye fiends! Hah! a pistol-shot! the current is broken, and — all is lost! lost! lost! Sleep! sleep! I command! I [120] *will* you to sleep! Mercy, mercy! I writhe in agony! all strength forsakes me! Voices again! They sound the rock! I hear them — *feel* them! They enter! *Peste!* they *shall* not have her! Sleep! sleep! for ever sleep, and die! perish, if need be — perish in this infernal tomb! One escape left — *mon Dieu*, I cannot! — my power has failed! I sink helpless, *will-less!* Mercy! Mercy!’

‘All right; this way, *mein Prinz*. Ha! ha! at last, *mein Freund!* In the king’s name I arrest you, Pierre Anselme, *alias* Piedro Villari, *alias* Snazelle, *alias* Polonatskoi, etc., etc.’

A choking gasp was the only response of the wretched man, crouching, like some intimidated hound deprived of its fangs, in a corner of the dimly-lighted cave, and surrounded by the heterogeneous collections of trophies that could ‘many a tale unfold.’

‘Pierre Anselme, miserable man! a long list of indictments are herein cited against you, the justice of which it is now for you to contend. If innocent, may the God in heaven aid you in proving yourself such! If guilty, may that same God — the Great [121] Judge of all — have mercy upon you, your abettors, and victims!’

So saying, another entered the gloomy cavern, holding in his hand a document, and enveloped in an undress and mantle, dripping with moisture and clinging with dew, as though the wearer had been exposed to the inclemency of the night for some hours — as indeed was the fact.

At sound of that voice, never heard upon earth before, yet somehow strangely familiar, the man addressed felt that the last straw of resistance was lost to him, vanished at the magic of those tones, never again to return. Raising his drooping head, just as the fading embers blazed forth in redoubled splendour prior to dying a natural death, the dwarf encountered the gaze of a tall, firmly built, ‘flaxen-haired youth,’ and with a yell, more akin to that of an untamed beast than a human being, he exclaimed, writhing and foaming at the mouth:

‘Fate! Fate! accursed Fate! Accursed Science! accursed Truth! There, on the wall, the horoscope, the native dies — dies in disgrace — when *he*, the “flaxen-haired youth,” [122] comes to — to — No! not seek revenge! he knows not! ha! ha! he knows not! Yet turn those eyes away, they bum, they scorch! I cannot bear it! My will! my *will!* where — where has it gone? Weak! powerless! Great God! I recognise Thee now! Guilty and disgraced I die! But *one* request I make, in mercy grant! Spare her — spare Nathalie D’Enfers, for God’s sake! There *is* a God, and before Him I now declare, she, Nathalie D’Enfers, is my child — my own flesh and blood! oh! spare her in mercy! By my own hand, my own *will*, I die!

And with this Pierre Anselme dexterously seized the jewel-wrought sabre from its scabbard by the side of its owner, and plunged it into the region of his heart, perishing, *not* by the hand but by the sword of the Prince Ferdinand von Guldenkranz.

The next moment the dwarf Anselme was nought but a corpse, and even as the lungs discharged their supply of air, a long, low wail penetrated the cave, seemingly from the bowels of the earth — a cry as of sympathy, pain, but terminating in a sigh of relief.

[123] The soldiers heard, and were amazed, half fearful of — they knew not what! Such a scene of horror presented itself before them, little wonder if their courage did for the moment wane; but their gallant commander, not one whit discomposed, at least so imagined his subordinates, stepped forward to lead the way and encourage his companions.

‘A search must be made! lanterns this way! I lead, you follow, my brave men! Forget not the cause of duty! Come, then!’

A solemn silence now reigned throughout the vaults, entombing both life and death. Hither, thither, search was diligently and scrutinizingly made. Treasures long sought, parchments and deeds despaired of ever forthcoming, jewels of priceless value, and possessions of momentous worth, were herein discovered, yet passed over for something of more immediate import. A rugged archway terminated

the long, irregular passage only to reveal another equally as narrow, damp, and winding, hung with festoons of cobwebs, and infested with insects that left a slimy track behind them. [124]

A stifling breath of unendurable atmosphere caused a faintness to come upon the foremost of the searchers, and in staggering, he almost fell over an obstacle in his path. With a sign to his comrades, he pointed to a motionless mass of white drapery, then sank from sheer exhaustion on to the ground, and his head would fain have been pillowed upon that recumbent form; but, upon immediate contact, life seemed to be suddenly restored to it, and at the same time instinct propelled him to utter the words which forced themselves from his lips, while from out his braided vest there dropped a tiny jewelled trinket.

’Tis she! my Rosenstein — my beautiful betrothed. My God, ’tis she! Hush! she breathes! In time — in time! She lives, and — yes, by Heaven’s will, she is saved! Good God! a moment later and — alas! the thought is too horrible. Keep it back! it tortures! And let me only remember that — she is safe — pure, and still *meine gelinde Rosenstein!* Yes, *Thou* hast led me hither, Great God! In time — in time! Eleanore, Eleanore, ’tis thy Ferdinand — awake my beloved! Ah! she smiles — she opens her eyes — so beautiful! [125] so *true!* Lights lower, my friends! Heaven will reward you, brave souls! See, she is conscious — again her own dear self! Eleanore, speak then, *mein Liebchen!*’

One word — but *one* and —

’Ferdinand, thou art here? Nay, look not so distressed — ’twas only a hideous dream — all has passed away now. ’Twas fancy — nothing more. A cruel, cruel dream, but faded and gone never again to return! Come away from this close, musty place! what do we here? Ah! my Ferdinand, how pleasant to awake and find ’twas only a dream!’

* * * * *

Prince Ferdinand von Guldenkranz and the lovely young Countess Eleanore — the fair Rosenstein — were shortly after joined together by the earthly bonds of matrimony, and made one in the eyes of the world, as they had long since been one in spirit.

Never more has the beautiful bride been subject to painful impressions which might be either traced to a distorted dream, or the baneful influence of an obsessing power that subdued her own will, and exercised [126] a dominant sway over her life and actions, and in the course of a few years even the reminiscence of that sad and painful experience of her maidenhood faded from recollection, so happy she had become in the love of a fond and ever-faithful husband, comforter, friend.

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In the purlieu of a gay and fashionable resort in the south of France stands a sombre block-building — an asylum for the insane — its dreariness complete in the lofty brick walls which surround and almost obscure it from public view.

Amongst many sad and distressing inmates of this dismal abode, it numbers one whose case is more pitiable than all others — a woman, aged in years, yet still remarkable for beauty and attractive person, drags out a mournful existence under the direful impression that some dark phantom dogs her

footsteps, whispers words in her ear, and persistently walks by her side, taunting and jeering in demoniacal mimicry! The pious sisters look on, and await with anxiety and hope for the time when the reaper Death [127] shall be sent to her relief, and gather in his mighty scythe this *pauvre insensée*, along with his rich, ripe sheaves.

This woman is Nathalie, Baroness D'Enfers — *priez pour elle*.

THE SLINKENSMIRK FAMILY

PART I.

I.

[131] ANGLEBRO', comparatively few years ago, was a town of inferior dimensions, and equally small pretensions; indeed, its only merit was derived from the fact of its having been a maritime port during the ancient Roman period, and of its still retaining traces of antiquity and historical interest, combined with surroundings of picturesque beauty and salubrious notoriety. A place that might have cheered the heart of pent-up dweller midst smoke and fog, or charmed the appreciative eye of artist, or lover of the quaint style and finish of a by-gone day. A place that was hailed as a welcome sight by the [132] impatient occupants of the mail-coach, as it passed through, on its jog-trot way to the cathedral city, some five-and-thirty miles or thereabouts in advance. Respected by its reverend pastor; venerated by the individuals indigenous to its clime; monopolised by the few old families, who looked down from their eminence with a species of condescending unobservance upon those whom they considered their subordinates in birth and social standing; patronised by the lawyer and doctor, who, though always ready to pocket exorbitant fees, in no wise imagined it incumbent upon them to extend a hand in fellowship to any of their clients or patients, as the case might be, who should happen to be circumstanced on a lower step of the ladder of existence; provided for by the tradespeople, who carried on business as their fore-elders had done before them, in the same unflagging, honest, and monotonous manner, and who, though in reality being the backbone or main-stay of the town, did *not* take upon themselves the airs and graces of their 'betters,' nor endeavour to ape what was unbecoming their means and position, as people [133] are but too apt to do nowadays; and idolised by both grave-digger and bell-ringer — each an institution that dated back as far as the chronicles of the place were registered, and, as is usually the fact, each being a character of wondrous eccentricity and profound stupidity combined: two qualities that are highly essential for the posts which they occupied.

A musty-fusty, damp, rheumatic-engendering, mildewed, ivy-grown parish church, perched upon the summit of the highest mound, and exposed to a cutting north-east wind, where the regular officiating parson was wont to discourse in a low, mumbling, utterly inaudible tone of voice to his flock, numbering an average of a hundred and fifty abnormal souls, who would, at rare intervals, awakened by their heads coming into unpleasant contiguity with the woodwork of the discoloured, high-backed pews, only to stare vacantly around, and then to relapse again into sweet oblivion, until re-called by a clink in the neck, or an exceptionally loud snore from a neighbour, who was doubtless reveling in the anticipations of a good harvest, or what fabulous price a certain prime piece of [134] over-fed cattle might 'fetch.' A draw-bridge, leading from the east to the western portion of the town, across a sluggish sort of river, that languidly merged into the broad expanse of ocean, and was lost in the hazy horizon. A market, held weekly in the sombre stone building dignified with the title of Town Hall, where country women, clad in gowns neat and clean, came each Saturday morning to 'squat' behind their baskets of eggs, butter, honey, and general farm produce — true pictures of 'health,' and models of patience itself! Fishermen and fish-wives, carrying on a small yet lucrative trade; and, although the majority of their earnings *did* go to replenish the till of the 'Pilgrim's Rest' or 'Good Bait,' still was the Court of Justice in those good old times much wanting in employment to keep up its respect and calling. Moreover, one special watchman and two subordinates were more than ample to maintain order, and were to be

seen walking disconsolately about, with hands in breeches' pockets, and for their motto, 'Nothing to do,' though it could not be added for *them*, as for some other and higher functionaries, and well paid for it.'

[135] The shops and houses of inferior quality were situated on the western side of the dividing river, and, as a rule, were remarkable for their dazzlingly whitened kitchens and scrupulously neat parlours, wherein the inevitable portrait of the reigning sovereign, in some guise or *disguise*, probably enough would greet the beholder with a bland smile from a brilliantly coloured pair of lips; the picture suspended in a frame of home manufacture above the chimney-piece. The eastern side — or such of it as was then built upon — was dedicated to those mortals of superior quality generally known and approved of as the 'gentry folks' to be *looked up* to, but by no means *aspired* to, by the inferior element; while the *crème de la crème*, as we, in our acquired habit of borrowing, should now designate them, for the most part inhabited handsome abodes in the purlieu of the town, away from the contaminating influence of, and undesirable contact with, their less favoured brethren.

We have made mention of the 'Pilgrim's Rest.' Let us now attempt to give some kind of description thereof in its flourishing condition, [136] subsequent to the foregoing, yet anterior to the commencement of the story. A small comer shop, not a house — or rather both shop and house, to be correct — with a gateway entrance, and a few wooden steps down to the red brick floor. A window at each angle, divided into innumerable diamond-cut panes, diminutive as each was, still large *enough* for an occasional green knob or bubble to interfere with perspective and view. Above, the sign suspended, with a representation in gorgeous colours of its signification — a worn and emaciated specimen of humanity, heavily burdened with a gigantic knapsack, fainting on the threshold of a mansion of colossal proportions and arcadian magnificence — in the distance, the selfsame traveller pursuing his way refreshed and strengthened, doubly burdened, yet seemingly not burdened at all! Over the green-barred gate the following name and announcement, inscribed in curious characters yet legible to all: 'Septimus Slinkensmirk, licensed dealer in wine, spirits, ale and tobacco, to be drunk *on* the premises, according to an Act of Parliament, sanctioned and passed by the illustrious King George II.'

[137] Mrs. Melissa Slinkensmirk was renowned throughout the length and breadth of the western side of Anglebro' as being an excellent 'mixer,' knowing to an exact nicety the sweetness of tooth of each and every customer, and the divers specialties of one and all. No woman worked harder, nor scolded *more* — scolded, not that she cherished a delusion that scolding would or *could* add one fraction to her well-balanced accounts, but scolded, because it was her nature to scold; and scold she *must*, even when reckoning up her weekly profits, after the closing hour, in the privacy of the bar-parlour. This propensity did in no degree damp the ardour of the *habitués* and casual callers at the 'Pilgrim's Rest;' it was simply taken and accepted for what it was worth, *i.e.* — nothing at all; and what it was *intended* for, if anything, was left an unsolved problem that nobody seemed desirous of either probing or discussing. The health, happiness, and prosperity of Mrs. Melissa Slinkensmirk was often drunk at others' expense, and, as was anticipated, was invariably received with a scold, perhaps all in good temper nevertheless. The question [138] may now be put, 'Was there not a *Mr.* Slinkensmirk?' to which we answer 'Yes; there *was* such an individual — Septimus Slinkensmirk by name — a man of no great personal attractions, possessing an ungainly figure, a graceless gait, large limbs awkwardly set, a stubbly growth of hair upon the chin, and a scant supply of piebald locks upon the head; with features of no particular cast, saving a pair of eyes that might be described in colour as 'starch-blue.' On the whole,

Septimus Slinkensmirk had been pronounced by his indefatigable better-half a ‘dullard,’ and as such, he was treated and tolerated by all frequenters and friends of the inn and its landlady. As the generality of human kind have a pet foible, so had *he*, and in *his* case it had taken root, and budded and blossomed into a deeply-founded fact, so far as he himself was concerned. It was to the effect that *he*, as the sole-surviving representative of the Slinkensmirks, who undoubtedly *must* have been a family of mark and distinction — and the seventh son of a seventh son, should at some future time rise to his lawful status of rank and wealth, taking his innate dignity [139] and abilities along with him to grace another and a more deserving and appreciative sphere — *his own* sphere — of existence and action. This it was that caused Septimus Slinkensmirk to nourish a spirit infinitely beyond the ‘Pilgrim’s Rest’ and all appertaining thereunto, and to walk about the town with an air of superiority and condescension that might have been excessively objectionable had it not been so ludicrous. Moreover, the neighbours had become familiar with it, and, as is the custom of simple country folks, neither rebelled against it nor looked for anything else, old and young accepting the oft-repeated theory with amicable credulity and a superlative degree of patience. But then, was not the second and more practical half of Septimus Slinkensmirk remarkable, for her *specialité* in the way of ‘mixing’? Decidedly; and that in itself would hide a multitude of sins.

In the course of nature a daughter was born to the Slinkensmirks, and though the mother — as the gossips phrased it — ‘had a bad time of it,’ yet, ere the second week of her ‘lying-in’ had elapsed, Mrs. Melissa [140] Slinkensmirk, baby in arms, and looking much as if the greater portion of her vital power had been wrung from her, was there at her post, attending upon customers who had never ceased grumbling at the substitute who had been temporarily engaged to dispense the articles that were licensed to be sold retail upon the premises. Mixing, scolding, imparting refreshment to the infant and soothing at one and the same time, the hearty welcome and genuine congratulations and compliments were by no means permitted to fall upon a rocky soil, though indeed it might appear as such: truth to tell, those who were fortunate to pay a visit to the ‘Pilgrim’s Rest’ that day were regaled on a *more* than superior glass, and had the privilege of an extra — to drink to the health and long-lived happiness of Miss Slinkensmirk, which was accomplished with enormous gusto, it being a gratis, at the expense of the proud maternal relation. Upon his introduction to his first-born, Septimus Slinkensmirk had rolled his pale-blue orbs within their sockets, patted the downy- thatched pate of the child, and after clearing his throat, spoke somewhat after the following effect:

[141] ‘Very good, *ve-ry* good — a Slinkensmirk! ha! *haw!* a fair specimen, me dear, a *fair* specimen — worthy of her ancestral fame, *worthy*, snub nose, blunted, wants nipping — *ne-epping* at the tip — nothing more, *nothing* more, Melissa — ah!’ and his starch-blue orbs reversed their revolving motion: a faint voice issuing from the vicinity of the four-post bedstead ejaculating the single and expressive word ‘fool.’

The babe grew and thrived; was christened and registered under the name of Theodocia Melissa, and the mother beheld with rapture intense the slender symmetry of limbs, and the general unfoldment of a sensitive and well-bred plant. Miss Slinkensmirk was a ‘lady born’; of this there *could* be no dispute, and as such, she was idolised, and her every wish and desire anticipated and gratified. Whenever Mrs. Melissa Slinkensmirk could spare a moment from her exacting duties, that moment was dedicated to the enrapturing contemplation of the future of her offspring; and while absorbed in a train of ideas of an aspiring character, she began to cherish a less severe opinion of her husband’s pet foible, for [142]

surely this was no ‘*common*’ infant — perhaps she had been too hasty in her previous judgment and condemnation of the Slinkensmirk ‘rights’ as a ‘parcel of tomfoolery.’

Some three or four years subsequent another sprout of humanity was ushered into the world — a daughter likewise, but totally unlike her sister, which fact engendered food for idle gossip and scandal, and elicited a doleful shake of the head from Septimus Slinkensmirk as his gaze encountered a stumpy-built, squat figure, with disproportionately large appendages, and minus filbert nails and every detail suggestive of refinement of breeding and elegance of stock. The mother was not slow of comprehension of these unpleasant facts, and from the very commencement a feeling of dislike almost akin to repulsion arose within her towards the poor child, who, in spite of less care and indulgence, lived and gave promise of a hardy physique and a healthier constitution than that of the elder.

In the meanwhile the profits of the ‘Pilgrims’ Rest’ had doubled and trebled, until a good round sum had been saved; for strictest economy had been the order of [143] subsistence within and without doors with the Slinkensmirks, people declaring that the ‘good lady’ allowed her spouse a weekly stipend of fifteen-pence as pocket cash, each fraction of which had to be accounted for to the rigidly correct earner upon making up her balance-sheet on Saturday night, prior to returning thanks for all blessings received on the following (Sabbath) morning.

As the daughter — Theodocia — emerged from childhood to interesting maidenhood, the visionary predictions of a fond parent were in no wise dulled or obliterated. Miss Slinkensmirk had all the attributes of a lady, and as such must take her place in society, and illumine that charmed circle with the reflection of her high-mindedness and attainments.

Forthwith, after duly and thoroughly turning the affair over and over again in her own mind, Mrs. Melissa Slinkensmirk decreed that ‘a change *must* be made,’ and reported this decision to her husband, merely as a matter of form, scarcely *compliment*, for such was not in her way. Septimus Slinkensmirk opened wide both his eyes, closed them [144] again, reopened and rolled them convulsively, then, with folded hands, meekly responded:

‘Very good, Melissa — *ve-ry* good, me dear. As *you* say, so I say, Melissa — a change *must* be made. Very good, so it *must*. I agree with you, me dear — I agree humbly and entirely with *you*, Melissa. Let us make a change, by—all—means — let us make *a* — change.’

From that magical moment Septimus Slinkensmirk had awakened from his apathetic monotony of slinking about with hands in his trousers’ pockets and boring his neighbours with the greatness of his progenitors — awakened like a rapacious tiger to the interests of himself and family, and, having probably been the native of some propitious planet, everything that he touched had turned to gold. Consequently, in comparatively short time, the honest earnings of his industrious partner was destined to become but the silvery streak in a mine of wealth.

With circumstances and position the man’s entire nature had experienced a kind of revolution. In the shady days *pride* had been his predominant quality — *pride*, even though he [145] wore a greasy coat out at elbows and shoes trodden down at heel, yet had he carried about with him a supercilious air that, we repeat, would have been repulsive had it not been so ludicrous — but as soon as he found himself otherwise situated, a *humility* replaced the former characteristic, and *new* acquaintances judged

him as being the ‘most courteous, affable, persuasive, and equable *gentle man*’ that it had ever been their good fortune to be brought into contact with.

If Septimus Slinkensmirk had revolutionised his whole nature, even so had his wife, Melissa. Indeed, no one, excepting an old customer, who *would* persist in occasionally putting in an appearance to disturb the harmony of all by allusions to the would-be forgotten past, could have recognised, in the idly fantastic form of the lady *en negligé* — in her laces of Valenciennes and diaphanous clouds of drapery that might have been patterned after a ‘Venus recumbent’ of the old masters, with becoming and modern additions to the toilette — the cotton-gowned, bare-armed, bib-aproned landlady of the small beershop in Church Lane. Still less could [146] any likeness be traced between Mrs. *Septimus* Slinkensmirk, the wife of Septimus Slinkensmirk — head of a firm of brewers and proprietor of some three dozen public-houses, churchwarden, and member of the local Board of Guardians — as she was now accustomed to appear at the annual flower-show, attired in robes of *poult de soie* of costly manufacture and fashionable style, with jewellery that was known to be the envy of the doctor’s and lawyer’s wives, and that even excited the malice of the new rector’s high-born lady — so it was said, at least — languidly reclining, with easy grace, and *natural* too, beside her daughter Theodocia, who had outvied the acme of maternal hopes in the attainment of charms and — *perfection!* behind the imposing and gratifying spectacle of a pair of cream-coloured thoroughbred ponies; and the hardworking scold, whom all liked and respected, notwithstanding her inborn propensity, and whose hands had often been blessed for that happy knack that they possessed — perhaps *inherited*, for nobody knew anything of the Wiggins family — of ‘mixing’ to a nicety of taste and flavour.

II.

[147] CHLINKENHOLM — such was the name of the house — a curious one, be it remarked, but one that combined the rare quality of uniqueness with its refreshing twin originality, and was calculated to engender inquiry and reflect an amount of honour, ingenuity, and taste upon its author, the present occupant and owner. Now, many suggestions as to title for the block-built red brick mansion had been made and discussed before this novel idea of combining the half of the surname that had been handed down by legitimate descent from one Schlinkenschmirk (who ‘came over with the Conqueror’ and gained for himself much repute and celebrity) with an old Anglo-Saxon word signifying a [148] species of evergreen oak — note well the analogy: the stability and ever flourishing renown of the Slinkensmirks, as the family name had degenerated into — had been put to the vote and carried unanimously.

Mrs. *Septimus* Slinkensmirk, as she now preferred to be called, had previously maintained a dogged preference for ‘The Mansion,’ that somewhat bearing an affinity to ‘The Manor,’ where resided the ruling power of the town of Anglebro’. Moreover, to put it in its literal phraseology, ‘it had a something about it that commanded respect, and at the same time made outsiders shrink into their very shoes and feel very small indeed.’

Miss Theodocia Slinkensmirk, who had benefited by the excessively refined atmosphere and general surroundings of a term’s habitation within the precincts of a superlatively select educational establishment in a curiously dead-and-alive city some five-and-thirty miles distant, had rebelled against her mother’s proposition as being ‘old-fashioned and vulgar,’ and in its stead would fain have adopted some fantastic foreign appellation [149] that was more suggestive of a casino or low-class cabaret than

aught else, and that had been chosen from the forbidden pages of a borrowed and highly relished second-rate romance.

The rest of the family had been too juvenile and inexperienced to offer an opinion upon the intricate theme — the second daughter, Philomela Lavinia, then being in the short skirt and frilled drawers stage of development, and her brother, Benedictus Methusaleh, an interesting production of human kind, beneath the external covering of a holland blouse, imperceptible socks, leather belt, and embroidered linen collar.

Finally, it came to pass that the husband and father, Septimus Slinkensmirk, one night, as he lay peacefully meditating and turning over in his mind the great question, was inspired with an idea, which idea was to the effect that their lately purchased abode should be designated with the well-sounding and all worthy appellation of ‘Schlinkenholm.’ A capital idea! and Septimus Slinkensmirk had bounded from his bed, as did a certain other, frantically crying ‘Eureka! Eureka!’ [150] in his vehemence awakening his sleeping partner and, worse still, the diminutive piece of humanity that had somehow lost hold of its resting-place, and was struggling fiercely to disentangle itself from the coils of misplaced bandages and appendages and regain its anchorage.

