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Caroline Corner

THE LIGHT IN THE CLOUDS

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*"For there is nothing covered that shall not be revealed:
neither hid that shall not be known."* — Luke xii, 2.

"And now, men, see not the bright light which is in the clouds." — Job xxxvii., 21.

I.

It was a typical November day, raw-cold and foggy. Little wonder that the city merchants and brokers jostled one another in their eager endeavours to reach the divers conveyances which were to convey them to their suburban homes. Men, middle-aged, old, and young, pushed their way, regardless of interruptions, and invulnerable to the plaintive voice of the youngest and less experienced of the flower-girls, who, with sunken cheek and hollow eye, implored each passer-by to purchase one of her tiny bouquets. Maybe their hearts were chilled by the inclemency of the weather, or that their thoughts and inclinations were far removed from their present uncongenial surroundings; at any rate few purchasers seemingly were forthcoming that evening.

Six o'clock had struck. In the office of Messrs. Buffin Bros, and Shrimp, the clerks were engaged in clearing away and arranging for the I morrow, when "*Ting, ting,*" resounded the hand-bell of senior partner No. 2. N.B. — The firm was comprised of three: Thomas Buffin, or Buffin senior, as he was more generally known, was accustomed to summon one of the staff of *employés* with a single reverberation of the bell, whilst his junior, James Shrimp, was expected to request attendance by a treble repetition, thus, "*ting, ting, ting.*"

In answer, away ran a bullet-headed youth, fresh from the country, who had been deriving infinite amusement from drawing amateurish caricatures on the blotting paper, and carting his initials on every available place with a very inelegant sort of pocket-knife.

"Yes, sir; I am here, sir." With a face as red as a tomato, and pulling at a lock of rebellious hair that would net keep in its place, notwithstanding frequent and lavish applications of a specially prepared,

home-made pomade, which had been thoughtfully packed, along with a diversity of luxuries, by his fond maternal parent, prior to his starting for the great metropolis.

“Well, Lumpkin, my lad, I am glad to see your beaming physiognomy.” (Lumpkin wondered what in the world that might be; but, standing open-mouthed, made no comment thereon.)

“To be sure it’s not one of the cleanest, though. Never mind, my boy; all in good time; we’ll make a man of you. Lumpkin,” asserted Josiah Buffin, a gleam of the comic glistening in his clear blue eye. Then assuming a more grave aspect he continued —

“And now to business, Lumpkin. Business first, play afterwards, if I should be. You see your master is not always right — far from it. Listen to me, lad. Take care to follow in the footsteps of the best example; act up to your conscience; remember ‘honesty is the best policy,’ and now, tell Mr. Snaffles I want him.”

With a muttered acquiescence the youth awkwardly sidled out of the office, and delivered the message to Mr. Snaffles, the confidential clerk to the firm.

“Ah, Mr. Snaffles,” quoth Mr. Josiah, when the former made his appearance. “How fares the world with you?”

“Complacently, sir, complacently,” was the suave response, the speaker meanwhile pursuing his old habit of chafing either hand.

“And yourself, sir, and Mr. Buffin. I trust —”

“My brother’s health continues bad — very bad. I am afraid he will have to remain for the winter in the south of France.”

“Dear, dear,” Snaffles purred, and appeared much concerned.

“Has that affair of Bentinck and Hodge’s been rectified? the accounts made to tally?”

“Yes, sir; it was owing to carelessness — sheer carelessness on their part — as usual. I went myself and discovered the error to their entire satisfaction; they wished me to convey their apologies —”

“Very good; mistakes may easily be made,” put in the good-natured Josiah Buffin.

“Not so easily rectified, sir.”

“You are right, Snaffles. And now, is there anything else before we leave to-night?”

“There’s Munroe —”

“Ah, attend to that yourself. We have every confidence in you. You can best explain and settle matters in that quarter. Has the brougham come? It’s late to-night.”

“I will make inquiries, and you shall be informed in one minute — in one minute, sir.” Exit Mr. Snaffles on lip-toes, closing the door noiselessly behind him. At the expiration of the aforesaid interval an announcement was made to the effect that the carriage was in attendance; and Mr. Josiah, with a genial “good night” to those of his *employés* who yet remained, forthwith prepared to take his departure.

“Hurr-rh! what a night for anybody to be about!” mentally ejaculated Buffin, jun., while poking about with his gold-headed stick to secure the right way in the dingy light.

“Egad! what’s that?” he exclaimed, aloud this time, as a feeble cry issued from a corner still darker than the rest.

“Some poor stray kitten, I’ll lay a wager. Here, Smedley, bring the lamp this way. I’ll send for some milk; poor beast! it shan’t starve if I can help it. I’ll take it home with me: it will amuse our baby, May; bless her, how she will crow!”

These thoughts occupied the mind of the kind-hearted, old gentleman, when his servant appeared, lamp in hand, and with a cynical smile on his chiselled features, which had been likened by one of his numerous admirers unto the profile of Marc Antony at the Crystal Palace.

“There, in the corner, Smedley. Look, it moves! My God! it is a human being!”

Josiah Buffin grasped the iron rail, when the dazed and wistful gaze of a pair of large, dark eyes met his own, and the skeleton form of a male child — a mere infant — was disclosed to view.

“Here, Smedley, summon one of the juniors — quick, man. We must have this soon to at once. Brandy — warm milk — anything to keep the urchin’s body and soul together. Into the office, and tell them Mr. Josiah ——. Fetch somebody — quick!”

Smedley did as he was bid; if reluctantly, at any rate precipitately. When he returned his master was still employed in poking the inanimate form with his stick, but all to no purpose.

“We are too late! — too late!” he repeated, brushing a hand across his eye that had suddenly become more dim, whilst a half sigh forced itself from his breast.

“He aint dead, sir, no more nor you nor me. He’s a skilinton; but he’s a live ’un. Why, sir, me an’ Jim Ketch, in our street, saw a worse nor this here ’un at a show down our way, all for a copper a piece; an’ Jim’s young brudder he was.

This place of valuable information was furnished by a diminutive, sickly-looking youth of the *gamin* order, who seem to be called into existence spontaneously with any sort of excitement that may be going.

What “Jim’s young brudder” was or was not is a fact destined to remain hidden from the world, at least to that portion of it assembled on the steps leading to the offices of Messrs. Baflin Bros. & Shrimp. Symptoms of life were again exhibited by the poor little creature; and Josiah Baffin forthwith determined to put into execution an idea which had seized upon him with such pertinacity that he was fain to regard it as a supernatural impression. Accordingly the forlorn and emaciated infant was enveloped in the warm bear-skin rug, and deposited upon the soft cushions of the brougham, much to the disgust of Smedley, who returned to Highgate with one of his aristocratic features, evincing a decidedly celestial affinity, which had not existed when he set out that afternoon from the pretty villa residence of his master.

“Ha-ha-ha! we have got him, Mr. Snaffles — we have got him! Let us once resign him to the care of the women folks and he’ll come round — right as nine-pence. Good night to you — good night.”

