

**UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY**

OU_212850

**UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY**

HUMOUR & FANTASY

VICE VERSA THE TINTED VENUS
A FALLEN IDOL THE TALKING HORSE
SALTED ALMONDS
THE BRASS BOTTLE

BY F. ANSTEY

LONDON
JOHN MWXRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET, W.

First edition in one volume . . . 1931

INTRODUCTION

VICE VERSA, the leading story in this collection, was first published so long ago as forty-nine years, but it would be false modesty on my part to assume that, even in these days, it is entirely forgotten, or that it may not have been read by some who belong to the present generation.

With the other five works, however, the case is different; at the time they appeared they pleased a certain number of the public, and I am proud to know that they continue to give pleasure to a few who were born considerably later. Still, three of them have been long enough out of print to make it more than probable that modern readers have not so much as heard of them.

Whether, if they read them now, they will find them at all to their taste is impossible to predict. For Humour, like other things, has its fashions, and what may have amused one generation is apt to leave the next rather envying (as in the case of Mr. Pickwick and Mr. Peter Magnus's friends) the ease with which its forbears were entertained.

For all I know, this may be the modern verdict on these stories, but, whatever their ultimate fate, I will not pretend that I feel myself called upon to offer any apologies for them.

I encourage myself by the thought that this *Humour and Fantasy* omnibus would not have been sent out to follow other vehicles of higher horse-power and greater carrying capacity without some confidence that it would not break down *en route*.

But from 1882 to 1931 is a long journey, and it will

INTRODUCTION

hardly be surprising if at the end of it the passengers do not appear quite as fresh as when they started, though they will need nothing but a welcome on their arrival to become almost their old selves again.

I shall hope, as long as hope is possible, that that welcome will not be withheld.

F. ANSTEY.

1931.

The story *The Tinted Venus* is included in this collection by kind permission of Messrs. J. W. Arrowsmith (London), Ltd.

CONTENTS

Vice Versa

	PAGE
PREFACE.	2
1. BLACK MONDAY.	3
2. A GRAND TRANSFORMATION SCENE	15
3. IN THE TOILS	31
4. A MINNOW AMONGST TRITONS	48
5. DISGRACE	69
6. LEARNING AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS	87
7. CUTTING THE KNOT	104
8. UNBENDING THE BOW.	120
9. A LETTER FROM HOME	133
10. THE COMPLETE LETTER-WRITER	146
11. A DAY OF REST.	155
12. AGAINST TIME	169
13. A RESPITE	185
14. AN ERROR OF JUDGMENT.	19s
15. THE RUBICON.	207
16. HARD PRESSED.	221
17. A PERFIDIOUS ALLY.	240
18. RUN TO EARTH	258
19. THE RECKONING.	269

The Tinted Venus

1. IN PURSUIT OF PLEASURE	289
2. PLEASURE IN PURSUIT.	308

CONTENTS

	PAGE
3. A DISTINGUISHED STRANGER	317
4. FROM BAD TO WORSE	323
5. AN EXPERIMENT	337
6. Two ARE COMPANY.	347
7. A FURTHER PREDICAMENT	357
8. BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP SEA	368
9. AT LAST !	384
10. DAMOCLES DINES OUT	395
11. DENOUNCED.	407
12. AN APPEAL.	420
13. THE LAST STRAW.	432
14. THE THIRTEENTH TRUMP.	440
15. THE ODD TRICK	455

A Fallen Idol

THE PROLOGUE	47i
SELF-RESTRAINT.	496
A REMONSTRANCE	509
FROM A PEDESTAL	520
LAST TOUCHES	537
EXPLANATIONS.	546
6. THE PRIVATE VIEW.	561
7. A PAINFUL INTERVIEW.	575
8. REOPENED WOUNDS	587
9. PUT TO THE TEST	601
10. CONVICTION.	612
11. MYSTIFICATIONS	621
12. FOR OLD SAKE'S SAKE	635
13. IN WHICH THE LUCK TURNS MORE THAN ONCE	652
14. ANTAEUS THE SECOND	668
15. THE DAY AFTER	683

CONTENTS

	PAGE
16. BRAVED !	700
17. BRUTUM FULMEN	

The Talking Horse 710

1. THE TALKING HORSE	
2. A MATTER OF TASTE	
	727.

Salted Almonds 753

1. SALTED ALMONDS ; OR, PLAYING THE GAME	795
2. AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE	801
3. " As THE TWIG IS BENT . . ." ETC.	832
4. CAVEAT EMPTOR !	837
5. LUNCH AMONG THE RUINS	843
6. WHY I HAVE GIVEN UP WRITING NOVELS	849
7. MRS. BRASSINGTON-CLAYPOTT'S CHILDREN'S PARTY	860
8. A BUSINESS MEETING OF THE SOCIETY OF PENGUINS	867
9. THE GULL	872
10. THE GAME OF ADVERBS	896
11. THE MAGIC H'S	907
12. AFTER REHEARSAL	922
13. THE LIGHTS OF SPENCER PRIMMETT'S EYES	928
14. A " FIRST NIGHT " SUPPER	937
15. THE ADVENTURE OF THE SNOWING GLOBE	943

The Brass Botfly

1. HORACE VENTIMORE RECEIVES A COMMISSION	963
2. A CHEAP LOT	973
3. AN UNEXPECTED OPENING	978
4. AT LARGE	990

CONTENTS

	PAGE
5. CARTE BLANCHE	995
6. EMBARRAS D E RICHESSES	1009
7. " GRATITUDE—A LIVELY SENSE OF FAVOURS TO COME".	1019
8. BACHELOR'S QUARTERS	1031
9. " PERSICOS ODI, PUER, APPARATUS "	1040
10. No PLACE LIKE HOME !	1061
11. A FOOL'S PARADISE	1068
12. THE MESSENGER OF HOPE	1084
13. A CHOICE OF EVILS	1094
14. " SINCE THERE'S NO HELP, COME, LET US KISS AND PART I ".	1108
15. BLUSHING HONOURS	1123
16. A KILLING FROST.	1130
17. HIGH WORDS.	1141
18. A GAME OF BLUFF.	1152
THE EPILOGUE.	1169

VICE VERSA

PREFACE

THERE is an old story of a punctiliously polite Greek, who, while performing the funeral of an infant daughter, felt bound to make his excuses to the spectators for "bringing out such a ridiculously small corpse to so large a crowd."

The Author, although he trusts that the present production has more vitality than the Greek gentleman's child, still feels that in these days of philosophical fiction, metaphysical romance, and novels with a purpose, some apology may perhaps be needed for a tale which has the unambitious and frivolous aim of mere amusement.

However, he ventures to leave the tale to be its own apology, merely contenting himself with the entreaty that his little fish may be spared the rebuke that it is not a whale.

In submitting it with all possible respect to the Public, he conceives that no form of words he could devise would appeal so simply and powerfully to their feelings as that which he has ventured to adopt from a certain Anglo-Portuguese Phrase-Book of deserved popularity.

Like the compilers of that work, he—"expects then who the little book, for the care what he wrote him and her typographical corrections, will commend itself to the—*British Paterfamilias*—at which he dedicates him particularly."

1. *Black Monday*

" In England, where boys go to boarding schools, if the holidays were not long there would be no opportunity for cultivating the domestic affections."—*Letter of Lord Campbell's*, 1835.

ON a certain Monday evening late in January, 1881, Paul Bultitude, Esq. (of Mincing Lane, Colonial Produce Merchant), was sitting alone in his dining-room at Westbourne Terrace after dinner.

The room was a long and lofty one, furnished in the stern uncompromising style of the Mahogany Age, now supplanted by the later fashions of decoration which, in their outset original and artistic, seem fairly on the way to become as meaningless and conventional.

Here were no skilfully contrasted shades of grey or green, no dado, no distemper on the walls ; the wood-work was grained and varnished after the manner of the Philistines, the walls papered in dark crimson, with heavy curtains of the same colour, and the sideboard, dinner-waggon, and row of stiff chairs were all carved in the same massive and expensive style of ugliness. The pictures were those familiar presentments of dirty rabbis, fat white horses, bloated goddesses, and misshapen boors, by masters who, if younger than they assume to be, must have been quite old enough to know better,

Mr. Bultitude was a tall and portly person, of a somewhat pompous and overbearing demeanour ; not much over fifty, but looking considerably older. He had a high shining head, from which the hair had mostly departed, what little still remained being of a grizzled auburn, prominent pale blue eyes with heavy eyelids

VICE VERSA

and fierce, bushy whitey-brown eyebrows. His general expression suggested a conviction of his own extreme importance, but, in spite of this, his big underlip drooped rather weakly and his double chin slightly receded, giving a judge of character reason for suspecting that a certain obstinate positiveness observable in Mr. Bultitude's manner might possibly be due less to the possession of an unusually strong will than to the circumstance that, by some fortunate chance, that will had hitherto never met with serious opposition.

The room, with all its aesthetic shortcomings, was comfortable enough, and Mr. Bultitude's attitude—he was lying back in a well-wadded leather arm-chair, with a glass of claret at his elbow and his feet stretched out towards the ruddy blaze of the fire—seemed at first sight to imply that happy after-dinner condition of perfect satisfaction with oneself and things in general, which is the natural outcome of a good cook, a good conscience, and a good digestion.

At first sight; because his face did not confirm the impression—there was a latent uneasiness in it, an air of suppressed irritation, as if he expected and even dreaded to be disturbed at any moment, and yet was powerless to resent the intrusion as he would like to do.

At the slightest sound in the hall outside he would half rise in his chair and glance at the door with a mixture of alarm and resignation, and as often as the steps died away and the door remained closed, he would sink back and resettle himself with a shrug of evident relief

Haoitual novel readers on reading thus far will, I am afraid, prepare themselves for the arrival of a faithful cashier with news of irretrievable ruin, or a mysterious and cynical stranger threatening disclosures of a disgraceful nature.

But all such anticipations must at once be ruthlessly dispelled. Mr. Bultitude, although he was certainly a merchant, was a fairly successful one—in direct defiance

of the laws of fiction, where any connection with commerce seems to lead naturally to failure in one of the three volumes.

He was an elderly gentleman, too, of irreproachable character and antecedents ; no Damocles' sword of exposure was swinging over his bald but blameless head ; he had no disasters to fear and no indiscretions to conceal. He had not been intended for melodrama, with which, indeed, he would not have considered it a respectable thing to be connected.

In fact, the secret of his uneasiness was so absurdly simple and commonplace that I am rather ashamed to have made even a temporary mystery of it.

His son Dick was about to return to school that evening, and Mr. Bultitude was expecting every moment to be called upon to go through a parting scene with him ; that was really all that was troubling him.

This sounds very creditable to the tenderness of his feelings as a father—for there are some parents who bear such a bereavement at the close of the holidays with extraordinary fortitude, if they do not actually betray an unnatural satisfaction at the event.

But it was not exactly from softness of heart that he was restless and impatient, nor did he dread any severe strain upon his emotions. He was not much given to sentiment, and was the author of more than one of those pathetically indignant letters to the papers, in which the British parent denounces the expenses of education and the unconscionable length and frequency of vacations.

He was one of those nervous and fidgety persons who cannot understand their own children, looking on them as objectionable monsters whose next movements are uncertain—much as Frankenstein must have felt towards *his* monster.

He hated to have a boy about the house, and positively writhed under the irrelevant and irrepressible

VICE VERSA

questions, the unnecessary noises and boisterous high spirits which nothing would subdue ; his son's society was to him simply an abominable nuisance, and he pined for a release from it from the day the holidays began.

He had been a widower for nearly three years, and no doubt the loss of a mother's loving tact, which can check the heedless merriment before it becomes intolerable, and interpret and soften the most peevish and unreasonable of rebukes, had done much to make the relations between parent and children more strained than they might otherwise have been.

As it was, Dick's fear of his father was just great enough to prevent any cordiality between them, and not sufficient to make him careful to avoid offence, and it is not surprising if, when the time came for him to return to his house of bondage at Dr. Grimstone's, Crichton House, Market Rodwell, he left his father anything but inconsolable.

Just now, although Mr. Bultitude was so near the hour of his deliverance, he still had a bad quarter of an hour before him, in which the last farewells must be said, and he found it impossible under these circumstances to compose himself for a quiet half-hour's nap, or retire to the billiard-room for a cup of coffee and a mild cigar, as he would otherwise have done—since he was certain to be disturbed.

And there was another thing which harassed him, and that was a haunting dread lest at the last moment some unforeseen accident should prevent the boy's departure after all. He had some grounds for this, for only a week before, a sudden and unprecedented snowstorm had dashed his hopes, on the eve of their fulfilment, by forcing the Doctor to postpone the day on which his school was to re-assemble, and now Mr. Bultitude sat on brambles until he had seen the house definitely rid of his son's presence.

All this time, while the father was fretting and fuming

in his arm-chair, the son, the unlucky cause of all this discomfort, had been standing on the mat outside the door, trying to screw up enough courage to go in as if nothing was the matter with him.

He was not looking particularly boisterous just then. On the contrary, his face was pale, and his eyelids rather redder than he would quite care for them to be seen by any of the "fellows" at Crichton House. All the life and spirit had gone out of him for the time; he had a troublesome dryness in his throat, and a general sensation of chill heaviness, which he himself would have described—expressively enough, if not with academical elegance—as "feeling beastly."

The stoutest hearted boy, returning to the most perfect of schools, cannot always escape something of this at that dark hour when the sands of the holidays have run out to their last golden grain, when the boxes are standing corded and labelled in the hall, and some one is going to fetch the fatal cab.

Dick had just gone the round of the house, bidding dreary farewells to all the servants; an unpleasant ordeal which he would gladly have dispensed with, if possible, and which did not serve to raise his spirits.

Upstairs, in the bright nursery, he had found his old nurse sitting sewing by the high wire fender. She was a stern, hard-featured old lady, who had systematically slapped him through infancy into boyhood, and he had had some stormy passages with her during the past few weeks; but she softened now in the most unexpected manner as she said good-bye, and told him he was a "pleasant, good-hearted young gentleman, after all, though that aggravating and contrary sometimes." And then she predicted, with some of the rashness attaching to irresponsibility, that he would be "the best boy this next term as ever was, and work hard at all his lessons, and bring home a prize"—but all this unusual gentleness only made the interview more difficult to come out of with any credit for self-control.