Amidst the uproar that then ensued, and *en parenthesis* to the ‘hush-a-byes’ and low, soothing murmurs that broke the solemn stillness of the small hours, one word expressive of contempt certainly did proceed from the much-aggrieved and sensitively-conditioned wife, but, coming direct as the ‘idea’ *must* have done from the returning shade of a departed progenitor, likely enough the Schlinkenschmirk of immortal memory himself — who *could* nourish anger upon reflection, or *dare* to offer opposition to *this*? None, decidedly *none*; and even the genteel Theodocia had been proud to speak of her home amongst her *bonnes camarades*, who were one and all supposed to be choice fruit from the vineyards of the ‘nobility and gentry’ of the land, as ‘Schlinkenholm, called after an ancestor of ours who was a [151] faithful friend and able champion of William the Conqueror.’

From that time the success of Miss Slinkensmirk might have been dated. The second term of her installation amongst the gems of patrician birth, her instructresses, the Misses Cringewell, took every opportunity to allow a free ventilation to this item of the personal history of the *one* pupil concerning whom they ‘had had their doubts’ — those ‘doubts’ being varnished over, but by no means obliterated, by the volunteer offer of ‘payment in advance’ — a way of transacting affairs written on the wrong side of the book that few, if any, of the ‘nobility and gentry’ were inclined towards, and that was estimated even as as great a recommendation as the influence of one of their ecclesiastical patrons, which personage had been the means of proving, with the firm support of Mrs. Septimus Slinkensmirk, the ‘advizability — nay, *necessity* — of a first-class education, with accomplishments befitting *such* a daughter of such a rising member of society’ — an understanding with the ‘gentlewomen of reduced circumstances’ having been previously established [152] as to commission upon each fresh pupil, which only made it the more satisfactory to all parties concerned, and the ecclesiastical patron in particular.

The Misses Cringewell had been sagely discriminate in their choice of questions, consequently their inherent cultivation had not been doomed to receive a shock, and the reverend gentleman had come away from the immaculate boarding establishment wherein all appertaining to trade was emphatically tabooed, and anything in the leastwise bearing a relation thereto, regarded and upheld as contamination of the vilest degree — with pocket heavier and heart lighter than when he had stood knocker in hand

upon the threshold of that domicile of virginity that had for its motto '*Sans reproche*' — perhaps the prefix '*sans peur*' was not deemed *appliqué*.

Theodocia Slinkensmirk was 'a lady born, every inch of her,' as her adoring maternal relation was wont to declare, and would heap honours and credit upon the grey hairs of her parents; whereas her sister was — well, she was short, thickset, and — coarse! Yes, there [153] was no closing of eyes to the fact, useless, still to deny it — Philomela Lavinia Slinkensmirk was coarse, and, worse than all, bid fair to grow coarser, squarer, and less lithe and delicate each year! A source of deep anxiety at first, it soon developed into one of indescribable aggravation to the regenerated mother who bore her, a source of disgust to the elder sister, who was slim, graceful as a fawn, and languidly interesting as any lady could desire to be; and a source of constant allusion and special gratification to her hopeful brother, Benedictus Methusaleh. The father had openly declared, when driven to delirious desperation one day, that it was the plebeian blood of the Wigginses that tainted the pure patrician element in the nature of his younger offspring, which, as may be supposed, was not calculated to abate the raging storm in the family circle; and Septimus Slinkensmirk had been but too glad to beat a sly retreat from the disturbed homestead and seek consolation elsewhere, preserving in his mind's eye a vision of a vengeful physiognomy emerging from a *négligé* toilette of laces, muslins, and furbelows too numerous [154] and cunningly devised to mention, and surrounded by sympathisers making free and indiscriminate use of the small regimental force of knick-knacks that were ever within arm's reach of Mrs. Septimus Slinkensmirk.

Not that by this last phrase we would mean to imply that that *lady* of sensitive constitution could by any possible means so far demean herself as to attend to her own requirements when others were present; a maid was kept for that special purpose at the liberal hire of £6 per annum, all found, 'washing and breakages excepted.' Do not forget and imagine it is Mrs. Melissa Slinkensmirk of the 'Pilgrims' Rest' and 'mixing' notoriety that we are now writing about. This would be an unpardonable offence and we would rather another commit it than ourselves.

The early morning meal at Schlinkenholm was a species of domestic, tribunal, inasmuch as each member of the family would bring forward his or her own particular grievances of the past four-and-twenty-hours, and freely give expression to opinions of dissatisfaction and want of redress. Whether justice, blind [155] and unbiassed, was at all times permitted to decide affairs of so contradictory a complexion we cannot undertake to declare; nevertheless, our feelings, in all probability, might not have been wrenched, nor in any wise injured, on behalf of a cruelly maltreated and suffering fellow Christian; for, until the commencement of this story martyr was a word altogether foreign as applied to a Slinkensmirk in its full, personal signification.

Septimus Slinkensmirk was condescendingly humble, yet no martyr. Mrs. Septimus Slinkensmirk was an invalid, and refinedly delicate, as every *lady* should be, yet no martyr. Miss Theodocia Slinkensmirk was debarred from things which, to tell the truth, her age and sex strongly proclaimed their rights in favour of, from the very fact of her extreme cultivation and hot-house rearing, which had prematurely forced her into an artificial growth and sickening contraction of all that was natural. In short, she was an excellent example of what training, combined with high-breeding, will do; yet she was no martyr. Philomela Slinkensmirk, with her powerful physique, rude health, and tremendous [156] appetite, could likewise be in no manner deserving of that epithet. Still less could her irrepressible brother,

Benedictus Methusaleh, who was blessed with a dominant will, and a courage that seldom failed to assert it.

The breakfast-hour during the winter-months was nine o'clock, in summer half-past eight; and, as we are now about to speak of the opening day of August, the latter was the time in vogue. Two minutes before the half-hour a stupendous gong sounded throughout the mansion; two minutes later, again it pealed forth for the third and last time of warning, and with its final vibration Septimus Slinkensmirk, local paper in hand and book under arm, glided phantom-like into the vacant apartment, pausing upon the threshold to run a pair of starch-blue orbs over the well-spread board, thereby taking in a tolerably agreeable scrutiny of the *tout ensemble*, and then resuming his habitual gait, which was slow and stealthy, yet *sure*, until he sank, telescopically and with funereal gravity, into his accustomed seat at the *foot* of the table, and immediately [157] behind the tempting spectacle of a cold boiled fowl and well-cured tongue. To have witnessed the expansion of nostril and dilation of orb, as the organ of scent came into close juxtaposition with the mellifluous odour arising from the aforesaid viands, might have conveyed the impression that Septimus Slinkensmirk was a bit of a gourmand, or what is politely termed a *bon vivant*; possibly this impression might have been erroneous, probably correct.

A stupendous noise upon the staircase outside disturbed mental and nasal meditation, recalling the paterfamilias from his epicurean flight to the more prosy platform of common, every-day duty — duty as a husband, and father of a promising progeny. In an instant both eye and nose contracted, and the former, after wandering vaguely and returning to the point of attraction, settled fixedly upon a certain ornamental figure in the opposite border of the ceiling; the hands met, and closed upon the pages of the much-thumbed volume — purchased for the small sum of three-pence of some second-hand vendor — that had been drilled into a happy [158] knack of opening at the chapter desired, and the jaw fell into position, while a twitching of lips, and a muttered 'whis-whis,' were the only outward signs by which to prove that it was something more than a lifeless personification of the attributes adoration and humility that sat there between the arms of a high-backed, ecclesiastical-looking chair.

'Pa, Benedictus has stolen the post-bag. *Insist* upon him giving it up. I want it, and I *will* have it — you odious young toad!' exclaimed Miss Theodocia, bursting into the breakfast-room, and darting afresh at the object of her remarks, and, failing in her endeavours, avenging herself by wringing one ear of the 'odious young toad' with unmerciful fury, that would stop for the next quarter-of-an-hour all circulation in that distended auricle, and elicited a tortuous howl of disapprobation in response, and a savage counter attack upon its authoress.

'You hateful creature! You shan't have it *now*! No! that you shan't, Miss Do. I — I'll burn it sooner.'

'Will you! *Will* you! Give it up this moment, or I ——'

[159] 'Ugh! What will you do? Ugh! *you*! Ugh! *you, you* —' (with each repetition advancing a step towards his opponent, and twisting his features into divers contortions, hideous to behold) — '*you — you — beast!*'

The last word was emphatically enunciated, in aggravating contiguity to his enraged sister's person; and tongue failing to give vent to half her inward wrath, Theodocia Slinkensmirk so far put off her usual cloak of refinement as to make free use of her more physical qualities, and closed in with the enemy, to the beating of kicks and blows and the music of a pair of full-toned and healthy lungs.

Meanwhile the post-bag, cause of all the woe, lay neglected upon the carpet, with contents strewn indiscriminately about. Septimus Slinkensmirk had, at the commencement, ventured a mild remonstrance, somewhat after this fashion:

‘Me babes, me precious offspring, apples of me eye’ — the next was drowned in the wild shriek that issued from Master Benedictus; then some allusion to Dr. Watts’s oft-repeated yet ever-failing-to-pacify verse respecting dogs and their not altogether [160] canine propensities; but, this serving in no degree to reproduce harmony, with a woful shake of the head and a sigh as his eyes resought the favourite spot, Septimus Slinkensmirk returned to his matutinal devotions with all-absorbing attention, to the strict exclusion of all mundane disturbances. Not a muscle relaxed, nor a feature moved one microscopic portion of an inch; perhaps the ‘whis-whis’ increased in velocity rather than diminished, yet that was all; so abstracted was he in the performance of duty — the setting of an excellent example to his offspring and subservients. In the height of the conflict Mrs. Septimus Slinkensmirk, heralded by a couple of retainers and attended by her second-born, Philomela, — who was serving the purpose of a kind of walking toilet-table, so well stocked was she with all appertaining thereto, — appeared upon the field of action in the imposing attire of morning *negligé*, which was utterly indescribable in its abundant simplicity, and perfect as a cunningly-executed imitation of what it professed to be, bearing in her course an atmosphere that was a combination of attar of roses, salts, *eau de* [161] *cologne*, *poudre de lis*, aromatic vinegar, vegetable pills, musk lozenges, hair-wash, and something that was contained in a silver-mounted pocket-flask, more pungent and gratifying than them all, which admixture soon impregnated the whole apartment, and was doubly, nay, trebly distilled in the vicinity of the couch.

Upon opening the door — or, to be fastidiously correct, waving an order for the door to be opened — a faint scream, worthy of any lady of high birth and position, issued from the cherry-paste lips of the sensitive maternal parent, and a signal was given to the effect that fan, handkerchief, and restoratives of various sorts and qualities were to be held in readiness for the forthcoming exemplification of intense refinement and susceptibility of nerve organs. But, upon turning her horror-stricken gaze from the objects of her affection and solicitude to regard the motionless form of her devotional spouse, second thoughts flashed upon her, and ere she was aware of it herself, she had gained his side with a miraculous amount of energy — so at least it seemed to the servant-maids, who were [162] strangers in the town, and had not known their present mistress in other days and under other circumstances — and was shaking, actually *shaking* him to his normal senses, shouting, in a soprano and crescendo key that was distinctly audible above the war fury that was about to terminate:

‘Septimus! *Sept* — imus! *Sept* — i — *mous*! You — you — *brute*! You — you — *fool*!’

‘Me dear! me — me *dear*! me ——’

‘Me dear! me dear! don’t “me dear” *me*, man! What do you mean with your — your — *tomfoolery*? Look at them children! *my* children! *our* children! your *own* children!!! look at ’em and — and — be ashamed of yourself! *ashamed* of yourself! you dolt — you — you ——’

‘Me dear, me life, me soul, me very existence — hem! remember, Melissa, be so good as to re — *member* we — we — are not *alone* — the maidens, me dear, the maidens,’ meekly suggested paterfamilias, rolling his eyes hither and thither in search of a resting-place, and finally dropping them beneath the withering stabs on pretence of wiping his gold-rimmed glasses.

[163] ‘Yes; it’s for *you* to remember — for *you* to hide your face, droning over your moonshine instead of attending to your duties as a man and — a *father!* You don’t deserve to be a father! — a father to *such* children! What does your Bible say about — about a “father pitying his children,” eh, man? How do *you* pity *yours* — *mine* — *ours*? Look on that tender blossom, that first bloom of innocence; look on *him* — my Benedictus — *our* Benedictus — an opening bud of great, *great* promise — look on each, cruel man! and thank the luck that has accorded such a *mother* to your children! Cry shame on him, Theodocia — gentle Theodocia — cry shame on him my — my blessed Benedictus! Philomela, Philomela, the *mouchoir*, the vinegar, the fan, the — oh! wicked husband!’ and with this, Melissa Slinkensmirk, furtively glancing behind and around, gracefully relapsed into a heap of muslins and perfumes upon a low ottoman, where she was immediately surrounded by a bevy of sympathizing dependants, who had rushed *en masse* from the domestic regions, and were very demonstrative in their semblance of feeling towards the ‘pore thing.’

[164] The attention of the more youthful assailant had been distracted from his adversary to the more edifying and less hurtful spectacle of the connubial fracas — indeed, from enemies Theodocia Slinkensmirk and her brother Benedictus Methusaleh had been transformed in an instant to friends, and after kicking the post-bag in the direction of his sister with a ‘There ye are, take it and hold yer row; let’s see the fun, do,’ Master Benedictus Slinkensmirk’s juvenile treble was heard to put in, *par parenthesis*, such pieces of advice as ‘Go it, mother — give it her, father — leather into him, missis — put the kye-bosh on to her, governor.’

Philomela, who, by-the-bye, without possessing any external and extraordinary gifts of nature in the way of beauty, was possessed of a fun-loving disposition and keen appreciation of anything of a comical tendency, that had more than once been as a stumbling-block in her path, as will be seen hereafter — yet, beneath all this was there a kindness of heart that, had it been permitted to come to the surface and expand, might have made up in part, if not in all, for what was wanting ere [165] she could deserve that same title as her sister so ably represented: a lady — it was this latter inconvenient propensity that caused the younger Miss Slinkensmirk to scarce retain a becoming gravity, and she was forced to maintain a back view of her much-aggrieved mamma while bathing that lady’s temples with Cologne water. Miss Theodocia, after casting a glance of unutterable contempt upon either parent, and muttering something of which only two words were at all distinguishable in the tumult of voices — ‘vulgarity’ and ‘menials’ — treated the affair as immeasurably beneath *her* notice, and when called upon, neither responded by tongue nor look, but placidly began the perusal of the contents of the uncared-for post-bag, that, unconscious of the evil that it had done, had lain calmly and undisturbed upon the floor. One, two, three, four letters had been unsealed and put away, after undergoing a skimming as ‘rubbish,’ which, interpreted, meant of a business character. A fifth was kept back as being of some slight importance, and one other remained, which, being of inferior dimensions, had been overlooked [166] — a diminutive envelope, addressed in a semi-masculine, semi-feminine, and wholly original handwriting. ‘Who in the world can *this* be from? It’s addressed to ma. Never mind, I’ll open it,’ soliloquised the eldest and most promising of the young Slinkensmirks.

“‘The Manor!’ What! which? “The *Man*-or requests the pleasure!” Who? “The Honourable Mrs. Despoticum-Lead-mall!” Never! impossible! “Mr., Mrs., and Miss Slinkensmirk’s company!” Ma, ma! Do you hear? Wake up! wake up! Don’t faint any more, and listen; here’s an invitation from “The

Manor!” Hold your tongue, Benedictus! Leave ma alone, Philomela! Be quiet, pa! Hem! “The Honourable — Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall ——”

‘Who? What’s that, Theodocia? What did you say? *whom?*’ correcting herself.

Having been repeatedly informed as to her error in using the nominative case of that particular pronoun by her highly finished daughter, Mrs. Septimus Slinkensmirk had of late acquired a habit of persistent employ of the objective, to the complete exclusion of [167] the former, when in a calm and unruffled state of mind. After all, Theodocia was most successful in restoring her mother to animation; for the hanging head was raised with a spasmodic jerk, the languishing expression gave place to one of eager inquiry, while a gloved hand waved aside the supporters, to make way for a clear hearing and understanding of all that her eldest-born had to impart.

“The Hon — our — able — Mrs. — Des — pot-icum-*Leademal*,” repeated Theodocia, intonating each syllable slowly, distinctly, and with an air of triumph.

‘My gracious! You don’t say so, Do!’ ejaculated the brewer’s ‘good lady,’ forgetting herself, and degenerating into vulgarisms, for which she received a cutting reproof, in the shape of a ‘black look’ of deep dye from Miss Slinkensmirk, who, after this mute admonition, proceeded clearly and emphatically.

“The Honourable Mrs. Despoticum-Lead-emall presents her compliments ——”

“Presents her compliments!” Harken to *that*, Septimus! *Now* where’s your humility? It’s your wife, your *wife* and [167] daughter, that you have to thank, sir, for restoring the name and dignity of the family. Go on, Theodocia, my love.’

‘Me *dear*, don’t you think — would it not be advisable — expedient, perhaps — that — that — the maidens, me dear — the maidens, Melissa, should retire?’

After this mild interrogation, the eyes of Papa Slinkensmirk took a revolving turn, and a succession of ‘hems, hems,’ in the direction of the domestic regions indicated, more than the words, their true signification.

‘The maidens? The *servants* you mean, sir. Yes, you may retire, dependants, and — let Titania be made aware that her services may be urgently demanded. Go!’ with an extension of arm worthy of the heroine in a tragedy. ‘Septimus, let me beg that in future you may have more respect for the purity of your offspring, if not for your own lawful helpmate and spouse, than by speaking of menials in *such* a manner. It’s indelicate, *worse* than coarse, in the presence of youth and innocence, let me not have to mention this again, and let me also beg that you will speak next time *when spoken* to. Begin [169] again, Theodocia, my love, begin again from the commencement; and you, Philomela, recline gracefully. Don’t sit up in that awkward fashion. Pay attention, and endeavour to profit by the example of your elegant sister. Benedictus, my lambkin, *please* make less noise. It distresses pore ma. Gracious goodness! what has become of the *mouchoir*? There, at my feet, Philomela, — and the fan, and salts, and revivifier, on the floor, I declare! Why do you not look to these things, undutiful child! Stand behind! My nerves are more than usually weak this morning, your clumsy figure agitates me shockingly. One moment, dearest, and then I shall be able to hear what our *friend* the Honourable Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall has to say. How much longer are you going to sit there like a — a — figure in Madame *Tussud*’s, while your pore wife is sinking for want of rest and refreshment! Get up and support me to the couch, Septimus. Hah! hah!’ (heavy panting). ‘A tiny piece off the breast, with — with a thin slice of ham, and a

— a — shaving of tongue — *now*, before I lose *all* strength and — and — appetite! Dear me! this disturbance [170] has shockingly upset me. Philomela, bathe my temples with the *eau*, or I shall go off again! What it is to be of such a refined constitution! So sensitive! so easily unstrung! Cruel, cruel man! Wicked, heartless child! You little imagine the wrong you do to an organization such as mine — timid, gentle as the dove! Kneel on that stool and fan me, Septimus. Gently, gently; anything rough or uncouth my nature rebels against! Dear, dear! Life itself is almost more than I can bear — weak, delicate morsel! Don't let me die, don't *let* me die, Septimus! Exert yourself, man! Philomela, undutiful girl! the restoratives — before — I — go!

Having been comfortably ensconced upon the easiest couch that the apartment contained, with a small occasional table near at hand, upon which were arranged the delicate viands specified, to the minutiae of sauce and seasonings, with the addition of an extrasized cup of fragrant *café au lait* and sundry fancy articles not just then in use, which had an unfortunate propensity of dropping or being left in divers parts of the room and [171] making their way under the furniture and in all kinds of improbable and intricate places; and experiencing the satisfactory knowledge of others being in a state of intense activity in fulfilment of her own passive commands, Mrs. Septimus prefaced her matutinal repast by again fainting gracefully away.

Evidently the delicately-constituted lady's nerves were in such a condition of restlessness that they would *not* be subjugated to a lengthened apathy; or it might be owing to the stinging effect produced by Miss Philomela's too lavish a quantum of the invigorating *eau* that was poured indiscriminately upon the Parisian head-adornment and permitted to take its course whithersoever it pleased, showing a decided preference for that particular feature that, though apparently unobservant, was none the less wakeful and keen of sensation; again, it might have been owing to the uninterrupted sound of smacking of lips and swallowing, succeeded by a deep exhalation and an immediate repetition of the whole, proceeding from the vicinity of the corner store closet, which, beyond the security of lock and key, was rendered further inaccessible [172] by the barricade of a cumbrous cheffoniere, and excluded from view by the back of a leather-cushioned arm-chair, for it was policy as well as theory that to lead into temptation was unchristianlike in the extreme; and, lastly, it might have been owing to that illustrious name reverberating through every fibre of her brain — *that* name that in all the height, or depth, of aspiration as a mother, the wife of Septimus Slinkensmirk, brewer, chairman of the local board, and ex-churchwarden, had scarcely dared hope to add to her list of friends, even as an exalted acquaintance before whom to make a humble obeisance and pass on — that of the Hon. Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall, widow of General the Hon. Invincibus Despoticum, third son of the late Lord and Lady Despoticum and elder brother of the present possessor of the title and estates, and lady of the manor of — by virtue of her own right and assumption of the family name of Leademall.

Surely this alone would have been cause sufficient to arouse any ambitious female deserving of the blessings of maternity from the most profound swoon that any lady of [173] culture ever indulged in from time immemorial!

'Leave me — leave me, pray. Get up, Septimus; don't — don't touch me! I cannot bear it. Worse still; don't sit there openmouthed, like — like — an idiot! the *mouchoir*. Philomela, look after your brother, miss, and see — see that the dear boy has a good breakfast — bless him! I'm afraid he's terribly neglected, like his pore ma, pore lamb!'

‘All right, mother, no fear. I’m enjoying myself — don’t go off on my account. I’m stunning, thanks,’ interposed a hollow-sounding voice through the organ of a well-filled mouth in close contact with a large gallipot of preserve.

‘Another pot — this season’s — I do believe. It’s your fault, lazy creature, for not giving the pore child his breakfast. Exert yourself, Philomela; what were you made for, I should like to know? — neither use nor ornament! Ain’t you ashamed of your wicked self? There, put me out again — it’s just the way I no sooner feel a trifle better than you throw me back again. The pocket companion, or — I shall go off again! Ah! raise me up — [174] gently, gently, Septimus! How often have I to remind you that your pore wife is an invalid, cruel man! Another cushion at my back — the hassock a quarter of an inch to the left. Ugh! plain bread, I declare; pass the buttered toast — and — no seasonings whatever to speak of! If you are above the humanities, Septimus Slinkensmirk, please to ring the bell for one of the servants. I suppose I *must* not starve?’ plaintively inquired Mamma Slinkensmirk, already handling her knife and fork pretty ably.

‘*Melissa*, me dear — me wife — me idol! I only await your commands,’ gallantly replied the husband, standing in penitence before her.

‘Then go away until — you’re wanted. This will do for *me* at present; one single mouthful is better than none at all. Now, Theodocia, my love, proceed — proceed with the Hon. Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall’s kind compliments and requests. I am feeling better, and may be able to bear it now — if you don’t mind the trouble, dearest.’

And in accordance with this, Theodocia, who had for the last few minutes been [175] endeavouring to decipher and translate the gorgeous armorial bearings and motto that headed the diminutive sheet of cream-laid, utterly ignoring the pantomime that was being played on her either side — for Master Benedictus Methusaleh was revelling in the delights of apricot jam away from the disturbing or opposing eye of mortal. So absorbing was the contemplation of this wondrous and indisputable token of high birth and distinction, and so gratifying when, as was the case, her own name in connection with — nay, in respectful request of — the reigning sovereign of the provincial court of fashion and *haut monde* was in prominent perspective thereunder, that she transformed into a paragon of filial obedience and good humour, and cleared her throat of any symptom of huskiness preparatory to answering her mother’s mildly-expressed desire.