And the last seen of Mr. Josiah that evening was a large proportion of buff-coloured waistcoat, his massive cable chain still shimmering from the effects of hearty laughter as the carriage rolled away.

II.

Years have passed since the foregoing incident. Now everything is wearing its brightest and most cheering aspect, for Christmas is approaching, and even the stolid, matter-of-fact English put forth strenuous efforts to drive dull care away at this festive season.

The drawing-room of a certain picturesque villa at the north of London is one of those rooms that invite persons to enter, and, upon that invitation being accepted, as it invariably is, contrive to make that person so comfortable, that he, or she, is loath to leave. Some subtle spell is there; a charm that 'twere vain to strive to resist; magnetically one is detained; and yet in nowise contrary to one's will. It is not the style and fittings of the apartment, handsome, though in this case they be; neither is it that opportunities are amply presented to gratify intellectual tastes. No; it is an influence which pervades the whole house; a warm genial atmosphere, which, to a sensitive organism, is the best possible index to the mental and moral status of the indwellers.

Holly, laurel, and mistletoe appear in profusion, relieved by many wax candles, which, together with the glow from the blazing log, impart a delightful feeling of homeliness and repose. The solo occupants of the apartment at present are two ladies. The elder, tall, majestic, and handsome, clad in some kind of soft black material, enlivened by a solitary damask rose and spray of maiden hair, is gracefully bending over a piece of wool-work, and only raises her head now and then to steal a glance at her companion on the couch. By these earnest and anxious regards it might well be supposed that the elder lady is wont to exercise a protecting care over the other. Such indeed is the case. Mrs. Josiah Buffin, when dying, shortly after the birth of her only child, May, had expressed a wish that her over indulgent husband should secure the services of the orphan daughter of her late governess to be instructress and companion to their motherless child.

Thus it was that Isabel Morton had been installed in the home of Josiah Buffin. The little May grew and thrived under such sensible and sympathetic treatment as she had always received, but her constitution, inherently weakly, would never be robust. This distressed her father; he feared that she might be too fragile a flower to bloom 'midst the tempests of life, and by dint of heavy fees he derived a vague sort of consolation from consulting the most eminent of the medical faculty. As time wore on, and the early days of childhood were over, another cause for anxiety developed itself in the mind of the parent; May became subject to "delusions," or, as it was termed, "the victim of delusions." But why those "delusions" were there, the learned physicians of the day could not explain. Her mental capacities were as clear and expansive, indeed, more so than those of the majority of her age; on this point they one and all agreed. Nevertheless she was whimsical, full of fancies, and, at times, the "victim of strange delusions." A name must be given, consequently, it was pronounced a "case of hysteria."

"May, dear, how quiet you are! what are you thinking about? Come, you are most uninteresting company. Do you know I have filled in almost half a slipper since you spoke last? Do let us have a chat, and don't let your thoughts go a-woolgathering any-more."

The silence was broken by Isabel Morton, who, having carefully folded her work and put it away in a trim little basket, came and sat upon a stool at her companion's feet.

"Is it really so long, Isabel? I had forgotten you were here; but, tell me, what is the time? I suppose they will be here presently. I wonder if — Frank has grown."

The only remarkable feature in May Buffin's fair girlish face was her eyes. At times there was a far away light in them — a light that seemed to belong to another world — another life. That light came into them now, and illumined her whole countenance with a *spirituelle* radiance.

“Five minutes past seven. Hark: yes, there is the sound of wheels — they are coming, May.”

No other inducement, was needed for May to arouse herself and adjust her feminine superfluities before the chimney-glass.

Scarcely was this completed, when the door was thrust open and her father appeared upon the scene, wearing his full compliment of buff waistcoat and a face more cheering than the rising sun. Behind him stood a tall, intellectual-looking young man, with dark eyes and moustache. This latter made a hasty movement in order to greet his “little friend and playmate”; but he stopped short when he beheld that charming little individual now metamorphosed into a “grown-up young lady,” with a long dress and hair coiled in a knot at the back.

“Now, children,” what's come over you? That's no welcome at all, May. And you, sir — I hope you've not got too learned to notice old friends. Ha-ha-ha,” and Mr. Josiah rubbed his hands for very joy.

“Come, my boy, do the honours of King Christmas. I can well remember the time when there was no need to be reminded when a pretty girl was in the way. That isn't so bad for an old fogey, now, is it? Ha-ha; that's the style.” Then, aside, in a singularly altered tone, he said:

“How has she been to-day, Isabel?”

“Pretty well, sir; but, in spite of my endeavours to amuse, she has persisted in dreaming more than ever to-day. But this is to be accounted for, I think,” continued Miss Morton, “by the anticipation of Frank's return.”

“So it is — so it is. Well, we must make everything as bright and joyous as we can for her; and — who knows? — she may now grow out of it. Dr. Palmer entertains great hopes: capital man, Dr. Palmer. And now that Frank has left college for good, it will be more lively for her.

At the same time I can never thank you sufficiently for your kindness, dear Miss Morton; but if the blessings of an old man be of any value, you have them, my dear, you have them.”

As he turned away, Isabel's quick perceptions detected something glistening in the corner of his clear blue eyes. Could it have been a tear, when the next moment his laughter was heard hearty and jolly as ever.”

After dinner the junior partner, Mr. Shrimp, joined the party in the drawing room, and the evening passed pleasantly and all too quickly away. The timepiece struck twelve. James Shrimp arose with a start. He was an ardent admirer of the majestic Isabel — ardent, yet silent. She was so stately and handsome; he was so small and unattractive. But to-night he was feeling desperately brave. Ever since he had known her he would have gone through fire and water for her sweet sake, although for his own life he could not have breathed a suggestion of his love for her. He could and did pay other women compliments but his tongue refused in the case of Isabel Morton, who, in his opinion, was the only one deserving of admiration and esteem. Now, in the moment of desperation, he gave utterance to more sentiments than the sum total of twelve long months. But, unfortunately, his cheeks flushed red as Miss Morton's damask rose, and he felt more than usually awkward while endeavouring to appear at

ease and his best. Mr. Josiah, kindly soul, took in the situation at once, and came to his partner's relief with an opportune remark which created considerable mirth; and thereby James Shrimp was enabled to retrieve his self-possession prior to bidding his fair innamorata a last "good-night."

When the ladies had retired to rest, and Josiah Buffin and Frank Sinclaire were alone, the former opened the conversation by observing:

"Well, my boy, and how do you like the idea of beginning life — life in earnest, now, my good fellow: no droning nor idling, but work — hard work. Ay, that's the stuff to make the man! What were we sent into the world for but development? To strengthen morally, physically, intellectually; to progress, lad — ever striving, ever climbing, — that's the style. You like the idea? That's capital. Now, my lad, there's one thing I'd have you to keep always in mind; it's simple, short, and a favourite maxim of mine. 'Honesty is the best policy.' Let this be your motto throughout life, and, egad! you'll never live to see the day when you'll regret it."

The answer was given in a calm, firm voice, the tone one of intense earnestness —

"That shall be my motto and my guide; and, with Gods' help, I will endeavour to bring no suspicion of disgrace on you and yours. There is my band upon it, Uncle Josiah, and with it is given a promise sacred and sure."