VICE VERSA

Then downstairs, the cook had come up in her evening brown print and clean collar, from her warm spice-scented kitchen, to remark cheerily that " Lor bless his heart, what with all these telegrafts and things, time flew so fast nowadays that they'd be having him back again before they all knew where they were ! " which had a certain spurious consolation about it, until one saw that, after all, it put the case entirely from her own standpoint.

After this Dick had parted from his elder sister Barbara and his young brother Roly, and had arrived where we found him first, at the mat outside the dining-room door, where he still lingered shivering in the cold foggy hall.

Somehow, he could not bring himself to take the next step at once ; he knew pretty well what his father's feelings would be, and a parting is a very unpleasant ceremony to one who feels that the regret is all on his own side.

But it was no use putting it off any longer ; he resolved at last to go in and get it over, and opened the door accordingly. How warm and comfortable the room looked—more comfortable than it had ever seemed to him before, even on the first day of the holidays !

And his father would be sitting there in a quarter of an hour's time, just as he was now, while he himself would be lumbering along to the station through the dismal raw fog !

How unspeakably delightful it must be, thought Dick enviously, to be grown up and never worried by the thoughts of school and lesson-books ; to be able to look forward to returning to the same comfortable house, and living the same easy life, day after day, week after week, with no fear of a swiftly advancing Black Monday.

Gloomy moralists might have informed him that we cannot escape school by simply growing up, and that,

BLACK MONDAY

even for those who contrive this and make a long holiday of their lives, there comes a time when the days are grudgingly counted to a blacker Monday than ever made a school-boy's heart quake within him.

But then Dick would never have believed them, and the moralists would only have wasted much excellent common sense upon him.

Paul Bultitude's face cleared as he saw his son come in. " There you are, eh ? " he said, with evident satisfaction, as he turned in his chair, intending to cut the scene as short as possible. " So you're off at last ? Well, holidays can't last for ever—by a merciful decree of Providence, they don't last quite for ever! There, good-bye, good-bye, be a good boy this term, no more scrapes, mind. And now you'd better run away, and put on your coat—you're keeping the cab waiting all this time."

" No, I'm not," said Dick, " Boaler hasn't gone to fetch one yet."

" Not gone to fetch a cab yet! " cried Paul, with evident alarm, " why, God bless my soul, what's the man thinking about ? You'll lose your train ! I know you'll lose the train, and there will be another day lost, after the extra week gone already through that snow ! I must see to this myself. Ring the bell, tell Boaler to start this instant—I insist on his fetching a cab this instant! "

" Well, it's not my fault, you know," grumbled Dick, not considering so much anxiety at all flattering, " but Boaler has gone now. I just heard the gate shut."

" Ah ! " said his father, with more composure, " and now," he suggested, " you'd better shake hands, and then go up and say good-bye to your sister—you've no time to spare."

" I've said good-bye to them," said Dick. " Mayn't I stay here till—till Boaler comes ? "

This request was due, less to filial affection than a faint desire for dessert, which even his feelings could

VICE VERSA

not altogether stifle. Mr. Bultitude granted it with a very bad grace.

" I suppose you can if you want to," he said impatiently, " only do one thing or the other—stay outside, or shut the door and come in and sit down quietly, I cannot sit in a thorough draught! "

Dick obeyed, and applied himself to the dessert with rather an injured expression.

His father felt a greater sense of constraint and worry than ever ; the interview, as he had feared, seemed likely to last some time, and he felt that he ought to improve the occasion in some way, or, at all events, make some observation. But, for all that, he had not the remotest idea what to say to this red-haired, solemn boy, who sat staring gloomily at him in the intervals of filling his mouth. The situation grew more embarrassing every moment.

At last, as he felt himself likely to have more to say in reproof than on any other subject, he began with that.

" There's one thing I want to talk to you about before you go," he began, " and that's this. I had a most unsatisfactory report of you this last term ; don't let me have that again. Dr. Grimstone tells me—ah, I have his letter here—yes, he says (and just attend, instead of making yourself ill with preserved ginger)—he says, ' Your son has great natural capacity, and excellent abilities ; but I regret to say that, instead of applying himself as he might do, he misuses his advantages, and succeeds in setting a mischievous example to—if not actually misleading—his companions.' That's a pleasant account for a father to read ! Here am I, sending you to an expensive school, furnishing you with great natural capacity and excellent abilities, and—and—every other school requisite, and all you do is to misuse them ! It's disgraceful ! And misleading your companions, too ! Why, at your age, they ought to mislead *you*—No, I don't mean that—but what I may tell

BLACK MONDAY

you is that Fve written a very strong letter to Dr. Grimstone, saying what pain it gave me to hear you misbehaved yourself, and telling him, if he ever caught you setting an example of any sort, mind that, *any* sort, in the future—he was to, ah, to remember some of Solomon's very sensible remarks on the subject. So I should strongly advise you to, itake care what you're about in future, for your own sake ! "

This was not a very encouraging address, perhaps, but it did not seem to distress Dick to any extent; he had heard very much the same sort of thing several times before, and had been fully prepared for it then.

He had been seeking distraction in almonds and raisins, but now they only choked instead of consoling him, and he gave them up and sat brooding silently over his hard lot instead, with a dull, blank dejection which those only who have gone through the same thing in their boyhood will understand. To others, whose school life has been one unchequered course of excitement and success, it will be incomprehensible enough—and so much the better for them.

He sat listening to the grim sphinx clock on the black marble chimneypiece, as it remorselessly ticked away his last few moments of home-life, and he ingeniously set himself to crown his sorrow by reviving recollections of happier days.

In one of the corners of the overmantel there was still a sprig of withered laurel left forgotten, and his eye fell on it now with grim satisfaction. He made his thoughts travel back to that delightful afternoon on Christmas Eve, when they had all come home riotous through the brilliant streets, laden with purchases from the Baker Street Bazaar, and then had decorated the rooms with such free and careless gaiety.

And the Christmas dinner too ! He had sat just where he was sitting now, with, ah, such a difference in every other respect—the time had not come then when the thought of " only so many more weeks and days left "

VICE VERSA

had begun to intrude its grisly shape, like the skull at an ancient feast.

And yet he could distinctly recollect now, and with bitter remorse, that he had not enjoyed himself then as much as he ought to have done ; he even remembered an impious opinion of his that the proceedings were " slow." Slow ! with plenty to eat, and three (four, if he had only known it) more weeks of holiday before him ; with Boxing Day and the brisk exhilarating drive to the Crystal Palace immediately following, with all the rest of a season of licence and varied joys to come, which he could hardly trust himself to look back upon now ! He must have been mad to think such a thing.

Overhead his sister Barbara was playing softly one of the airs from " The Pirates " (it was Frederic's appeal to the Major-General's daughters), and the music, freed from the serio-comic situation which it illustrates, had a tenderness and pathos of its own which went to Dick's heart and intensified his melancholy.

He had gone (in secret, for Mr. Bultitude disapproved of such dissipations) to hear the Opera in the holidays, and now the piano conjured the whole scene up for him again—there would be no more theatre-going for him for a very long time !

By this time Mr. Bultitude began to feel the silence becoming once more oppressive, and roused himself with a yawn. " Heigho ! " he said, " Boaler's an uncommonly long time fetching that cab ! "

Dick felt more injured than ever, and showed it by drawing what he intended for a moving sigh.

Unfortunately it was misunderstood.

" I do wish, sir," said his parent testily, " you would try to break yourself of that habit of breathing hard. The society of a grampus (for it's no less) delights no one and offends many—including me—and for Heaven's sake, Dick, don't kick the leg of the table in that way ; you know it simply maddens me. What do you do it for ? Why can't you learn to sit at table like a gentleman ? "

Dick mumbled some apology, and then, having found his tongue and remembered his necessities, said, with a nervous catch in his voice, " Oh, I say, father, will you—can you let me have some pocket-money, please, to go back with ? "

Mr. Bultitude looked as if his son had petitioned for a latch-key.

" Pocket-money ! " he repeated, " why, you can't want money. Didn't your grandmother give you a sovereign as a Christmas-box ? And I gave you ten shillings myself! "

" I do want it, though," said Dick ; " that's all spent. And you know you always *have* given me money to take back."

" If I do give you some, you'll only go and spend it," grumbled Mr. Bultitude, as if he considered money an object of art.

" I shan't spend it all at once, and I shall want some to put in the plate on Sundays. We always have to put in the plate when it's a collection. And there's the cab to pay."

" Boaler has orders to pay your cab—as you know well enough," said his father, " but I suppose you must have some, though you cost me enough, Heaven knows, without this additional expense."

And at this he brought up a fistful of loose silver and gold from one of his trouser-pockets, and spread it deliberately out on the table in front of him in shining rows.

Dick's eyes sparkled at the sight of so much wealth ; for a moment or two he almost forgot the pangs of approaching exile in the thought of the dignity and credit which a single one of those bright new sovereigns would procure for him.

It would ensure him surreptitious luxuries and open friendships as long as it lasted. Even Tipping, the head boy of the school, who had gone into tails, brought back no more, and besides, the money would bring

VICE VERSA

him handsomely out of certain pecuniary difficulties to which an unexpected act of parental authority had exposed him ; he could easily dispose of all claims with such a sum at command, and then his father could so easily spare it out of so much !

Meanwhile Mr. Bultitude, with great care and precision, selected from the coins before him a florin, two shillings, and two sixpences, which he pushed across to his son, who looked at them with a disappointment he did not care to conceal.

" An uncommonly liberal allowance for a young fellow like you," he observed. " Don't buy any foolishness with it, and if, towards the end of the term you want a little more, and write an intelligible letter asking for it, and I think proper to let you have it—why, you'll get it, you know."

Dick had not the courage to ask for more, much as he longed to do so, so he put the money in his purse with very qualified expressions of gratitude.

In his purse he seemed to find something which had escaped his memory, for he took out a small parcel and unfolded it with some hesitation.

" I nearly forgot," he said, speaking with more animation than he had yet done, " I didn't like to take it without asking you, but is this any use ? May I have it ? "

" Eh ? " said Mr. Bultitude, sharply, " what's that ? Something else—what is it you want now ? "

" It's only that stone Uncle Duke brought mamma from India ; the thing, he said, they called a ' Pagoda stone,' or something, out there,"

" Pagoda stone ? The boy means Garuda Stone. I should like to know how you got hold of that; you've been meddling in my drawers, now, a thing I will not put up with, as I've told you over and over again."

" No, I haven't, then," said Dick, " I found it in a tray in the drawing-room, and Barbara said, perhaps, if I asked you, you might let me have it, as she didn't think it was any use to you."

" Then Barbara had no right to say anything of the sort."

" But may I have it ? I may, mayn't I ? " persisted Dick.

" Have it ? certainly not. What could you possibly want with a thing like that ? It's ridiculous. Give it to me."

Dick handed it over reluctantly enough. It was not much to look at, quite an insignificant-looking little square tablet of greyish green stone, pierced at one angle, and having on two of its faces faint traces of mysterious letters or symbols, which time had made very difficult to distinguish.

It looked harmless enough as Mr. Bultitude took it in his hand ; there was no kindly hand to hold him back, no warning voice to hint that there might possibly be sleeping within that small marble block the pent-up energy of long-forgotten Eastern necromancy, just as ready as ever to awake into action at the first words which had power to evoke it.

There was no one ; but even if there had been such a person, Paul Bultitude was a sober prosaic individual, who would probably have treated the warning as a piece of ridiculous superstition.

As it was, no man could have put himself in a position of extreme peril with a more perfect unconsciousness of his danger.

2. *A Grand Transformation Scene*

" Magnaque numinibus vota exaudita malignis."

PAUL BULTITUDE put on his glasses to examine the stone more carefully, for it was some time since he had last seen or thought about it. Then he looked up and said once more, " What use would a thing like this be to you ? "

Dick would have considered it a very valuable prize

VICE VERSA

indeed ; he could have exhibited it to admiring friends—during lessons, of course, when it would prove a most agreeable distraction ; he could have played with and fingered it incessantly, invented astonishing legends of its powers and virtues ; and, at last, when he had grown tired of it, have bartered it for any more desirable article that might take his fancy. All these advantages were present to his mind in a vague shifting form, but he could not find either courage or words to explain them.

Consequently he only said awkwardly, " Oh, I don't know, I should like it."

" Well, any way," said Paul, " you certainly won't have it. It's worth keeping, whatever it is, as the only thing your uncle Marmaduke was ever known to give to anybody."

Marmaduke Paradine, his brother-in-law, was not a connection of whom he had much reason to feel particularly proud. One of those persons endowed with what are known as " insinuating manners and address," he had, after some futile attempts to enter the army, been sent out to Bombay as agent for a Manchester firm, and in that capacity had contrived to be mixed up in some more than shady transactions with rival exporters and native dealers up the country, which led to an unceremonious dismissal by his employers.

He had brought home the stone from India as a propitiatory token of remembrance, more portable and less expensive than the lacquered cabinets, brasses, stuffs and carved work which are expected from friends at such a distance, and he had been received with pardon and started once more, until certain other proceedings of his, shadier still, had obliged Paul to forbid him the house at Westbourne Terrace.

Since then little had been heard of him, and the reports which reached Mr. Bultitude of his disreputable relative's connection with the promotion of a series of companies of the kind affected by the widow and curate,

A GRAND TRANSFORMATION SCENE

and exposed in money articles and law courts, gave him no desire to renew his acquaintance.

" Isn't it a talisman, though ? " said Dick, rather unfortunately for any hopes he might have of persuading his father to entrust him with the coveted treasure.

" I'm sure I can't tell you," yawned Paul," how do you mean ? "

" I don't know, only Uncle Duke once said something about it. Barbara heard him tell mamma. I say, perhaps it's like the one in Scott, and cures people of things, though I don't think it's that sort of talisman either, because I tried it once on my chilblains, and it wasn't a bit of good. If you would only let me have it, perhaps I might find out, you know."

" You might," said his father drily, apparently not much influenced by this inducement, " but you won't have the chance. If it has a secret, I will find it out for myself " (he little knew how literally he was to be taken at his word), " and, by the way, there's your cab—at last."

There was a sound of wheels outside, and, as Dick heard them, he grew desperate in his extremity ; a wish he had long secretly cherished unspoken, without ever hoping for courage to give it words, rose to his lips now ; he got up and moved timidly towards his father.