‘The Hon. Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall presents her compliments to Mr., Mrs., and Miss Slinkensmirk, and requests the pleasure of their company at her reception and soiree [176] on the evening of Tuesday, the 18th inst., at eight o’clock.

‘An answer will oblige.

‘The Manor, Saturday, August 1.’

‘Well, I never did! Fancy *that*, Septimus! Did you ever hear the like? Do, my darling ——’

‘Don’t be vulgar, ma! *Theodocia*, if you please, *now* if not before,’ interrupted that young lady, taking her seat at the breakfast table and experiencing an unpleasant doubt concerning that final clause respecting an answer that must of necessity, she supposed, be in writing, consequently correct to a minimum and in accordance with the strictest rules of etiquette and good breeding.

‘Hem! how nice it’s put, too! She’s a lady, Septimus, a *lady*, every inch of her!’

‘Of course she is, ma; there are no two opinious respecting that,’ returned Miss Theodocia conclusively, and sending up her plate, *viâ* Philomela, for ‘a piece of chicken, plump and tender, please pa; and then you shall have some coffee.’

‘Philomela, ring the bell for a jug of hot [177] water; Benedictus — where on earth is he *now*?

Just look about for him, Philomela.’

‘*Ben-ny*, me son, me second self, where are you, me bird, me charmer?’ inquired Septimus Slinkensmirk, reinstating the eyeglasses upon the bridge of his nose, in order to pay due respect to the commands of his eldest-born.

‘Yere I am,’ growled a voice from the corner contiguous to the store-closet.

‘Oh Lud! if the boy isn’t after another pot of this season’s, may I — never know what it is to be burdened with nerves! Philomela, look after the pore infant; Septimus, have regard for your son’s appetite, and appease his hunger, innocent lambkin in want! — actually in want! — and his father surrounded by abundance! *Such* is man! *such* his greediness!’ cried the wife and mother, rising in person from her semi-recumbent position, and in volubility and tone as her suspicions increased and her temper waxed warmer — ‘As I expected — oh! Benny, Benny! your pore ma’s best preserve!’ reprovngly, as her hopeful son emerged from his hiding-place with physiognomy much bedaubed, and licking to [178] a conspicuous degree of cleanliness the lips and environs so far as his tongue could by any endurable possibility be made to reach.

‘Not this season’s, sure-*ly*.’

‘Don’t know, don’t care! it’s very good! Leave me alone, Phil, will yer? Don’t turn up your nose at *me*, Do. They’ve bin and eaten all the toast, the pigs — ugh! yah! yurr!’ and upon this painful discovery, Master Slinkensmirk rubbed the knuckles of both fists in both eyes, and opening both lungs to their widest expansion, gave vent to his grievance and disgust in one long and sonorous howl that drowned sympathy and offers of amendment alike, and went far towards injuring the drum of every ear present, had they not been so accustomed to such, and become hardened.

‘Me bud — me blossom — me — me ——’

‘Hold your tongue, Septimus. It’s *you*, Philomela — you — *you* — *you*, madam!

‘I?’ put in Philomela for the first time, in sheer astonishment, ‘what have *I* done? I have not eaten the toast.’

‘Hark at her, husband! That’s right, Septimus; sit by and hear your own lawful wife [179] insulted — openly set at defiance — to be called a — a — liar next! that’s the way — cruel man! Oh! you common, ill-bred Slinkensmirk! you piece of vulgarity, you! how dare you speak so to your pore ma. It was Philomela, wasn’t it, my cherub? Oh! she’s a ——’

‘No, it wasn’t — it’s them — them pigs,’ gasped Benedictus, glaring at each in turn, and tearing holes in his mamma’s Valenenciennes *mouchoir* with his teeth.

‘Which pigs, my pretty one?’ pursued Melissa Slinkensmirk, never waning in her agreeable occupation, nor lifting her eyes from her half-emptied plate.

‘Why *her*, and *him*, and *you!*’ burst out the promising son; then making a frantic raid upon his sister Theodocia’s plate, and in the scuffle that ensued clutching a corner of the white cloth, thereby overturning most of the contents of the table, and adding to the confusion by lying flat upon the carpet and kicking and screaming alternately.

‘Ma, it’s simply disgusting that you should allow Benedictus to behave in this unseemly manner! What would the Hon. Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall say, if she could see us at [180] this moment! Just imagine the scandal — the blow to the dignity of the family! *another* disgrace!’ with a deep set glance at her sister that caused Philomela’s face to flush crimson.

‘*Another* disgrace! ay, true enough! ain’t you ashamed of yourself *now*, Septimus — answer me *that* — ain’t you ashamed of yourself as a man and — and a father, sir? Look at that undutiful girl, and despise yourself — despise yourself, I say,’ by a clever manoeuvre turning the blame on to the scape-goats — father and younger daughter.

‘*Me-lissa*, me dear — reason — reason in *all* things; would it not be as well to — to adopt some plan of action instanter, at once, me dear, or I fear, I do indeed, I sadly fear the — the — maidens, hem! our breakfast may probably be spoilt — probably, me dear, *probably!*’ observed Papa Slinkensmirk, preparing himself by tucking up his shirt-cuffs to put into practical execution what he had just suggested, should it happen to meet with approval.

‘*There* you are again, Septimus, always thinking of your own stom ——’

‘*Gra-cious*, ma!’ exclaimed Miss Theodocia in an offended tone from another part of the [181] room, whither she had removed her cup and saucer to proceed with her repast in solitary peace, regardless of existing and unpropitious circumstances, while her sister, with a serio-comic cast of countenance, set to work to remedy the mischief and make all right again.

Philomela dearly loved a piece of fun, and had a passion for practical joking that had lately involved her in a terrible plight and insurmountable trouble. The inclinations of her governesses — the Misses Cringewell, to whose deserving care she had been entrusted, in hopes of their being competent to drill some degree of ‘delicacy and elegance’ into the younger daughter, to counteract the ‘horrid vulgarity’ of ‘rude health’ and strong muscular development, — no wise reciprocating in these natural and irrepressible propensities of their unsusceptible pupil — those ladies had been far from appreciating the gist of that last trick played upon them; and it having by some circuitous route reached their ears that Miss Philomela Slinkensmirk was about to bid adieu to the ‘boarding establishment for the daughters of the nobility and gentry [182] *only*,’ at the close of the forthcoming term, thought fit to seize the opportunity of availing themselves of ‘an example’ — a terrible example of disobedience and vulgar demeanour! — by expelling the offender, and citing hers as an instance of the highly select quality of the class whom they alone admitted as boarders beneath the shelter of their irreproachable roof.

Thus it came about that Philomela had been in disgrace ever since her premature return home, and had met with nothing but cuffs, and snubs, and sharp-pointed weapons of spiteful speech, that, notwithstanding her stolidity — otherwise ‘stupidity’ — plainness of features — if such it could be called, seeing that there was a something decidedly engaging in that open, genuine round face, small *retroussée* nose, and easy-going disposition that was wont to find compensation and, alas! fun in everything, making the most of a little, and the best of what she had — *had* penetrated the coarse exterior and pierced

deep into the inner self, probing the heart with many a pang, and causing many a salt tear to bedew her sleepless pillow when alone [183] at night to contemplate the serious *dénoûment* of her girlish frolic.

Not a person had she been permitted to see beyond the inmates of Schlinkenholm since her expulsion from school, now some seven weeks previous; neither had she been allowed to venture out of doors, lest she might be observed and questions be asked by some inquisitive neighbour, and by that means the 'shameful affair,' as Miss Theodocia phrased it, get circulated amongst the townsfolk, who doubtless would rejoice in the luxury of a fresh bit of scandal; and, as Mrs. Septimus Slinkensmirk declared more than once, 'Rather than the lawyer's wife, much less the doctor's wife, *infinitely* less the rector's wife, and more than all the stuck-up Bogies, and Lovelorns, and Braggarts, and Simplicities should know of the disgrace, I'd offer up my daughter as a sacrifice, and my own lawful husband into the bargain, that I would!' To which her eldest-born had replied, 'Yes, ma, dear, and Benedictus along with them; and I would help to pile on the faggots. Wouldn't we have a rare time of it *then*, without anything whatever to oppose us or — or disgrace us, ma dear?'

[184] In such a state of surroundings and existence, perhaps a nature of still less susceptibility, and even more inclined to look upon the bright side of everything, might have diminished in ardour and struggled vainly with the opposing elements, until it was compelled to give in beneath the overwhelming force and wearying continuance of being talked *at* and branded as a monster of shame and iniquity, as Philomela undoubtedly was.

During the first fortnight she had battled hard, with a vigorous endeavour to maintain her rights, on the ground of unintentional desire to either harm or insult the much aggrieved maidens Cringewell; but her spirit, inflexible when confident of just cause, had finally swayed and broken down beneath the treatment to which she had been exposed from early morning until night, leaving her in a condition of half-belief that she *must* be the incorrigible and black-hearted sinner that both mother and sister used every pains to paint her, while expatiating upon her shameful delinquencies and depravity of appearance and character.

Probably the allusion, this one favoured by [185] Miss Theodocia, to the awkward and unprepossessing type of external qualities, served to bring about the surrender more speedily than the uncomplimentary and ill-deserved attacks upon her internal endowments of nature would have done; for no young lady of seventeen cares to be repeatedly informed of the fact, if she *be* not of slender proportions nor Perian beauty; moreover, to be nagged at without intermission, excepting during the still hours of solemn night, when, poor girl, her misery laid upon her in treble weight, and drove away that sleep that she had never before experienced difficulty in evoking; and to occupy the unenviable post of drudge and interloper at one and the same time, was sufficient to try the easiest temper on record, not to mention the whispers and side glances, significant of a world of meaning and ridicule, that the elder daughter was accustomed to bestow in her sister's presence upon their weak-minded mother, who was but a *protégée* in the arts and wiles of conventional elegance under the tutelage of the accomplished Theodocia; and the feeling that naturally arose in rebellion against the unsatisfactory [186] state of her situation in general and her species of imprisonment in particular, which latter was beginning to undermine her physical as well as mental constitution. A violent outbreak one day, and all was over. Poor Philomela was vanquished, hopelessly defeated, and no longer had either strength or inclination to

contest any more. Her ladylike sister was triumphant, and did not fail to make it known by asserting her superiority more than ever, and flaunting her favours before the dimmed eye of the hapless junior. Each day seemed to blanch the once rosy cheeks that had been disdainfully likened to a milkmaid's, and brought with it less nerve or even desire to contend against her lot. In place of that roguish twinkle and careless, unstudied gait, a subdued compliance hid from view the sufferings and yearnings within, and, to judge from this outward semblance, Philomela Slinkensmirk was, as her sister termed it, 'tamed,' which, in other words, signifies that her spirit, her will, her identity was broken — lost, and that she was now 'tolerable, nay, desirable, to act the slavish part for which nature had intended her.'

[187] Yet, as the philosophers of old had it, 'In the direst calamity a thread of compensation runs parallel throughout;' so, in Philomela's case, was there a thread, which thread was embodied in human form, individualised in the shape of a young man! Yes, Philomela Slinkensmirk actually 'had a young man!' Or, to be puritanically correct — as mistakes are often made in *affaires du coeur*, especially on the side of the feminine gender — Philomela Slinkensmirk *thought* she 'had a young man.' Moreover, the genteel Theodocia, who was the elder by three years, five months, and eleven days, had *not* 'a young man,' nor as yet even the promise of such a desirable possession in perspective, though no doubt she had frequently conjured up visions appertaining thereto which would be realised *some day*. This fact, trifling as it may appear to one in no wise concerned, was not likely to make the compensation less sweet, at any rate; for the mortal is but mortal after all. This was the prop, the straw, the crutch — call it what we may — that had sustained Philomela for many weeks past while dragging out an unenviable existence [188] in an atmosphere of undisturbed wretchedness. This was the silver lining to the enshrouding cloud that o'ershadowed her path; the solitary star that shed a beacon-light in the dull firmament o'erhead; the oasis in the wearying desert of hurricanes of contumely and showers of abuse; the fount from which to quench her parching thirst for sympathy and consolation; the golden gleam that, shining from afar, beamed on, undiminished in brightness, and, piercing beyond the material vision into the great and unfathomable future, could not fail to speak of hope — hope on! All this and more — a billion times more than can be put forth coldly into language — all this personified, say rather sanctified, cherished and nourished in her heart of hearts, and carefully withheld from the outside world.

This prodigy of humankind, for human he *was*, had been met, and in meeting adored, at the home of a schoolfellow with whom Philomela had spent a portion of the last Midsummer vacation. The course of their mutual attachment had been permitted to break the general rule and prove a [189] satisfactory exception by maintaining an even and unruffled tenor throughout the term of their brief yet profitable acquaintance; for the friend who had been instrumental in bringing them together — one Cissie Fairbairn, daughter of an ex-officer in the navy — could afford to be generous; still more, could afford to lend a helping hand to a fellow Christian, inasmuch as *she* had made her choice, and, on the whole, she was very well pleased with *her* bargain, not being at all reticent in circulating abroad the news of her engagement, much to the envy, hatred, and uncharitableness of the majority of her young lady associates.

Now the next best thing, after having secured a beau one's self, is the occupation of providing one for a special favourite who has been proved to be in no degree addicted to the aforesaid qualities.

‘It would be exceedingly nice if you could manage to gain the affection of my Eric’s friend, would it not, dear?’

So said Miss Fairbairn, and the response that she got was somewhat after this:

‘Fiddle-faddle! stuff and nonsense! *Do* [190] keep that sweet little fancy of yours from roving into all sorts of improbabilities. You know, Cissie darling, I — I — that is, Mr. — I mean we both don’t like one another, excepting as — as — *friends* — of course!’

‘Oh! you don’t, don’t you? Hum! Then why do you always turn so red when he makes his appearance, eh? Why, you’re as red as — as a peony *now*, I do declare! And — and — Mr. — oh! yes he is — he’s coming up the path with Eric! Am I all right — presentable, dear? He’s got a rose for *somebody*!’

How this was brought about, who first fell a victim to the shafts of the god Cupid, and who *most* enjoyed those summer rambles through the ripe, golden, waving corn-fields, we will leave our readers to suppose. If *young*, they will ready enough fill up the vacuum with a romance of their own concocting; if of mature years, let them pause a few seconds to recall some analogous incidents in the records of their past existence, and once again put off the practicality of age to bask in the shallow and fleeting delights of the sunshine of youth. Be assured it can do them no harm, and to many who have become [191] intolerant, hardened, and inflexible it may be beneficial. Let us return to that particular morning at Schlinkenholm.

Everything having been re-arranged, and the comforts of Master Benedictus Methusaleh sedulously attended to — the plate of Mrs. Septimus Slinkensmirk replenished, aromatic vinegar, fan, *elixir vitae* (contained in a fancy silver-mounted flask-shaped utensil), *chatelaine*, salts, *eau-de-Cologne*, lace tippet, Grecian scarf and *mouchoir* duly replaced within arm’s reach of the presiding genius of the comfortable couch, and Miss Theodocia reinstalled in her seat at the head of the table, order was restored, and after a repetition of unavailing ‘hem-hems,’ the voice of Septimus Slinkensmirk rose above the clatter-clatter of knife and fork.

‘Theodocia, me pearl; Philomela, me ruby; Benedictus, me gem of gems; Melissa, me wife, me soul — let us ask a blessing.’ And after taking a circuitous turn within their sockets, the starch-blue orbs fastened themselves upon the exact petal of a certain flower in the ornamental moulding of the ceiling opposite, while a pair of huge hands, [192] much freckled, closed in an attitude of pious adoration over the pages of an opened volume, and a low ‘whis-whis’ immediately commenced.

‘Nobody ain’t here, father — bother grace,’ irreverently spoke the, son, with his mouth well filled, and proceeding as with ravenous hunger.

‘When *will* you learn manners, heathen! *Father*, indeed! as if you were a — a — nobody’s child,’ scornfully remarked the refined Theodocia, assisting herself to a upon which her attention had just alighted. ‘It’s your fault, pa, for allowing it. Ma, why don’t *you* forbid it! What would our friend the Honourable Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall say, *if* she knew? — it’s disgusting!’

‘Never mind, Theodocia; say no more about it — he’s quiet now,’ said Philomela in an undertone, dreading a renewal of what they had just passed through.

‘Hum! *indeed* I it may do for *your* vulgar notions, but it won’t do for me, Philomela. Attend to your own servile affairs, and leave things of refinement and elegance to *me*. There is a whole bundle of

stockings for you [193] to darn this morning, and plenty of menial work I can provide to occupy *your* leisure.'

'Haw-haw!' laughed the brother Benedictus, grinning hideously in his younger sister's face. 'Go it, girls! I'll lay a wager on Do — who'll you ——'

'Benedictus, me bird, me starling,' began Papa Slinkensmirk, his head moving mechanically, similar to that of a certain species of toy manufacture.

'Don't annoy the child, Septimus! It's just like you, to interrupt and con — confumigate; how dare you laugh, Philomela! — leave the room this instant, graceless creature!'

'*Me-lissa!* me dear, *me* dear,' remonstratingly put in the husband, taking upon himself the part of mediator, which is invariably unsatisfactory, and in nine cases out of ten lands the well-meaning actor in a slough of disgrace.

'Septimus! will you sit by and hear your own lawful wife insulted? the mother of your own children openly laughed at, made derision of! Shocking! base man, shocking!'

[194] 'Shameful! *disgusting!*' from Miss Theodocia.

'Ha, ha! Go it!' from Master Benedictus.

'There's for you, even your own offspring — *our* offspring, remanding you.'

'Repri — ma — *repri* — manding,' *sotto voce* from the elder daughter.

'Yes — hard as it is for a pore mother's feelin's to say it — I repeat, there's your own offspring — *our* offspring, repri — ma — reprimanding you, Septimus! Ain't you ashamed of yourself? Either Philomela Slinkensmirk leaves this room, or — or — *I do.*'

Mamma Slinkensmirk was growing hysterical, and ascending the crescendo scale at a rapid pace.

'Philomela, me treasure, me precious jewel, would it be possible — can you entertain the minutest objection to — to ——'

'Ya — yah — yurr — h! salts, fan, vinegar, *mouchoir*, *eau-de* — *de* —'

'*Wee,*' humorously broke in Benedictus Methusaleh, with a chuckle, and repeating the last so as not to allow this spark of wit to be hid from appreciation. '*Eau-de-wee* [195] she wants — *give* it her, Phil, *give* it her.'

'No! no, no! Balsamic elixir — nerve recuperator, or — or I shall go off again. Keep away! out of my sight, ungrateful child, undutiful daughter — leave the room! — leave — the — room!' screamed Mrs. Septimus Slinkensmirk, visibly shaking with passion.

'Very well, I'll go, father.' And in making her exit Philomela caught these words in answer, uttered in something less than a whisper:

'Me rare and brightest gem, your breakfast shall — shall be served in — in *my* study, me bird of — of — paradise.'

With a sickly smile, a heavy heart, and an unappeased appetite, the poor girl quitted the apartment, knowing full well, alas! but *too* well, from early experience, that this aside was about as likely of verification as it was that she should appear *en grande toilette* at the forthcoming reception and soiree

of the Honourable Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall; yet even on the threshold outside a compensative vision arose before her, and caused her weary footsteps to lighten as she sped to the solitude [196] of her chamber, there to settle herself down to the monotonous occupation of darning, only enlivened by the colouring of a vague and deliciously improbable reverie.

‘Ah! I am better now — now *she* — that wicked, cruel girl has gone! To think that I should have given birth to — to *such!* — I — a Wiggins! Oh! Septimus! Septimus!’

‘Me *dear* — me love. A tiny piece — a *ti-ny* piece, plump and delicate, like — like — your own fair self, Melissa,’ gallantly interposed Septimus Slinkensmirk, making one of those timely hits of speech that he occasionally did indulge in.

Mamma Slinkensmirk smirked, and hid her blushes, which of course were there, behind her stupendous fan; then falteringly replied:

‘Well, I don’t know — perhaps, as you are so very, very pressing — I will just take a — a — *tiny* piece, with a *shaving* of ham, and a *morsel* of tongue, Septimus — nothing more — not a fraction. My appetite is waning, waning terribly.’

‘Oh I *my* — mother! what *must* it have been!’ interrupted Master Benedictus [197] Methusaleh, in the fashionable style of his age; ‘it does wane, don’t it! It’s no big’un, is it? Oh, no! Oh, *dear* no! not at *all* — haw — haw!’

This was passed over as though taken in its literal signification, and not in the deep meaning that was supposed to be understood. Septimus Slinkensmirk — head of the establishment — returned to his seat, after executing the small commands of his better half, and everything around appearing in promising and consistent harmony, he again ventured on a bold hem, hem.

‘Theodocia, me seraph, Benedictus, me cherub, let us ask a blessing.’

‘Go it, then, father, there’s a good soul, make haste and — hadn’t you better put beginning and end in one?’ philosophically suggested Benedictus.

‘Hem! hem! eyes down, me babes.’

“Lord Jesus, we beg Thee to receive our sincere and heartfelt thanks for what we are about to receive and — and — have already received,” (*he*, poor man, had not received much, saving a tantalising sniff, that morning), “and to grant that each and every [198] day of our fleeting lives here upon earth we may be able to partake of, and thoroughly enjoy, these Thy bountiful and gracious blessings, at the same time remembering that ‘man shall not live by bread alone, but by every drop that proceedeth out of the Great Fountain of Light and Wisdom’ — Thy Master and our’s. Hear us, and bless us; and, above all, continue to shower thy favours in plenty upon us. Amen.”

With a long-drawn sigh and a circumlocutory motion of the eyes, which brought them back to the agreeable spectacle of an uncut limb of the boiled fowl, which alone remained to tell of the plump proportions of the once feathered biped, Papa Slinkensmirk unclasped his hands, and employed them in the more practical occupation of carving, to his entire satisfaction — to judge, at least, from the placid smile that lurked upon his all-shaven physiognomy. From this time breakfast was proceeded with in comparative unanimity, Mamma Slinkensmirk and Miss Theodocia monopolising the conversation between themselves, exclusively on the subject of the next week’s visit to The Manor.

Much did the latter discourse [199] upon the ways and doings of polite society, and the stringent rules and regulations consistently and absolutely compulsory therewith, succeeding by these measures in gaining the promise of a new silk dress direct from a fashionable West End depôt in London, in which to make her charming appearance upon the aforesaid auspicious occasion, and coming off triumphant in her nicely expressed desire to drive up to the door of the Hon. Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall in all the state that a hired brougham and pair of picked horses could possibly furnish. Verily, it must then have been that Master Benedictus Methusaleh was appalled, dumb-stricken with his sister's intensity of accomplishment in the arts and wonders of the world of fashion and elegance, else surely he *could* not have preserved such a prolonged open-mouthed silence. Finally his nature re-asserted itself, and he exclaimed:

'By gum! ain't mother and our Do coming it strong, father, eh? Don't see why me and you shouldn't do the same, eh, governor?'

'Ha! Ha! *ha!* excellent! excellent, me [200] chick, me fledgling bantam, me youthful cock robin, excellent!' laughed Septimus Slinkensmirk, exposing a broad range of very white teeth, and enunciating the remark by slapping his right knee.

'What do you think of that for a son — *my* son — *our* son, Septimus? Didn't I always say as our Benedictus would be a — philosophy, or — or something similar? To be shore — to be shore I did! Look at them pair, Septimus, and be proud! proud that you gave your children *such* a mother!'

'Ma!' ejaculated the daughter, partly out of modesty at hearing herself praised, partly for another reason that may be easily understood by persons of ever so inferior an education.