"Bless you, my boy; you are a noble fellow. Yet I would not have you so serious; you speak as if — as if I could doubt you, Frank."

After this silence prevailed for some few minutes. Frank Sinclair was the one to interrupt this time.

"Uncle, there is something that has disturbed me much of late. It has always been in my mind, but of late it seems to have taken a deeper hold, and leaves an impression which I cannot shake off. It is a kind of vision that arises before me, more often when I am alone; a scene of squalor and poverty, succeeded by the glimpse of a half-starved infant enveloped in a bundle of rags, and stowed away in some dark corner. Involuntarily I shiver, and feel chilled, hungered, and faint. Then rest, oblivion, creep upon me, and my senses are apparently wrapped in a deathlike slumber — my spirit struggling to free itself from its fetters of clay. Presently the sound of voices impedes my would-be errant soul, and with a cry — a wail of regret — I, that miserable child, am recalled to this world of probation. Here my day-dream ends, but to begin again and again with little or no variation. Tell me, uncle, can it be some delirium which has clung to me since the days of some infantile disorder? Over-study, an excited imagination, weakness of the digestive organs may account for most morbid affections, but this is different. A picture — a scene repeated and still repeated without a single omission, and the most singular part of it is that I feel myself closely connected with that wretched child, and experience the same sensations, the effect of cruelty and privation, that it must have endured. If this be due to the unsound condition of the mental faculties, the sooner I have them seen to the better: if you are anxious to make a man of me, uncle," he added, in a lighter strain.

"Ha! Don't give way to sentimentalities: shake them off as one would the effects of a disagreeable dream. It's all them ologies, and onomies, and thingammy-ptolemies — nothing more nor less, Frank. You want rest; and that reminds me of another favourite maxim of your uncle Josiah's when lie wan a small boy. 'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.' Ha, ha, ha!"

Josiah Buffin laughed, but to a close observer, such as his companion, it might have been apparent that this laugh was a trill a forced, and the fact of his approaching a side-table and pouring out a glam of port, was very suggestive of an excuse, for Uncle Josiah was no wine-bibber.

However, the subject was allowed to drop, and, when next Frank Sinclaire was inclined to speak of it, marvellous changes had been wrought. Nevertheless that, vision continued to haunt him until the mystery of night had merged into the light of day.

III.

“Mr. Snaffles is a nice fellow, May, and rather good-looking, don’t you think so?” asked Frank Sinclaire, his dark and penetrating eyes fastening themselves on the countenance of his companion.

“No — that is — yes, I suppose he is;” and May dropped her eyes on to her breakfast-plate.

“Well?” This was as much as to say “Proceed,” but the hint was not taken, so the speaker was himself compelled to proceed.

“Silence means consent. I infer that you *do* consider him good-looking. Well, there’s no accounting for taste.”

“I never said so,” she said, gently.

“But you mean it,” he answered, determinedly. “I tell you what, May, I don’t like that fellow. He is insincere, he is mean, he’s a sneak, and — there, I only wish Uncle Josiah were rid of the man; his ‘model clerk’ — pshaw!” And with this Frank left his seat to pace up and down the floor at a desperate pace.

“Frank,” a soft voice whispered close to his ear; “don’t be angry, do talk rationally, and now that you have breached the subject, if you’ll come and sit down quietly, I’ll tell you a secret.”

“All right, I will, I’ll try at least. You must think me a brute — a fool — to go on like this; but I am thinking of your welfare, and I love you so, May.” Again those dark searching eyes were riveted upon her own; this time she turned aside with a nervous little laugh, and the next moment commenced to disburden her mind of that which bad for some months past considerably perplexed and distressed her.

“Ever since that evening, now most of a year ago, when papa brought Mr. Snaffles home with him from the city, to dine with us, and introduced him as his ‘confidential clerk,’ I have experienced a peculiar chill of horror at his approach, and when he has touched my hand at times I have almost cried out. A stifling oppression comes over me as though I had suddenly awakened to find myself in some damp subterranean dungeon; he seems to carry about with him an atmosphere that overpowers me, and, my vision becoming clearer, that atmosphere appears to be laden with serpents and other venomous reptiles of hideous and malignant aspect. This may seem ludicrous, but it is a fact, and I am sure it has been presented to me for some wise purpose. Oh, Frank, you cannot imagine how I have longed to tell you this my little secret; you are the only person who can understand and will listen to my ‘odd whims and fancies,’ as they call them. I could not confide this to anybody, not even to Isabel, for she would have sent immediately for the doctor, who would have insisted upon my swallowing more of his nauseous physic, and left injunctions for me to be “watched.” She shuddered as she uttered this last word, and tears came into her large expressive eyes. Like the rest of his sex, the sight of a woman in tears was too much for Frank Sinclaire. He drew her gently to him, and in a kind, sympathetic tone,

succeeded in leading her away from this to a more agreeable topic. Speedily enough was Mr. Snuffles forgotten, for their minds were too all-absorbed in personal and much more interesting affairs. Nevertheless the other was merely temporarily in abeyance, and was predestined to arise again in more palpable significance than heretofore.

* * *

Time rolled on — winter had passed and summer had come — yet few changes had taken place in the household of Mr. Josiah Baffin.

Frank Sinclaire had been initiated into mercantile life in the city of London, and, naturally of a studious turn of mind, was accustomed to spend the greater part of his leisure in scientific research, which was far more according to his taste than the humdrum of commerce. His was a disposition that to attempt meant to succeed, for intensity and perseverance were the predominating qualities; failure was a thing altogether foreign to his curriculum. Instead of Talleyrand's famous maxim: "*Surtout, point de zèle,*" to him "*Zèle, plein de zèle,*" would have been more applicable. A faithful friend, he would have made an implacable foe, for his was one of those natures that must love or hate with vehemence, and know not the meaning of *dolce far niente* in their perpetual state of activity.

Josiah Baffin was the same as ever — genial, and well-beloved; and although the inevitable buff waistcoat could not conscientiously testify to such frequent repetitions of audible hilarity, yet he was as ever open-hearted and indulgent to the whole world. A keen observer might have remarked some additional wrinkles on his large, square brow, and a few hard lines about his mouth when in repose. Moreover, his eyes had acquired a habit of fixedly regarding the countenance of his adopted son as though disturbed in mind by some vexed and difficult problem, while his, Frank's, every movement was remarked with anxious concern.

May was the first to note this peculiarity in her father, and, experiencing some kind of instinctive dread, made a confidante of Miss Morton, who, in order to set her young friend at ease, "pooh-poohed" the idea, and would not be persuaded that anything was troubling Mr. Josiah. At the same time this communication had made an impression on the strong-minded Isabel, and she resolved to mention the subject to her ardent admirer, Mr. Shrimp (that gentleman's courtship being in the same condition of stagnant advancement, though more than once he had rehearsed in the privacy of his chamber, — an eloquent offer of his hand and heart; but, alas! upon finding himself alone in the company of his majestic lady-love, both eloquence and EASE had vanished, and left him dumb and mute, awkward, as any other man who is in love.