" Father," he said, " there's something I want to say to you so much before I go. Do let me ask you now."

" Well, what is it ? " said Paul. " Make haste, you haven't much time."

" It's this. I want you to—to let me leave Grimstone's at the end of the term."

Paul stared at him, angry and incredulous, " Let you leave Dr. Grimstone's (oblige me by giving him his full title when you speak of him)," he said slowly. " Why, what do you mean ? It's an excellent school—never saw a better expressed prospectus in my life. And my old friend Bangle, Sir Benjamin Bangle, who's a member of the School Board, and ought to know some-

VICE VERSA

thing about schools, strongly recommended it—would have sent his own son there, if he hadn't entered him at Eton. And when I pay for most of the extras for you too. Dancing, by Gad, and meat for breakfast. I'm sure I don't know what you would have."

"I'd like to go to Marlborough, or Harrow, or somewhere," whimpered Dick. "Jolland's going to Harrow at Easter. (Jolland's one of the fellows at Grimstone's—Dr. Grimstone's I mean.) And what does old Bangle know about it? He hasn't got to go there himself! And—and Grimstone's jolly enough to fellows he likes, but he doesn't like *me*—he's always sitting on me for something—and I hate some of the fellows there, and altogether it's beastly. Do let me leave! If you don't want me to go to a public school, I—I could stop at home and have a private tutor—like Joe Twitterley!"

"It's all ridiculous nonsense, I tell you," said Paul angrily, "ridiculous nonsense! And, once for all, I'll put a stop to it. I don't approve of public schools for boys like you, and, what's more, I can't afford it. As for private tutors, that's absurd! So you will just make up your mind to stay at Crichton House as long as I think proper to keep you there, and there's an end of that!"

At this final blow to all his hopes, Dick began to sob in a subdued hopeless kind of way, which was more than his father could bear. To do Paul justice, he had not meant to be quite so harsh when the boy was about to set out for school, and, a little ashamed of his irritation, he sought to justify his decision.

He chose to do this by delivering a short homily on the advantages of school, by which he might lead Dick to look on the matter in the calm light of reason and common sense, and commonplaces on the subject began to rise to the surface of his mind, from the rather muddy depths to which they had long since sunk.

He began to give Dick the benefit of all this stagnant wisdom, with a feeling of surprise as he went on, at his own powerful and original way of putting things.

A GRAND TRANSFORMATION SCENE

" Now, you know, it's no use to cry like that," he began. " It's—ah—the usual thing for boys at school, I'm quite aware, to go about fancying they're very ill-used, and miserable, and all the rest of it, just as if people in my position had their sons educated out of spite ! It's one of those petty troubles all boys have to go through. And you mark my words, my boy, when they go out into the world and have real trials to put up with, and grow middle-aged men, like me, why, they see what fools they've been, Dick ; they see what fools they've been. All the—hum, the innocent games and delights of boyhood, and that sort of thing, you know—come back to them—and then they look back to those hours passed at school as the happiest, aye, the very happiest time of their life ! "

" Well," said Dick, " then I hope it won't be the happiest time in mine, that's all ! And you may have been happy at the school you went to, perhaps, but I don't believe you would very much care about being a boy again like me, and going back to Grimstone's, you know you wouldn't ! "

This put Paul on his mettle ; he had warmed well to his subject, and could not let this open challenge pass unnoticed—it gave him such an opening for a cheap and easy effect.

He still had the stone in his hand as he sank back into his chair, smiling with a tolerant superiority.

" Perhaps you will believe me," he said, impressively, " when I tell you, old as I am and much as you envy me, I only wish, at this very moment, I could be a boy again, like you. Going back to school wouldn't make me unhappy, I can tell you."

It is so fatally easy to say more than we mean in the desire to make as strong an impression as possible. Well for most of us that—more fortunate than Mr. Bultitude—we can generally do so without fear of being taken too strictly at our word.

As he spoke these unlucky words, he felt a slight

VICE VERSA

shiver, followed by a curious shrinking sensation all over him. It was odd, too, but the arm-chair in which he sat seemed to have grown so much bigger all at once. He felt a passing surprise, but concluded it must be fancy, and went on as comfortably as before.

" I should like it, my boy, but what's the good of wishing ? I only mention it to prove that I was not speaking at random. I'm an old man and you're a young boy, and, that being so, why, of course—What the dooce are you giggling about ? "

For Dick, after some seconds of half-frightened open-mouthed staring, had suddenly burst into a violent fit of almost hysterical giggling, which he seemed trying vainly to suppress.

This naturally annoyed Mr. Bultitude, and he went on with immense dignity, " I—ah—Fm not aware that Fve been saying anything particularly ridiculous. You seem to be amused ? "

" Don't! " gasped Dick. " It, it isn't anything you're saying—it's, it's—oh, can't you feel any difference ? "

" The sooner you go back to school the better ! " said Paul angrily. " I wash my hands of you. When I do take the trouble to give you any advice, it's received with ridicule. You always were an ill-mannered little cub. I've had quite enough of this. Leave the room, sir! "

The wheels must have belonged to some other cab, for none had stopped at the pavement as yet; but Mr. Bultitude was justly indignant, and could stand the interview no longer. Dick, however, made no attempt to move; he remained there, choking and shaking with laughter, while his father sat stiffly on his chair, trying to ignore his son's unmannerly conduct, but only partially succeeding.

No one can calmly endure watching other people laughing at him like idiots, while he is left perfectly incapable of guessing what he has said or done to amuse

A GRAND TRANSFORMATION SCENE

them. Even when this is known, it requires a peculiarly keen sense of humour to see the point of a joke against oneself.

At last his patience gave out, and he said coldly, " Now, perhaps, if you are quite yourself again, you will be good enough to let me know what the joke is ? "

Dick, looking flushed and half-ashamed, tried again and again to speak, but each time the attempt was too much for him. After a time he did succeed, but his voice was hoarse and shaken with laughter as he spoke. " Haven't you found it out yet ? Go and look at yourself in the glass—it will make you roar ! "

There was the usual narrow sheet of plate glass at the back of the sideboard, and to this Mr. Bultitude walked, almost under protest, and with a cold dignity. It occurred to him that he might have a smudge on his face or something wrong with his collar and tie—something to account to some extent for his son's frivolous and insulting behaviour. No suspicion of the terrible truth crossed his mind as yet.

Meanwhile Dick was looking on eagerly with a chuckle of anticipation, as one who watches the dawning appreciation of an excellent joke.

But no sooner had Paul met the reflection in the glass than he started back in incredulous horror—then returned and stared again and again.

Surely, surely, this could not be he !

He had expected to see his own familiar portly bow-windowed presence there—but somehow, look as he would, the mirror insisted upon reflecting the figure of his son Dick. Could he possibly have become invisible and have lost the power of casting a reflection—or how was it that Dick, and only Dick, was to be seen there ?

How was it, too, when he looked round, there was the boy still sitting there ? It could not be Dick, evidently, that he saw in the glass. Besides, the

VICE VERSA

reflection opposite him moved when he moved, returned when he returned, copied his every gesture !

He turned round upon his son with angry and yet hopeful suspicion. " You, you've been playing some of your infernal tricks with this mirror, sir," he cried fiercely. " What have you done to it ? "

" Done ! how could I do anything to it ? As if you didn't know that ! "

" Then," stammered Paul, determined to know the worst, " then do you, do you mean to tell me you can see any—alteration in me ? Tell me the truth now ! "

" I should just think I could ! " said Dick emphatically. " It's very queer, but just look here," and he came up to the sideboard and placed himself by the side of his horrified father. " Why," he said, with another giggle, " we're—he-he—as like as two peas ! "

They were indeed; the glass reflected now two small boys, each with chubby cheeks and auburn hair, both dressed, too, exactly alike, in Eton jackets and broad white collars ; the only difference to be seen between them was that, while one face wore an expression of intense glee and satisfaction, the other—the one which Mr. Bultitude was beginning to fear must belong to him—was lengthened and drawn with dismay and bewilderment.

" Dick," said Paul faintly, " what is all this ? Who has been, been taking these liberties with me ? "

" I'm sure I don't know," protested Dick. " It wasn't me. I believe you did it all yourself."

" Did it all myself ! " repeated Paul indignantly. " Is it likely I should ? It's some trickery, I tell you, some villainous plot. The worst of it is," he added plaintively, " I don't understand who I'm supposed to be now. Dick, who am I ? "

" You can't be me," said Dick, " because here I am, you know. And you're not yourself, that's very plain. You must be *somebody*, I suppose," he added dubiously.

A GRAND TRANSFORMATION SCENE

" Of course I am. What do you mean ? " said Paul angrily. " Never mind who I am. I feel just the same as I always did. Tell me when you first began to notice any change. Could you see it coming on at all, eh ? "

" It was all at once, just as you were talking about school and all that. You said you only wished—— Why of course; look here, it must be the stone that did it! "

" Stone ! what stone ? " said Paul. " I don't know what you're talking about."

" Yes, you do—the Garuda Stone ! You've got it in your hand still. Don't you see ? It's a real talisman after all ! How jolly ! "

" I didn't do anything to set it off; and besides, oh, it's perfectly absurd ! How can there be such things as talismans nowadays, eh ? Tell me that."

" Well, something's happened to you, hasn't it ? And it must have been done somehow," argued Dick.

" I was holding the confounded thing, certainly," said Paul, " here it is. But what could I have said to start it ? What has it done this to me for ? "

" I know! " cried Dick. " Don't you remember ? You said you wished you were a boy again, like me. So you are, you see, exactly like me ! What a lark it is, isn't it ? But, I say, you can't go up to business like that, you know, can you ? I tell you what,* you'd better come to Grimstone's with me now, and see how you like it. I shouldn't mind so much if you came too. Grimstone's face would be splendid when he saw two of us. Do come ! "

" That's ridiculous nonsense you're talking," said Paul, " and you know it. What should I do at school at my age ? I tell you I'm the same as ever inside, though I may have shrunk into a little rascally boy to look at. And it's simply an abominable nuisance, Dick, that's what it is ! Why on earth couldn't you let the stone alone ? Just see what mischief you've

VICE VERSA

done by meddling now—put me to all this inconvenience ! "

" You shouldn't have wished," said Dick.

" Wished ! " echoed Mr. Bultitude. " Why, to be sure," he said, with a gleam of returning hopefulness, " of course—I never thought of that. The thing's a wishing stone ; it must be ! You have to hold it, I suppose, and then say what you wish aloud, and there you are. If that's the case, I can soon put it all right by simply wishing myself back again. I — I shall have a good laugh at all this by and by—I know I shall ! "

He took the stone, and got into a corner by himself where he began repeating the words, " I wish I was back again," " I wish I was the man I was five minutes ago," " I wish all this had not happened," and so on, until he was very exhausted and red in the face. He tried with the stone held in his left hand, as well as his right, sitting and standing, under all the various conditions he could think of, but absolutely nothing came of it ; he was just as exasperatingly boyish and youthful as ever at the end of it.

" I don't like this," he said at last, giving it up with a rather crestfallen air. " It seems to me that this diabolical invention has got out of order somehow ; I can't make it work any more ! "

" Perhaps," suggested Dick, who had shown throughout the most unsympathetic cheerfulness, " perhaps it's one of those talismans that only give you one wish, and you've had it, you know ? "

" Then it's all over ! " groaned Paul. " What the dooce am I to do ? What shall I do ? Suggest something, for Heaven's sake ; don't stand cackling there in that unfeeling manner. Can't you see what a terrible mess I've got into ? Suppose—only suppose your sister or one of the servants were to come in, and see me like this ! "

This suggestion simply enchanted Dick. " Let's have 'em all up," he laughed ; " it would be such fun ! How

A GRAND TRANSFORMATION SCENE

they will laugh when we tell them ! " And he rushed to the bell.

" Touch that bell if you dare ! " screamed Paul. " I won't be seen in this condition by anybody ! What on earth could have induced that scoundrelly uncle of yours to bring such a horrible thing as this over I can't imagine ! I never heard of such a situation as this in my life. I can't stay like this, you know—it's not to be thought of ! I — I wonder whether it would be any use to send over to Dr. Bustard and ask him to step in ; he might give me something to bring me round. But then the whole neighbourhood would hear about it ! If I don't see my way out of this soon, I shall go raving mad ! "

And he paced restlessly up and down the room with his brain on fire.

All at once, as he became able to think more coherently, there occurred to him a chance, slender and desperate enough, but still a chance, of escaping even yet the consequences of his folly.

He was forced to conclude that, however improbable and fantastic it might appear in this rationalistic age, there must be some hidden power in this Garuda Stone which had put him in his present very unpleasant position. It was plain too that the virtues of the talisman refused to exert themselves any more at his bidding.

But it did not follow that in another's hands the spell would remain as powerless. At all events, it was an experiment well worth the trial, and he lost no time in explaining the notion to Dick, who, by the sparkle in his eyes and suppressed excitement in his manner, seemed to think there might be something in it.

" I may as well try," he said, " give it to me."

" Take it, my dear boy," said Paul, with a paternal air that sorely tried Dick's recovered gravity, it contrasted so absurdly with his altered appearance. " Take it, and wish your poor old father himself again ! "

Dick took it, and held it thoughtfully for some

VICE VERSA

moments, while Paul waited in nervous impatience. " Isn't it any use ? " he said dolefully at last, as nothing happened.

" I don't know," said Dick calmly, " I haven't wished yet."

" Then do so at once," said Paul fussily, " do so at once. There's no time to waste, every moment is of importance—your cab will be here directly. Although, although I'm altered in this ridiculous way, I hope I still retain my authority as a father, and as a father, by Gad, I expect you to obey me, sir ! "

" Oh, all right," said Dick indifferently, " you may keep the authority if you like."

" Then do what I tell you. Can't you see how urgent it is that a scandal like this shouldn't get about ? I should be the laughing-stock of the city. Not a soul must ever guess that such a thing has happened. You must see that yourself."

" Yes," said Dick, who all this time was sitting on a corner of the table, swinging his legs, " I see that. It will be all right. I'm going to wish in a minute, and no one will guess there has been anything the matter."

" That's a good boy! " said Paul, much relieved, " I know your heart is in the right place—only do make haste."

" I suppose," Dick asked, " when you are yourself again, things would go on just as usual ? "

" I — I hope so."

" I mean you will go on sitting here, and I shall go off to Grimstone's ? "

" Of course, of course," said Paul; " don't ask so many questions. I'm sure you quite understand what has to be done, so get on. We might be found like this any minute."