'Ah! Theodocia, my child, you are too modest, you take *too* much after your ma, dearest — just what I was at that age, so is my daughter before me; you remember, Septimus, how you used to — to struggle — struggle for a — hem! hem!'

Mamma Slinkensmirk hesitated and concluded the sentence with an affected cough.

'Ho! ho!' roared Benedictus, licking his [201] eight fingers and thumbs consecutively, and grinning audaciously behind his mother's back; "*doesn't* he remember? I should rather think he would, that's all!'

'Ring the bell, pa. I have finished, ma has finished, Benedictus has finished and — you have finished, have you not? it's time! — so we *all* have finished. Ring the bell, somebody!'

So said Miss Theodocia, rising from the table; this was a sign that breakfast at Schlinkenholm for *that* morning was a thing of the past.

III.

[202] EIGHT o'clock, and the guests were already beginning to congregate in the grand old withdrawing rooms of The Manor. Branches of candelabra at regular intervals sprang from all sides of the heavily-draped walls, illumining what would otherwise have been dull and sombre, and adding a bright and genial aspect to the massive antiquity of both style and fittings of the mansion.

At the far end of the inner apartment, and immediately beneath the balustrade gallery that in former days had been dedicated to the accommodation of musicians, and was *now* exclusively reserved for

state occasions, sat the Hon. Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall, attended [203] by a few of her usual satellites and would-be especial favourites. In person the lady of The Manor was large — vulgar and envious people might have pronounced her corpulent — with a sallow complexion that had by no means been beautified by her lengthy sojourn in India; dark hair, mingled with iron-grey, piercing black eyes that were a strange combination of irony and love of the comic, a broad smile — when she *did* smile, which was only under rare and curiously exceptional circumstances — and a firmly-set lower jaw, that was suggestive of immense decision of will, it *alone* being sufficient to offer a clue to the general character of the owner. In attire, the stereotyped black velvet, with ruby velvet turban beset with gems and golden arrows, the whole piled up high upon the crown of the head, and a peacock's-feather fan of huge dimensions, that was flourished about in proportion as the heat of argument *increased* or *decreased*, and which was of service, inasmuch as it plainly, said as words themselves:

'Thus far shalt thou go and no farther.' In age: well! we will not even offer an opinion upon that intricate question — *nobody* knew, [204] moreover, *nobody* dared to venture upon such forbidden ground, deeming it imprudent, as well as in bad taste.

The Hon. Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall was courteous and affable to all, because *she could afford to be so*; yet she would not brook familiarity, and had an innate abhorrence, so she often was wont to affirm, of all that was mean. 'Tis true she accepted the lavish attentions bestowed upon her by the majority of her acquaintances, but she possessed the soundness of common-sense to be fully awake to the why and wherefore of their origin, and in her heart of hearts she valued them accordingly, though she *might* appear to be highly gratified and much moved by their frequent and unremitting occurrence. In early life she had insisted that *she* should only number amongst her friends those whom she had tried and proved worthy of the name through the purifying furnace of need; but alas! this youthful chimera had soon to be relinquished, or she would have found herself solus in a world of brethren and fellow Christians, and in the course of a few years she had settled down as other folks are [205] compelled to do, oftentimes glossing over their sense of right and justice, striving to subdue their offended spirits of rebellion, and blandly smiling when smiles befit them least. Still, it must be said that she in no wise bent to *all* the shams and mockeries that are included in the popular phraseology 'conventionalities of society' — far from it. When, upon the decease of her husband, who had died respected by the few, feared by the many, and mourned by his tailor, she had shortly succeeded to the inheritance of the manorial rights, and come to live in this country, a brief insight into the customs and characteristics of the inhabitants of the town of Anglebro', and a cursory glimpse into the life and manners of those whom it would be her lot to exist amongst upon amicable terms, had been quite enough as an index to her future course of action. Thus she had commenced as she intended to continue, and, if need be, conclude; how *that* was may readily be ascertained, if not already supposed.

Amongst the early arrivals were Mrs. Toadyvell, a dark, wizened, little personage, arrayed in a pearl-grey satin and carelessly [206] hanging Brussels lace shawl, which latter, it was rumoured, must be indigenous to the wearer, as the one was never seen without the other, though it did ever appear as if casually placed upon the shoulders in the witchery of artless becomingness.

This lady's husband was an under-paid and subordinate official in the War Office, who had married relying on the boasts of the object of his preference, and, as may be imagined, was vehemently indignant upon awakening to his error. On the left hand side of the hostess, the bosom-friends, Miss Anastasia

Bogle — daughter of Bogle, the retired watch and clock maker, who had a shadowy idea of coming forward as a candidate for representation of the borough at the next election, but was, as yet, hardly decided upon the party interest that he should favour — and Miss Melancholia Lovelorn, two young ladies who were absorbed, heart and soul — the former perhaps *more* particularly — in all things connected with the rites and observances of sacerdotalism, rigidly eschewing card-playing, dancing, play-going, etc., etc., as nought else but vanity and vexation of spirit — so at [207] least they were taught, and so they implicitly and obediently believed, or pretended to do, which was just as well. To the right, the rector's wife, a lady who could wisely accommodate herself to any thing or any one, pliant as a reed, yet, when occasion demanded, inflexible as a Puritan, susceptible to opinions diametrically opposed, ever ready to lend a willing ear, and agree to all the 'whims and vagaries of her husband's flock; in short, the right person in the right place — and bearing a good name amongst her *lady* as well as gentlemen friends. What more *could* be said in her favour?

Mrs. Syxaneight, and Mrs. Esculapius Bottlewashe, the lawyer's and doctor's wives, each with a marriageable eldest daughter, who were wont to give utterance to unpleasant remarks concerning 'unpaid bills' when passing in the streets, but were now carrying on an endearing conversation if the epithets 'pet, darling, ducky, and love,' might be taken as a criterion, and the counteracting glances of envy and detestation which were cast underneath at one another were permitted to pass unobserved, likewise the whispered aside, 'Ma, just look! now *isn't* [208] she a fright?' — 'Did you *ever* see such a sight in all your life, ma?'

The fathers of these *extremely* youthful pair being engaged in somewhat similar occupation, suavely exchanging compliments, and at the same time each in his own mind disposing of the other as 'a bump-tious snob,' and 'a grovelling sneak,' individually and respectively. The Reverend Luke Gospelwarm was paying an enslaving attention to the dictates of Magnus Coffephull, the wealthy banker, and a great pillar of the Church, and the small group by the doorway consisted of three justices of the peace — brilliant luminaries and powerful potentates, these! one of whom, the chairman, was monopolizing time and talk, to the *seeming* edification of his patient hearers, and the Liberal-Conservative or Conservative-Liberal member for Angelbro', whom everybody had hoped much of, and whom everybody was woefully disappointed in, though *nobody* would have dreamed of giving expression to the mere shadow of such a fact before that gentleman's face, or even in that gentleman's presence, though his back might be turned their way.

[209] Fluttering about in butterfly fashion, in the vicinity of the ladies, were a trio of fair-haired, downy-chinned fledgling curates, conspicuous in their long buttoned-up coats amongst the rest of ordinary evening wear; many were the jealous eyes that followed each and every movement of these disciples of divinity, and many an anxious thought and sleepless night could be traced to either one of these sublime heart-breakers! In a corner apart sat one, who seemed to have nothing in common with the others; one, to judge from external symptoms, of studious habits and unsocial tendencies, who could derive more entertainment and enjoyment from the pages of deep philosophy and sound learning, than in mingling in the routine of polite society. A curious impression he conveyed to the beholder. That long, straggling flaxen-hair, ungenial yet courteous demeanour, and above all those ugly coloured spectacles, were beyond all doubt attractive in a manner; but upon further information, in response to numerous queries, that he was one Herr von Spielengetrickstermann, Professor; at one of the German Universities, all interest [210] collapsed — is not the length of a professor's purse proverbially

short? — and the news was communicated direct and instanter to all marriageable daughters or *protégées*, who were too well drilled to cast a second glance in that direction, thus accounting for the eccentric individual's solitude.

'Why doesn't your friend behave like a Christian, Mr. Wyndhurst? *is* he civilised? I scarcely imagine so?' loudly remarked Lady Diana Kairforknaut, fixing a gold eyeglass in the vacuum of the right eye, and turning her regards full and unblushingly upon the object of her speech. 'I never saw such a spectacle in my life! Gracious heavens! where *did* you pick the article up?' her ladyship continued, scanning the said 'article' from head to foot, and giving her opinion in a distinctly audible tone.

'Ha! ha! 'pon my word, you're funny, Lady Diana; so you don't admire my learned friend, eh?'

'Ad-mire him? Why he — he's a scarecrow! Where did you say you picked him up?' repeated her ladyship.

'Oh! he comes from — from — some unpronounceable place in the Fatherland, I [211] suppose; but he's a clever fellow, I can assure you, and a downright good one, too! He's a little bit odd, but you must agree with me, Lady Diana, originality is delightful nowadays! We all seem to have settled down into one groove; people in each set all wear the same type of expression, all smirk and smile when it is desirable to do so, and look horror-stricken when the stringent commands of society compel — all say the same things, in varied phraseology perhaps, yet meaning one and the same always. We dress alike, go through the same routine of existence, and woe betide anybody who dares to deviate from the beaten track for a broader and better! It makes a fellow bored, and half inclined to do something desperately wicked to shock the narrow-minded bigots! Heigho!' and Evelyn Wyndhurst put on the air of one terribly *blasé*.

'You are right, I agree with you, Mr. Wyndhurst — for the last sev — hem! three years I have done my share in endeavouring to bring about a revolution — what is the result? Look at those immaculate pieces of youth and innocence, all blushes and smiles, [212] and made up of sweet nothings and terms of endearment, yet at heart hating one another, and jealous lest the other should receive a larger share of attention than herself — *they* are a type of the future mothers of England! What *can* we expect from such? Men are deceived if a girl be but dressed out in the "simplicity" of muslin pure and spotless! *They* think those downcast eyelids are due to inherent modesty, unblemished by contact with the world! that low, faltering voice, and simper part and parcel of youth and maidenhood! that light fawn-like grace unstudied! that abundance of rippling hair as nature made it, and those occasional worldly — wise thrusts but attributable to *naïveté*! Poor simpletons! they little know or think of the training that each must of necessity undergo by mother or *chaperone*, ere she can be transformed from a crude and uninteresting hoyden into an accomplished and able specimen of drawing-room angler, with attractive and well-poised bait.'

'Ha! ha! you are hard, Lady Diana — awfully hard upon us,' began Mr. Wyndhurst, taking a survey of his companion, [213] and not feeling quite sure whether after all the shams were not preferable to the semi-masculine and wholly unbecoming mode of attire which the Lady Diana Kairforknaut — who, *en passant*, was decidedly *passé* — was pleased to adopt and offer as an example.

'Yes, hard, but not *too* hard; facts are *always* hard; unpleasantly so sometimes. *Apropos*, is it a fact that you are already a victim to the *grande passion*, Mr. Wyndhurst? Melancholia Lovelorn is looking spi-

tefully enough at me to warrant it; surely you are not going to — to — marry *that* shallow-brained parson-huntress! Why, she has set her cap at half a-dozen curates that *I* know of, but all to no purpose; even young Noodlekins wouldn't say snap to her snip, and *he* had to be given up at last — his mother did it, so they say. Well for him he had a mother more sensible than himself, or — —'

'Mr., Mrs. and Miss Slinkensmirk,' announced a stentorian voice, emanating from the possessor of a pair of prodigious calves encased in silk hose.

'*Who? who?*' ejaculated Lady Diana, seizing her huge eye-glass and putting it into [214] immediate use. 'Gracious powers! *who* next? what *will* that aunt of yours do next, Mr. Wyndhurst?'

'Ha-ha! how can *I* say, Lady Diana? There's no accounting for the vagaries of the sex — hem!' answered Evelyn Wyndhurst, stroking his dark moustache and stealing an underneath glance at his philosophical friend, the German professor, who had permitted his book to drop with a thud upon the floor, and was sitting gazing abstractedly beneath his coloured spectacles. 'But what so *very* awful has occurred just now, that should engender such a display of genuine astonishment?' he pursued.

'*As-tonishment!* say rather, *horror*, Mr. Wyndhurst! yes, *horror!*' emphatically repeated her ladyship, her sense of sight only having served to confirm what she had hoped was nought but a delusion of hearing.

'Really, Lady Diana, I must appear excessively dull, but I don't quite understand, I *must* beg for an explanation.'

'Ah! I forgot, Mr. Wyndhurst, you are a fresh-comer in the town, therefore are not as yet initiated into who is [215] who. Will you — *can* you believe me when I tell that — that *man* is Slinkensmirk, the brewer? and those — those *persons* the wife and daughter of — the brewer? There now, does not *that* justify my amazement — my *horror*? Credit it or *not*, it is — a fact, Mr. Wyndhurst.'

'Pardon me, I can, I *do* believe it — who *could* doubt the fair Lady Diana? Hem! hem! but — for my own part — I don't see anything so appalling or horrifying about the gentlemen or ladies either — rather the reverse, by Jove! with the young one — and, as we were talking about deviating from the old track, I fancy my respected aunt must have forestalled me by adding such an acquisition to her circle of friends — confoundedly graceful, by Jupiter!'

The last was added in an audible *sotto voce*, and the fair hearer looked down upon her undress of blue serge, made in walking length and fashion, and winced again.

'True, Mr. Wyndhurst, but don't you think your aunt has — has stepped beyond *all* bounds this time — just a little bit, perhaps?'

'Not at all! a pretty girl like Miss — Miss [216] what's her name? — is *always* acceptable. By- the-bye, do you know her, Lady Diana? I shall be uncommonly grateful for an introduction.'

'No, indeed! You must go to your aunt if you want *that*,' responded her ladyship, growing rather red in the face and feeling intensely nettled.

'Ah! here's your admirer, Prettyman, with a bouquet, I declare! I have an abhorrence of being *de trop*, so *au revoir* Lady Diana — I'll take your advice about the introduction;' and with this the handsome Evelyn Wyndhurst, who had lately come into possession of a tolerable fortune and was heir to an

extensive estate in Ceylon, walked off, vacating his seat for a young curate, who lived and fascinated under the name of Edwin Prettyman, and who, as his lady acquaintances declared, was ‘a perfect duck.’

‘Good — good evening, Lady Di — Diana; he! he! I — I’ve brought the fl—flowers! You said you — you adored fl — flowers; he! he! Will — will you ac — cept th — these?’

‘Put them down,’ curtly replied her ladyship.

[217] ‘Ye — yes — it — it’s hot — very hot; isn’t it, Lady Di — Diana?’

‘No,’ was the laconic answer.

‘No; I — I don’t mean that — it — its vul — vulgar — I mean it’s warm; now isn’t it, La — Lady Diana?’

‘Yes. No. I don’t know. What are you talking about?’

‘I — I said it was — it is hot — no, not — not — warm — I ——’

‘Hold your tongue, man, *do*. He has asked her to go into the conservatory, I declare!’ interposed Lady Diana Kairforknaut, speaking her thoughts aloud.

‘Who — who has asked — who, where, Lady Di — Diana? the conservatory, shall we — would you mi — mind ——’

‘Yes, let us go, Mr. Prettyman; I — I should enjoy it *so* much.’

Perhaps it was not the words so much as the *look* that accompanied them that caused the curate to alight on his feet, seize the ungloved hand and press it tenderly as he placed it within his arm, exclaiming, in his exuberance:

[218] ‘Would you, though, *really*, Lady Diana? well, I never; he! he! — ha! ha!’

Meanwhile, Mr. Evelyn Wyndhurst had been successful in obtaining the desired introduction, and, finding that his distant view had been correct in giving the palm to Miss Theodocia Slinkensmirk, as being the prettiest girl in the rooms, if not for other reasons, he had suggested that they should adjourn to the less-crowded conservatory and enjoy an undisturbed *tête-à-tête* amongst the cool surroundings of the choice collection of plants and exotics.

After a brief and befitting reluctance, numerous preventatives from the enemy ‘cold,’ in the shape of becoming little additions to the toilette, bestowed by the thoughtful hand of an adoring mamma, who took the opportunity to whisper into her daughter’s ear:

‘It’s the nephew — heir to no end of estates and property — encourage him; he’s the *only* man in the room,’ and an undertone of supplication from the eligible *parti* that was gratifying in extremis, when it is considered that all the women, married and [219] *unmarried*, were posing and scheming for *him*, Miss Slinkensmirk, arrayed in a soft, creamy cashmere, with a solitary damask rose embedded in her masses of glossy dark hair, and with a satisfied sparkle in her large, limpid blue eye, traversed the spacious drawing-room on the arm of the hostess’ nephew, Mr. Evelyn Wyndhurst.

Everybody paused in conversation to ask the *one* question, ‘*Who* is she?’ and an expression of anything but vexation hovered over the countenance of the Hon. Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall as she responded:

‘Miss Slinkensmirk; that is her papa over there in the white waistcoat, talking to Herr von Spielengetrickstermann.’

‘What? that — that *gentleman* with the — the ill-fitting gloves and — and — *new* patent leathers?’ asked Mrs. Shoddydew, of mysterious origin.

‘Yes, that is he; and that lady in the sea-green satin and Valenciennes lace is ——’

‘Surely not the — the brewer’s *wife*?’ put in Miss Anastacia Bogle, of watch and clock paternity.

‘Yes, Miss Bogle; husbands were not so [220] scarce in *those* days,’ replied Mrs. Toadyvell, clearly perceiving how matters stood with the hostess.

‘What a relief to get out of that stifling atmosphere, is it not, Miss Slinkensmirk? This is a comfortable seat, I *know*; let me offer it to you. Thanks, I’ll sit here, if you’ll allow me. Now for a quiet chat. I detest conventionalisms, and was feeling awfully bored when you came in. It’s more than human nature can stand to have to do the agreeable to a bevy of uninteresting old maids for a whole evening. By-the-bye, are there no pretty young girls in Anglebro’, saving present company, of *course*, or is it that my aunt has ransacked the town to gather together the least attractive? If the Fates hadn’t sent *you*, Miss Slinkensmirk, I should have committed suicide or — or — beat a retreat and indulged in the consolation of a cigar.’

‘Oh! Mr. Wyndhurst!’

‘I should, indeed; and the proper verdict to return would have been, “No wonder.” You are fond of flowers, I am sure, Miss Slinkensmirk; what a richly-tinted rose, and [221] how well it becomes the complexion of the wearer! Ah! how many hearts you will make heavy to-night!’

So saying, Mr. Evelyn Wyndhurst sighed, casting down his fine dark eyes, and his companion thought:

‘This is good for a beginning! he is smitten already.’

For half a minute neither spoke; then Theodocia, as though suddenly recollecting, broke the silence by observing:

‘Mr. Wyndhurst, tell me *now* — do tell me now.’

‘Tell you — what?’ in a tone of matter-of-fact inquiry.

‘What? what you said you would.’

‘Oh! ah! hum! yes, certainly. Well, have I not told you, Miss Slinkensmirk?’ said Evelyn Wyndhurst, drawing his low stool a trifle nearer.

‘No! you — you haven’t — *yet*,’ responded Miss Theodocia Slinkensmirk picking to pieces a corner of her lace handkerchief, and lowering her head so that her features appeared to great advantage as a model for a Grecian statue, and the light being shaded [222] from her pretty blue eyes caused them to be of double depth and darkness.

‘Well — I don’t mind; perhaps you would like it repeated, eh? — hem!’

‘I — don’t — know,’ artlessly perhaps, at any rate very engagingly, the answer was pronounced in a subdued manner.

‘Well, it’s simply this’ (coming closer): ‘you are an *uncommonly* pretty girl, Miss Slinkensmirk’ — then, placing a hand upon her kid glove, ‘an *uncommonly* pretty girl and —hang it all! Lady Diana!’ A form had emerged from behind a tall clematis plant, and a face, dark and vengeful, peered down

upon the speaker through the moonbeams. In a moment his stool was pushed back, overturning a stand of flower-pots and engendering a muttered anathema from the clumsy perpetrator. 'Ah! Lady Diana! you are wise to come out into the cool — terrifically hot inside! romantic view, is it not, Prettyman? You've chosen the finest point over there, lucky man! Yes, Miss Slinkensmirk, she is indeed, as you say, an uncommonly pretty girl.'

'Mr. Wyndhurst? I — I — never said ——'

[223] 'Yes, yes, decidedly, just so. Ta-ta, Lady Diana! wish you luck, Prettyman, old fellow!' Then aside: 'Good riddance! Now, Miss Slinkensmirk, I must apologise; there *are* times, you know, when, a — a fellow — you saw her ladyship's face? Certainly, that is sufficient! bad job, can't be helped — title, fortune, decentish kind of girl, but — not *pretty*, Miss Slinkensmirk. *What* did you say your name is? ah, Theodocia? exquisite name! *sweet* name! Will you — will you accept this sprig of stephanotis, Miss — Miss Theodocia? and — and — keep it — keep it always — for *my* sake?'

'What *will* ma say to this, I wonder? Stammering — a sure sign, and stephanotis, for *his* sake, already! Orange blossoms will be next, if I am not mistaken!' contemplated Miss Slinkensmirk, receiving the flowers with a low-toned acquiescence, and arranging them in her bosom.

"How your papa and mamma must idolize you! and your brother — have you a brother, Miss Slin — Miss Theodocia?"

'Yes. I have *one* brother — a dear, darling little creature — Oh! *such* a love, Mr. [224] Wyndhurst! said the young lady just awakening to the charms of Master Benedictus Methusaleh.

'He *must* be! he *must* be,' agreed Evelyn Wyndhurst in a pathetic voice; then, continuing, 'I have neither brother nor sister — have *you* a sister, Theodocia? Hem! hem! beg pardon, Miss—Miss ——'

'Never mind for *once*. I accept your apology, and you — may call me by my Christian name, if — if — you prefer it. I do, though, as dear pa says, we *ought* to be proud of our surname, seeing that we are descendants of the renowned Schlinkenschmirk who came over with the Conqueror.'

'*In*-deed! You astonish me! you ought to be proud *in-deed!*' (Then aside, beneath his breath: 'Who the deuce was he?') You have no sister, then? poor sister!

'No, that is, yes; you misunderstand me. I *have* a sister, but ——'

'But — she is not Miss Theodocia! No, of course! there can be only *one* Miss Theodocia; *her* name is ——'

'Philomela.'

'Ah! and has she too the beauty of a [225] goddess, the grace of a nymph, the charms of a syren, the—the ——'

'Hush! some one may hear you — there are voices.'

'And for *my* part I don't consider her so pretty, do you, dear?' says the first voice.

'No, indeed! not a vestige of beauty about her! though she's *vain* enough, stuck-up creature! decked out in such elegance — most unbecoming, *I* think! Ma says pure white muslin is best suited for innocent young girls, when they are *pretty* of course, May' (with a cutting glance at her companion), 'and I *know*

the *men* admire sympathy,' replies the second voice assertively, in a tone of peevish fretfulness and conceit combined.

'Yes, *that* they do, and — and it's better to please the men than annoy the woman after all, isn't it, pet?'

'Why, you silly darling, don't you know that when you please the men you are aggravating the women at the same time? But fancy old Despotiums having *them* at her house! I call it downright disgusting! [226] Ma almost fainted away in old Major Oldentuff's arms, when *they* stalked into the room! What does *your* ma think of it, May?'

'Oh! she's shocked; *awfully* shocked! she says she felt her heart turn right over, and it made her feel quite sick! she has forbidden *me* to strike up any sort of acquaintance with the girl — we should lose *caste*, you know, ducky.'

'Of course we should, and perfectly right, too, if we stooped so low as a brewer's daughter. Our papas may meet her *father* and — and say "good-day," or even "how do ye do," but *we* are different, ma says — she ——'

'S — sh! little pitchers! she's there — through those plants with — with — a gentleman; how shocking!'