"Mr. Shrimp, I wish to ask your advice on a matter that is causing us, May and myself, great anxiety. Shall we go on to the grotto? We shall be free from interruption there."

"With pleasure," gulped the modern Romeo, with an unmistakable glance of admiration at his beautiful Juliet. "Anything I can do for you, Miss — Miss Morton: anything in this world that would relieve you of pain, I would willingly go through fire and water to accomplish, as — as I believe I have told you before."

Poor Mr. Shrimp never exceeded this degree of regard, for at this junction his face became a match in colour with his Solferino tie, and, for the next few minutes, he experienced a sort of semi-suffocation.

“Thanks so much; you are very kind,” returned Isabel, placing her hand through his arm, as a matter of course, for there was a tacit understanding between them, though, as yet, no binding word had been given.

“Will you sit here, Mr. Shrimp? and I will join you. That’s right. Now, are you comfortable?” she asked with true woman’s archness when they had gained the grotto, and looking up from beneath her broad-brimmed hat, which, by-the-bye, was exceedingly becoming.

Comfortable! how could he be otherwise? And yet, everything seemed to whirl distractingly before him, and his tongue cleaved to the roof of his mouth. He was enduring a species of delicious torture, and the only response he was just then able to make was a pitiful look of adoration that told more, far more than many an able speech could have done.

“And now, I’ll begin; please pay attention for I am in earnest,” and the half-smile, which had hovered over the handsome countenance of Isabel Morton, was exchanged for an expression of intense earnestness.

“And so am I, Miss — Miss Isabel; can you doubt me?” broke in Mr. Shrimp, starting to his feet, and gazing at his companion as though about to pounce upon and devour her.

“Really, Mr. Shrimp — James — ahem!” (this was the first time she had called him by his Christian name; how sweetly it sounded from her lips ; anything but commonplace!) “I — I never dreamed of doubting you” (he verily believed he could detect an emphasis on that last pronoun!) “If my words would imply aught but what they were intended I really am very sorry,” and she looked it, and this very sympathy softened and sanctified her manifold charms in the eyes of her admirer.

“No; it is I who am a — a — ass,” burst forth the lover, in defiance of the elementary rules of grammar, and waxing uncomfortably warm.

“You must allow a difference of opinion on that score, Mr. Shrimp. However, we’ll not enter into argument, but, with your permission, I will at once commence what I have to say.

“For some weeks,” pursued Isabel, “I have remarked a change in good old Mr. Josiah. He does not laugh so much as formerly, nor take such an interest in our pleasures and domestic affairs. More than once I have interrupted him in grave thought when his countenance has been enshrouded in a grey, grim cloud: so unusual for him. Now, can you offer any clue to the solution of this? I fancied that business loses might account for this. Tell me, Mr. Shrimp, has anything gone wrong in the city?” She leaned forward now, clasping her hands, and fastening her irresistible, black eyes on the pale blue orbs of her adorer.

“My dear Miss Morton — Isabel, there is, as you say, at least,” he hesitated, and, drawing forth a silk pocket-handkerchief, wiped his forehead, again and again, as though to encourage inspiration.

“You said you would ‘go through fire and water’ to relieve me of pain.”

“And so I would,” he spoke up manfully.

“Then, why not place confidence in me? Do you not remember those lines of Tennyson:

“Unfaith in aught is want of faith in all:

Then trust me all in all, or not at all?”

Those are my sentiments. Now, will you tell me?"

James Shrimp would have been more than man had he proved invulnerable. The situation, the state of his emotions, the fascinating grace of his fair *inamorata*, severally would have sufficed to manifest his human frailty, but conjointly!

"The — the only thing of which I am aware, Miss Morton, in connection with business affairs, and which may tend to engender anxiety is that owing to some mistake having been made, there has been, and is still, difficulty in balancing the accounts. Mr. Snaffles is diligently going through all again, and the fault, I trust, indeed, I have no doubt, will soon be rectified. Matters of the kind, however trivial, are a source of worry and annoyance to everybody concerned.

"But, surely, an error made by a careless book-keeper cannot be the cause of such an alteration in our estimable friend, Mr. Josiah," added Mr. Shrimp, doubtingly; for at the office the affair had been reckoned a mistake and nothing more by senior partner No. 2.

"Well, it does seem absurdly trivial," replied Miss Morton; then regarding the matter through those far-seeing and practical spectacles or her's, she continued:

"But, supposing all does not come right by-and-bye; that the defalcation cannot be accounted for; how then, Mr. Shrimp?"

"Hum! it would be awkward, very awkward indeed. But, thank goodness, there's no fear of such a contingency; so pray do not distress yourself, Miss Isabel" (it always demanded an effort to get that name out, although it was indelibly inscribed on his heart).

"And now let us folk of ourselves — of each other — of both," he stammered. "You are not in a hurry to get away, are you?" he went on, gradually inclining nearer and nearer till his arm rested on her own. "You don't want to go back to the house just yet, do you?" While this was being said his hand had traversed her sleeve, and now lay lightly upon her wrist, "I think it — we are very comfortable here, don't you?" Now there was a slight pressure, so slight she was scarcely sure of it. "Aye!" No longer dubious, the pressure had developed into an unmistakable squeeze!

"I am very comfortable, thank you; I hope you are the same."

"By Jove! I am. I — I never was so happy in my life. I never knew what happiness is until now, Isabel."

"Certainly the scenery about here is very pretty; that bit over there is charming; this grotto is a favourite haunt of mine at this time of the year. Who would think that we are so near London?" was the lady's reply.

"Who, indeed?" echoed James Shrimp; at present he was in paradise.

"But it is not the place; it is the state," he endeavoured to explain.

"Oh, indeed." Metaphysical abstractions were not Isabel's *forte*.

"And the cause — the origin — the fundamental principle: that is yourself, ahem." With this he stopped short to observe the effect; and deriving encouragement, he pursued in one uninterrupted strain —

"Yes, Isabel, you are the cause — the origin — the fundamental principle of my happiness. You are my life, my soul, my existence. Without you — no! such were an impossibility and unworthy of consideration. But *with* you, this world would be an elysium; my life would be the quintessence of bliss, and

you should exist and reign in an atmosphere of adulation. Isabel, I love, I adore.” And now his arm encircled her waist; his lips were close to her cheek.

“Tell me, Isabel,” he whispered, “tell me my love is not in vain.” Whatever the answer may have been, James Shrimp availed himself of the opportunity to imprint a long, lingering kiss upon that blooming cheek, and the shades of evening had already subdued the glory of the summer’s day, when it occurred to the enamoured couple that it was time to return to the house.

“Oh, Isabel, I am so glad. I always said how it would be; and yet I am awfully surprised and so delighted,” exclaimed May impulsively upon bearing the news. “And papa,” she went on, “won’t he be glad when he hears of it; how I wish he would come home, so that I might be the first to tell him. I wonder if Mr. Shrimp — I shall call him Jemmy now — I wonder if he has told Frank; we left them together in the library. But, Isabel, you’ll be getting married,” she added ruefully, “and I shall be left — alone.” Those large expressive eyes, which an instant ago had been radiantly blue, now changed to a soft and limpid darkness like those of the gazelle.