" That settles it," said Dick, " any fellow would do it after that."

" Yes, yes, but you're so slow about it ! "

" Don't be in a hurry," said Dick, " you mayn't like it after all when I've done it."

A GRAND TRANSFORMATION SCENE

" Done what ? " asked Mr. Bultitude sharply, struck by something sinister and peculiar in the boy's manner.

" Well, I don't mind telling you," said Dick, " it's fairer. You see, you wished to be a boy just like me, didn't you ? "

" I didn't mean it," protested Paul.

" Ah, you couldn't expect a stone to know that; at any rate, it made you into a boy like me directly. Now, if I wish myself a man just like you were ten minutes ago, before you took the stone, that will put things all right again, won't it ? "

" Is the boy mad ? " cried Paul, horrified at this proposal. " Why, why, that would be worse than ever ! "

" I don't see that," objected Dick, stubbornly. " No one would know anything about it then."

" But, you little blockhead, can't I make you understand ? It wouldn't do at all. We should both of us be wrong then—each with the other's personal appearance."

" Well," said Dick blandly, " I shouldn't mind that."

" But I should—I mind very much. I object strongly to such a—such a preposterous arrangement. And what's more, I won't have it. Do you hear, I forbid you to think of any such thing. Give me back that stone. I can't trust you with it after this."

" I can't help it," said Dick doggedly. " You've had your wish, and I don't see why I shouldn't have mine. I mean to have it, too."

" Why, you unnatural little rascal! " cried the justly-enraged father, " do you mean to defy me ? I tell you I will have that stone ! Give it up this instant! " and he made a movement towards his son, as if he meant to recover the talisman by main force.

But Dick was too quick for him. Slipping off the table with great agility, he planted himself firmly on the hearth-rug, with the hand that held the stone clenched behind his back, and the other raised in self-defence.

" I'd much rather you wouldn't make me hit you, you

VICE VERSA

know," he said, " because, in spite of what's happened, you're still my father, I suppose. But if you interfere with me before I've done with this stone, I'm afraid I shall have to punch your head."

Mr. Bultitude retreated a few steps apprehensively, feeling himself no match for his son, except in size and general appearance ; and for some moments of really frightful intensity they stood panting on the hearth-rug, each cautiously watching the other, on his guard against stratagem and surprise.

It was one of those painful domestic scenes which are fortunately rare between father and son.

Overhead, the latest rollicking French polka was being rattled out, with a savage irony of which pianos, even by the best makers, can at times be capable.

Suddenly Dick drew himself up. " Stand out of my way ! " he cried excitedly, " I am going to do it. I wish I was a man like you were just now ! "

And as he spoke, Mr. Bultitude had the bitterness of seeing his unscrupulous son swell out like the frog in the fable, till he stood there before him the exact duplicate of what Paul had so lately been !

The transformed Dick began to skip and dance round the room in high glee, with as much agility as his increased bulk would allow. " It's all right, you see," he said. " The old stone's as good as ever. You can't say anyone would ever know, to look at us."

And then he threw himself panting into a chair, and began to laugh excitedly at the success of his unprincipled manoeuvres.

As for Paul, he was perfectly furious at having been so outwitted and overreached. It was a long time before he could command his voice sufficiently to say, savagely: " Well, you've had your way, and a pretty mess you've made of it. We're both of us in false positions now. I hope you're satisfied, I'm sure. Do you think you'll care about going back to Crichton House in that state ? "

A GRAND TRANSFORMATION SCENE

" No," said Dick, very decidedly : " I'm quite sure I shouldn't."

" Well, I can't help it. You've brought it on yourself ; and, provided the Doctor sees no objection to take you back as you are and receive you as one of his pupils, I shall most certainly send you there."

Paul did not really mean this, he only meant to frighten him ; for he still trusted that, by letting Boaler into the secret, the charm might be set in motion once more, and the difficulty comfortably overcome. But his threat had a most unfortunate effect upon Dick ; it hardened him to take a course he might otherwise have shrunk from.

" Oh," he said, " you're going to do that ? But doesn't it strike you that things are rather altered with us now ? "

" They are, to a certain extent, of course," said Paul, " through my folly and your wicked cunning ; but a word or two of explanation from me——"

" You'll find it will take more explanation than you think," said Dick ; " but, of course, you can try, if you think it worth while—when you get to Grimstone's."

" When I, — I don't understand. When I,—what did you say ? " gasped Paul.

" Why, you see," exclaimed Dick, " it would never have done for us both to go back ; the chaps would have humbugged us so, and as I hate the place and you seem so fond of being a boy and going back to school and that, I thought perhaps it would be best for you to go and see how you liked it! "

" I never will! I'll not stir from this room ! I dare you to try to move me ! " cried Paul. And just then there was the sound of wheels outside once more. They stopped before the house, the bell rang sharply—the long-expected cab had come at last.

" You've no time to lose," said Dick, " get your coat on.

Mr. Bultitude tried to treat the affair as a joke. He laughed a ghastly little laugh.

VICE VERSA

" Ha ! ha ! you've fairly caught your poor father this time ; you've proved him in the wrong. I admit I said more than I exactly meant. But that's enough. Don't drive a good joke too far ; shake hands, and let us see if we can't find a way out of this ! "

But Dick only warmed his coat tails at the fire as he said, with a very ungenerous reminiscence of his father's manner : " You are going back to an excellent establishment, where you will enjoy all the comforts of home—I can specially recommend the stickjaw ; look out for it on Tuesdays and Fridays. You will once more take part in the games and lessons of happy boyhood. (Did you ever play ' chevy ' when you were a boy before ? You'll enjoy chevy.) And you will find your companions easy enough to get on with, if you don't go giving yourself airs ; they won't stand airs. Now good-bye, my boy, and bless you ! "

Paul stood staring stupidly at this outrageous assumption ; he could scarcely believe yet that it was meant in cruel earnest. Before he could answer, the door opened and Boaler appeared.

" Had a deal of trouble to find a kebab, sir, on a night like this," he said to the false Dick, " but the luggage is all on top, and the man says there's plenty of time still."

" Good-bye then, my boy," said Dick, with well-assumed tenderness, but a rather dangerous light in his eye. " My compliments to the Doctor, remember."

Paul turned indignantly from him to the butler ; he, at least, would stand by him. Boaler would not see a master who had always been fair, if not indulgent, to him driven from his home in this cold-blooded manner !

He made two or three attempts to speak, for his brain whirled so with scathing, burning things to say. He would expose the fraud then and there, and defy the impudent usurper ; he would warn every one against this spurious pinchbeck imitation of himself. The whole household should be summoned and called upon to judge between the two !

No doubt, if he had had enough self-command to do all this effectually, while Dick had as yet not had the time thoroughly to adapt himself to his altered circumstances, he might have turned the situation at the outset, and spared himself some very painful experiences.

But it is very often precisely those words which are the most vitally important to be said that refuse to pass our lips on a sudden emergency. We feel all the necessity of saying something at once, but the necessary words unaccountably desert us at the critical moment.

Mr. Bultitude felt himself in this unfortunate position. He made more wild efforts to explain, but the sense of his danger only petrified his mind instead of stimulating it. Then he was spared further conflict. A dark mist rose before his eyes ; the walls of the room receded into infinite space ; and, with a loud singing in his ears, he fell, and seemed to himself to be sinking down, down, through the earth to the very crust of the antipodes. Then the blackness closed over him—and he knew no more.

3. *In the Toils*

" I beseech you let his lack of years be no impediment to let him lack a reverend estimation, for I never knew so young a body with so old a head."—*Merchant of Venice*, Act iv.

WHEN Mr. Bultitude recovered his senses, which was not for a considerable time, he found that he was being jolted along through a broad well-lit thoroughfare, in a musty four-wheeler.

His head was by no means clear yet, and for some minutes he could hardly be said to think at all; he merely lay back dreamily listening to the hard grinding jar of the cab windows vibrating in their grooves.

His first distinct sensation was a vague wonder what Barbara might be intending to give him for dinner,

VICE VERSA

for, oddly enough, he felt far from hungry, and was conscious that his palate would require the adroitest witching.

With the thought of dinner his dining-room was almost inseparably associated, and then, with an instant rush of recollection, the whole scene there with the Garuda Stone surged into his brain. He shuddered as he did so ; it had all been so real, so hideously vivid and coherent throughout. But all unpleasant impressions soon yielded to the delicious luxury of his present security.

As his last conscious moment had been passed in his own dining-room, the fact that he opened his eyes in a cab, instead of confirming his worst fears, actually helped to restore the unfortunate gentleman's serenity ; for he frequently drove home from the city in this manner, and believed himself now, instead of being, as was actually the case, in that marvellous region of cheap photography, rocking-horses, mild stone lions, and wheels and ladders—the Euston Road—to be bowling along Holborn.

Now that he was thoroughly awake he found positive amusement in going over each successive incident of his nightmare experience with the talisman, and smiling at the tricks his imagination had played him.

" I wonder now how the dickens I came to dream such outrageous nonsense ! " he said to himself, for even his dreams were, as a rule, within the bounds of probability. But he was not long in tracing it to the devilled kidneys he had had at the club for lunch, and some curious old brown sherry Robinson had given him afterwards at his office.

" Gad, what a shock the thing has given me ! " he thought. " I can hardly shake off the feeling even now."

As a rule, after waking up on the verge of a fearful crisis, the effect of the horror fades swiftly away, as one detail after another evades a memory which is never

too anxious to retain them, and each moment brings a deeper sense of relief and self-congratulation.

But in Paul's case, curiously enough, as he could not help thinking, the more completely roused he became, the greater grew his uneasiness.

Perhaps the first indication of the truth was suggested to him by a lurking suspicion—which he tried to dismiss as mere fancy—that he filled rather less of the cab than he had always been accustomed to do.

To reassure himself he set his thoughts to review all the proceedings of that day, feeling that if he could satisfactorily account for the time up to his taking the cab, that would be conclusive as to the unreality of any thing that appeared to have happened later in his own house. He got on well enough till he came to the hour at which he had left the office, and then, search his memory as he would, he could not remember hailing any cab !

Could it be another delusion, too, or was it the fact that he had found himself much pressed for time and had come home by the Underground to Praed Street ? It must have been the day before, but that was Sunday. Saturday, then ? But the recollection seemed too recent and fresh ; and besides, on Saturday, he had left at two, and had taken Barbara to see Messrs. Maskelyne and Cooke's performance.

Slowly, insidiously, but with irresistible force, the conviction crept upon him that he had dined, and dined well.

" If I have dined already," he told himself, " I can't be going home to dinner ; and if I am not going home to dinner, what—what am I doing in this cab ? "

The bare idea that something might be wrong with him after all made him impatient to put an end to all suspense. He must knock this scotched nightmare once for all on the head by a deliberate appeal to his senses.

The cab had passed the lighted shops now, and was

VICE VERSA

driving between squares and private houses, so that Mr. Bultitude had to wait until the sickly rays of a street lamp glanced into the cab. for a moment, and, as they did so, he put his feet up on the opposite seat and examined his boots and trousers with breathless eagerness.

It was not to be denied ; they were not his ordinary boots, nor did he ever wear such trousers as he saw above them ! Always a careful and punctiliously neat person, he was more than commonly exacting concerning the make and polish of his boots and the set of his trousers.

These boots were clumsy, square-toed, and thick-soled ; one was even patched on the side. The trousers were heavy and rough, of the kind advertised as " wear-resisting fabrics, suitable for youths at school," frayed at the ends, and shiny—shamefully shiny—about the knees !

In hot despair he rapidly passed his hands over his body. It felt unusually small and slim, Mr. Bultitude being endowed with what is euphemistically termed a " presence," and it was with an agony rarely felt at such a discovery that he realised that, for the first time for more than twenty years, he actually had a waist.

Then, as a last resource, he took off his hat and felt for the broad, smooth, egg-like surface, garnished by scanty side patches of thin hair, which he knew he ought to find.

It was gone—hidden under a crop of thick close curling locks !

This last disappointment completely overcame him ; he had a kind of short fit in the cab as the bitter truth was brought home to him unmistakably.

Yes, this was no dream of a distempered digestion, but sober reality. The whole of that horrible scene in the dining-room had really taken place ; and now he, Paul Bultitude, the widely-respected merchant of Mincing Lane, a man of means and position, was being ignominiously packed off to school as if he were actually

the schoolboy some hideous juggle had made him appear!

It was only with a violent effort that he could succeed in commanding his thoughts sufficiently to decide on some immediate action. "I must be cool," he kept muttering to himself, with shaking lips, "quite cool and collected. Everything will depend on that now!"

It was some comfort to him in this extremity to recognise on the box the well-known broad back of Clegg, a cabman who stabled his two horses in some mews near Praed Street, and whom he had been accustomed to patronise in bad weather for several years.

Clegg would know him, in spite of his ridiculous transformation.

His idea was to stop the cab, and turn round and drive home again, when they would find that he was not to be got rid of again quite so easily. If Dick imagined he meant to put up tamely with this kind of treatment, he was vastly mistaken; he would return home boldly and claim his rights!

No reasonable person could be perverse enough to doubt his identity when once matters came to the proof; though at first, of course, he might find a difficulty in establishing it. His children, his clerks, and his servants would soon get used to his appearance, and would learn to look below the mere surface, and then there was always the possibility of putting everything right by means of the magic stone.

"I won't lose a minute!" he said aloud; and letting down the window, leaned out and shouted "Stop!" till he was hoarse.

But Clegg either could not or would not hear; he drove on at full speed, a faster rate of progress than that adopted by most drivers of four-wheeled cabs being one of his chief recommendations.

They were now passing Euston. It was a muggy, slushy night, with a thin brown fog wreathing the houses and fading away above their tops into a dull,

VICE VERSA

slate-blue sky. The wet street looked like a black canal; the blurred forms, less like vehicles than non-descript boats, moving over its inky surface, were indistinctly reflected therein ; the gas-lights flared redly through the murky haze. It was not a pleasant evening in which to be out-of-doors.

Paul would have opened the cab-door and jumped out had he dared, but his nerve failed him, and, indeed, considering the speed of the cab, the leap would have been dangerous to a far more active person. So he was forced to wait resignedly until the station should be reached, when he determined to make Clegg understand his purpose with as little loss of time as possible.