'Not — the nephew, sure-*ly*! Gracious goodness! it *is* though — the deceitful cat! the audacious monkey! the double-faced serpent! He's the *only* man in the room. What shall we do, May? — play evesdropper? It's unlike me, but ——'

[227] 'Hold your silly tongue! Listen, they can't see us here — don't make a noise.'

So saying two immaculate clouds of spotless muslin crouched down where they could not be perceived, and maintained a breathless silence, so absorbed were they in what did not concern them.

'No, she — she is not *pretty*, not at all *pretty*, Mr. Wyndhurst — poor dear Philomela, nobody admires *her*, nor — nor falls in love with *her*.' This last sounded very much *like* a slip that would fain have been glossed over, for the speaker bent low her head, and stammering confusedly, continued very rapidly: 'She is very, very young — her education is scarcely completed yet. Ma will not allow anything to interfere with our studies, and dear pa will *insist* upon our being highly accomplished — suited for *any* station in society, he says, and — I — I — think he is right, don't *you*, Mr. Wyndhurst?'

'Certainly, Miss Slinkensmirk, especially when *one* at least of the daughters is so — so charming I' saying which, Mr. Evelyn Wyndhurst possessed himself of a gloved hand and [228] pressed it passionately to his lips. 'Ten thousand pardons if — if — I have taken a liberty,' — the hand was pulled abruptly away *after* it had received the pressure and kisses. 'I have been abroad — in Germany — and have caught their national custom, I suppose. You are not angry, Miss Theodocia? Tell me, you are not *angry*? and as he spoke he leaned forward so that his companion felt his warm breath fan her hair.

'No! No! I am not angry *this* time, but you mustn't do it again, Mr. Wyndhurst — at least, without my permission,' she added eagerly.

'Decidedly *not*! Oh! what a happy man you have made me this evening, Miss Slinkensmirk, and — we shall understand one another from now, I fancy, eh? — be friends, firm and true, eh?' Mr. Evelyn Wyndhurst had an exceedingly persuasive manner naturally — he was aware of it, and had cultivated it until it was, as most ladies inwardly confessed, 'simply irresistible.' Was Miss Theodocia Slinkensmirk

inclining to the same belief? It certainly appeared so, by the style of the whispered rejoinder. If that [229] was but a piece of acting, what a fortune was bound up in the personality of the brewer's daughter! 'Friends? friends? what *is* friendship, Miss Theodocia? friendship such as *ours* is to be, I mean? Can you interpret that word?'

'Friendship? — such as ours, Mr. Wyndhurst? Why not say friendship in the general acceptance of the term — its common signification — intimacy based on mutual esteem — respect and — and regard — sympathy between two individualised souls — calm, equable, and imperishing affection — the magnetic link that binds together our *inner* selves — the *one* thing that remains true when all else proves selfish and false?'

Theodocia Slinkensmirk *did* look beautiful, more beautiful than ever she had done in her life before; the warmth of giving free utterance to this new feeling that obsessed her had imparted a brilliancy to her whole countenance and illumined her features with an unusual *spirituelle* light. Was this her real nature, and the common every-day one but a sham — a coarse and grosser covering? [230] or was *this* the false, and the other the real? Perhaps she herself could not have said just then.

'Ah! how different you are from the majority of your sex! how different, Miss Theodocia! What a glorious nature *yours* must be! tender, kind, sublimely true! Most of the women one meets nowadays are worldly, shallow, unspiritual, *unloveable*, soulless — ah! yes, that is it, surely! Soulless! Do you recollect Byron's description of his "Leila"? *You* remind me of her, "Soul breathes forth in every glance." Don't pick that rosebud to pieces; give it to me as it is, please — ah!' and Evelyn Wyndhurst took the bud, and with it the hand which he pressed in both his own, bending low, so as to gaze deep into a pair of downcast eyes that stole furtive glances from out the long sweeping lashes. 'Confound it! another interruption!' This was uttered below his breath, and the speaker flung himself back in his seat and clasped his hands behind his head in an easy, nonchalant attitude, while the following colloquy took place at a short distance.

[231] 'She has done *her* best, at any rate! *She* is not to blame if he doesn't come to the point! That unfeminine disregard of the proprieties is a ruse, and nothing more nor less! a piece of artifice to blind the men! I see through it, my lady! we *women* are not such fools!'

'But do you really think he *will* give in, Anastasia?'

'Well, my dear, there's the title, and — a *tolerable* fortune with it, you see, and to a poor curate ——'

'Yes, ye — es, certainly, but — Edwin is such a — a *sweet* man! How well he read last Sunday! such charming *style*! and — and — *exquisitely* white, ringed hands! — any woman might be proud of *him*.'

'What I do you mean to say — surely *you*, are not foolish enough to give a thought to him, Mellie?'

'Oh no! oh! dear no! *You* were the favourite at last month's meeting, dear, when — when — Lady Diana was away — ah!'

'Do you *think* so, dear? ha-ha! perhaps there *is* a degree of truth in what you say, pet; but as for her ladyship being present or [232] — or a thousand miles away, I — I don't see that *that* should signify. By-the-bye, how vixenish old Toadyvell is to-night! — not received her quarterly, I imagine! What is your opinion of the nephew, Mellie? good-looking, isn't he? *ra*-ther! indisputable expectations, and

— of a very decent stock — whom will he chose, do you suppose? One of us girls in Anglebro’ — he *ought* to, at least — such must be old Begum’s intention in having him here.’

‘Ye — es, he seems to have been taken with the Slinkensmirk girl ——’

‘Horrors! what *are* you talking about! His aunt would never sanction *that!* A brewer’s daughter! a low-born, ill-bred creature with nothing but—but ——’

‘Beauty, dear; but beauty goes a long way with *some* men, Anastasia.’

‘Yes, but even *beauty* does not always win the game, Miss Lovelorn! Hark! what is that? I fancied I heard some one speak! *She*, I declare, and—and ——’

‘The nephew himself; let us stand here in this out-of-the-way corner and — listen — hah! if there isn’t Edwin and — and — that Lady [233] Diana *again!* He has got hold of her hand, I *believe!* Hush! he’s saying something!’

‘*What* were they talking about, Mr. Wyndhurst? I fancied it must have been *you*, was I mistaken?’ interrogated Miss Slinkensmirk with a well-executed attempt at innocence.

‘Idle gossip! vain, empty nothings, Miss Theodocia, which I detest most of *anything* in a woman! Perhaps I should not be so hard upon them, poor things! they are verging on the sear and yellow leaf! it must be shockingly distressing for a woman to be left out in the cold! passed over and ticketed “not wanted!” I rather imagine they deserve our pity; what say *you*, Miss Theodocia?’

Miss Theodocia laughed and toyed nervously with her fan, then shivered as though she felt a draught.

‘You are chilly — shall we go in?’ asked Evelyn Wyndhurst kindly and thoughtfully.

‘Oh no! not cold! only a slight draught; my shawl ——’

‘Allow me, please.’

‘Ah! thanks, thanks *very* much, Mr. [234] Wyndhurst, how attentive you are! you must be accustomed to the society of ladies — *a* lady perhaps?’ pursued Miss Theodocia Slinkensmirk, bestowing one of her most captivating glances upon her companion.

‘Hum! by Jove! there’s my friend Spielengetricksternmann! Have you had an introduction? — he’s a capital fellow! first-rate company! I’ll call him ! *Hi! hier! mein Freund*, come this way, old fellow. He speaks English *well*, you’ll find. Herr Von Spielengetricksternmann, Miss Slinkensmirk. You can take my seat, old boy, my worthy aunt may be looking after me. *Au revoir*, Miss Theodocia. *Prends garde, mon ami,*’ and Mr. Evelyn Wyndhurst turned, to find himself face to face with the ‘inseparables’ — May Bloomingshy and Lily Simplicity.

The sensations of Miss Slinkensmirk can be better imagined (especially by our lady readers) than described; however, this — this — *individual* was *his* friend, and as *such* must be treated, but — what an odd specimen! what a curious spectacle! what — what a *guy!* Theodocia — pensive, genteel Theodocia — would have been inclined to laugh heartily, [235] had she not been so annoyed — or, as she inwardly expressed it, ‘sold.’ She verily believed it took him — this ridiculous German — full five minutes to be seated — then, what on earth *could* she find by way of conversation?

‘Hem-hem! Mr. — Mr. — you are fond of reading?’ — upon perceiving a much-worn volume under his arm, she thought she might venture on this topic.

'*Ja — ja — sehr gut* — I lofe veil de — de — philosophies — de grand, sublime truths — de nature — de uniferse — de vonderful vorks — de — de intensities — de might — de power — de mind — de great von vill.'

'So do I, yet people will not agree with us, Mr. — hem! people are — are —'

'Tirty! low! File! dey not understand! *Nein! Nein!* mean togs! noting more, *Fräulein*. You lofe de philosophies?'

'Yes — oh, yes!' rapturously responded Miss Theodocia, who had no more idea of what her interlocutor was meaning than if he had been talking Sanscrit.

'*Ach! gut — sehr gut!* you take dis, and read so much — *ein, zwei, drei, vier, funf, sechs*, [236] *sieben* — sefen chap-teer — ex-cellent! deep! tough! profound!'

'But — I could not — *could* not think of depriving you of your book, Mr. — Mr. — hem-hem!'

'*Gott in Himmel!* take it, I have more — ten folume. You vill read and learn all de — de — philosophies! de natures! de von-ders! de grand, big truths! de creation! de intensities! de vorks! de macrocosm! de power! de magnetism! de — de cosmogony!'

'Good *gracious!* what an intolerable bore! what excuse *can* I make?' contemplated Miss Slinkensmirk, wondering by whom the nephew was now monopolised, and neither feeling charitably nor comfortably disposed.

'Hem! but I think — I *fear* I — I am not clever enough to —'

'Not at all! You shall learn — learn much and I — I will teach you *Fräulein*. You lofe veil the philosophies.'

'I detest a *fool!*' muttered Miss Theodocia between her set teeth. 'Here are some more apt pupils for you than I, coming this way — who are they, do you know, Mr.—?' she continued eagerly, to change the conversation.

[237] 'Dat I know not! dey big, tick-beaded Englishmans!'

'Hush! they may hear you! What are they saying?' interrupted the young lady, bending an ear to catch what was being spoken.

'Egad! what a pretty girl! where the deuce has she got to? the little rascal, to hide herself in this manner! I've been all round the grounds, followed by the infernal Toadyvell — that woman is my *bête-noire!* I wish her husband would shut her up in an asylum! he'd be a veritable philanthropist, I declare! Daughter of old Slinkensmirk, the brewer, eh, captain? who would believe it? there's more refinement and grace in her than in any other woman in the room; have you had an introduction yet?'

'No, worse luck! I've been bored to desperation with the Bogle all the evening — even Lady Diana, with all her coarseness, is better than *her!* Why will the old girl *persist* in having such a set of females at her house, major? God knows there are *some* bearable women in the world! pretty ones, too!'

[238] 'For the simple reason that *noblesse oblige*; moreover, it excludes, what we men desire, as inferior, and therefore forbidden fruit. They little think they are bringing a rod to their own backs, these ladies of the *haut-monde* — driving husbands and sons to the society of —'

'The more *genuine* article, at any rate,' put in the other with a laugh.

‘You’re right, captain. We look for what we get from *them*, and *they* give what is expected of them — a mutual barter — but — these *others* — bah! Capital Havanna, this of yours, St. Leger! Let us take a stroll outside; you’re as sick as I, no doubt, of the company to-night. There she is, by *Jingo!* talking to old Sauerkraut. Give her the tip; she’ll take it, I’ll lay a wager ! There’s stamina in *her* — only wants drawing out. How disconsolate Prettyman is looking, picking that bouquet to pieces in the comer! Where’s Lady Diana? Ah! there she is — at young Wyndhurst again! By-the-bye, where has he been most of the evening?’

‘Not knowing, can’t say, major; favouring [239] innocence in muslin, likely enough; he’s only a ——.’

‘Not *he!* he’s beyond *that*, at any rate! A quarter of an hour at *that* is dose sufficient for any man between five-and-twenty and forty — after *that*, it may be invigorating — who knows?’

‘Neither you nor I, Oldentuff, of a certainty,’ answered the captain, with a significant laugh; then adding, ‘By Jupiter! she has given him the slip! neatly done, I’ll be bound! Now for it!’

‘Take care, captain, she’s a beauty, but — don’t get entangled. These *canaille* are up to snuff, and *have* a fellow before he knows he’s himself!’

‘Ha! ha! ha! never fear, major! I’ve not got so much to lose!’

‘Caste! put in the other.’

‘Pshaw! what *is* caste?’

‘Don’t be democratic, for heaven’s sake, captain, and — don’t monopolise her for the rest of the evening, there’s a good fellow!’

‘Right you are! Meanwhile, you keep an eye on — on — *her* for me! I can’t *afford* to lose Cousin Clara, or — or — goodness knows [240] I would willingly cast her and her thirty thousand off!’

‘Ha-ha! poor St. Leger! how he hates to be obliged to do a mean thing! — a *mean* thing *he* calls it! a common every-day thing *I* call it! Do not most of us rebel at first, and after all are forced to give in — to do as *others* do! Such is life; if *motives* instead of actions themselves were to be exposed to view, would there be any marrying and giving in marriage? Heigho! Now for another spell with the ladies!’ and so soliloquizing, Major Oldentuff threw away the end of his cigar and re-entered the drawing-room.

Signorita Scratchinini was singing. This lady was a professional — the best the town could produce: not that she was a native, or even a resident, but merely a temporary inhabitant belonging to that class of itinerants who infest provincial resorts during the summer season. Mr. Clement Noodlekins — curate and adorer of the fine arts — was stationed at her side, in literally open-mouthed entrancement. Mrs. Justinus Braggart — wife of one of the ‘great unpaid’ — who was considered the most finished amateur vocalist [241] in Anglebro’, was criticising the performance in loud tones, that all could hear, to her neighbour, Mrs. Luke Gospelwarm, the rector’s obliging spouse. Septimus Slinkensmirk had got up a vehement discussion with Sir Benjamin Broadacres, extensive landowner and gentleman-farmer, on the forthcoming rise in hops, while Mrs. Septimus Slinkensmirk was vainly endeavouring to open a *tête-à-tête* upon the correct method of training youth — young girls in particular — with the lady on her right, which lady, being none other than Mrs. Magnus Coffephull, appeared neither to appreciate nor desirous to enter into conversation, by the way in which she withdrew her garments from all contact with those of the persevering and loquacious brewer’s wife, finally turning her back

deliberately upon her left-hand supporter to inquire feelingly after the health of Mrs. Oldentuff of the major — being in a state of doubt and anxiety as to whether there was a Mrs. Oldentuff or no. Mrs. Toddylove-Tippler, on the settee in the centre, wife of another distinguished J.P., was airing her views demonstratively and emphatically upon [242] the working-class-question to the wife of their parliamentary representative — that gentleman himself now listening patiently and attentively to the senseless twaddle of his neighbour, Mrs. Simplicity, who held an idea that a clause might be added to the mistress and servants act, relative to the doing away of holidays once a month — *unless* convenient.

The unsuccessful Tory candidate, who gloried in the name of Colonel Reginald Adolphus Fitz Eustace Patrician-Blueblood, was stuttering anathemas prefaced with startling adjectives against radicals, and their — isms in a comer to nobody in particular, but everybody in general who ‘had the sense to listen and profit thereby,’ while his late antagonist, equally unsuccessful, one Bumptious Bulbyboys, was holding forth in a similar strain, yet very opposite meaning, having for *his* text, ‘One man his has good has hanother, hand bett — ter! hequality hin *hall* things his *my* maxim. Boom for your lordship hefe — not at hall! hat your commands, my lord — a draught? hah ! so there his! the screen a leetle farther this way — now feel it, your lordship?’

[243] In the course of the evening the professor had grown more sociable, and was in earnest conversation first with Miss Melancholia Lovelorn (who, *par parenthesis*, was reveling in the hope of causing a twinge of jealousy, and did not fail to keep two-thirds of an eye upon a certain curate seated beside a certain lady); then with the muslin-skirted young ladies who stood each with an arm round the other’s waist, and had a bewitching habit of exclaiming, ‘Oh!’ and hiding their faces behind a cascade of curls — *natural*, of course; then with the doctor’s *larger* half, who, by the way, was but imperfectly acquainted with the customary veneering of education, having been bred and reared upon the moors; then with Lady Diana Kairforknaut, who had been compelled to renounce Mr. Evelyn Wyndhurst upon some trifling excuse of his own; and, in short, with every lady successively in the drawing-rooms at The Manor. At twelve o’clock carriage after carriage was announced, and the guests took their departure, each contributing his or her testimony to having spent ‘a most enjoyable evening,’ which was received by the hostess [244] with the conventional smile and accepted as a compliment — at least, so it appeared from *outward* indications — and, to judge from *external* semblances, there lingered not a sigh of regret nor shadow of disappointment in the mind or *heart* of a single individual. Such happy, satisfied, cheerful faces, expressive of naught but mutual affection and contentment, were they that nodded a parting adieu, after having exchanged the stereotyped good wishes, hopes of meeting again *soon*, etcetera. And this is human nature as exemplified in polite and cultured provincial society.

PART II.

IV.

[245] HA! ha! *hah!* me babes!’ laughed Septimus Slinkensmirk the morning after the successful visit to The Manor, rubbing his hands and exposing a wide range of ivory. ‘A bouquet — of flowers — for Miss — Theodocia Slinkensmirk — ha! ha! — well! well! — capital! *cap* — ital! wonderful girl is our Theodocia! a Slinkensmirk, every inch and atom of her!’ After which satisfactory declaration, he closed both eyes for the space of thirty seconds to indulge in inward meditation, then, re-opening them with a cunning twinkle and a knowing shake of the head: ‘We know who they have come from! [246] haw!

haw! *we* know, Philomela and Benedictus, me chicks, me fledgling bantams — *we* know who they have come from! hah! hah! capital! *cap* — ital!

‘Who sent ’em, governor?’ interrogated Master Slinkensmirk, temporarily relinquishing his entertaining pastime of ‘bagging’ the cat’s head to put the question.

‘Haw! *haw!* *we* know, me son, *we* know.’

‘If you don’t tell us, I won’t tell what *I* know about ’em — there! and I know more than you, for I saw the fellow that brought ’em, and heard what he said when he give ’em to Soosan,’ enticingly interposed Benedictus Methusaleh.

‘Eh? hum — eh? *what’s* that, me gem, me priceless jewel?’

‘Yurrr! you’d like to know now, wouldn’t you just? and I’d tell, if *she* hadn’t been such a greedy pig and taken that bit of hot buttered toast that *I* wanted at breakfast.’

‘I didn’t know you wanted it, Benny. I thought I asked you first — I meant to do so,’ put in a voice from one upon whose lap was built up a tower of undarned stockings of divers descriptions and sizes, fresh from ‘the [247] wash,’ and whose left arm was encased in one of blue worsted manufacture, which was much mutilated about the heel.

‘Ga — arn! did you, pig? don’t believe it! Never mind, that don’t make any difference — them flowers *ain’t* for Do — they’re for *her*, and I’m jolly glad, though she *is* a pig.’

‘For *me!*’ ejaculated Philomela in amazement, and dropping her work, thereby losing the needle.

‘For *Philomela!*’ exclaimed Papa Slinkensmirk incredulously.

‘Yes, for Phil — *Philomela*, as you call her,’ repeated Master Benedictus, pinching the cat’s tail with the tongs, and laughing heartily at the effect.

‘But, *Ben* — ny, how, why, *what* makes you say so?’ inquired his sister, the blood rushing into her pale cheeks and dyeing them a rich crimson, while her eyes sparkled with hope through the tears that suffused them.

‘Hah! *yah*, Miss Inquisitive, I didn’t mean to let you know, for your gluttony! but *she* flew out of her room and pulled my ear this morning because I — played her a trick, the [248] brute! so I’ll just tell you. I was in the garden, shan’t say what doing, when the chap brought ’em — a cad in buttons.’

‘Hum! The Manor, of a certainty I go on, me treasure.’

‘Hold your row then, father, or I *won’t*. Well! I was in the garden when the cad brought ’em, and I saw him give ’em to Soosan — I came a bit closer, ’cos, thinks I, it’s a follower, and followers ain’t allowed on these here pre-*mises*. Says he, “Give ’em to Miss Philomela Slinkensmirk.”’

“Miss Slinkensmirk you mean,’ says Soosan.

“Miss Philomela Slink —,” yes, “Slink,” says he.

“All right; I know it’s Miss *Theodocia*, of course,” says Soosan ag’in.

“No,” says he with the buttons; “not *her* — Miss *Philomela*, the younger sister, I was told.”

“Lor’ bless you!” says Soosan; “it’s as much as my place is worth! I dursn’t! you don’t know our missus.”

‘Yes, she says *that*, our Soosan did, and I [249] almost split with laughter; but I kep’ it in, for that would have spoilt *all*.

“Well,” says the cove in livery, “them was *my* orders, and I had ’em well drilled into me, the Lord knows! and mind it won’t be *my* fault if my master kicks up a shindy. They’re for Miss — Philomela — Slinkensmirk,” and he was going off then in a bit of a huff, when Soosan calls him back, and what do you think she says? why, she says:

“Do you git out on Sundays?”

‘I put one eye out to have a look at the bloke, and oh, my! wasn’t there a comical coon over the way? not comical at all, oh dear no! didn’t he just have four eyes, and two of them green goggles!’

‘Well! well! but about the flowers — there must be some — some mistake,’ suggested Septimus Slinkensmirk.

‘Call me a lie, that’s right, governor! say it’s a lie! — it *ain’t*, though. *She* believes it! See how red *she’s* got! We ain’t going to have any chaps come a sneaking after *you*, Cinderella; *you’re* too useful. Don’t sit gaping there, lazy — get on with my leggings. Fine hole there!’

[250] And Master Benedictus Methusaleh Slinkensmirk thrust both fists into his pockets and began to whistle ‘Yankee Doodle,’ going through a parody on the hornpipe for his sister’s delectation, with aggravating leers and hideous grimaces, in close juxtaposition to her face.

‘But, Benedictus, me bird, me starling — Benedictus,’ commenced the happy father, whilst gently stroking the nap of his silk hat prior to setting out on his daily routine.

‘Well, what’s amiss, old man? — anything gone wrong?’

‘No, the Lord be thanked, nothing amiss; but are you — are you — may not you have been mis—mis ——’

‘No! thundered the hopeful son. ‘I *ain’t* mistaken — I heard it as plain as — as — I was priggling the magnum-bonums, if you *must* know, and they ain’t a stone’s throw ——’

‘Certainly! *certainly!* no offence; I understand — I understand perfectly, me prodigy, *perfectly*. It’s a mystery that — I — cannot — solve. We must leave it, Benedictus, leave it to the women-folks. [251] Good-day, Philomela. Good-day, Benedictus. *Good-day*, me babes.’

Papa Slinkensmirk was about to make his exit, but he was detained by his daughter, who left her pile of unfinished stockings upon the floor, and hastened across the room.

‘Father, may I speak a few words to you? I will not keep you long; in the library, please,” she added.

And ere the reply could come, she had placed her hand through her father’s arm and was leading him into the adjoining apartment, taking pains to close the door upon them after their entrance.

‘Of course you are aware of my meaning, father? You have not forgotten what — what I spoke to you about last week?’

‘Yes — yes. I do *not* forget, but I — I ——’

‘Would rather I had changed my mind, that is it, I *know*, father. You do not like the idea of my leaving home — leaving *you*, perhaps. You are kind, *very* kind, but it must be. I can — cannot go on as I am

doing — it is a living death! a slow misery! to be what I am, nothing but an interloper — a — a disgrace and — shame!’

[252] ‘No! no! not *that* — not *that*, Philomela,’ and she saw, or *fancied* she saw, something glisten at the corner of her father’s eye, but it could not have been a tear, surely! He — *no* one could feel so deeply for *her* — ah! no — she must be mistaken!