“So long as I can be of any use — so long as you want me. May, I will never desert you. Have I not been like a mother to you, my child?” and Isabel’s firm protecting arm was instinctively employed to support her youthful charge. Isabel Morton’s nature was positive; it was her disposition to give, not receive; her mind was clear, steady, and reliable; her heart brim-full of affection of a patronising order, though none the less tender and sincere; whereas May was decidedly negative — that is, she was susceptible to outside influences and inclined to be swayed thereby: it was inherent in her to yearn for protection, sympathy, support, and incumbent upon her to give in to a superior, or rather more dominant will. It is hard for such as her to compete in the arena of life; like sensitive plants, they recoil from contact with the gross and uncultured, and wither and oft-times die should the force of circumstances compel them to exist in an atmosphere that is uncongenial. Again, they are seldom appreciated, for they are so seldom understood, and are invariably permuted to remain on the threshold, whilst others, less deserving, very probably, enter and are regaled.

Verily, they have their reward.

IV.

Some twelve days had gone by since the incidents recorded in the last chapter. Business was going on as usual in the offices of Messrs. Buffin Bros., and Shrimp. Clerks tall and short, lean and stout, old and young, were perched on high, uncomfortable-looking stools, scratching away as though life depended upon it; and, in many instances, life did depend upon it. As every hive has its drones, so, of course, drones were to be found here; these came under the denomination of juniors fresh from school, who were entertaining one another across the desks with facial impersonations and pantomimic gestures, characteristic of their more sedate seniors. Numerous were the caricatures drawn of “Hezekiah Snaffles making love to a pretty young girl,” which feat elicited roars of suppressed laughter from the whole force of juniors.

Mr. Josiah has just arrived; it is later than usual, being close upon eleven o’clock; and has made a request that he may not be disturbed unless something of importance demands his attention. Alone,

in his private office, he proceeds to loosen his neck-cloth, then, with trembling hand, he draws his silk pocket-handkerchief across his brow with a weary, restless action.

The atmosphere seems exceptionally confining to him this morning. He turns towards a smoke-begrimed window, which opens on to sooty leads, and, throwing up the sash, thrusts out his head, thirstily inhaling what small proportion of fresh, summer air that survives in so densely-crowded a neighbourhood. After this he returns to his seat — an old-fashioned elbow-chair — and, with both arms planted upon the desk before him, gives himself up to profound meditation. Some minutes elapse, and then he speaks in a low, hoarse tone; apparently he is unaware of thus giving utterance to his thoughts: —

“And it must end thus! the dream of my old age is shattered in its very fulfilment! What have I done to deserve it? Did I not act as I thought for the best — for his welfare? I imagined I was doing my duty — the duty of a Christian — when I rescued him, an infant, from destitution and vice; and I have been the means of leading him into temptation — temptation such as he has not been strong enough to resist. I, who fancied I was implanting the good seed in his young mind when I besought him to keep that maxim for his own throughout life, ‘Honesty is the best policy.’ Honesty? Can there be such a thing in this world? My God! I begin to doubt, to doubt at three-score years and ten; now when my race is almost run! No, no, it must not be; I will not doubt, and doubting not, I must believe. Oh, Frank, my boy, my boy!” and the old man’s voice breaks into hard, irrepressible sobs, each adding its contribution to his aged and sorrow-stricken countenance.

Presently a light illumines his tear dimmed eye, and he raises his head while his thoughts continue to materialise themselves into words.

“No, I cannot; I will not believe it. Frank, my boy, something tells me you are not guilty; some unseen presence is here, I feel it, and it speaks to my soul. Hush! what does it say?”

“He is innocent — innocent — innocent! Dark clouds may gather; but look — look long; see’st not the bright light in the clouds?”

“And now it has gone; that still small voice is hushed; so sweet, so soothing, it was as an angel’s voice; and I must — I will believe, for my soul has heard and felt.”

A calm quiescence came over him and Mr. Josiah remembered no more until he was disturbed by a repetition of loud knocks at the door.

“Ah, Lumpkin, my lad, is it you?” he said, suddenly awaking from his trance-like slumbers.

“Yes, sir, if you please. Telegram, sir, just come,” answered the lymphatic Lumpkin, now considerably advanced on the high-road to maturity, and improved accordingly, since our first introduction

“Ah! From Hezekiah Snaffles.

“Taken suddenly ill last night — shall not get up to town. No alarm — will write further particulars in a day or two.”

Josiah Buffin read in a low voice; then aloud —

“So, poor Mr. Snaffles is ill. Dear, dear. I am very sorry for him. Moreover, it’s most unfortunate — most unfortunate, just now, too,” he pursued, relapsing into his old habit of clothing his thoughts in words.

“Any answer, did you say, sir?”

This recalled him from a perplexing labyrinth of speculations. Mr. Josiah hooked up, and replied: — “No; no answer. We must wait, Lumpkin; there’s nothing for it but to wait, and hope and trust,” he added, in a fervent undertone. The clerk withdrew: Josiah Baffin was left alone.

Presently the grim, devouring spirit of doubt again creeps in. Stealthily it advances, like some rank weed snapping the germs of choice exotics — those highest efforts of the human mind — and engendering nought but chaos where simplicity and harmony once had reigned. Stealthily, yet surely, until an atmosphere, thick and impenetrable, is gathered 'twixt the poor old man and the guardian of his happiness and welfare.

“Strange! everything turns against me,” he wails forth in his distress. “Has my good genius entirely deserted me? deserted me now when I have attained my allotted number of years, three score and ten? O God! it does seem hard that a lifetime’s trouble should come upon me now! Why am I deserted at this, et eleventh hour? Heaven have mercy on a miserable old man!”

His bold head is laid low on his breast, and scalding tears rain down his furrowed cheeks. Three score years and ten; and yet, in the hour of trouble he is but a child — an infant. If we did but search more deeply should we not perceive that these very trials, which, in our blind ignorance we deem so fruitless — unjust, are the most blessed offerings that a merciful Providence can accord?

“Tears and smiles alike are sent
To give the soul fit nourishment.”

Ay, and to remind us of our weakness our dependence, our human fallibility!

The first passionate outbreak of grief subsided, the clouds move on, the light once more appears. Josiah Baffin is arranging his neckcloth at the glass; he is resolved upon, going home: useless is to remain in that office nursing his agonising fears.

He starts at his own reflection; so altered, he scarcely recognizes himself. Simultaneously a sound as of music thrills his ear. He listens; he is absorbed, although the air, the chant, is an unfamiliar one. And yet the refrain is sweet — sweet and entrancing. It runs thus: —

“Reap, reap, reap.
The fruit of the seed that is sown.”

V.

When Josiah Baffin reached home that afternoon he went direct to his study, with the request that Miss Morton should be informed that her presence was urgently desired.