" I must pay him something extra," he thought; " I'll give him a sovereign to take me back." And he searched his pockets for the loose coin he usually carried about with him in such abundance ; there was no gold in any of them.

He found, however, a variety of minor and less negotiable articles, which he fished out one by one from unknown depths—a curious collection. There was a stumpy German-silver pencil case, a broken prism from a crystal chandelier, a gilded Jew's harp, a little book in which the leaves on being turned briskly, gave a semblance of motion to the sails of a black windmill drawn therein, a broken tin soldier, some Hong-Kong coppers with holes in them, and a quantity of little cogged wheels from the inside of a watch ; while a further search was rewarded by an irregular lump of toffee imperfectly enfolded in sticky brown paper.

He threw the whole of these treasures out of the window with indescribable disgust, and, feeling something like a purse in a side pocket, opened it eagerly.

It held five shillings exactly, the coins corresponding to those he had pushed across to his son such a little while ago ! It did not seem to him quite such a magnificent sum now as it had done then ; he had shifted his point of view.

It was too clear that the stone must have carried out his thoughtless wish with scrupulous and conscientious exactness in every detail. He had wanted, or said he wanted, to be a boy again like Dick, and accordingly he had become a perfect duplicate, even to the contents of the pockets. Evidently nothing on the face of things showed the slightest difference. Yet—and here lay the sting of the metamorphosis—he was conscious under it all of being his old original self, in utter discordance with the youthful form in which he was an unwilling prisoner.

By this time the cab had driven up the sharp incline, and under the high pointed archway of St. Pancras terminus, and now drew up with a jerk against the steps leading to the booking office.

Paul sprang out at once in a violent passion. " Here, you, Clegg ! " he said, " why the devil didn't you pull up when I told you ? eh ? "

Clegg was a burly, red-faced man, with a husky voice and a general manner which conveyed the impression that he regarded teetotalism, as a principle, with something more than disapproval.

" Why didn't I pull up ? " he said, bending stiffly down from his box. " 'Cause I didn't want to lose a good customer, that's why I didn't pull up ! "

" Do you mean to say you don't know me ? "

" Know yer ? " said Clegg, with an approach to sentiment : " I've knowed yer when you was a babby in frocks. I've knowed yer fust nuss (and a fine young woman she were till she took to drinking, as has been the ruin of many). I've knowed yer in Infancy's hour and in yer byhood's bloom ! I've druv yer to this 'ere werry station twice afore. Know yer ! "

Paul saw the uselessness of arguing with him. " Then, ah—drive me back at once. Let those boxes alone. I—I've important business at home which I'd forgotten."

Clegg gave a vinous wink. " Lor, yer at it agin," he said with admiration. " What a artful young limb it is !

YICE VERSA

But it ain't what yer may call good enough, so to speak, it ain't. Clegg don't do that no more ! "

" Don't do what ? " asked Paul.

" Don't drive no young gents as is a-bein' sent to school back agin into their family's bosims," said Clegg sententiously. " You was took ill sudden in my cab the larst time. Offal bad you was, to be sure—to hear ye, and I druv' yer back ; and I never got no return fare, I didn't, and yer par he made hisself downright nasty over it, said as if it occurred agin he shouldn't employ me no more. I durstn't go and offend yer par ; he's a good customer to me, he is."

" I'll give you a sovereign to do it," said Paul.

" If yer wouldn't tell no tales, I might put yer down at the corner p'raps," said Clegg, hesitating, to Paul's joy ; " not as it ain't cheap at that, but let's see yer suffering fust. Why," he cried with lofty contempt as he saw from Paul's face that the coin was not producible, " y'ain't got no suffering ! Garn away, and don't try to tempt a pore cabby as has his livin' to make. What d'ye think of this, porter, now ? 'Ere's a young gent a tryin' to back out o' going to school when he ought to be glad and thankful as he's receivin' the blessin's of a good eddication. Look at me. I'm a 'ard-workin' man. I am. I ain't 'ad no eddication. The kids, they're a learnin' French, and free'and drorin, and the bones on a skellington at the Board School, and I pays my coppers down every week cheerful. And why, porter ? Why, young master ? 'Cause I knows the vally on it ! But when I sees a real young gent a despisin' of the opper-toonities as a bountiful Providence and a excellent par has 'eaped on his 'ed, it—it makes me sick, it inspires Clegg with a pity and a contemp' for such ingratitood, which he cares not for to 'ide from public voo ! "

Clegg delivered this harangue with much gesture and in a loud tone, which greatly edified the porters and disgusted Mr. Bultitude.

" Go away," said the latter, " that's enough. You're drunk ! "

" Drunk ! " bellowed the outraged Clegg, rising on the box in his wrath. " 'Ear that. 'Ark at this 'ere young cock sparrer as tells a fam'ly man like Clegg as he's drunk ! Drunk, after drivin' his par in this 'ere werry cab through frost and fine fifteen year and more I I wonder yer don't say the old 'orse is drunk ; you'll be sayin' that next! Drunk ! oh, cert'nly, by all means. Never you darken my cab doors no more. I shall take and tell your par, I shall. Drunk, indeed ! A ill-conditioned young wiper as ever I see. Drunk ! yah ! "

And with much cursing and growling, Clegg gathered up his reins and drove off into the fog, Boaler having apparently pre-paid the fare.

" Where for, sir, please ? " said a porter, who had been putting the playbox and portmanteau on a truck during the altercation.

" Nowhere," said Mr. Bultitude. " I—I'm not going by this train ; find me a cab with a sober driver."

The porter looked round. A moment before there had been several cabs discharging their loads at the steps ; now the last had rolled away empty.

" You might find one inside the station by the arrival platform," he suggested ; " but there'll be sure to be one comin' up here in another minute, sir, if you like to wait."

Paul thought the other course might be the longer one, and decided to stay where he was. So he walked into the lofty hall in which the booking offices are placed and waited there by the huge fire that blazed in the stove until he should hear the cab arrive which could take him back to Westbourne Terrace.

One or two trains were about to start, and the place was full. There were several Cambridge men " going up " after the Christmas vacation, in every variety of ulster ; some tugging at refractory white terriers, one or two entrusting bicycles to dubious porters with many

VICE VERSA

cautions and directions. There were burly old farmers going back to their quiet countryside, flushed with the prestige of a successful stand under cross-examination in some witness-box at the Law Courts ; to tell and retell the story over hill and dale, in the market-place and bar-parlour, every week for the rest of their honest lives. There was the usual pantomime " rally " on a mild scale, with real frantic passengers, and porters, and trucks, and trays of lighted lamps.

Presently, out of the crowd and confusion, a small boy in a thick pilot jacket and an immensely tall hat, whom Paul had observed looking at him intently for some time, walked up to the stove and greeted him familiarly.

" Hallo, Bultitude ! " he said, " I thought it was you. Here we are again, eh ? Ugh ! " and he giggled dismally.

He was a pale-faced boy with freckles, very light green eyes, long, rather ragged black hair, a slouching walk, and a smile half-simpering, half-impudent.

Mr. Bultitude was greatly staggered by the presumption of so small a boy venturing to address him in this way. He could only stare haughtily.

" You might find a word to say to a fellow ! " said the boy in an aggrieved tone. " Look here ; come and get your luggage labelled."

" I don't want it labelled," said Paul stiffly, feeling bound to say something. " I 'm waiting for a cab to take me home again."

The other gave a loud whistle. " That'll make it rather a short term, won't it, if you're going home for the holidays already ? You're a cool chap, Bultitude ! If I were to go back to my governor now, he wouldn't see it. It would put him in no end of a bait. But you're chaffing——"

Paul walked away from him with marked coolness. He was not going to trouble himself to talk to his son's schoolfellows.

" Aren't you well ? " said the boy, not at all discouraged by his reception, following him and taking his arm. " Down in the mouth ? It is beastly, isn't it, having to go back to old Grimstone's ! The snow gave us an extra week, though—we've that much to be thankful for. I wish it was the first day of the holidays again, don't you ? What's the matter with you ? What have I done to put you in a wax ? "

" Nothing at present," said Paul. " I don't speak to you merely because I don't happen to have the—ah—pleasure of your acquaintance."

" Oh, very well, then ; I daresay you know best," said the other huffily. " Only I thought—considering we came the same half, and have been chums, and always sat next one another ever since—you might perhaps just recollect having met me before, you know."

" Well, I don't," said Mr. Bultitude. " I tell you I haven't the least idea what your name is. The fact is there has been a slight mistake, which I can't stop to talk about now. There's a cab just driven up outside now. You must excuse me, really, my boy, I want to go."

He tried to work his arm free from the close and affectionate grip of his unwelcome companion, who was regarding him with a sort of admiring leer.

" What a fellow you are, Bultitude ! " he said ; " always up to something or other. You know me well enough. What is the use of keeping it up any longer ? Let's talk, and stop humbugging. How much grub have you brought back this time ? "

To be advised to stop humbugging, and be persecuted with such idle questions as these, maddened the poor gentleman. A hansom really had rolled up to the steps outside. He must put an end to this waste of precious time, and escape from this highly inconvenient small boy.

He forced his way to the door, the boy still keeping fast hold of his arm. Fortunately the cab was still there, and its late occupant, a tall, broad man, was

VICE VERSA

standing with his back to them paying the driver. Paul was only just in time.

" Porter ! " he cried. " Where's that porter ? I want my box put on that cab. No, I don't care about the luggage ; engage the cab. Now, you little ruffian, are you going to let me go ? Can't you see I'm anxious to get away ? "

Jolland giggled more impishly than ever. " Well, you *have* got cheek ! " he said. " Go on, I wish you may get that cab, I'm sure ! "

Paul, thus released, was just hurrying towards the cab, when the stranger who had got out of it settled the fare with satisfaction to himself and turned sharply round.

The gas-light fell full on his face, and Mr. Bultitude recognised that the form and features were those of no stranger—he had stumbled upon the very last person he had expected or desired to meet just then—his flight was intercepted by his son's schoolmaster, Dr. Grimstone himself!

The suddenness of the shock threw him completely off his balance. In an ordinary way the encounter would not of course have discomposed him, but now he would have given worlds for presence of mind enough either to rush past to the cab and secure his only chance of freedom before the Doctor had fully realised his intention, or else greet him affably and calmly, and, taking him quietly aside, explain his awkward position with an easy man-of-the-world air, which would ensure instant conviction.

But both courses were equally impossible. He stood there, right in Dr. Grimstone's path, with terrified starting eyes and quivering limbs, more like an unhappy guinea-pig expecting the advances of a boa, than a British merchant in the presence of his son's schoolmaster ! He was sick and faint with alarm, and the consciousness that appearances were all against him.

There was nothing in the least extraordinary in the fact of the Doctor's presence at the station. Mr. Bulti-

tude might easily have taken this into account as a very likely contingency and have provided accordingly, had he troubled to think, for it was Dr. Grimstone's custom, upon the first day of the term, to come up to town and meet as many of his pupils upon the platform as intended to return by a train previously specified at the foot of the school-bills ; and Paul had even expressly insisted upon Dick's travelling under surveillance in this manner, thinking it necessary to keep him out of premature mischief.

It makes a calamity doubly hard to bear when one looks back and sees by what a trivial chance it has come upon us, and how slight an effort would have averted it altogether ; and Mr. Bultitude cursed his own stupidity as he stood there, rooted to the ground, and saw the hansom (a " patent safety " to him in sober earnest) drive off and abandon him to his fate.

Dr. Grimstone bore down heavily upon him and Jolland, who had by this time come up. He was a tall and imposing personage, with a strong black beard and small angry grey eyes, slightly blood-tinged ; he wore garments of a semi-clerical cut and colour, though he was not in orders. He held out a hand to each with elaborate geniality.

" Ha, Bultitude, my boy, how are you ? How are you, Jolland ? Come back braced in body and mind by your vacation, eh ? That's as it should be. Have you tickets ? No ? follow me then. You're both over age, I believe. There you are ; take care of them."

And before Paul could protest, he had purchased tickets for all three, after which he laid an authoritative hand upon Mr. Bultitude's shoulder and walked him out through the booking hall upon the platform.

" This is awful," thought Paul, shrinking involuntarily ; " simply awful. He evidently has no idea who I really am. Unless I'm very careful I shall be dragged off to Crichton House before I can put him right. If I could only get him away alone somewhere."

VICE VERSA

As if in answer to the wish, the Doctor guided him by a slight pressure straight along by the end of the station, saying to Jolland as he did so, " I wish to have a little serious conversation with Richard in private. Suppose you go to the bookstall and see if you can find out any of our young friends. Tell them to wait for me there."

When they were alone the Doctor paced solemnly along in silence for some moments, while Paul, who had always been used to consider himself a fairly prominent object, whatever might be his surroundings, began to feel an altogether novel sensation of utter insignificance upon that immense brown plain of platform and under the huge span of the arches whose girders were lost in wreaths of mingled fog and smoke.

Still he had some hope. Was it not possible, after all, that the Doctor had divined his secret and was searching for words delicate enough to convey his condolences ?

" I wished to tell you, Bultitude," said the Doctor presently, and his first words dashed all Paul's rising hopes, " that I hope you are returning this term with the resolve to do better things. You have caused your excellent father much pain in the past. You little know the grief a wilful boy can inflict on his parent."

" I think I have a very fair idea of it," thought Paul, but he said nothing.

" I hope you left him in good health ? Such a devoted parent, Richard—such a noble heart! "

At any other time Mr. Bultitude might have felt gratified by these eulogies, but just then he was conscious that he could lay no claim to them. It was Dick who had the noble heart now, and he himself felt even less of a devoted parent than he looked.

" I had a letter from him during the vacation," continued Dr. Grimstone, " a sweet letter, Richard, breathing in every line a father's anxiety and concern for your welfare."

Paul was a little staggered. He remembered having written, but he would scarcely perhaps have described

his letter as "sweet," as he had not done much more than enclose a cheque for his son's account and object to the items for pew-rent and scientific lectures with the diorama as excessive.

"But—and this is what I wanted to say to you, Bultitude—his is no blind doting affection. He has implored me, for your own sake, if I see you diverging ever so slightly from the path of duty, not to stay my hand. And I shall not forget his injunctions."

A few minutes ago, and it would have seemed to Paul so simple and easy a matter to point out to the Doctor the very excusable error into which he had fallen. It was no more than he would have to do repeatedly upon his return, and here was an excellent opportunity for an explanation.