‘Well, perhaps not! we’ll say no more about *that*. I dare say I’m appreciated at my full value; we’re all apt to set too high a price upon our own worth.’

Philomela tried to laugh, but it was only a grim shadow of her old laugh; then, continuing:

‘I have cut out an advertisement that I fancy would do, if they should consider me competent. This is it — hem!

“Wanted at Michaelmas, in a truly Christian family, a young person of cultivated mind and high attainments, to undertake the education and entire management of five promising children; a thorough knowledge of the English and French languages, with rudiments of German, Italian, and Latin absolutely necessary. Music, singing, drawing and painting indispensable; must be [253] certificated (medically and educationally), a member of the Church of England (low), and willing to make herself generally useful. Salary £19 per annum. N.B. — Personal attractions *not* essential. Apply to Mrs. Piety-Praiseworthy, The Repose, ——shire.”

‘Now, if you are agreeable, father, I will reply at once, and ——’

‘What would your *mother* say, Philomela?’

‘Ah! I have allowed for *that*. She would be terribly annoyed if — if people were to *know*, but — why *should* they? Why not say I have gone on — on a visit to — friends! I did last year to the Fairbairns,’ and, at the reminiscence of those two happiest weeks of her whole existence, the poor girl sighed and turned hastily aside to gaze out of the window through a blinding mist.

‘Ye — es, ye — es, as you say, they need not know all, and mother would get reconciled to it in time,’ mused Septimus Slinkensmirk, slowly rubbing his chin.

‘In *time*? say rather, *soon*, *very* soon. Titania and Martha between them could do my work, and you might in a short time [254] — three months at most — forget that there is such a person as I. Theodocia would be *glad* after she had found some one else to do for her, and it would be *much* better for all parties. Say “yes,” father, and oh! I *will* do my best to — to alter my evil nature, as they call it, I will, *indeed*, only say “yes,”” entreated Philomela, in her enthusiasm stretching up and clasping her arms round her father’s neck.

Septimus Slinkensmirk would fain have been placed in any position other than this, and was enduring a strange conflict ’twixt want of moral courage and the natural bent of his inclinations.

‘I — I scarcely know — must consider,’ he began.

‘You *have* considered. I gave you a week to think it over; that was all you asked for. Oh! don’t disappoint me *now*, when I have found — *almost* secured — a suitable situation, father, don’t, please don’t!’ pitifully implored the daughter.

‘But, are you fitted to — to undertake all specified — it reads an abundance,’ faltered the father.

[255] ‘Yes! yes! I have learned French and German, and the foundation of Latin and Italian, and was always considered “quick.” Music came to me naturally — I have a voice, you *know*. I used to be the one chosen to sing to the girl’s mammas in the drawing-room when they called upon the Misses Cringewell, and — and — personal attractions are not essential, it says, so I *ought* to do. Only say “yes,” and you’ll make me so — so happy again, father dear.’

‘And if I say “no,” Philomela, what then?’

‘Then ? *then!*’ and she dropped her eyes upon the carpet and struggled courageously to keep back the choking sobs. ‘I will try — try a little longer, and if — if I can’t bear it I’ll run away, I must — I *shall!*’

With this her strength gave way, and the poor girl broke down at last.

‘Don’t — don’t be weak — foolish, me child, it’s — it’s unbecoming a Slinkensmirk — be brave, be manly, hem! womanly! and — and perhaps I may — I will.’

‘Oh! do — do, and I will work hard and try to redeem — to *alter* myself. Do, father [256] and every night and morning I will pray for you.’

‘Very well, *ve* — ry well! that’s enough! Yes, yes, do as you like, and — and — remember that you still bear the name of a great and distinguished line of ancestry; there’s no compulsion that *all* should be made public. *Good-day.*’

So ended the interview, and when, after ten minutes’ relief in tears — silent and alone — Philomela Slinkensmirk returned to the breakfast-room, she was saluted by Master Benedictus exclaiming:

‘O lud! what’s up! she’s been roaring! No more flowers for you, if *he* was to see you with them ugly eyes, I’ll bet! Here’s plenty for you to do. I’ve just pulled off another button, and that brute of a cat has ripped up my knickerbocker with its claws. I’ve had my revenge, though! You should have seen how she wriggled and swore when I touched up her ears with Do’s knitting-pin made red hot; *such* a lark! I nearly died of laughing! She hasn’t got ’em *yet*,’ nodding in the direction of the flowers. ‘Why don’t you nab ’em, their *yours*? She’ll collar ’em if she sees ’em, and I’d rather you, with all your [257] piggish, ugliness, should have ’em than *her*. Whew! jam her tail in the door, Martha!’ referring to the cat, most probably, who had seized the first opportunity to escape, after undergoing shocking torture. ‘Leave ’em alone, thief!’

‘Miss Theodocia sent me for them, sir,’ answered the maid, taking possession of the flowers.

‘Who told her they was here?’ demanded Slinkensmirk junior.

‘I did, if you please, sir.’

‘And who told *you*, blockhead?’

‘Soosan,’ curtly replied the girl.

‘Then Soosan’s a big lie! they ain’t for her at all, and she shan’t have ’em.’

But Benedictus Methusaleh was just too late, for by the time he was upon the stairs the bouquet was safely delivered into the fair hands of Miss Slinkensmirk, who, feeling fatigued after last night’s affair, had not as yet left her bed.

‘Shut the door, Martha, and tell Master Benedictus if he makes such a noise I — I’ll give him a repetition of what he has already had this morning.’

[258] ‘Yes, miss, thank you, I will.’

‘And, Martha, don’t forget the tea in a quarter of an hour, and hot water — but I’ll give further orders after the tea. Just look in mistress’ room and tell ma I want her. She’s to slip on a gown and come immediately. That’s all — be off!’

‘Yes, miss, certainly,’ and the servant-maid withdrew.

‘Lovely flowers! charmingly arranged! I never bargained for *this*. What *will* ma say? Ah! what’s *this*? Well, I *declare*! an offer — I shouldn’t wonder! an offer, *already*! just like him!’ So soliloquising, Theodocia Slinkensmirk carefully extracted a slip of paper that was twisted around a spray of stephanotis and maiden-hair.

‘Stephanotis! what I accepted from him last evening! to call my attention to it, no doubt! Yes, it’s a message! Bother that girl! she hasn’t drawn the blinds! Never mind, I can see if I pull back the curtain. Now for it! — “I have not forgotten you, if you have me! Will you meet me at 7.30 p.m. at the stile near Gray’s Farm? If ‘yes,’ put out a white signal from the side window. [259] Do not disappoint. Your own Evelyn.” — *Not* an offer, but — every bit as good,’ and the young lady sprang out of bed and danced for very joy. ‘Ma! Ma! why don’t you make haste? you old simpleton! — hem!’ — as the door was opened and that personage appeared *en demi-toilette* upon the threshold. ‘Come in, ma, dear! *Such* news! Sit down and don’t speak until I give you leave! See these flowers? — a nod in the affirmative. ‘From the nephew — Evelyn Wyndhurst. Don’t speak! See this scrap of paper? An offer, or, unless I am mistaken, something akin to it! Listen!’ and the *billet-doux* was re-read, aloud this time, and full enunciation given to each word and its signification.

‘Lawks! Do!’ exclaimed the fond parent. ‘You don’t say so ! It’s not from — from him with the *hes-tates* — the *heir*?’

‘Look for yourself, ma! It’s “him with the estates,” sure enough!’ responded the daughter, overlooking vulgarity in the acme of delight.

‘Well, I *nev-er* did! How will the Toadyvells, and Kairforknauts, and Coffephulls, and Sixaneights, and Bogles, and [260] Bloomingshys, and Loveloms, and Braggarts, and Simplicities, and that — that odious ‘Trickyman’ *look*? Theodocia, my child, your fortune is *made*! I bless you! You are a credit — a credit to *any* member of the Wigginses and to the whole *han-cestry* of Slinkensmirks! Would that I could say as much for my other daughter!’

‘Never mind *her*! she’s right enough, *in her place*! Now, what’s to be done? We had arranged for the play to-night! I can scarcely understand Evelyn’s meaning!’ Theodocia had easily fallen into the way of calling the Hon. Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall’s nephew by his Christian name. ‘He was most anxious that we — that is *I*, of course — should go to see “London Assurance,” as he neatly affirmed, but ——’

‘An *after* thought, my dear. He cannot bear the idea of other men coming between you and him, depend upon it!’ interposed Mamma Slinkensmirk from her seat upon a travelling-trunk in the corner.

‘Ah! quite likely! poor Evelyn! jealous of Captain St. Leger — ha-ha! well, I must acknowledge I *did* flirt with the captain just [261] a *tri-ple*! I dote on the military, and he paid me such *great* attention and such — such *delightful* compliments, ma! I can’t remember half what he said about my “angelic

form,” “snow-crowned violet orbs,” and “sylph-like grace.” It was *very* nice, I can assure you, and if it were not for Evelyn Wyndhurst, I don’t know, I might — I *mi*-ght ——’

‘At any rate you needn’t give the direct cut until — all is arranged, you know, Theodocia,’ said the world-wise mother.

‘Of *course* not! don’t school *me*, ma! The only way to keep a beau is to have others dangling after one! What would become of love if it were not kept up to the mark by its propeller — jealousy? Pshaw! die a calm and provokingly natural death! So I’m to keep the appointment? on that we are decided! Silly fellow! why didn’t he say five o’clock, and then I could have gone to the play! botheration!’ and Miss Slinkensmirk pouted and commenced to pull to pieces the bouquet. ‘It’s the way with men! stupid, jealous creatures! I’ll lead him a [262] dance with St. Leger if he doesn’t come to the point at once and have done with it!’

‘Don’t be *too* hard, my beauty! You don’t know what the poor fellow may suffer. It reminds me of *my* maidenhood and my cruel, heartless coquetries — ah! *I* was just such a naughty, bewitching little flirt as *you*, Theodocia, and ——’

‘Pooh! so one might conclude I’ ironically retorted ‘the beauty’; then, altering her tone, as it dawned upon her, was more expedient, she went on: ‘But, ma, dear, *you* must go to the play, and pa.’

‘Without *you*, my pet? Oh, no! I couldn’t *think* of such a thing,’ answered Mrs. Septimus Slinkensmirk, martyrically forfeiting her own pleasure for the sake of her offspring.

‘Why not? don’t be absurd! Pa will go, and — you can say — say — not that I’m *ill* — that wouldn’t *do* — but — that I have a sick head-ache after last night’s late hours, and — and — you were afraid that the closeness — the gas — the heat — *you* know, ma; you can invent something — only don’t make a *mull* of it, there’s a dear good ma! Now kiss me and — go back to your own room; I shall stay in [263] bed an hour or two to recuperate my good looks. Ta-ta. It’s only Martha with my tea; don’t upset her.’

At seven o’clock punctually, Mr. and Mrs. Septimus Slinkensmirk set off in a *one*-horsed brougham from the livery-stables to the playhouse, and a few minutes subsequent to their departure, Miss Theodocia, in her most becoming walking attire, stole forth to keep the appointment. It wanted some five minutes, or rather more, to the time agreed upon — half-past seven — when the young lady arrived at the spot indicated, so, taking her seat upon the lower step of the stile, she gave herself up first to arranging her person and then her thoughts, making a selection of what was best to be said and what left *un*-said. A white flag had been suspended from the side window by way of signal in the affirmative; moreover, she was now wearing *the* sprig of stephanotis in her bosom. ‘*This*,’ her mother had insisted, ‘would serve as a weathercock to let the young man know which way the wind was blowing,’ and Theodocia, perceiving the advisability of the thing, had adopted it forthwith.

[264] A variety of attitudes, expressions, and posings were practised ere the right and befitting one of maidenly modesty was decided upon, and scarcely had her features assumed a downcast coyness, when footsteps were heard approaching — *his* footsteps, no doubt! How long they were in reaching the stile! and how painful to retain this photographic fixity of position and smile! At last! at last! *what* a relief!

‘Goot efening, *Fräulein*. You go den to de tayartre *nicht*? You lofe better de nature? — de grand, *vonderful* nature? — *gut, sehr gut, mein Fräulein!*’

‘Gracious heavens! is it *you?*’ ejaculated Miss Slinkensmirk, losing her pose in an instant, and changing her expression to one of amazement and disgust.

‘*Ach!* but you start! have no fear, *Fräulein!* I — *I shall not bite!*’ said the professor, for it was he, book under arm, green spectacles, and with the addition of a quaker-looking hat.

‘I — beg your pardon. I — did not mean to — to be so brusque, but I — was startled and — hardly knew what I said! I hope ——’

[265] ‘*Nein! nein! nicht mehr, Fräulein!* dat is enough, quite! You go not to de *tayartre*, but you com here — here to sit and tink and tink and lofe de nature! *Ach!* but it is *von von-derful* vorld, grand and mag-needicent! You have read de book? de great philosophies — *ja?*’ inquired Herr von Spielengetrickstermann, composedly taking his seat upon the reverse side of the stile, and turning over the pages of the volume upon his knee, while a shade of anxiety and annoyance spread over the countenance of his companion.

‘No — not *yet*. I — I have been suffering from a severe headache all day — the effects of last night’s dissipation — it *was* dissipation to me. I am so delicate — so finely organised! so sensitive! But if — you will allow me to ——’

‘Keep it — keep it still, *von*, two, tree days — dat vill do. Vell, *Fräulein*, now, ve vill have again *von* lesson on de — de unifers.’

‘Hem, hem! excuse me Mr. — Mr. — Professor — excuse me. I — I have an engagement this evening; *if* you would be so [266] kind as to postpone it — the lesson — I — shall be obli— *delighted!* *This* evening it is impossible, so please excuse me — another time — to-morrow, perhaps,’ interrupted Theodocia, in a state of alarm lest Mr. Wyndhurst should come upon them and thereby conceive another cause for jealousy.

‘Ah! *fe-ry* goot! *fe-ry* goot! so must it be! den to-morrow, *Fräulein*, to-morrow, ve vill say. Goot - evening, goot - evening, *Fräulein*; and the professor extended his hand in English custom.

Mechanically her own was placed therein; at the same time Miss Slinkensmirk’s face bore an expression of blank dismay, and nerving herself up for the urgency, she said, in the calmest tone she could just then assume:

‘Really, sir, I must *again* entreat your pardon; but, hem! I was awaiting a friend when you — you came up, and ——’

‘And I? Am I, den, not also *von* friend?’ put in the German.

‘Oh, yes; a *friend* — a very great *friend*, I hope — I *believe*,’ answered the young lady, [267] with one of her persuasive smiles. ‘But I was about to remark, that — that the time is almost up, and — my friend — my *other* friend — will be here in a moment,’ glancing at her watch, and finding it two minutes beyond the half-hour specified. ‘So if — if you would be so good, sir, as to — to ——’

‘*Ach!* dis is *von-derful!* I also vas to meet here *von* friend,’ said the Professor von Spielengetrickstermann, still retaining his place on the stile.

‘*In-deed* it is singular — exceedingly so! in *that* case I will go — *I shall not be wanted* — good-evening!’

This was a happy hit of Miss Theodocia's, for in a second the German philosopher bounded from his seat, and raising his comically-shaped hat, muttered an inaudible something, and turned upon his heel in an opposite direction.

'What a relief!' breathed the young lady, as she watched the retreating figure of her late companion until it was out of sight. Then she commenced to re-arrange scattered ideas, and spent the next half-hour in deep [268] meditation, with rare intervals to turn her head and steal a glance north, south, east and west, murmuring an impatient imprecation against the one who now solely occupied her thoughts. But all to no purpose! He never came! and *she*, wearied, out of temper, and as she termed it 'balked,' was forced to retrace her steps in the gathering gloom of an autumnal night; and upon the return of her parents from the play, she had the additional aggravation of hearing that 'the nephew' had been there and had inquired most kindly after Miss Slinkensmirk's health — adding that: 'He had hoped to have had the pleasure of seeing her, as she had expressed such a *strong* desire to witness the performance of "London Assurance."'

'I've been made a fool of! I see it all! and it's — it's either Philomela or — or — that toad! that viper, Benedictus! *I'll* wring his ear — *I'll* thrash him — I — I'll wring his *neck* for him, *that* I will — the imp of wickedness! Philomela, take that' — a sounding box of the ear was implied in that pronoun — 'and — and play your own low-bred tricks on somebody else — not *me*, madam. Don't [269] stand smirking and smiling like a stuffed Taffy, pa! You ought to be ashamed of yourselves — every one of you! you *know* you ought! You — you—monstrosities! As for *you*, ma, you're as bad as any of them, and — and — I only hope you *may* know what it is to have a troublesome and discreditable child, as — as — you *can't* appreciate *my* worth!'

With this, Miss Theodocia flounced out of the room, banging the door behind her; and no sooner had she taken her departure than Mamma Slinkensmirk, calling frantically for her *mouchoir* — aromatic vinegar — *eau de Cologne* — fan — salts — pills and recuperator, relapsed into an interesting swoon, and Master Benedictus emerged from behind the curtain holding his sides and rollicking about in a condition of uncontrollable laughter.

'Oh! *wasn't* it rich! wasn't it rich to see Do's phiz! — as black as his majesty's, every bit, and *twice* as comical! Didn't she make your ear sound, eh, Phil! Wouldn't I have give it her if she'd touched me! yurrrh!' placing his fists in an attitude of boxing, and [270] seeming very brave now that there was no chance of the enemy's re-appearance upon the field. 'I could have *bust*, but I dursn't for my life! It served her right! taking to herself what wasn't her own, the thief! I told her them flowers didn't belong to her, and she tried to push me headlong down the stairs for saying so. *Now* she's been served out, and I glory in it! it's worth a pull of the ear — *that* it is — only I've got off scot free *this* time — better luck still! I say, it wasn't a lark of yours, was it though, Phil? You *used* to have pluck for anything, but you've got so glum of late. Tell us, *I* won't split, and — what d'ye think — I've seen him with the four eyes slinking about again this evening — two of 'em goggles, *you* know! such a comical cove! He always stares up at these windows as if — —'

'Hus — sh!' said Philomela in an aside, whilst bustling about in attendance upon her mother, who was vociferous in her demands upon reawakening from the lady-like faint. 'I'll tell you all by-and-by; only be a good boy, and you shall have *my* tart at dinner tomorrow, Benny,' she contrived to whisper in

passing, for which she received a sly wink and [271] a low whistle expressive of acceptance and appreciation.

Five days passed, and nothing more was either seen or heard of the people at The Manor. Mrs. Septimus Slinkensmirk emphatically urged the necessity of a return call upon their new friends; but Theodocia — her inherent sense of etiquette and refinement overruling intense desire and inclination — contended that it was yet early — *too* early for such a visit.

‘It would look too eager, ma, and *that* would never do.’

This was conclusive.

Meanwhile, the young lady did her best in all possible ways to bring about a *rencontre*. The mornings found her clambering the rocks, ridgeways and promontories — hitherto untrodden by *her* — and exploring the thousand and one wonders of an ever-varying coast-line, where all fresh-comers loved to linger, and geologists, conchologists and antiquarians spent hour after hour in deep research and patient contemplation. In the afternoons Mamma Slinkensmirk and daughter took long drives through wood and dale, a radiant [272] August sun emitting a lustre that illumined all with its ambient tint, and transformed the verdant meads into fields of cloth-of-gold, and the flowering brushwood into fairy abodes for the elves and sprites that leapt and sped hither and thither in the shape of red-brown hares and speckled game enjoying life in full exuberance, as though with a prescience that it *must* be short for the accommodation and *pastime* of man! The cool, moonlit evenings were devoted to the promenade and listlessly listening to the strains of a more than second-rate band of itinerant musicians — Papa Slinkensmirk always acting as escort upon these occasions, much as it went against the bent of his nature to do so; nevertheless, both his ‘good lady’ and his ‘first-born’ proclaimed that it was absolutely demanded, consequently demurring was out of the question *in toto*. Yet, in spite of rigorous measures, and strategem, the outcome of two feminine minds, all proved unavailing.

‘Surely it must be that the fates are against us, ma,’ grumbled Miss Theodocia, the fourth day after her unsuccessful rendezvous at the stile, having just come home tired and [273] much provoked. ‘I wish to goodness I hadn’t snubbed the captain *now!* where in the world *can* he have got to? Can’t *you* suggest something?’

As if Mrs. Septimus Slinkensmirk had not been exerting herself beyond the limits of any lady in endeavouring to alight upon some fresh and *profitable* plan of procedure; ay, in this perhaps outvying her indefatigable daughter, who was now ready to turn upon her abettor for the thought and assistance that had been fruitlessly, yet none the less deservingly, given.

‘Well, my love, I see nothing for it but — to make up our minds to — the *call* — say tomorrow,’ began the mother, nervously treading her way.

‘No! *that* — *won’t* — *do!* I’ve said so fifty times! that *won’t* do! Within the week! its preposterous!’ affirmed Miss Slinkensmirk, with flashing eye, and avenging herself by snipping into small pieces her sister’s embroidery. ‘Can’t you suggest something — something — *sensible?*’ she continued, in a loud and irritable voice.

‘Theo — *docia*, my beautiful and best, do [274] not — *pray* do not get — get — out of temper — it — it agitates me.’

‘Fudge! exert yourself, ma! it would be a thousand times better for you.’

‘Oh! o — oh, Philomela! where is that cruel, disobedient girl! that wicked creature — Philomela! Philomela !!’

Mamma Slinkensmirk was becoming hysterical, and doubtless wanted her numerous array of restoratives picked up from the floor, where they had been swept by the careless arm of her promising first-born.

‘Heroics again? I detest such — such — *humbug!* You know very well I can’t endure such meaningless outbreaks. Once in a while is all very well and bearable, but when it comes to ——’

‘If you please, ma’am, here’s Mrs. Luke Gospelwarm. I have showed her into the drawing-room, and ——’

‘Mrs. Luke Gospelwarm? Lawks! now for it, Do!’ ejaculated Mrs. Septimus Slinkensmirk, starting up from her recumbent position upon the couch, and forgetful of her agitated nerves.

‘Leave the room, Susan,’ from Miss [274] Theodocia. ‘Stay — request Mrs. Luke Gospelwarm to be seated, and — your mistress will be with her presently. Learn to control your vulg — yourself in the presence of menials, ma, *do,*’ after the door was closed upon the abigail. ‘Coming at such an unchristian time of day! *She’s* no lady, though she *be* the rector’s wife! Where has she learned her manners, I wonder! *You* must go in, ma — *I* can’t.’

‘But, Theodocia ——’

‘It’s no use ‘but-ing,’ *I can’t.* Look at me, ma!’

‘Look at *me,* then!’ plaintively echoed the mother.

‘*You!*’ scornfully returned the daughter.

‘*You’re* not going to marry the Honourable Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall’s nephew!’ Then, an idea flashing across her brain: ‘Very well, I’ll be down in — in ten minutes. Make some excuse for me — you can do that, surely. She doesn’t like being kept waiting, and we mustn’t offend her; she’s a Leademallite, remember.’

So saying, Theodocia Slinkensmirk hurried away to make a hasty toilet, and scarcely [276] more than a second over the specified time had elapsed ere she entered the drawing-room — a picture of ease and amiability — to greet the rector’s wife with a warm and even affectionate welcome.

‘Dear Mrs. Gospelwarm, how *kind* — how *good* of you to come to us at this unconventional hour! — so sociable — so *nice* to come in upon us unexpectedly! *Do* let me persuade you to join us in our five o’clock tea. No! Ah! *so* sorry — so very, *very* sorry!’ and what is more, Theodocia *looked* it.

‘So am I, dear Miss Slinkensmirk — very sorry *indeed;* but — but I’m sure you will excuse me when I tell you the purport of my call today. My husband and self, with the cooperation of many — *most,* I may say — of the distinguished members of his estimable flock, are about to get up a subscription concert in aid of the “South Sea Missionary Expedition” to convert the heathen Feejee. That our own town may stand high in the list, we desire to raise a certain sum, which sum will outrival the majority of towns similar in size and means to Anglebro’ — the surplus, if any, to go to the “Mothers’ Monthlies,” or to be [277] disposed of in any manner that Mr. Luke Gospelwarm may deem expedient.’