He had not been seated many minutes when Isabel appeared, looking handsome and queen-like as ever. But her happy expression vanished immediately, and was replaced by one of grave solicitude when she spoke.

“Mr. Josiah, I am afraid you are not well. What is the matter? Has anything recurred to trouble you?”

“Yes, Isabel, my dear, something has occurred. I am in unutterable grief, and have sent for you. You are a good woman, sensible and true, and will keep my secret I know; only forgive me, I must have

your word, your promise first. Say, Isabel, that which I am about to confide to you shall never be divulged to mortal ears. Ah! you cannot sanction this; and why? Have you not implicit confidence in me? have I not always proved your friend?"

Isabel's countenance had betrayed her most inward feelings; she was sorry, distressed, and yet she was determined to adhere to the voice of duty, hard though it be at times. It required an effort, but she managed it.

"That you have always been to me, sir, and more, nevertheless I cannot make any such promise; it would neither be just nor right."

"Ah! it is Shrimp whom you are thinking of! Good girl, forgive me; I had forgotten. Of course, he is not included under the ban. Now will you give me your word and attention, Isabel?"

"I will, with pleasure. Mr. Josiah."

He commenced —

"For some time it has been a struggle to appear the Josiah Baffin former days. I have had a worm-gnawing, gnawing here at my breast, Isabel, and I believe you were able to detect it. The storm which threatened has broken at last, and in its fury has crushed an old man's heart.

"Things have gone wrong in the City; cheques have been presented and cashed to the sum of £ 1.500."

"Fifteen hundred pounds!" echoed the listener aghast.

Ay, my dear, fifteen hundred pounds; not that it would have mattered materially had it been twice that amount, could the — the delinquent have been another, and not him, my boy —"

"Frank — do you mean?" broke in Isabel still mere amazed. "Is it possible that you can suspect him?"

The old man's chin fell on his breast; his voice low and husky when he replied —

"It is. Mr. Snaffles, our confidential clerk, and the only person who knows of it beyond ourselves, Isabel — Mr. Snaffles found proof sufficient in his (Frank's) own desk. A small bottle of some chemical preparation, to eradicate ink marks, stowed away at the book of a drawer." His breath came and went in gasps as he said this, the perspiration meanwhile breaking out in drops upon his brow.

Isabel Morton was really alarmed at the appearance of her old and valued friend; how she wished her James were here. At any rate she must not show trepidation; now was the time when strength of mind was most required.

"And is that the proof, the only proof?" she inquired calmly.

"Is it not sufficient? sufficient to convict and transport —"

"Rubbish! It's proof to *me* of his innocence. Would it be probable that he, or any other sane person, would so compromise himself by keeping the tools which he had employed locked up in his own desk? This is too absurd!

"Is that the bottle? 'Watson, chemist, Rotherhithe: Poison.'" She read from the label, then continued in a firm, resolute voice: "That, of course, goes for nothing. We must have the whole affair carefully searched into, for that Frank is not the guilty one I am as positive as I am of my own existence." With this she uncorked the bottle and vigorously inhaled the unwholesome aroma of the contents.

After a brief silence Josiah Buffin awakened from his reverie, and said —

“Ah, Isabel, my dear, I know you too well. You wish to relieve my aching heart; but no, it cannot be. I am beyond that now. My grief has gone — gone in a moment. I feel insensible to pain — almost lifeless. Isabel, when I am gone, tell him all. That I fancied I was doing my duty, doing all for his good. It was a mistake, and I am to blame. Yet, ask his forgiveness; it was my ignorance. I should not have put temptation in the lad’s way; he was young and — never mind — never mind, now. You, my dear, and Brother Thomas, and Mr. Shrimp, and Snaffle, and myself; these alone must know. Not May, poor child. Promise me this, Isabel, and that May shall be cared for and looked after by you as — as now.”

Isabel Morton was gazing fixedly out of the window; abstractedly gazing through an impenetrable mist. Mechanically she turned, and, placing a hand lightly upon the old man’s shoulder, she answered, “I give my promise, Mr. Josiah, sacredly and surely.”

“God bless you.”

Then there was silence. By-and-bye Josiah Buffin aroused himself from his attitude of inert dejection, and remarked in a singularly strained voice:

“And Frank? what must be done with him, Isabel? I cannot permit him to continue living here in close companionship with little May. I *did* think; but no, that is over; he must go away — abroad — to Australia — anywhere; and with another name forget the past and its associations. Frank Sinclair must be no more.”

Frank Sinclair must go away — abroad — to Australia — anywhere. Frank Sinclair must be no more. Who has spoken those words, and what can they mean?”

The door was thrust open, and May, with crimson spot on either cheek and eyes full of fire and enthusiasm, rushed into the room.

“Father — Isabel, what do I hear? Some false accusation against Frank? For it *is* false — a base calumny — a cruel wrong. Believe, oh, believe what I say; it is true. I have heard all that has been said. Forgive me; ’twas against my will that I was drawn hither, and forced to remain; and yet, I see it now, it was for a beneficent purpose. Hark! there is singing; an angel’s chorus. Hush!

“*Reap, reap, reap*

“*The fruits of the seed that is sown.*

“Ah! a beautiful light; a ‘bright light in the clouds.’ It opens. Look, look. She comes; my good genius, enveloped in heaven’s own light. She comes, my guardian angel. She smiles upon me, and draws near. I feel her presence, calm and soothing; her breath fans ray cheek. She whispers in my ear, ‘Frank, Frank.’ Ah! it is to save him she comes. Yes, dearest spirit, I am ready. Oh! sweet, entrancing sleep. I see, I see.”

The young girl’s countenance has become glorified with light not of this earth; her soul beams forth from its casket of clay; the flesh is for the time subjected; the spirit reigns supreme. Presently this *spirituelle* serenity is disturbed by a quivering of the lips, while the eyelids flicker for an instant, are raised, and the balls appear to pass upwards into the head. Then succeeds a deathly immobility of features; the fair skin is blanched to an alabaster whiteness. She sighs: a slow, prolonged breath. A smile passes over her countenance; her lips again more, and in a soft, somnambolic voice she speaks:

“A little room. It is so foggy, I scarcely can see. Stay! he brings a candle: yes, it is a man. Oh, such a wretched place! What is he doing there? Ah! it is dark again — dark, shadowy, and confused. I must rest awhile.”

Again her senses are enthralled in a brief trance: again both lips and eyelids are affected with nervous twitching; again a long-drawn breath prefaces the following remarks: —

“More distinct now. There is a window high up in the roof; I can see the stars shining — so bright, so beautiful; they seem to look down upon him and weep! — why should they weep? Ah! they will not let me go near him — why?

“The candle burns away — it is in a draught — and the stand — a brass one, is bespattered with grease.

“The man is enveloped in clouds; his head is a globe of mist; and everything about him is dark — so dark; it makes me shudder.