But, somehow the words would not come. The schoolmaster's form seemed so tremendous and towering, and he so feeble and powerless before him, that he soon persuaded himself that a public place, like a station platform, was no scene for domestic revelations of so painful a character.

He gave up all idea of resistance at present. "Perhaps I had better leave him in his error till we get into the train," he thought; "then we will get rid of that other boy, and I can break it to him gradually in the railway carriage as I get more accustomed to him."

But in spite of his determination to unbosom himself without further delay, he knew that a kind of fascinated resignation was growing upon him and gaining firmer hold each minute.

Something must be done to break the spell and burst the toils which were being woven round him before all effort became impossible.

"And now," said the Doctor, glancing up at the great clock-face on which a reflector cast a patch of dim yellow light, "we must be thinking of starting. But don't forget what I have said."

And they walked back towards the book-stalls with

VICE VERSA

their cheery warmth of colour, past the glittering buffet, and on up the platform, to a part where six boys of various sizes were standing huddled forlornly together under a gaslight.

"Aha!" said Dr. Grimstone, with a slight touch of the ogre in his tone, "more of my fellows, eh? We shall be quite a party. How do you do, boys? Welcome back to your studies."

And the six boys came forward, all evidently in the lowest spirits, and raised their tall hats with a studied politeness.

"Some old friends here, Bultitude," said the Doctor, impelling the unwilling Paul towards the group. "You know Tipping, of course; Coker, too, you've met before—and Coggs. How are you, Siggers? You're looking well. Ah, by the way, I see a new face—Kiffin, I think? Kiffin, this is Bultitude, who will make himself your mentor, I hope, and initiate you into our various manners and customs."

And, with a horrible dream-like sense of unreality, Mr. Bultitude found himself being greeted by several entire strangers with a degree of warmth embarrassing in the extreme.

He would have liked to protest and declare himself there and then in his true colours, but if this had been difficult alone with the Doctor under the clock, it was impossible now, and he submitted ruefully enough to their unwelcome advances.

Tipping, a tall, red-haired, raw-boned boy, with sleeves and trousers he had outgrown, and immense boots, wrung Paul's hand with misdirected energy, saying "how-de-do?" with a gruff superiority, mercifully tempered by a touch of sheepishness.

Coggs and Coker welcomed him with open arms as an equal, while Siggers, a short, slight, sharp-featured boy, with a very fashionable hat and shirt-collars, and a horse-shoe pin, drawled, "How are you, old boy?" with the languor of a confirmed man about town.

The other two were Biddlecomb, a boy with a blooming complexion and a singularly sweet voice, and the new-comer, Kiffin, who did not seem much more at home in the society of other boys than Mr. Bultitude himself, for he kept nervously away from them, shivering with the piteous self-abandonment of an Italian greyhound.

Paul was now convinced that unless he exerted himself considerably, his identity with his son would never even be questioned, and the danger roused him to a sudden determination.

However his face and figure might belie him, nothing in his speech or conduct should encourage the mistake. Whatever it might cost him to overcome his fear of the Doctor, he would force himself to act and talk ostentatiously, as much like his own ordinary self as possible, during the journey down to Market Rodwell, so as to prepare the Doctor's mind for the disclosures he meant to make at the earliest opportunity. He was beginning to see that the railway carriage, with all those boys sitting by and staring, would be an inconvenient place for so delicate and difficult a confession.

The guard having warned intending passengers to take their seats, and Jolland, who had been unaccountably missing all this time, having appeared from the direction of the refreshment buffet, furtively brushing away some suspicious-looking flakes and crumbs from his coat, and contrived to join the party unperceived, they all got into a first-class compartment—Paul with the rest.

He longed for moral courage to stand out boldly and refuse to leave town, but, as we have seen, it was beyond his powers, and he temporised. Very soon the whistle had sounded and the train had begun to glide slowly out beyond the platform and arch, past the signal boxes and long low sheds and offices which are the suburbs of a large terminus—and then it was too late.

4. *A Minnow amongst Tritons*

"Boys are capital fellows in their own way among their mates ; but they are unwholesome companions for grown people."—*Essays of Elia*.

FOR some time after they were fairly started the Doctor read his evening paper with an air of impartial but severe criticism, and Mr. Bultitude as he sat opposite him next to the window, found himself overwhelmed with a new and very unpleasant timidity.

He knew that, if he would free himself, this utterly unreasonable feeling must be wrestled with and overcome ; that now, if ever, was the time to assert himself, and prove that he was anything but the raw youth he was conscious of appearing. He had merely to speak and act, too, in his ordinary everyday manner ; to forget as far as possible the change that had affected his outer man, which was not so very difficult to do after all—and yet his heart sank lower and lower as each fresh telegraph post flitted past.

"I will let him speak first," he thought ; "then I shall be able to feel my way." But there was more fear than caution in the resolve.

At last, however, the Doctor laid down his paper, and, looking round with the glance of proprietorship on his pupils, who had relapsed into a decorous and gloomy silence, observed : "Well, boys, you have had an unusually protracted vacation this time—owing to the unprecedented severity of the weather. We must try to make up for it by the zest and ardour with which we pursue our studies during the term. I intend to reduce the Easter holidays by a week by way of compensation."

This announcement (which by no means relieved the general depression—the boys receiving it with a sickly interest) was good news to Paul, and even had the effect of making him forget his position for the time.

"I'm uncommonly glad to hear it, Dr. Grimstone," he said heartily, "an excellent arrangement. Boys have

A MINNOW AMONGST TRITONS

too many holidays as it is. There's no reason, to my mind, why parents should be the sufferers by every snowstorm. It's no joke, I can assure you, to have a great idle boy hanging about the place eating his empty head off 1 "

A burglar enlarging upon the sanctity of the law of property, or a sheep exposing the fallacies of vegetarianism, could hardly have produced a greater sensation.

Every boy was roused from his languor to stare and wonder at these traitorous sentiments, which, from the mouth of any but a known and tried companion, would have roused bitter hostility and contempt. As it was, their wonder became a rapturous admiration, and they waited for the situation to develop with a fearful and secret joy.

It was some time before the Doctor quite recovered himself ; then he said with a grim smile, " This is indeed finding Saul amongst the prophets ; your sentiments, if sincere, Bultitude—I repeat, if sincere—are very creditable. But I am obliged to look upon them with suspicion ! " Then, as if to dismiss a doubtful subject, he inquired generally, " And how have you all been spending your holidays, eh ! "

There was no attempt to answer this question, it being felt probably that it was, like the conventional " How do you do ? " one to which an answer is neither desired nor expected, especially as he continued almost immediately, " I took my boy Tom up to town the week before Christmas to see the representation of the ' Agamemnon ' at St. George's Hall. The ' Agamemnon,' as most of you are doubtless aware, is a drama by Æschylus, a Greek poet of established reputation. I was much pleased by the intelligent appreciation Tom showed during the performance. He distinctly recognised several words from his Greek Grammar in the course of the dialogue."

No one seemed capable of responding except Mr. Bultitude, who dashed into the breach with an almost pathetic effort to maintain his accustomed stiffness.

VICE VERSA

" I may be old-fashioned," he said, " very likely I am ; but I—ah—decidedly disapprove of taking children to dramatic exhibitions of any kind. It unsettles them, sir—unsettles them ! "

Dr. Grimstone made no answer, but he put a hand on each knee, and glared with pursed lips and a leonine bristle of the beard at his youthful critic for some moments, after which he returned to his *Globe* with a short ominous cough.

" I've offended him now," thought Paul. " I must be more careful what I say. But I'll get him into conversation again presently."

So he began at the first opportunity : " You have this evening's paper, I see. No telegrams of importance, I suppose ? "

" No, sir," said the Doctor shortly.

" I saw a report in to-day's *Times*" said poor Mr. Bultitude, with a desperate attempt at his most conversational and instructive manner, " I saw a report that the camphor crop was likely to be a failure this season. Now, it's a very singular thing about camphor, that the Japanese——" (he hoped to lead the conversation round to colonial produce, and thus open the Doctor's eyes by the extent of his acquaintance with the subject).

" I am already acquainted with the method of obtaining camphor, thank you, Bultitude," said the Doctor, with dangerous politeness.

" I was about to observe, when you interrupted me," said Paul, " (and this is really a fact that I doubt if you are aware of), that the Japanese never——"

" Well, well," said the Doctor, with some impatience, " probably they never do, sir, but I shall have other opportunities of finding out what you have read about the Japanese."

But he glanced over the top of the paper at the indignant Paul, who was not accustomed to have his information received in this manner, with less suspicion and a growing conviction that some influence during the

A MINNOW AMONGST TRITONS

holidays had changed the boy from a graceless young scapegrace into a prig of the first water.

" He's most uncivil "—Mr. Bultitude told himself—" almost insulting, but I'll go on. I'm rousing his curiosity. I'm making way with him ; he sees a difference already." And so he applied himself once more.

" You're a smoker, of course, Dr. Grimstone ? " he began. " We don't stop anywhere, I think, on the way, and I must confess myself, after dinner, a whiff or two—I think I can give you a cigar you'll appreciate."

And he felt for his cigar-case, really forgetting that it was gone, like all other incidents of his old self ; while Jolland giggled with unrestrained delight at such charming effrontery.

" If I did not know, sir," said the Doctor, now effectually roused, " that this was ill-timed buffoonery, and not an intentional insult, I should be seriously angry. As it is, I can overlook any exuberance of mirth which is, perhaps, pardonable when the mind is elated by the return to the cheerful bustle and activity of school-life. But be very careful."

" He needn't be so angry," thought Paul," how could I know he doesn't smoke ? But I'm afraid he doesn't quite know me, even now."

So he began again : " Did I hear you mention the name of Kiffin amongst those of your pupils here, Doctor ? I thought so. Not the son of Jordan Kiffin, of College Hill, surely ? Yes ? Why, bless my soul, your father and I, my little fellow, were old friends in days before you were born or thought of—born or thought of. He was in a very small way then, a very small——Eh, Dr. Grimstone, don't you feel well ? "

" I see what you're aiming at, sir. You wish to prove to me that I'm making a mistake in my treatment of you."

" That was my idea, certainly," said Paul, much pleased. " I'm very glad you take me, Doctor."

" I shall take you in a way you won't appreciate soon, if this goes on," said the Doctor under his breath.

VICE VERSA

" When the time comes I shall know how to deal with you. Till then you'll have the goodness to hold your tongue," he said aloud.

" It's not a very polite way of putting it," Paul said to himself, " but, at any rate, he sees how the case stands now, and after all, perhaps, he only speaks like that to put the boys off the scent. If so, it's uncommonly considerate and thoughtful of him, by Gad. I won't say any more."

But by-and-by, the open window made him break his resolution. " I'm sorry to inconvenience you, Dr. Grimstone," he said, with the air of one used to having his way in these matters, " but I positively must ask you either to allow me to have this window up or to change places with you. The night air, sir, at this time of the year is fatal, my doctor tells me, simply fatal to a man of my constitution."

The Doctor pulled up the window with a frown, and yet a somewhat puzzled expression. " I warn you, Bultitude," he said, " you are acting very imprudently."

" So I am," thought Paul, " so I am. Good of him to remind me. I must keep it up before all these boys. This unpleasant business mustn't get about. I'll hold my tongue till we get in. Then, I daresay, Grimstone will see me off by the next train up, if there is one, and lend me enough for a bed at an hotel for the night. I couldn't get to St. Pancras till very late, of course. Or he might offer to put me up at the school. If he does, I think I shall very possibly accept. It might be better."

And he leant back in his seat in a much easier frame of mind ; it was annoying, of course, to have been turned out of his warm dining-room, and sent all the way down to Market Rodwell on a fool's errand like this ; but still, if nothing worse came of **it**, he could put up with the temporary inconvenience, and it was a great relief to be spared the necessity of an explanation.

The other boys watched him **furtively** with growing

A MINNOW AMONGST TRITONS

admiration, which expressed itself in subdued whispers, varied by little gurgles and "squirks" of laughter; they tried to catch his eye and stimulate him to further feats of audacity, but Mr. Bultitude, of course, repulsed all such overtures with a coldness and severity which at once baffled and piqued them.

At last his eccentricity took a shape which considerably lessened their enthusiasm. Kiffin, the new boy, occupied the seat next to Paul; he was a nervous-looking little fellow, with a pale face and big pathetic brown eyes like a seal's, and his dress bore plain evidence of a mother's careful supervision, having all the uncreased trimness and specklessness rarely to be observed except in the toilettes of the waxen prodigies in a shop-window.

It happened that, as he lay back in the padded seat between the sheltering partitions, watching the sickly yellow dregs of oil surging dismally to and fro with the motion in the lamp overhead, or the black indistinct forms flitting past through the misty blue outside, the pathos of his situation became all at once too much for him.

He was a home-bred boy, without any of that taste for the companionship and pursuits of his fellows, or capacity for adapting himself to their prejudices and requirements, which give some home-bred boys a ready passport into the roughest communities.

His heart throbbed with no excited curiosity, no conscious pride, at this his first important step in life; he was a forlorn little stranger, in an unsympathetic strange land, and was only too well aware of his position.

So that it is not surprising that as he thought of the home he had left an hour or two ago which now seemed so shadowy, so inaccessible and remote, his eyes began to smart and sting, and his chest to heave ominously, until he felt it necessary to do something to give a partial vent to his emotions and prevent a public and disgraceful exhibition of grief.

Unhappily for him he found this safety-valve in a series of suppressed but distinctly audible sniffs.

VICE VERSA

Mr. Bultitude bore this for some time with no other protest than an occasional indignant bounce or a lowering frown in the offender's direction, but at last his nerves, strung already to a high pitch by all he had undergone, could stand it no longer.

" Dr. Grimstone," he said with polite determination, " I'm not a man to complain without good reason, but really I must ask you to interfere. Will you tell this boy here, on my right, either to control his feelings or to cry into his pocket-handkerchief, like an ordinary human being ? A good honest bellow I can understand, but this infernal whiffling and sniffing, sir, I will not put up with. It's nothing less than unnatural in a boy of that size."

" Kiffin," said the Doctor, " are you crying ? "

" N—no, sir," faltered Kiffin ; " I — I think I must have caught cold, sir."