‘Certainly — exactly — just so,’ from Miss Theodocia.

‘Certainly, exactly, just so,’ echoed that young lady’s mother, placidly waving her Valenciennes *mou-choir*, and following each word of her visitor with the motion of her head.

‘Now, our dear and *mutual* friend, the Hon. Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall, has given permission to the concert being held in the large dining-hall at The Manor, and upon these considerations, which will, I need hardly say, render the assemblage select to a degree, the names of a dozen or more ladies and gentlemen have been handed in as patrons and patronesses. Hem! To retain the *exclusive* selectness of the whole affair, it has been declared advisable to restrict the performers, whether vocalists or instrumentalists, to *amateurs*. Signorita Scratchinini was discussed, but finally pronounced “unworthy” by a large majority of *ladies*; therefore *her* name has been withdrawn, and — hem! — and having heard the far and wide renown of [278] your dear daughter’s excellence as an *artiste musicale* ——’

‘Dear Mrs. Gospelwarm, you make her blush, pore child! She is *so* sensitive — so retiring, *so* ——’

‘Oh, ma!’ put in Theodocia, hanging her head and holding her breath.

The rector’s wife laughed evenly and pleasantly, and made some remark about ‘highly gifted individuals usually being of sensitive organisms,’ paying some further compliments, and thereby gaining a step towards her cause — the cause that had been of much inconvenience, seeing that the ‘signorita’ on whom they had depended so greatly had that very morning taken herself off, leaving many unpaid bills behind her. Many suggestions and trials had been made — all in vain, alas! — ere the brewer’s charming daughter was agreed upon as a substitute, ‘though scarcely a fit and proper person,’ as Mrs. Simplicity had persisted in — maintaining a fixed and steady eye upon her offspring, clad in all the purity of virgin white, who had volunteered her services in the performance of a lengthy [279] duet with her inseparable friend, Miss Bloomingshy.

‘Then it is decided, I think, Mrs. Slinkensmirk. I may put down your daughter’s name for *one* at least,’ observed Mrs. Luke Gospelwarm, pocket-book and pencil in hand.

‘There’s *pa*’s consent *first*, ma dear,’ meekly reminded the daughter, frowning significantly at her mother behind her uplifted taper fingers.

‘To be shore, there’s your *pa*! Mr. Slinkensmirk is very particular, Mrs. Gospelwarm — very particular *in-deed*, and ——’

‘But - surely, madam — the Honourable Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall, Lady Diana Kairforknaut, Mrs. Justinus Braggart, our highly-deserving member, Lord Blenkensopp, Sir Benjamin Broadacres, Mr. Evelyn Wyndhurst ——’

‘Decidedly — decidedly — little objection — not at all, in fact, to any of *them* that *I* can see, but gentlemen are — are — gentlemen, and ——’

‘Peculiar!’ interposed Miss Slinkensmirk, coming to the rescue; then coyly adding, ‘at least *pa* is, so careful! ridiculously careful [280] over me, as if — as if — somebody *must* run away with me — so silly!’

‘Well I such care is needful when — when youth and — and — such charms are at stake! Nevertheless, if you fancy Mr. Slinkensmirk *could* experience *any* objection, of course — not another syllable — I

would not for the whole race of heathen Feejees *be* the means of causing such an *estimable* gentleman one moment's anxiety, and — as I have other calls to make ——'

'Oh! pray, dear Mrs. Gospelwarm — a cup of tea — a glass of wine.'

The rector's wife had arisen, and was about to extend her hand in adieu. 'Not *anything*, thank you, my dear — I have not time, I find — Mr. Evelyn Wyndhurst — who has been on a shooting expedition with my worthy husband the last few days — is expected back at The Manor at 5.15, and I am commissioned to secure *his* services for Monday next — he is an excellent musician and vocalist, so I suppose, and will be a wonderful acquisition. *Good*-afternoon, madam — am sorry if I ——'

'No! no! you misunderstand — dear — *dear* Mrs. Gospelwarm — ma is mistaken—that is, [281] I mean — pa cannot *possibly* have any objection to — to this — for a charitable purpose.'

'A *charitable* purpose! *that* alters the affair *altogether*!' assented Mrs. Septimus Slinkensmirk, as though she had just been made aware of the fact.

'Yes — a *charitable* purpose, decidedly, Mrs. Slinkensmirk — moreover, an exceptionally deserving one, when one considers the shocking depravity of the barbarian Feejee, and their total absence of conscience and self-respect, not to mention an utter want of shame in their manners and modes of attire! — it's more than enough to make the blood of civilised Christians curdle in their veins.'

Mrs. Luke Gospelwarm shuddered visibly while readjusting her bonnet-strings.

'Ah! horrible! horrible! In *that* case, Theodocia, my love, your pa ——'

'*Must* give in — dear old pet!' the daughter finished with a saucy, simpering laugh.

'Naughty child! to speak so of your pa!' playfully retorted Mamma Slinkensmirk.

'Then I may be permitted to ——'

'Add *my* name, yes, eh ma dear?' asked Miss Theodocia coaxingly, and telegraphing [282] a signal in the affirmative in the direction of the couch.

'Very well — *ve-ry* well! who *can* resist such endearing ways, Mrs. Gospelwarm?'

'Ah! *who* indeed?' breathed that last mentioned lady.

The upshot of it was that Miss Slinkensmirk's name was put down for two appearances — one in each part of the programme, and after a friendly altercation, "an *encore*, *if* insisted upon," a satisfactory arrangement for all parties concerned, and the rector's wife felt much relieved when she got outside, for preparations had already been put into execution, and though the concert was 'under the patronage of the nobility and gentry' throughout the district, yet artistes of talent or no talent were slow to come forward, and still more inaccessible to discover.

It was a bitter pill for many of the ladies to countenance the brewer's daughter in their midst; nevertheless, it *had* to be swallowed, and digested as best it could; moreover, it necessitated close contact and unavoidable familiarity in the rehearsal meetings, one of which [283] was to be held that very evening at the rectory.

'So he has been away shooting,' said Theodocia, when she returned to the drawing-room, after having parted from their late visitor at the garden gate. 'That accounts for it all, and here have I been walking

my legs off to catch him! just my luck, I declare!’ and with this she flung herself down upon the settee in a pet.

‘Never mind, dearest, *never* mind! You’ll see him this evening; let bygones be bygones. He’ll be all the more eager after this absence. Men always are, love. We forget, but with *them* it’s ——’

‘That’s very true, but it doesn’t make up for my almost breaking my neck on those abominable rocks, and ruining my complexion in the full glare of an afternoon sun! — not to forget the “get up” for nothing, and the torture of listening to that *vile* band in pa’s odious society! I’ll serve him out for it, never fear! I’ll play off Captain St. Leger, see if I don’t! What shall I sing? Let me see, something at him, of course.’

‘Of *course!*’ echoed Mamma Slinkensmirk. [284] And Miss Theodocia left her seat to turn over the music and make a choice selection of something *apropos* and to the point, or, as she phrased it, ‘something *at* him,’ that pronoun being applied to the nephew of the Hon. Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall.

In the meantime Philomela Slinkensmirk had responded to the advertisement inserted in the local newspaper, and had this morning received from the hands of the parlour-maid, whom she had bribed with a piece of feminine finery to call at the post-office and inquire if there were any letters for a certain initial, a closely written epistle containing further ‘particulars,’ which, interpreted, meant a host of additions, too numerous for us to detail, but, to make a brief summary, set forth that it was Mrs. Piety Praiseworthy’s desire to obtain a governess competent and accomplished, seamstress industrious and respectable, nurse-maid fond of children and good-tempered, and general servitor of irreproachable character and willing disposition, with a certificate of the ‘young person’s Christianity and membership of the Church of England’ from a dignitary of the same. [285] If these could *all* be vouched for, the writer would be pleased to take the ‘young person’ for a month *on trial* at the salary before stipulated — nineteen pounds per annum ; upon perusal and re-perusal of which Philomela’s entire countenance brightened and beamed with satisfaction and hopes of future happiness. So ambiguous is that one word happiness, so relative its true signification, that what one may rejoice over, another may deem insufferable cruelty and pain.

This it was that occasioned the poor girl to be wearing her old gladsome smile, and to cheat herself into the belief that ‘the world, after all, is a haven of bliss if people’ (*she*, in particular) ‘would but look upon the bright side of things, and not misinterpret what is doubtless intended in kindness.’ Alas! ere bed-time came her humane philosophy was destined to receive a shock, for in her sanguine anticipations she had sacrificed self in its entirety, and as she lay herself down to seek sleep that *would* not come — rest that was worse than none at all — she found herself alone, hungry, exhausted and uncared-for, the victim of her better nature, her [286] unsophisticated generosity, that was raised far, far above the understanding, much less appreciation, of her kindred and surroundings. Thus the best, the purest, *must* in this state of slow progression succumb to the grosser, the more selfish and unspiritualized, of their brethren, for as yet their time has not come; nevertheless, their deeds are graven by the All-Powerful Hand in the sands of immortality and eternity.

V.

[287] ‘SO you think he will be back in time for the concert, Theodocia?’ said Mrs. Septimus Slinkensmirk, as she sank back in her chair, gently rocking herself to and fro, and joining the tips of her fingers in a position of ease before her.

‘Think? I’m certain — *positive* — of it, ma. It’s a wonder to me that he could stay away the three days! It’s more than I expected, I can assure you, and had it not been that the captain had left the town, Evelyn would not have been so ready to abandon the course to *his* manoeuvres — as St. Leger would say — *I know,*’ answered the daughter, actively engaged in selecting a few rare flowers from those that she had given orders should be [288] sent, upon delivery, to her own dressing-room, and surrounded as she was by a small wardrobe of evening attire and all pertaining thereunto.

‘Ah! it’s almost a pity you drove him away, love! I always imagined you *might* have been successful *there*; the casting was decidedly *struck*, Theodocia — and — “a bird in the hand,” you know, dearest, “is worth two in the bush.”’

‘Pooh! a paltry, half-pay officer! what *next*, ma! how absurdly you talk, to be sure!’ and Miss Slinkensmirk stationed herself before the *cheval* glass and tossed her head disdainfully, observing with intense gratification the becoming effect, and repeating it with an additional extension of under-lip and an extra elongation of neck. ‘True, he admires me amazingly, but — what *then*? How is it possible that *I* can be held responsible for one who may fall a victim to — to ——’

‘Your charms — certainly *not* — is out of *all* question, but — he’s a *somebody*, Theodocia, and to *my* way of thinking it might have been worth while to — to — well! to have [289] kept him dangling a bit longer, if only to spite that Cousin Clara — an impertinent upstart! who was *her* father, I should like to know?’

‘Well! never mind *that* — keep such affairs in the background, ma — they only give rise to inquiry, and — the less said about *such* the better for all the world! — hem! poor fellow! it’s a pity, a *great* pity, and he *so* handsome, *so* fascinating, *so* run after by all the women! He’ll feel it shockingly. I only hope it may not end tragically for him! He’s rather given to fastness, so they say, and — *I* shouldn’t be much surprised if — if it resulted in ——’

‘Sooicide? nor more should I. It would read well in the papers, Theodocia! I fancy I see it in black and white now. “Sooicide in high life!” Not so bad for a beginning, and would breed *lots* of offers! Men like something outrageous! let a woman be notorious in *any* way, and she’s bound to have any amount of chances. But then again its all very pleasant, *and* romantic, and desirable, at the same time it seems to me like a surety gone. You remember the fable of the dog [290] and the shadder, my child. Have a care, Theodocia, have a ca — re! don’t be *too* independent, *too* sure! “There’s many a slip,” you know, dearest.’

‘Ha! ha! ha!’ Miss Theodocia laughed what would be termed, when applied to the heroine of a sensational romance, ‘a long rippling, silvery laugh.’ ‘Why, you talk as if — as if there were only *one* man in the world, and even upon that *awful* consideration you make an enormous mistake, ma, for *I* would have him, be quite certain of *that*. But, joking apart, this evening is to decide my fate’ (it *did*, in a manner). ‘To be Mrs. Evelyn Wyndhurst, or not to be? Which do you say, ma? The odds are in favour

of the former, or I am not Theodocia Slinkensmirk. There! what do you think of your daughter *now*? Will I *do*, ma dear?’

‘Theodocia, my love, you are charming! That blue tulle is a success, though I *must* confess I had my doubts about it — it’s trying! *ve — ry* trying.’

‘Yes — to an ordinary complexion,’ put in the daughter, imparting a ‘finishing touch to the artistic charms of her own *extraordinary* [291] complexion, and attitudinising before the dressing-glass.

‘Ah! you’re right! to an *ordinary* complexion. Thank goodness, *my* child is no *ordinary* person’s offspring! The style suits you immensely; the figure and the whole effect is *ex-quisite*! You won’t have a rival *to-night*, Theodocia,’ said Mamma Slinkensmirk, exerting herself to rise from her chair, and, taking her daughter’s wrist, slowly turn her round, thereby indulging in a full and satisfactory survey. ‘Exquisite! *ex-quisite*! and that’s just all about it!’ With this, the mother relinquished her hold, and awakened to the discomposing fact that her *specialité* in the way of ‘Valenciennes *mouchoir*’ was peeping audaciously out of the fancy apology for a pocket worn by Miss Theodocia.

‘Hem! fan! smelling-bottle, gloves, *mouchoir* — don’t forget anything, my dear,’ significantly reminded Mamma Slinkensmirk.

‘All right, ma dear, thanks. I’ve got all, even to — a sprig of stephanotis,’ and Theodocia smirked and dropped her eyes, and raised them again with a side glance from the corners — [292] which performance had been rehearsed more than a dozen times during the day, and was now as near perfection as it could possibly be.

‘A drop of my *attar* — eh, pet?’

‘Oh! yes, ma dear, please — be quick!’ and after Mrs. Septimus Slinkensmirk had hastened away with scarcely credible alacrity, ‘Bother! I wish I hadn’t said yes! it’s only to find me out! Ah! you good ma! put it down, I think I’ll not have it, after all — it may not agree with *millefleur* — that will do for me. Keep the *attar* for yourself, ma dear — and now I’m ready! ready and prepared for any amount of competition, any contest whatever! I’m well-armed; don’t you think so? You may reserve all your congratulations against my return to-night! perhaps you’ll need them! Theodocia Melissa Wyndhurst, it won’t sound so bad, especially when particulars and details are given. An estate in Ceylon — a decentish kind of place in the West of England, *and* £15,000 a year. It’s better than the captain, ma! You see I shall be right, after all.’

‘Ye — es, per — *haps* so! but I can’t help feeling — feeling — for the pore young man! [293] It seemed very much as if the last was put in as a substitute for something else; however, the mother sighed and *still* experienced an uncomfortable doubt that nothing could dispel.

‘Fiddle-dedee! he’ll marry old Cousin Clara, spend her fortune, and — go to the bad — or — break his neck on the race course. If I were to marry him, the only difference would be that *I* should be ruined too. *We both* have expensive habits, and after the novelty of the honeymoon had worn off, we should *both* find out our mistake, but too late! and — what would be the result? Heaven knows! a cat-and-dog life, or cold-mutton diet and shabby gentility, or *you go your way, I go mine* sort of existence, which means, interpreted, “Let any man look after you: what do *I* care, so long as *I* haven’t to hand out, and you don’t spoil *my* little game by putting in an untimely appearance?” That’s marrying for love! Pooh! let him go in for Cousin Clara, and as quickly as possible! He’s fathoms deep in debt already, and this

Goodwood affair will involve him a few fathoms more! Evelyn Wyndhurst is [294] certainly not my style — I like a man to be ——’

‘The carriage has come, Theodocia, and Lady Diana Kairforknaut says will you come at once — the time is up — can *I* do anything for you?’ It was Philomela, the sister, who spoke, putting her head in at the door of the dressing-room.

‘No — yes! tell Lady Diana — that is, tell Susan to tell Lady Diana, that I — never mind, I’ll go myself, in *one* moment — and you, Philomela, you can put all away for me. I don’t fancy that girl Titania raking over *my* wardrobe! See that everything is put properly away, and any mending that is to be done — you can do it — it’ll amuse you while we’re all out, and keep you out of mischief. Ta-ta, ma dear, don’t be late; eight o’clock, *punctual*, mind, just half-past seven *now*. Don’t let pa make a guy of himself, and just give him a good talking to about that vulgar habit of his; don’t forget, say *I* told you. Be sure you have a presentable *mouchoir*, ha! ha!’ and with this piece of impertinence Miss Theodocia Slinkensmirk laughingly gathered the Shetland wrap around her fair [295] slender form, and tripped away downstairs humming a few bars of the solo with which she was about to favour the fashionable and select audience assembled at the house of the Hon. Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall.

‘Saucy darling! *I* saw it! by-by!’ responded Mamma Slinkensmirk, making the best of the inevitable, and blowing kisses from the tips of her fingers. Then, turning to her younger daughter: ‘Dear! dear! *what* a difference! It cuts me to the quick, *that* it does. Leave me, Philomela — keep out of my sight, and send Titania. Even the presence of a menial is preferable, sad though it is to be obliged to say it. A mother’s feelings — *who* can tell? Hark! what is that? The railway, or that dear child? Benedictus Methusaleh, *I de-clare!* Wicked girl, how *could* you leave him, pore darling! Fallen into the fire! broken his pretty nose! choked his sweet little self! Run, Philomela! Stupid creature, standing there, when for all *you* know his very life is at sacrifice! Ah! this will come home to you, heartless sister! — *all* will come home to you, undutiful child! *Stay!* don’t leave me — [296] your own lawful mother — in *this* plight. Clear all those things away from the couch, and assist me across the floor. Don’t tread so heavily! What a foot, to be shore. Each step shatters every nerve that I possess. A nice state of agitation I shall be in for the concert! and you the cause, miss — *you*, my own daughter! Hah! my pocket-companion! Where in the world have you put it? Bring it here, and the fan, and salts, and scent-bottle, and *sal-volatile*, and pills, and vinegar, and — and — *mouchoir*. My head! my pore head is splitting! Go at once and comfort the dear child, or I — I shall go wild!’

Philomela, as may be supposed, was only too glad to make her escape at any price, and at the foot of the staircase encountered her hopeful brother kicking frantically, and two maid-servants standing as sentinels to guard the front-door from attack.

‘What’s the matter, Susan?’ inquired Philomela.

‘Why, miss, Master Benedictus somehow caught his boot in Miss Theodocia’s dress, and ——’

[297] ‘I didn’t, yer lie, I didn’t!’ cried that young gentleman, seizing an arm of the speaker and endeavouring savagely to effect a meeting between his upper and under teeth through the flesh.

‘But you *did*, Master Benedictus — you *know* you did,’ persisted Martha, the other girl.

‘I didn’t. I trod on it a-purpose, and she — she — yarrh! I — I’ll tear it off her back! I — I’ll kill her and that ugly brute with her — I’ll pull *her* head off for — for — calling me a ——’

‘And what did *you* call her ladyship?’ interposed Susan, who was about to leave, therefore was desperate. ‘If you’ll believe me, Miss Philomela, he ran behind the brougham a-screaming and a-shouting and a-calling my lady a *hateful* name, and Miss. Theodocia, she looks as black as — as — hem!’

‘Serve her right! I’ll teach her to touch *my* ear — the stuck-up peacock! Phil, with *all* her ugliness, is worth a thousand of her. I’ll let ’em know what *she* is! I know the bloke what *she’s* after, and — and *he* shall know *me*, and — and — know *her* too! *I’ll* tell [298] him what stuff she puts on her face! *I’ll* let him know what she is without her fine ways and — and get-up at home! Garn! I shan’t told my tongue! and if you don’t give me some more pineapple I — I’ll pull my hair out and say *you* did it, and — and — kick and scream and make *her* ill, and she can’t go to — to hear her lovely Theodocia sq — squall.’

‘Very well, Benny, you shall have some. Come with me into the dining-room, and we’ll have a nice evening to ourselves ——’

‘And pineapple, and potted lobster, and custard, and toast, and poached eggs, and curry, and apricot jam for supper, hey?’ with an extra loud sniff, and wiping his nose with the back of his sleeve.

‘Oh yes — *anything* you like, only be a good boy. And you’ll read me a pretty story from that new fairy-tale book that father bought you,’ coaxingly continued the sister, striving to draw him away by the arm.

‘No, I shan’t — I ain’t going to read — I’m going to *eat*! *You* can read, and don’t have any of them stockings about. It turns me sick to see you work — work — working at them everlasting stockings — blow ’em!’

[299] ‘Well, we’ll see. Come along, there’s a dear.’

At this juncture a violent ringing of bells signified that the mistress was not in one of the best of humours, and that the services of her maid were demanded instanter.

At ten minutes to eight a brougham from the livery-stables came and bore Mr. and Mrs. Septimus Slinkensmirk away to The Manor. Perfect peace was reigning at Schlinkenholm, for Master Benedictus Methusaleh, after having partaken of an exorbitant supper within an hour and a half of a very fair meal of tea, hot cakes, bread and butter and honey, had fallen asleep, coiled up and well covered over with rugs, upon the sofa.

Philomela had been compelled to put aside all else, and give her undivided attention to the entertainment of her brother, while he sat enjoying his repast. As soon as she had read him into sweet oblivion, however, she found that the shades had considerably lowered — so much so, indeed, that to work without a lamp, would in a very few minutes be absolutely impossible. Then there was Theodocia’s [300] things to put away — wardrobe to tidy and make all right — besides a pile of mending and darning that frowned upon her in burdensome magnitude! It had been a hard day for Philomela — the malignant planets were undoubtedly in the ascendant, and strife, contention, uproar and tumult were the effect.

More than usual, things had seemed to take a contrary turn. Septimus Slinkensmirk had asserted his rights as master of the establishment — Mrs. Septimus Slinkensmirk had asserted *her* rights — Miss Theodocia Slinkensmirk had asserted *her* rights, and Master Benedictus had asserted *his* rights. One of the domestics had likewise asserted *her* rights in audaciously objecting to being bitten by her young

master, and, not content with that piece of unbecoming boldness, had thought proper to take the law into her own hands, and soundly thrash the aforesaid young gentleman, for which she had received warning, and the threat of ‘no character’: the upshot of it being two fellow dependants had been so much affected by the contagion of indignation, that they had knocked gently at the sitting-room door, and intimated their intention of leaving ‘this day month.’

[301] The dressmaker had had to be reminded of her promise for ‘5.30 p.m. precisely’ no less than seven times, and had finally sent the article on unfinished, with an impertinent message, delivered by an impertinent apprentice, and — ten minutes behind time!

Lady Diana Kairforknaut had called in the forenoon to request the pleasure of Miss Slinkensmirk’s company (Miss Slinkensmirk was becoming ‘the fashion’ in Anglebro’) in her ladyship’s brougham — having a motive for so doing, probably enough — yet being sweetly agreeable, nevertheless — and to the intense chagrin of mother and daughter, Benedictus was discovered, *en dishabille*, in voluble converse with my lady! — moreover, upon being caught in the act, pursued his discourse on the row between father and mother at dinner time — how Soosan and Martha and Mary were all going to hook it — how ‘mother “went off” after shaking Philomela. She’s our Cinderella, you know! She’s made to do everything, like Cinderella in the story-book. And oh my! ain’t she soft to do it! Would I put up with [302] Do’s nonsense! Hollo! here she is! ain’t we spiff, eh? where’s the curl-papers and the rusty old frock? that’s how *she* goes about when nobody ain’t here.’

In the midst of all these *contretemps*, Philomela had actually had the presumption to be taken with giddiness, and fall from the top to the bottom of a flight of stairs, and alighting upon her head, had obstinately remained unconscious of all disturbances for more than half an hour, when ‘she had aroused herself at last, to provokingly faint away — just as she was beginning to be a bit useful in finishing the sapphire tulle’ that had been a source of perplexity and profound anxiety to the wearer lest it should not be ready for the evening.