“Now he gets up. How thin! his clothes hang loosely: he looks miserable, and yet — determined. He takes something out of his pocket — examines it — it is a bottle. He smiles a grim, hideous smile, and walks with a slow, measured step. I know that walk; it is familiar, and yet. — If only I could see his face! He keeps his eyes lowered, and only cautiously steals a glance behind — around — as though fearful lest he should be observed. He is at work now; he touches certain parts of the thin, crisp papers with the stoppers of the bottle; then proceeds to fill up the space — there are figures, but I cannot read them — it hurts my head. Clouds gather betwixt that man and myself: I can see no more. Let me sleep: sleep off this pain; to awaken calm and refreshed.”

And now expressions of alarm, distress, horror, pass in succession over the clairvoyante’s face. It is as though antagonistic influences are at work.

In singular contrast to the former, and more natural, purity of repose, are the wild contortions of countenance provoked by malignant forces resolutely striving for the mastery. The struggle is a fierce one; the conflict evenly maintained. The lookers-on tremble at the spectacle before them; and well they may! It is a case of human obsession: the indwelling spirit is dormant, whilst others — good and evil — are determined to enter in. Which shall triumph? The answer is all important. Now that the gates are opened, these next moments will decide the future course for weal or woe, of an incarnated soul!

Meanwhile, the contest rages; the spectators look on with bated breath. The powers of darkness and light are waging a war against right and wrong: the contention is terrible: what shall the issue be?

* * *

All is over. Again that sigh, and the features relax into unruffled quiescence. With the graceful languor of trance, the clairvoyante rises from her prostrate position on the couch, and passing a band lightly before and across her closed eyes, recommences to speak.

“Such a large ship! and a great many people.” It is the same curious, far-away voice. She continues: —

“Sailors — sailors everywhere. Turks, Chinese, Malays, and Negroes all are there. Some are busy; others are idling about with their hands in their pockets and smoking. They all appear gay and good-tempered. Stay! there is one different from the rest; that one I must follow. I do not like him; and jet — I must

— I must follow him! He makes his way towards one of those big ships; it is a steamboat. Hark! I must not go so near; he chills me. Does he not see me? He seems to fancy someone is behind, for he looks around. Ah! he is afraid; I feel it. But, listen! he speaks; he asks a question. Oh! I have got it. There is another man; this one wears a cap, amber and black. I like that man; he is generous and good-natured. He, also, doesn't like the man with the ginger whiskers, though he doesn't know why.

"Wednesday night — eight o'clock, I heard him say The sun is setting; the sky is crimson and gold; such a glorious summer's evening! And now — all is over. I must sleep."

Gently her head falls back upon the cushion; a smile hovers over her youthful and happy features, and for the next few seconds the clairvoyante remains in a deep trance. At the expiration of that time she awakens, rubs her eyes, sits up, and asks:

"What has occurred? has anything been said?"

VI.

The sun was shining brightly next day when Josiah Buffin, having indulged in a brief rest after his journey from London to Liverpool, ventured forth upon a strange mission.

Turning to the right, then to the left, up one street and down another, eventually he arrived at his destination — the Docks.

The imposing eight of a small fleet of vessels lay before him; vessels of various sizes, accommodation, classification and tonnage; some with their cobwebs of rigging, others with their engines and funnels. It was towards one of the latter that he directed his footsteps. He paused to make inquiries of a sailor, who was smoking a short "clay" and surveying his ship with an amount of British pride. The answer was so far satisfactory that it enabled the inquirer to lend an ear to an oft-repeated "yarn" and thereby while away an idle half hour or so.

"Capital, capital, my man! and so you hauled her in, safe and sound — eh?"

"Shiver me timbers, we did! and the like was never known afore. Mo and my mate, we was —"

"Egad! the very man!" ejaculated Mr. Josiah, fumbling in his pocket for a loose coin for "Jack." Without waiting to hear more he, with a nod to his communicative friend (who received the memento with a grin and a knowing wink), hurried off in the track of the "ginger- whiskered" individual.

"By George, it is true! it *must* be true!" he repeated vehemently to himself, waxing warmer and warmer each time.

"By the powers there is the 'cap'! — 'amber and black' — marvellous, marvellous!" and in order to satisfy himself that he was not dreaming, the old man stamped his foot, then pinched himself.

No! he was wide awake as ever he had been in his life. Great drops of perspiration broke out upon his brow. No heed was taken thereof, for a fixed and engrossing attention was bestowed upon that slight, eccentric-looking personage with a profusion of hair and stealthy gait, who constantly turned to "look behind, around, as though he fears to find someone there."

Mr. Josiah took all in at a glance. He perceived in a moment that each circumstance in detail agreed with that described in vision by his daughter. With impunity, then, might he echo the exclamation “marvellous.”

“Wednesday night; eight o’clock.” The very words; this was conclusive. With a step forward he seized the arm of the “ginger- whiskered.” Their eyes met; both were amazed; the former spoke, his voice trembling with agitation —

“My God, it is Snaffles!”

The game was played out. Hezekiah Snaffles had lost. Little use for him to bear up now; it would only be to kick against the pricks. His complexion, never very brilliant, now turned to a dull leaden hue. He grasped the hand of his late employer, and in guttural accents whispered in his ear —

“I confess. It was I — I, and not Frank Sinclaire.”

“You — *you!*” Mr. Josiah gasped hoarsely, still retaining his hold. “Villian that you are!” he continued, a paroxysm of long pent-up wrong towards another taking possession of him.

“Be merciful. It was for others, not for myself,” pursued the craven one. “You yourself are a father; I ask you, could you see your child, the beautiful May —”

“Silence! let not her name issue from lips so polluted and vile! You may go, wretched man, and may the wrath of heaven be not visited in full justice upon you — you who have been the means of crushing an aged heart, of shortening an old man’s days, of bringing his gray hairs with sorrow to the grave!

“Help! help! I am choking!” (Snaffles had seized the opportunity and was gone). “Water! water!” With this Josiah Baffin fell a dead weight to the ground.

It was sunset: a glorious sunset such as May had described in her prophetic trance. A crowd collected: a doctor was summoned, and the information spread wide and fast that it was a partial paralysis of the brain that the old gentleman had been suddenly attacked by.

Some dozen or more were ready to fetch a cab, and in due time Mr. Josiah was conveyed to the nearest hotel, a medical practitioner in attendance. Upon further examination, it was deemed expedient to communicate with the gentleman’s friends; his entire constitution was proved to be in a terribly shattered condition; the action of the heart irregular and feeble.

“What the consequences of the attack may be upon one of his years I cannot undertake to say; but it were better to telegraph immediately to the address on this card: ‘Lawn Villa, Highgate.’”

* * *

It so happened that Frank Sinclaire had returned from executing a commission of his “Uncle Josiah’s” some twenty minutes previous to the delivery of this telegram. Without delay of any kind whatever, and with only a vague explanation of the cause, he hastened to catch the train from London to Liverpool. Arriving at the Castle Hotel, early next morning, he was informed by the two doctors, who had been closeted in earnest consultation, that little or no hope of their patient’s recovery could now be entertained. A second telegram was dispatched without loss of time; and by expeditious measures both Isabel Morton and May contrived to catch the early morning express. In the excess of grief which

had befallen them May was stunned — petrified. Throughout the journey she sat with glazed eyes, staring into nothing, and seemingly unconscious of the loss she was about to sustain. A superficial observer might have imagined her devoid of those fine sensibilities which help to make up the noblest of earth's born, so unconcerned did she appear to all around her. But in reality it was that stupefaction, which is only experienced by the most sensitive and susceptible organisms, and so little understood, so harshly misjudged by the ordinary and commonplace. A shock has paralysed the nerve-action; it only needs a trifle to restore it to its vitalised and more natural state, to bring back the wandering soul, as it were, to endure the cares and trials incidental to its incorporation.