" I hope you are telling me the truth, because I should be sorry to believe you were beginning your new life in a spirit of captiousness and rebellion. I'll have no mutineers in my camp. I'll establish a spirit of trustful happiness and unmurmuring content in this school, if I have to flog every boy in it as long as I can stand over him ! As for you, Richard Bultitude, I have no words to express my pain and disgust at the heartless irreverence with which you persist in mimicking and burlesquing a fond and excellent parent. Unless I perceive, sir, in a very short time a due sense of your error and a lively repentance, my disapproval will take a very practical form."

Mr. Bultitude fell back into his seat with a gasp. It was hard to be accused of caricaturing one's own self, particularly when conscious of entire innocence in that respect, but even this was slight in comparison with the discovery that he had been so blindly deceiving himself !
* The Doctor evidently had failed to penetrate his disguise, and the dreaded scene of elaborate explanation must be gone through after all.

A MINNO

The boys (with the exception of the boy who was the object of the exhibition, and waited eagerly on the Doctor's patience.

They were soon gratified. If there was one thing Paul detested more than another, it was the smell of peppermint—no less than three office boys had been discharged by him because, as he alleged, they made the clerks' room reek with it,—and now the subtle searching odour of the hated confection was gradually stealing into the compartment and influencing its atmosphere.

He looked at Coggs, who sat on the seat opposite to him, and saw his cheeks and lips moving in slow and appreciative absorption of something. Coggs was clearly the culprit.

"Do you encourage your boys to make common nuisances of themselves in a public place, may I ask, Dr. Grimstone?" he inquired, fuming.

"Some scarcely seem to require encouragement, Bultitude," said the Doctor pointedly: "what is the matter now?"

"If he takes it medicinally," said Paul, "he should choose some other time and place to treat his complaint. If he has a depraved, liking for the abominable stuff, for Heaven's sake make him refrain from it on occasions when it is a serious annoyance to others!"

"Will you explain? Who and what are you talking about?"

"That boy opposite," said Paul, pointing the finger of denunciation at the astonished Coggs; "he's sucking an infernal peppermint lozenge strong enough to throw the train off the rails!"

"Is what Bultitude tells me true, Coggs?" demanded the Doctor in an awful voice.

Coggs, after making several attempts to bolt the offending lozenge, and turning scarlet meanwhile with confusion and coughing, stammered huskily something to the effect that he had "bought the lozenges at a

VICE VERSA

chemist's," which he seemed to consider, for some reason, a mitigating circumstance.

" Have you any more of this pernicious stuff about you ? " said the Doctor.

Very slowly and reluctantly Coggs brought out of one pocket after another three or four neat little white packets, make up with that lavish expenditure of time, string, and sealing-wax, by which the struggling chemist seeks to reconcile the public mind to a charge of two hundred and fifty per cent, on cost price, and handed them to Dr. Grimstone, who solemnly unfastened them one by one, glanced at their contents with infinite disgust, and flung them out of window.

Then he turned to Paul with a look of more favour than he had yet shown him. " Bultitude," he said, " I am obliged to you. A severe cold in the head has rendered me incapable of detecting this insidious act of insubordination and self-indulgence, on which I shall have more to say on another occasion. Your moral courage and promptness in denouncing the evil thing are much to your credit."

" Not at all," said Paul, " not at all, my dear sir. I mentioned it because I—ah—happen to be peculiarly sensitive on the subject and——" Here he broke off with a sharp yell, and began to rub his ankle. " One of these young savages has just given me a severe kick ; it's that fellow over there, with the blue necktie. I have given him no provocation, and he attacks me in this brutal manner, sir ; I appeal to you for protection ! "

" So, Coker " (Coker wore a blue necktie), said the Doctor, " you emulate the wild ass in more qualities than those of stupidity and stubbornness, do you ? You lash out with your hind legs at an inoffensive school-fellow, with all the viciousness of a kangaroo, eh ? Write out all you find in Buffon's Natural History upon those two animals a dozen times, and bring it to me by to-morrow evening. If I am to stable wild asses, sir, they **snail** be broken in ! "

A MINNOW AMONGST TRITONS

Six pairs of sulky glowering eyes were fixed upon the unconscious Paul for the rest of the journey ; indignant protests and dark vows of vengeance were muttered under cover of the friendly roar and rattle of tunnels. But the object of them heard nothing ; his composure was returning once more in the sunshine of Dr. Grimstone's approbation, and he almost decided on declaring himself in the station fly.

And now at last the train was grinding along discordantly with the brakes on, and, after a little preliminary jolting and banging over the points, drew up at a long lighted platform, where melancholy porters paced up and down, croaking " Market Rodwell ! " like so jnany Solomon Eagles predicting woe.

Paul got out with the others, and walked forward to the guard's van, where he stood shivering in the raw night air by a small heap of portmanteaux and white clamped boxes.

" I should like to tell him all about it now," he thought, " if he wasn't so busy. I'll get him to go in a cab alone with me, and get it over before we reach the house."

Dr. Grimstone certainly did not seem in a very receptive mood for confidences just then. No flies were to be seen, which he took as a personal outrage, and visited upon the station-master in hot indignation.

" It's scandalous, I tell you," he was saying " scandalous ! No cabs to meet the train. My school reassembles to-day, and here I find no arrangements made for their accommodation ! Not even an omnibus ! I shall write to the manager and report this. Let some one go for a fly immediately. Boys, go into the waiting room till I come to you. Stay—there are too many for one fly. Coker, Coggs, and, let me see, yes, Bultitude, you all know your way. Walk on and tell Mrs. Grimstone we are coming."

Paul Bultitude was perhaps more relieved than disappointed by this postponement of a disagreeable interview, though, if he had seen Coker dig Coggs in the

VICE VERSA

side with a chuckle of exultant triumph, he might have had misgivings as to the prudence of trusting himself alone with them.

As it was he almost determined to trust the pair with his secret. " They will be valuable witnesses," he said to himself, " that, whoever else I may be, I am not Dick."

So he went on briskly ahead over a covered bridge and down some break-neck wooden steps, and passed through the wicket out upon the railed-in space, where the cabs and omnibuses should have been, but which was now a blank spectral waste with a white ground-fog lurking round its borders.

Hare lie was joined by his companions, who, after a little whispering, came up one on either side and put an arm through each of his.

" Well," said Paul, thinking to banter them agreeably ; " here you are, young men, eh ? Holidays all over now ! Work while you're young, and then——Gad, you're walking me off my legs. Stop ; I'm not as young as I used to be——"

" Grim can't see us here, can he, Coker ? " said Coggs when they had cleared the gates and palings.

" Not he ! " said Coker.

" Very well, then. Now then, young Bultitude, you used to be a decent fellow enough last term, though you *were* coxy. So, before we go any further—what do you mean by this sort of thing ? "

" Because," put in Coker, " if you aren't quite right in your head, through your old governor acting like a brute all the holidays, as you said he does, just say so, and we won't be hard on you."

" I—he—always an excellent father," stammered Paul. " What am I to explain ? "

" Why, what did you go and sneak of *him* for bringing tuck back to school for, eh ? " demanded Coker.

" Yes, and sing out when he hacked your shin ? " added Coggs ; " and tell Grimstone that new fellow was blubbing ? Where's the joke in all that, eh ? Where's the joke ? "

A MINNOW AMONGST TRITONS

" You don't suppose I was bound to sit calmly down and allow you to suck your villainous peppermints under my very nose, do you ? " said Mr. Bultitude. " Why shouldn't I complain if a boy annoys me by sniffing, or kicks me on the ankle ? Just tell me that ? Suppose my neighbour has a noisy dog or a smoky chimnev, am I not to venture to tell him of it ? Is he to——"

But his arguments, convincing as they promised to be, were brought to a sudden and premature close by Coker, who slipped behind him and administered a sharp jog below his back, which jarred his spine and caused him infinite agony.

" You little brute ! " cried Paul, " I could have you up for assault for that ! "

But upon this Coggs did the very same thing only harder. " Last term you'd have shown fight for much less, Bultitude," they both observed severely, as some justification for repeating the process.

" Now, perhaps, you'll drop it for the future," said Coker. " Look here ! we'll give you one more chance. This sneaking dodge is all very well for Chawner. Chawner could do that sort of thing without getting sat upon, because he's a big fellow ; but we're not going to stand it from you. Will you promise on your sacred word of honour, now, to be a decent sort of chap again, as you were last term ? "

But Mr. Bultitude, though he longed for peace and quietness, dreaded doing or saying anything to favour the impression that he was the schoolboy he unluckily appeared to be, and he had not skill and tact enough to dissemble and assume a familiar genial tone of equality with these rough boys.

" You don't understand," he protested feebly. " If I could only tell you——"

" We don't want any fine language, you know," said the relentless Coggs. " Yes or no. Will you promise to be your old self again ? "

VICE VERSA

" I only wish I could," said poor Mr. Bultitude—" but I can't ! "

" Very well, then," said Coggs firmly, " we must try the torture. Coker, will you screw the back of his hand, while I show him how they make barley-sugar ? "

And he gave Paul an interesting illustration of the latter branch of industry by twisting his right arm round and round till he nearly wrenched it out of the socket, while Coker seized his left hand and pounded it vigorously with the first joint of his forefinger, causing the unfortunate Paul to yell for mercy.

At last he could bear no more, and breaking away from his tormentors with a violent effort, he ran frantically down the silent road towards a house which he knew from former visits to be Dr. Grimstone's.

He was but languidly pursued, and, as the distance was short, he soon gained a gate on the stuccoed posts of which he could read " Crichton House " by the light of a neighbouring gas-lamp.

" This is a nice way," he thought, as he readied it breathless and trembling, " for a father to visit his son's school ! "

He had hoped to reach sanctuary before the other two could overtake him ; but he soon discovered that the gate was shut fast, and all his efforts would not bring him within reach of the bell-handle—he was too short.

So he sat down on the doorstep in resigned despair, and waited for his enemies. Behind the gate was a large many-windowed house, with steps leading up to a portico. In the playground to his right the school gymnasium, a great gallows-like erection, loomed black and grim through the mist, the night wind favouring the ghastliness of its appearance by swaying the ropes till they creaked and moaned weirdly on the hooks, and the metal stirrups clinked and clashed against one another in irregular cadence.

He had no time to observe more, as Coker and Coggs joined him, and, on finding he had not rung the bell,

A MINNOW AMONGST TRITONS

seized the occasion to pummel him at their leisure before announcing their arrival.

Then the gate was opened, and the three—the revengeful pair assuming an air of lamb-like inoffensiveness—entered the hall and were met by Mrs. Grimstone.

" Why, here you are ! " she said, with an air of surprise, and kissing them with real kindness. " How cold you look ! So you actually had to walk. No cabs as usual. You poor boys ! come in and warm yourselves. You'll find all your old friends in the schoolroom."

Mr. Bultitude submitted to be kissed with some reluctance, inwardly hoping that Dr. Grimstone might never hear of it.

Mrs. Grimstone, it may be said here, was a stout, fair woman, not in the least intellectual or imposing, but with a warm heart, and a way of talking to and about boys that secured her the confidence of mothers more effectually, perhaps, than the most polished conversation and irreproachable deportment could have done.

She did not reserve her motherliness for the reception room either, as some schoolmasters' wives have a tendency to do, and the smallest boy felt less homesick when he saw her.

She opened a green baize outer door, and the door beyond it, and led them into a long high room, with desks and forms placed against the walls, and a writing table, and line of brown-stained tables down the middle. Opposite the windows there was a curious structure of shelves partitioned into lockers, and filled with rows of shabby schoolbooks.

The room had been originally intended for a drawing-room, as was evident from the inevitable white and gold wall-paper and the tarnished gilt beading round the doors and window shutters ; the mantelpiece, too, was of white marble, and the gaselier fitted with dingy crystal lustres.

But sad-coloured maps hung on the ink-splashed walls, and a clock with a blank idiotic face (it is not

VICE VERSA

every clock that possesses a decently intelligent expression) ticked over the gilt pier-glass. The hoards were uncarpeted, and stained with patches of ink of all sizes and ages ; while the atmosphere, in spite of the blazing fire, had a scholastic blending of soap and water, ink and slate-pencil in its composition, which produced a chill and depressing effect.

On the forms opposite the fire some ten or twelve boys were sitting, a few comparing notes as to their holiday experiences with some approach to vivacity. The rest, with hands in pockets and feet stretched towards the blaze, seemed lost in melancholy abstraction.

" There ! " said Mrs. Grinistone cheerfully, " you'll have plenty to talk to one another about. I'll send Tom in to see you presently ! " And she left them with a reassuring nod, though the prospect of Tom's company did not perhaps elate them as much as it was intended to do.

Mr. Bultitude felt much as if he had suddenly been dropped down a bear-pit, and, avoiding welcome and observation as well as he could, got away into a corner, from which he observed his new companions with uneasy apprehension.

" I say," said one boy, resuming the interrupted conversation, " did you go to Drury Lane ? Wasn't it stunning ! That goose, you know, and the lion in the forest, and all the wooden animals lumbering in out of the toy Noah's Ark ! "

" Why couldn't you come to our party on Twelfth-night ? " asked another. " We had great larks. I wish you'd been there ! "

" I had to go to young Skidmore's instead," said a pale, spiteful-looking boy, with fair hair carefully parted in the middle. " It was like his cheek to ask me, but I thought I'd go, you know, just to see what it was like."

" What, was it like ? " asked one or two near him languidly.'

" Oh, awfully slow ! They've a poky lietle house in Brompton somewhere, and there was no dancing, only

A MINNOW AMONGST TRITONS

boshy games and a conjurer, without any presents. And, oh ! I say, at supper there was a big cake on the table, and no one was allowed to cut it, because it was hired. They're so poor, you know. Skidmore's pater is only a clerk, and you should see his sisters ! "

" Why, are they pretty ? "

" Pretty ! they're just like young Skidmore—only uglier ; and just fancy, his mother asked me ' if I was Skidmore's favourite companion, and if he helped me in my studies ? ' "

The unfortunate Skidmore, when he returned, soon found reason to regret his rash hospitality, for he never heard the last of the cake (which had, as it happened, been paid for in the usual manner) during the rest of the term.

There was a slight laugh at the enormity of Mrs. Skidmore's presumption, and then a long pause, after which some one asked suddenly, " Does any one know whether Chawner really has left this time ? "

" I hope so," said a big, heavy boy, and his hope seemed echoed with a general fervour. " He's been going to leave every term for the last year, but I believe he really has done it this time. He wrote and told me he wasn't coming back."