‘Pure obstinacy! nothing else! why doesn’t she *often* have attacks of giddiness and tumble downstairs? Why can’t she have one when there’s nothing to be done, and not conveniently arrange it so as to have one when we are beset with work and difficulties? Artful creature! I wouldn’t allow it if *I* were you, ma. Hold your tongue, pa! you’ve added *your* share to the confusion, goodness [303] knows, and as for you, Benedictus — if ever you *dare* to mention *my* name again to any of *my* friends, I’ll an — nihilate you, you odious young toad!’ — the elegant Theodocia had affirmed with lips livid with inward wrath.

Was it obstinacy that had occasioned Philomela’s untimely attack of giddiness, or was it rather owing in somewise to the note that Martha had managed to slip unperceived into her hand soon after breakfast? Probably the latter, for the contents of that epistle had fallen like a lump of lead upon the receiver’s breast, and lay there in insufferable weight, almost necessitating the cessation of the heart’s action.

A few lines — curt, and to the point — stating that the writer, having held a consultation with her inestimable friends, the Misses Cringewell, she, Mrs. Piety Praiseworthy, ‘had heard sufficient to perceive the danger she had been about to rush blindfold into, by taking into her house, and the bosom of her united family a young person of the character and tendencies of Philomela Slinkensmirk, as governess and protectress to five pure-minded buds of promise,’ concluding with an [304] exhortation for the

afore-mentioned ‘young person’ to put herself immediately under the care of a worthy and discriminating spiritual adviser of *Low Church* persuasion.

To the young hope is fresh and full of vigour, but under certain conditions even they may despair; in one single moment the last spark may suddenly be extinguished and all become dark — dark and cold, and barren, and desolate before them — as it *had* become to Philomela Slinkensmirk. The anticipation of change, of fresh air, and of getting away from never-ending trouble, nagging, turmoil, quarrelling, and ungenial surroundings, with perpetual drudgery, unprofitable, unappreciated, unsatisfactory — to have her future left in her own hands — to begin afresh, and strive hard to elicit sympathy, a kindly smile of encouragement, a simple yet valued word now and again, gently spoken; and, more than all, not to be continually reminded of her personal disadvantages, and that she was ‘a disgrace and shame to all who bore her name’ — these had been her sole consolations of late, when she lay down her heavy aching head to rest — cruel mockery! — at night, the [305] only time she had for thought. A few weeks back, and a vision was wont to arise before her tear-dimmed eyes, a low voice whispering words within her enraptured ear that eased the burden by its magical sound and stayed the tears all gathering fast, while a light would pass o’er ‘her entire countenance, and for five minutes she wandered again in fancy through the golden waving corn-fields, with one hand held captive in a soft, warm grasp, and listening with a strange new thrill of delight to the all-absorbing expressions of affection unchanging, and vows that should *never* decay. Five minutes of happiness complete! Five minutes’ bliss upon earth! and then — stern, inflexible, *cruel* reality forced itself upon her, and she had awakened from her sleepless dream of the past to witness the grim, grey present in still more hideousness before her. Then she had arisen from her bed, and stealing softly across the chamber, unlocked a drawer, and taking therefrom a small leather case — *his* present — touched a spring and revealed a *carte de visite*, a few dried flowers, and — a scrap of paper — that was all! *All!* yet sufficient to [306] recall her young life’s romance, and, alas! another and another night’s misery. And the morning dawned upon her, pale, swollen, and with red, bloodshot eyes — the result of hours of unrest and long weeping; and even as she caught an unsought glimpse in the looking-glass, again a fresh flood of tears poured forth in an agony of weakness and misery. Surely no joy came to *her* with the morning!

The breakfast-bell sounded, and she had to obliterate the traces of her sorrow as quickly and as well as she could, while her limbs trembled so she could scarcely stand.

‘*What* a sight, to be sure! She gets plainer and plainer every day! Why don’t you try to make yourself more presentable, if not for your own sake, for that of others who are blessed with gentility and an idea of grace and refinement!’

Such had been her sister’s greeting that particular morning, and similar from mother and brother, in each respective style of phraseology. Some feeble excuse of not feeling well had been offered: that was received with an outburst of derision. *Now* she neither [307] strove nor desired to bring forward any apology or reason for her increasing ‘ugliness.’ None the less, it grieved her as much, nay, fifty times more, than it was calculated to affect those whose sensitive nerves it offended.

But *then* she had something else to share her solitary attention; *now* both were crushed, dead; and as she, on the evening of the concert at The Manor, sank wearily into a seat by the large, old-fashioned window, and in her weakness buried her face in both hands, hot, scalding, hard, and bitter tears glazed her eyeballs, but, no — they would not, *could* not flow, and she fancied her heart *must* burst, it swelled

and heaved so tremendously, and a lump arose in her throat that choked all utterance, all sobs, all sighs.

How long it was that she sat there not even herself could tell. That sensation, or more correctly speaking, *numbness* of sensation, had soon set in that *does* come in time, when the feelings have been wrenched and overstrained beyond a certain bound. A species of stupor — normal apathy — living death, call it what we may; however long it [308] may have lasted, it was naught but a lost link in the chain of her life, a link that in after years she might endeavour to replace, but would have to relinquish the task as a hopeless one — doubtless for the best, who can say? A link that would connect a feeble, knotty, and emaciated cord with one silvery, even, of great brightness and length.

Being, feeling, life, consciousness, came suddenly upon her, and, with all, a knowledge, an intuition of a presence! The room had become dark, and a lamp was dimly burning upon a table at the far end. One of the servants must have been in and brought it. Perhaps Philomela had not been observed, perhaps the maid had mercifully left her undisturbed to enjoy a sleep — a sleep? ah no!

The windows were well shaded by trees, and very little light could be imparted through their agency; indeed, looking out into the garden beyond, an inky blackness alone met the gaze — that weird blackness that is so eerie when abruptly awakening and turning towards a casement from a less degree of darkness within.

Yet Philomela aroused from her [309] day-trance refreshed, relieved, comforted, and with the impression, the belief — the indisputable yet unaccountable knowledge full upon her, of the nearness of a *presence* — whether man, woman, or child she could not say; it was a *presence*. Moreover, it was a spiritualised being — not merely an animal, a soulless entity — that could *feel* and act in sympathy, in soul affinity. The sensation was beyond all expression in language, so soothing, so life-giving! And she would fain have sat there for hours, for she *knew* she had companionship *now*, though she could *behold* no person whatever.

As her eyes grew more accustomed to the lights and shades, the one appeared to commingle with the other, until no longer an impenetrable darkness was without, but only an autumnal evening's fading twilight, and there — close, close beside the window, was — the *presence*! Starting, she clasped both hands tightly together, and gazed with a fixed stare before her — she *could* not scream, she *dare* not rejoice, for she imagined it must be a ghost, a wraith, a spectre that she now beheld, and her tongue cleaved to the [310] roof of her mouth. Astonishment, fright, took possession of her, and a clammy perspiration bedewed her brow and rendered her cold and corpse-like.

A far-away ring from a bell — *so* far away, it seemed — distant voices, muffled and indistinct as through a telephone, followed by the opening of a door — miles and miles away — a few steps, still far away, nearer, and then an arm encircled her, and with its touch the distance leaped from afar to her side, and that same low, muffled voice murmured one word in her ear:

‘Philomela!’

It was not much, but all — everything — to *her*, and even as she fell fainting on to a broad and manly breast, she breathed in response:

‘Evelyn — *my* Evelyn — come back to me. I am happy now! Oh! let me die!’

But Philomela did *not* die — anything indeed but *die*, for from that moment she recovered strength, and beauty came in due time; her cheeks grew round and damask, her eyes brightened and sparkled with vivacity, and her step was light and elastic. [311] In short, opinions varied considerably as to which Miss Slinkensmirk should bear the palm — the genteel and pensive Theodocia, or her happy, genial sister. Had it not been for that ‘*presence*’ perhaps it might have been different; the probability is that Philomela *would* have died — wasted away as an uncared-for blossom — fading day by day for want of air and nourishment, or, in other words, kindness and sympathy, as, alas! so many of our young are permitted to do each year! Instead of that, her time of trial was over; she had borne her part bravely, complaining little, and her reward was great when she, within three months, became the wife of Evelyn Wyndhurst, and still more a favourite of his aunt, the Hon. Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall.

To this day they laugh over the looks of consternation worn by the ‘nobility and gentry’ of Anglebro’, when, in place of Mr. Evelyn Wyndhurst, whose name was inscribed upon the programme for his voluntary services, a stranger, bearing in some inexpressible particular a resemblance to the ‘German professor,’ Herr von Spielengetrickstermann, [312] minus those ‘odious green spectacles,’ lank light locks, and ridiculously curious garb, stepped upon the extemporised platform, and handing a young lady to the pianoforte, commenced to favour the ‘select audience’ with a most able rendering of an old yet ever favourite song, ‘I’ll come back to the old love again.’

‘What’s the meaning of *this*?’ interrogated Lady Liana Kairforknaut in a loud voice of nobody in particular, but all in general.

‘Lawks a mercy me!’ ejaculated Mrs. Septimus Slinkensmirk, ‘if it isn’t ——’

‘Keep quiet, ma, *can’t* you!’ interrupted the elegant Miss Theodocia, waxing pale as alabaster, as a strange presentiment came upon her, and pinching her mother’s arm to emphasize the remark.

‘What a piece of impertinence — *who* is he?’ inquired Mrs. Justinus Braggart.

‘Won’t the nephew be here, I wonder? What a — hem! — pity I’ said Miss Anastasia Bogle.

‘Ma, isn’t he coming?’ from Miss Simplicity.

‘Hush! — it’s to be hoped so, I’m sure,’ [313] answered ma, glancing at her daughter’s expensive embroidered muslin — new for the occasion.

‘Now, girls, don’t look so glum — he *may* come, after all. In any case, here’s another to set your caps at — ha! haw!’ jocosely remarked Sir Benjamin Broadacres — gentleman farmer — in his usual blunt manner to a trio of *passée* daughters.

‘Oh, pa!’ — then, *sotto voce* — ‘don’t talk so loud, you vulgar old thing!’ for which he returned a half suppressed ‘Haw! Haw!’ and took another pinch of snuff, spilling a portion of the contents of the richly chased box on to the velvet garments of his eldest born.

‘Where’s Wyndhurst? Not back yet? By Jove, I’m in luck! Is there a seat vacant beside Lady Di — Diana?’ observed Mr. Edwin Prettyman to Major Oldentuff.

‘No. Blenkensopp has stolen a march on you to-night, my boy. By-the-way, what’s the matter with Miss Slinkensmirk? She’s looking as if she’d had a great fright — seen a ghost or — something of the kind,’ said the major in reply.

‘Perhaps she *has*, major,’ put in another [314] voice, shrill and piercing — that of Mrs. Toadyvell. ‘Your friend, the captain, was much taken with her pretty face; perhaps he has come back in spirit — if such be possible, as some affirm it is. It’s said one’s dying thoughts are oftentimes embodied at a distance.’

‘What, in heaven’s name — what *are* you talking about, madam? Who?’

‘Yes, your friend — he *was* a friend of yours, I believe.’

‘Not — not — St. Leger?’ gasped the major, grasping the back of a chair for support, for a singular weakness had taken possession of him.

‘Yes, Captain St. Leger. Were you not aware that he was thrown from his horse and killed on the racecourse yesterday morning? — broke his neck, I believe. I thought *you* would have known. How *well* he sings! Such depth, such feeling in his voice! Who is he? Surely young Wyndhurst won’t disappoint!’

But this last was addressed to thin air, for the major had brusquely turned and left the dining-hall, making his way into the grounds [315] surrounding The Manor, and staggering as a drunken man would do.

‘My God! it’s *too* awful! poor fellow! poor St. Leger! he was a brother to me!’ and the great powerful Englishman covered his face with both hands, two crystal drops trickling from between his quivering fingers and watering the dew-bathed sod where he stood.

‘A *brother* to him! Ah, what might he not have been to *me*! Heaven have mercy upon him — upon *me*, and grant me strength to live calmly and with my secret all unknown!’

Another had heard Mrs. Toadyvell’s words — a woman *this* was — *not* young, but a *woman* with a true woman’s heart — and she also had stolen unobserved from the house, lest others should remark her weakness, and, in their cold inhumanity and petty love of gossip, question and sneer that *she* who had long since passed the midday of youth should *feel* — should know what it is to love, and have that loved one taken away at *such* an age, in *such* a manner. The world *can* understand the fleeting love dream of youth, but alas! [316] what toleration has it for the deeper, more stable affection of mature womanhood?

At the termination of the song, a mingled tumult of applause and buzz of the oft-repeated question, ‘*Who* is he?’ rang throughout the spacious hall; but all was set at rest when the hostess, the Hon. Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall arose from her seat and introduced the ‘stranger’ as her nephew, Mr. Evelyn Wyndhurst, otherwise Herr von Spielengetricksternmann, and the young lady as Miss Philomela Slinkensmirk, his affianced bride.

A blank dismay settled upon the countenances of all present, and, for half a minute a rigid silence reigned, which was broken at length by Septimus Slinkensmirk, who had maintained a fixity of gaze startling to behold into nothingness before him, relaxing his glazed and semi-dazed orbs to wander spasmodically whithersoever they pleased, then vehemently smacking his right knee, he gave utterance to his satisfaction in the following terms:

‘Ha! ha! *haw*! capital! *cap*-ital! You’ve tricked us, Mr. Trickyman — you’ve tricked us! excellent! *Excellent*!! Philomela, me [317] babe, me jewel. Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen, it’s *too* good! *too* capital!’

too capital, my dear — haw! haw! *haw!!!* We've all been tricked, and I — I — Give me your hand, Mr. Wyndhurst — so — and yours, Philomela. Bless thee, me children — bless thee, me babes.'

'Philomela — Philomela! sweet girl! darling creature! she's a treasure, Mr. Wyndhurst — a *treasure*, although I say it as is her own lawful ma — she being my own flesh and blood and a veritable Slinkensmirk into the bargain. She is a *treasure!* worth her weight in emeralds and diamonds! didn't I always say so, Septimus? To be shore, to be shore!' Then, turning to the Hon. Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall, who was taking stock of the 'nobility and gentry' with an amused twinkle in her eye, 'Ah! she'll be a blessing to your nephew, ma'am! a downright blessing, that she will,' declared Mamma Slinkensmirk. 'And will she leave her pore ma? Philomela, my love, it's cruel — cruel to leave her pore ma! but there — a mother *must* make sacrifice of her best! It's hard, after so many years of untiring devotion, but such is life! there's no [318] complaining — no complaining where duty compels. Ah! a mother's feelings who *can* tell! Theodocia, the *mouchoir*, the salts, the fan, the *sal volatile* — or — I shall go off — it's *too* much! And — and — get your dear sister a chair; don't you see she's standing? Your own sweet sister! pore lamb! Mr. Wyndhurst, sir, I congratulate you — I congratulate you publicly and heartily! She's the facsimile of her ma. Bless you both!'

'Am I dreaming, Philomela? if so, for heaven's sake awaken me! What's the meaning of it all? Tell me. I feel as if I — I — should faint! Where is *he?* the nephew — the — the *other* Evelyn Wyndhurst, and — and — that odious German,' gasped Theodocia, seizing her sister's arm and speaking in an undertone, while trembling visibly.

'*This* is Evelyn Wyndhurst, the nephew, the other was his friend, Mr. Eric Gordon, who was married yesterday to my old schoolfellow, Cissie Fairbairn, and Evelyn was "best man." But what *is* the matter? You're not well, Do, dear,' said Philomela, in utter ignorance of the cause of her sister's sudden indisposition.

[319] 'Then he — he — your *fiancé* was — *is* the nephew, Evelyn Wyndhurst, and — and — the professor also,' continued Theodocia.

Philomela laughed. 'Yes, it was a trick, so I hear, that they had agreed to play in fun upon the folks of Anglebro'; but I really am not acquainted with particulars as yet, though I believe Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall can enlighten us; is it not so, Evelyn?'

'Yes, I must beg to apologise for the hoax to all the company in general, and to you, Miss Slinkensmirk, in particular, for especially boring you, as the sister of my lady love, with my cosmogonies: you remember the old adage, "All is fair in love and war," and nature having endowed me with an innate *penchant* for mischief, between the two, and with the assistance of my friend, Mr. Gordon, who did in no wise object to playing the part of Evelyn Wyndhurst during his short sojourn in the town, I willingly availed myself of the excellent chance of proving the constancy of one whom I had long cherished hopes of some day claiming for my bride, and at the same time the splendid opportunity of gratifying my inherent propensity. If I have [320] gone too far, or in any way by omission or commission overstepped the bounds of conventionalism, I now most humbly crave your pardon, and hope that Herr von Spielengetrickstermann may be forgiven, if not forgotten. My aunt, I fancy, has a few remarks to make, ere we proceed with our evening's entertainment.' So saying, 'the nephew with the brilliant expectations' and — now that he was in reality *himself* — good looks and noble bearing, took his seat beside his betrothed, who fully appreciated the fun of the whole affair, more particularly as it gave to

her the one whom she had treasured as the idol of her heart — the hero of her life's romance — ever since that happy fortnight when they had rambled together through the golden cornfields and exchanged vows of mutual and lasting affection.

'Ladies and gentlemen — I also must ask pardon for the countenance that I have given to this eccentric frolic of my nephew, on the plea of the dull state of the town at present, and the possibility of a harmless piece of excitement, that we must *all* acknowledge is sometimes delightfully refreshing and [321] invigorating. Moreover, we must be charitable to the ways of youth, especially as in this case it is said that Mr. Evelyn Wyndhurst derives his fun-loving propensity from his late mother's family, matching his Aunt Despoticum — as she *once* was, mind — in her love of practical joking. It has afforded me no small amusement, I can assure you; and now that I witness the pleasant *dénouement*, I can but feel glad and rejoice in my nephew's good fortune, that has proved to him the faithfulness of his first love. My friends and guests, let us all unite in best wishes for the happiness, prosperity, and long life of Evelyn Wyndhurst and his future bride. Philomela, my dear, God bless you!'

This speech of the Hon. Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall was received with loud applause; there was not a lady present, young or old, but appeared to join heartily in it; nevertheless, a disagreeable, sickly sensation worked within each organism, and, strive as they might with smiles and outward expressions of congratulations, that qualm would *not* cease to torment, but engendered hard lines and bilious sights to intervene between their [322] expensive, yet, alas! unsuccessful attire, and *that* couple, who now occupied the posts of honour at the feet of their worthy hostess, radiant with satisfaction and hope for the future.

Miss Theodocia — calm, lady-like Miss Theodocia — spite of vigorous efforts to retain composure, was observed to be inwardly suffering a martyrdom, and Lady Diana Kairforknaut it was who remarked to her neighbour, the rector's wife:

'He may thank the Fates that have given him the younger sister, and not this poor, silly thing, who has not an idea beyond her milliner and dressmaker. She's terribly aggrieved, *I* know. Well, it shows his common sense in *some* degree in choosing the one with the less sham of the two, though heaven only knows what folly men go and commit in one day to rue for ever after.'

'She's *very* plain, dear, is she not?' said Miss Anastasia Bogle; 'and a brewer's daughter! I *wonder* at the Hon. Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall.'

'Yes,' sighed her friend, Miss Melancholia Lovelorn, 'I *did* think Lady Diana would — [323] but ah! Edwin will have another chance *now*!'

'Pooh! *fancy*, ma! Mr. Wyndhurst and that — *that* ugly girl — a *velveteen* dress, for I examined it! — what a figure!' affirmed Miss May Bloomingshy, in a whisper.

'I wish I'd worn my summer's muslin, *now*, botheration! and that old Toadyvell must go and tread upon my train as I was coming from the coffee-room, and slit a quarter of a yard of embroidery! spiteful creature! just because I was on Major Oldentuff's arm! I shan't come on again for an *encore*, if I'm called!' from the 'inseparable,' Miss Simplicity.

'Dear! oh, dear! never ask *me* for a new dress again! what *would* your papa say if he knew what it cost! and all to no purpose! It's monstrous!' asserted the last-mentioned young lady's mamma bitterly.

‘Dear Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall, pray permit me to congratulate you on your nephew’s *charming* choice! A *sweet* girl! How happy you must feel! *When* is the wedding to come off? Indeed! so *soon*? What a comfort, a blessing to you to have *such* a niece! Live with you at The Manor, of [324] course? No! ah! true, his own estate in the West of England — extensive property, no doubt? Yes, to be sure, worth many thousands, I should say? Ah! quite so, exactly! Ve — ry nice! Ve — ry pleasant! You *must* think so! you must be satisfied, hem, *delighted*, of course! Mr. Wyndhurst, allow me to congratulate you, so glad! No introduction necessary — Miss Philomela Slinkensmirk and I are friends already!’ Then, in a whisper, ‘You are the envy of *all* the ladies, my dear! So glad! so glad, bless you!’ and with this Mrs. Toadyvell passed on to each of the feminine sex successively, and in turn made each wince again beneath the darts of her piercing and affable sarcasm.

Before the concert broke up, however, Miss Theodocia Slinkensmirk was perceived, by a lady acquaintance, in a far off corner engaged in an absorbing *tête-à-tête* with Mr. Clement Noodlekins, who was apparently suffering from a nervous attack combined with intolerable heat, by the many times that he wiped his blushing face with a crimson silk pocket-handkerchief.

The conclusion arrived at by the majority of the weaker sex was to the effect [325] that *every one* (excepting the individual self) had that evening experienced a grievous disappointment, and that the nephew, Mr. Evelyn Wyndhurst, was, after all, not even worthy the cost of a new dress, much less the name of *husband*; moreover, if Miss Theodocia Slinkensmirk was going to take up with young Noodlekins, it *must* be that she was driven to an extremity for a beau — they would rather *she* than *they*. As for Lady Diana Kairforknaut encouraging Edwin Prettyman, the idea was — disgusting! out of *all* proportion! — that Mrs. Justinus Braggart should open her doors at her next reception to the brewer and his wife and daughters was opposed to all sense of duty in her, or rather her husband’s, semi-public position; that Miss. Anastasia was certainly no younger: two additional crow’s-feet had been added this last month, which would *not* be filled up — her bosom friend, Miss Melancholia Lovelorn, was more sickly-looking than ever, now that all hope of catching Edwin Prettyman was compelled to be relinquished; that those ‘inseparables’ were ridiculous objects in their unbecoming juvenile garb; that the Rev. [326] Luke Gospelwarm needn’t expect *their* cooperation any longer, unless he had a new importation of more interesting (and eligible) curates; that Sir Benjamin Broadacres was vulgar and coarse in his remarks, and that his daughters might as well give in to the inevitable, and be ticketed ‘not wanted’ — poor things! they had done their best; that Major Oldentuff was a bear, and as such conducted himself in the society of ladies; that ‘Cousin Clara’ was too old for *that* sort of thing — it only made her appear ludicrous; that Captain St. Leger was a fool to go and risk and *lose* his life, when he might, had he chosen, have had every penny of his cousin’s fortune at his own command; that Lord Blenkinsopp was poorer and less *compos-mentis* than ever; that the representative of the town of Angrebro’ was *not* a man of his word, and his wife too much of the fine lady to mind her husband’s business; that Mrs. Toddylove-Tippler’s nose was decidedly enlarged, and beginning to blossom at the tip; that Mrs. Toadyvell was growing more wheedling and spiteful every day of her life; and lastly, that the Honourable Mrs. Despoticum-Leademall [327] *must* be taking leave of her senses! — what else *could* such conduct be attributable to?

And the masculine gender *unanimously* declared that Miss Philomela Slinkensmirk was ‘a charming little girl’ and Mr. Evelyn Wyndhurst ‘a lucky fellow’ — so opinions differ.