VII.

All was quiet in the dimly-lighted chamber of the hotel to which Josiah Buffin had been conveyed, and from which it was His will that the fine old man should not go forth until he was carried to his last resting-place here upon earth. Mr. Josiah was dying — dying; but would leave a name behind, and many sweet reminiscences of a kind and generous heart — impressions that would live for ever in the minds of young and old; no matter how hardened their nature might become through contact with the world, there would always remain one soft, warm spot for the memory of a noble old man. Who does not cherish some tender recollection, hallowed and sacred as the years roll on, of a few words of encouragement; a simple yet kindly offering, it may be, or an endeavour to aid when in trouble or disgrace, and feel a debt of inexhaustible gratitude towards his childhood's friend long since passed away? Upon a large, old-fashioned, four-post bedstead lay Josiah Buffin, now calm and free from pain. During the afternoon occasional difficulty in breathing had been perceptible; now that was passed and stillness akin to that of death had taken its place.

Isabel and May had arrived early in the evening, and, from all appearances, not one whit too soon; the end was fast approaching. A return to consciousness broke the solemn silence, and drew the anxious watchers more closely round the bed; each trusting to be recognised and to receive some token of regard. Silence again; those short, irregular breaths sound hard and ominous; life is ebbing; the spirit would soon be freed.

“Children.” The lips of the dying were seen to move, and, instinctively, for the voice was faint and indistinct, they came nearer to catch what might be said.

“He has forgiven — forgiven the cruel injustice. Isabel, I have told him all; he was prepared. Those strange visions of his, which I laughed at, and scoffingly termed hallucinations — ah, I thought to efface the past, but He — He willed it otherwise. I see now; it is for the best. Isabel, he is still my boy. God bless him!”

The ghastly hue of death was again discovered after the effects of this effort; the eyelids closed; the extremities grew cold; the vital force was so reduced that the heart now seldom beat. Still was it not time yet; the white-robed angel stood aloof.

A smile beams forth — the “bright light in the clouds” — sensibility returns, and the old man is once more himself.

“May, my darling May, weep not for me. Could you but see my heavenly home you would rejoice, my child. I have had a dream; in that dream your mother appeared to me. I could not approach her; she

was so radiantly fair; but she beckoned me on — on. My spirit grew light, I felt disencumbered, and able to penetrate the vast unknown. We journeyed together; she leading, I following. It was as though I was borne on the wind, and drawn by some subtle magnetic power. Eventually she paused; uplifted the veil, and I beheld, for one moment beheld, a tithe of those glories which ‘it hath not entered the heart of man to conceive.’ May, there is a way — a bridge which connects this world with the next. Some there are who hold a passport to that bridge. The Great and Wise Father has entrusted these, His favoured children, with a special talent. You are one of these; guard that talent, develop it for the good of your fellow creature. Hide not your light under a bushel, neither keep that talent covered up in a napkin. The world has become hard and materialistic; darkness, as of night, usurps the place of faith; intellect, that of simple trust.

“But a little while and men shall see ‘the bright light in the clouds.’

“Remember these words; and pray — let your aspirations be pure and lofty, and inspiration will be the answer. ‘Prayer is the voice of the soul; it ascends to the throne of the Father, and is there heard as the cry of helpless infancy is heard in the mother’s heart.’ Then cease not to ‘trust in Him at all times,’ my child; ‘pour out your heart before Him.’

“And now farewell; my mission on earth is accomplished. I have other work to do. Kiss me, darling! Good-bye! Good-night!” And with one long breath, a sigh of relief, the spirit is released; the good, the faithful, has passed on to a higher and brighter sphere.

* * *

Two years have gone by. It is summer time again — a soft evening in July: one of those listless gloamings when everything seems half entranced, and no sound is heard save the sweet, low song of the insects, which lulls one to rest, and, to the imaginative, may recall dreams of fairy love, so airy and soothing is the effect.

The villa at Highgate is wearing its old aspect again. Those eighteen months of mourning are over, so far as conventional custom goes, and the house and grounds have, this day, put on their brightest adornments. At present a group assembled on the lawn are expatiating on the charms of two ladies, both of them brides; and opinions are at variance as to which should bear the palm, the imperial and handsome Mrs. Shrimp or the *spirituelle* and fascinating Mrs. Sinclair.

Meanwhile, one at least of the happy bridegrooms comes in for a share of the admiration; both, for the commendation of the fair sex.

Nature has done much for Frank, but a careful and judicious training has done more: *L’instruction fait tout*, the French poet has it. Had Frank Sinclair’s lot been cast amongst the depraved, great would have been the harm accruing, not to himself alone, for, trivial though the influence of one mind may appear, it is none the less weightily freighted for good or ill. Josiah Buffin had turned the scale in the right balance, even so was it ordained; and Frank Sinclair, the infant, who was found ’twixt life and death on the steps of the offices of Messrs. Buffin Bros, & Shrimp will live to

“Reap
The fruit of the seed that was sown.”

May is looking stronger, and more womanly, nevertheless she retains her *petite* figure and dreamy eyes. The physicians consider her case a complete success, as they no longer hear of those delusions to which she formerly had been subject, and which (though this they would never acknowledge) had baffled all medical skill. Others who can understand and appreciate are permitted to join that harmonious circle who hold converse with beings of another and a better world; and the poor, the afflicted, the conscience-stricken and sorely oppressed, have cause, indeed, to bless the "Medium," through whom they of times derive rays of hope and encouragement to press on, on to noble ends and aims — the talent is *not* allowed to rust.

It is now some months since Mr. Shrimp has cast his shell. Some vow he has grown both in height and circumference since that memorable day when he led his beautiful bride from the altar.

Whatever truth there may be in this, his smile has certainly expanded until its proportions have become so comprehensive as to leave no room for those blushes that were wont to suffuse his physiognomy in the presence of a certain *demoiselle*. In short, he can now stand up and make a speech of prolonged eloquence; and what though people do persist that he rehearses the same to his strong-minded help-mate beforehand? Will not envy try to undermine everything?

* * *

Thomas Buffin had been obliged to return, with his wife, to the South of France immediately after the funeral of his brother Josiah. Although his name is still included in that of the firm of Buffin, Shrimp, and Sinclair, he, Thomas Buffin, has withdrawn all pecuniary interest in mercantile concerns, and has retired to enjoy his few remaining years in peace.

Nothing more was heard of Snaffles, the "confidential clerk;" doubtless he has suffered, or will suffer, for the wrong that he has done, for justice compels that each shall "reap the fruit or the seed that is sown."