" Thank goodness ! " said several, with an evident relief, and some one was just observing that they had had enough of the sneaking business, when a fly was heard to drive up, and the bell rang, whereupon everyone abandoned his easy attitude, and seemed to brace himself up for a trying encounter.

" Look out—here's Grimstone ! " they whispered under their breaths, as voices and footsteps were heard in the hall outside.

Presently the door of the schoolroom opened, and another boy entered the room. Dr. Grimstone, it appeared, had not been the occupant of the fly, after all. The new-comer was a tall, narrow-shouldered, stooping fellow, with a sallow, unwholesome complexion, thin

VICE VERSA

lips, and small sunken brown eyes. His cheeks were creased with a dimpling subsmile, half uneasy, half malicious, and his tread was mincing and cat-like.

" Well, you fellows ? " he said.

All rose at once, and shook hands effusively. " Why, Chawner ! " they cried, " how are you, old fellow ? We thought you weren't coming back ! "

There was a heartiness in their manner somewhat at variance with their recent expressions of opinion ; but they had doubtless excellent reasons for any inconsistency.

" Well," said Chawner, in a low, soft voice, which had a suggestion of feminine spitefulness, " I was going to leave, but I thought you'd be getting into mischief here without me to watch over you. Appleton, and Lench, and Coker want looking after badly, I know. So, you see, I've come back after all."

He laughed with a little malevolent cackle as he spoke, and the three boys named laughed too, though with no great heartiness, and shifting the while uneasily on their seats.

After this sally the conversation languished until Tom Grimstone's appearance. He strolled in with a semi-professional air, and shook hands with affability.

Tom was a short, flabby, sandy-haired youth, not particularly beloved of his comrades, and his first remark was, " I say, you chaps, have you done your holiday task ? Pa says he shall keep everyone in who hasn't. I've done mine ; " which, as a contribution to the general liveliness, was a distinct failure.

Needless to say, the work imposed as a holiday occupation had been first deferred, then forgotten, then remembered too late, and recklessly defied with the confidence begotten in a home atmosphere.

Amidst a general silence Chawner happened to see Mr. Bultitude in his corner, and crossed over to him. " Why, there's Dicky Bultitude there all the time, and he never came to shake hands ! Aren't you going to speak to me ? "

A MINNOW AMONGST TRITONS

Paul growled something indistinctly, feeling strangely uncomfortable and confused.

"What's the matter with him?" asked Chawner.
"Does anyone know? Has he lost his tongue?"

"He hadn't lost it coming down in the train," said Coker: "I wish he had. I tell you what, you fellows—He—here's Grim at last! I'll tell you all about it up in the bedroom."

And Dr. Grimstone really did arrive at this point, much to Paul's relief, and looked in to give a grip of the hand and a few words to those of the boys he had not seen.

Biddlecomb, Tipping, and the rest, came in with him, and the schoolroom soon filled with others arriving by later trains, amongst the later comers being the two house-masters, Mr. Blinkhorn and Mr. Tinkler; and there followed a season of bustle and conversation, which lasted until the Doctor touched a small hand-bell, and ordered them to sit down round the tables while supper was brought in.

Mr. Bultitude was not sorry to hear the word "supper." He was faint and dispirited, and although he had dined not very long since, thought that perhaps a little cold beef and beer, or some warmed-up trifle, might give him courage to tell his misfortunes before bedtime.

Of one thing he felt certain. Nothing should induce him to trust his person in a bedroom with any of those violent and vindictive boys; whether he succeeded in declaring himself that night or not, he would at least insist on a separate bedroom. Meantime he looked forward to supper as likely to restore geniality and confidence.

But the supper announced so imposingly proved to consist of nothing more than two plates piled with small pieces of thinly-buttered bread, which a page handed round together with tumblers of water; and Paul, in his disappointment, refused this refreshment with more firmness than politeness, as Dr. Grimstone observed.

"You got into trouble last term, Bultitude," he said

VICE VERSA

sternly, " on account of this same fastidious daintiness. Your excellent father has informed me of your waste and gluttony at his own bountifully spread table. Don't let me have occasion to reprove you for this again."

Mr. Bultitude, feeling the necessity of propitiating him, hastened to take the two largest squares of bread and butter on the plate. They were moist and thick, and he had considerable difficulty in disposing of them, besides the gratification of hearing himself described as a " pig " by his neighbours, who reproved him with a refreshing candour.

" I must get away from here," he thought, ruefully.

Dick seems very unpopular. I wish I didn't feel so low-spirited and unwell. Why can't I carry it off easily as—as a kind of joke ? How hard these forms are, and how those infernal boys did jog my back ! "

Bedtime came at length. The boys filed, one by one, out of the room, and the Doctor stood by the door to shake hands with them as they passed.

Mr. Bultitude lingered until the others had gone, for he had made up his mind to seize this opportunity to open the Doctor's eyes to the mistake he was making. But he felt unaccountably nervous ; the diplomatic and well-chosen introduction he had carefully prepared had left him at the critical moment ; all power of thought was gone with it, and he went tremblingly up to the school-master, feeling hopelessly at the mercy of an\~thing that chose to come out of his mouth.

" Dr. Grimstone," he began ; " before retiring I — I must insist—I mean I must request——What I wish to say is——"

" I see," said the Doctor, catching him up sharply. " You wish to apologise for your extraordinary behaviour in the railway carriage ? Well, though you made some amends afterwards, an apology is very right and proper. Say no more about it."

" It's not that," said Paul hopelessly ; " I wanted to explain——"

A MINNOW AMONGST TRITONS

" Your conduct with regard to the bread and butter ? If it was simply want of appetite, of course there is no more to be said. But I have an abhorrence of——"

" Quite right," said Paul, recovering himself ; " I hate waste myself, but there is something I must tell you before——"

" If it concerns that disgraceful conduct of Coker's," said the Doctor, " you may speak on. I shall have to consider his case to-morrow. Has any similar case of disobedience come to your knowledge ? If so, I expect you to disclose it to me. You have found some other boy with sweetmeats in his possession ? "

" Good Heavens, sir ! " said Mr. Bultitude, losing his temper ; " I haven't been searching the whole school for sweetmeats ! I have other things to occupy my mind, sir. And, once for all, I demand to be heard ! Dr. Grimstone, there are, ahem, domestic secrets that can only be alluded to in the strictest privacy. I see that one of your assistants is writing at his table there. Cannot we go where there will be less risk of interruption ? You have a study, I suppose ?

" Yes, sir," said the Doctor with terrible grimness, " I have a study—and I have a cane. I can convince you of both facts, if you wish it. If you insult me again by this brazen buffoonery, I will ! Be off to your dormitory, sir, before you provoke me to punish you. Not another word ! Go ! "

And, incredible as it may appear to all who have never been in his position, Mr. Bultitude went. It was almost an abdication, it was treachery to his true self ; he knew the vital importance of firmness at this crisis. But nevertheless his courage gave way all at once, and he crawled up the bare, uncarpeted stairs without any further protest !

" Good night, Master Bultitude," said a housemaid, meeting him on the staircase : " you know your bedroom. No. 6, with Master Coker, and Master Biddlecomb, and the others."

VICE VERSA

Paul dragged himself up to the highest landing-stage, and, with a sick foreboding, opened the door on which the figure 6 was painted.

It was a large bare plainly papered room, with several curtainless windows, the blinds of which were drawn, a long deal stand of wash-hand basins, and eight little white beds against the walls.

A fire was lighted in consideration of its being the first night, and several boys were talking excitedly round it. " Here he is ! He's stayed behind to tell more tales ! " they cried, as Paul entered nervously. " Now then, Buititude, what have you got to say for yourself ? "

Mr. Buititude felt powerless among all these young wolves. He had no knowledge of boys, nor any notion of acquiring an influence over them, having hitherto regarded them as necessary nuisances, to be rather repressed than studied. He could only stare hopelessly at them in fascinated silence.

" You see he hasn't a word to say for himself ! " said Tipping. " Look here, what shall we do to him ? Shall we try tossing in a blanket ? Fve never tried tossing a fellow in one myself, but as long as you don't jerk him too high, or out on the floor, you can't hurt him dangerously."

" No, I say, don't toss him in a blanket," pleaded Biddlecomb, and Paul felt gratefully towards him at the words ; " anyone coming up would see what was going on. I vote we flick at him with towels."

" Now just you understand this clearly," said Paul, thinking, not without reason, that this course of treatment was likely to prove painful ; "I refuse to allow myself to be flicked at with towels. No one has ever offered me such an indignity in my life ! Oh, do you think I've not enough on my mind as it is without the barbarities of a set of young brutes like you ! "

As this appeal was not of a very conciliatory nature they at once proceeded to form a circle round him and, judging their distance with great accuracy, jerked

A MINNOW AMONGST TRITONS

towels at his person with such diabolical dexterity that the wet corners cut him at all points like so many fine thongs, and he span round like a top, dancing, and, I regret to add, swearing violently, at the pain.

When he was worked up almost to frenzy pitch Biddlecomb's sweet low voice cried, " *Cave*, you fellows ! I hear Grim. Let him undress now, and we can lam it into him afterwards with slippers ! "

At this they all cast off such of their clothes as they still wore, and slipped modestly and peacefully into bed, just as Dr. Grimstone's large form appeared at the doorway. Mr. Bultitude made as much haste as he could, but did not escape a reprimand from the Doctor as he turned the gas out; and as soon as he had made the round of the bedrooms and his heavy tread had died away down the staircase, the light-hearted occupants of No. 6 " lammed " it into the unhappy Paul until they were tired of the exercise and left him to creep sore and trembling with rage and fright into his cold hard bed.

Then, after a little desultory conversation, one by one sank from incoherence into silence, and rose from silence to snores, while Paul alone lay sleepless, listening to the creeping tinkle of the dying fire, drearily wondering at the marvellous change that had come over his life and fortunes in the last few hours, and feverishly composing impassioned appeals which were to touch the Doctor's heart and convince his reason.

5. *Disgrace*

" Well had the boding tremblers learned to trace
The day's disasters in his morning's face."

LEEP came at last, and brought too brief forgetfulness. It was not till the dull grey light of morning was glimmering through the blinds that Mr. Bultitude awoke to his troubles.

The room was bitterly cold, and he remained shiver-

VICE VERSA

ing in bed for some time, trying to realise and prepare for his altered condition.

He was the only one awake. Now and then from one of the beds around a boy would be heard talking in his sleep, or laughing with holiday glee—at the drolleries possibly of some pantomime performed for his amusement in the Theatre Royal, Dreamland—a theatre mercifully open to all boys free of charge, long after the holidays have come to an end, the only drawbacks being a certain want of definiteness in the plot and scenery, and a liability to premature termination of the vaguely splendid performance.

Once Kiffin, the new boy, awoke with a start and a heavy sigh, but he cried himself to sleep again almost immediately.

Mr. Bultitude could bear being inactive no longer. He thought, if he got up, he might perhaps see his misfortunes shrink to a more bearable, less hopeless scale, and besides, he judged it prudent, for many reasons, to finish his toilet before the sleepers began theirs.

Very stealthily, dreading to rouse anyone and attract attention in the form of slippers, he broke the clinking crust of ice in one of the basins and, shuddering from the shock, bathed face and hands in the biting water. He parted his hair, which from natural causes he had been unable to accomplish for some years, and now found an awkwardness in accomplishing neatly, and then stole down the dark creaking staircase just as the butler in the hall began to swing the big railway bell which was to din stern reality into the sleepy ears above.

In the schoolroom a yawning maid had just lighted the fire, from which turbid yellow clouds of sulphurous smoke were pouring into the room, making it necessary to open the windows and lower a temperature that was far from high originally.

Paul stood shaking by the mantelpiece in a very bad temper for some minutes. If the Doctor had come in then, he might have been spurred by indignation to

utter his woes, and even claim and obtain his freedom. But that was not to be.

The door did open presently, however, and a little girl appeared ; a very charming little maiden indeed, in a neat dark costume relieved by a fresh white pinafore. She had deep grey eyes and glossy brown hair falling over her forehead and down her back in soft straight masses, her face was oval rather than round, and slightly serious, though her smile was pretty and gay.

She ran towards Mr. Bultitude with a glad little cry, stretching out her hands.

" Dick ! dear Dick ! " she said, " I am so glad ! I thought you'd be down early ; as you used to be. I wanted to sit up last night so very much, but mamma wouldn't let me."

Some might have been very glad to be welcomed in this way, even vicariously. As for boys, it must have been a very bad school indeed which Dulcie Grimstone could not have robbed of much of its terrors.

Mr. Bultitude, however, as has been explained, did not appreciate children—being a family man himself. When one sees their petty squabbles and jealousies, hears their cruel din, and pays for their monkeyish mischief, perhaps the daintiest children seem but an earthly order of cherubim. He was only annoyed and embarrassed by the interruption, though he endured it.

" Ah," he said with condescension, " and so you're Dr. Grimstone's little girl, are you ? How d'ye do, my dear ? "

Dulcie stopped and looked at him, with drawn eyebrows and her soft mouth quivering. " What makes you talk like that ? " she asked.

" How ought I to talk ? " said Paul.

" You didn't talk like that before," said Dulcie plaintively. " I—I thought perhaps you'd be glad to see me. You were once. And—and—when you went away last you asked me to—to—kiss you, and I did, and I wish I hadn't. And you gave me a ginger

VICE VERSA

lozenge with your name written on it in lead pencil, and I gave you a cough-lozenge with mine ; and you said it was to show that you were my sweetheart and I was yours. But I suppose you've eaten the one I gave you ? "

" This is dreadful ! " thought Mr. Bultitude. " What shall I do now ? The child evidently takes me for that little scoundrel Dick." " Tut-tut," he said aloud, " little girls like you are too young for such nonsense. You ought to think about—about your dolls, and—ah, your needlework—not sweethearts ! "

" You say that now ! " cried Dulcie indignantly. " You know I'm not a little girl, and I've left off playing with dolls—almost. Oh, Dick, don't be unkind ! You haven't changed your mind, have you ? "

" No," said Paul dismally, " I've changed my body. But there—you wouldn't understand. Run away and play somewhere, like a good little girl ! "

" I know what it is ! " said Dulcie. " You've been out to parties, or somewhere, and seen some horrid girl . . . you like . . . better than me ! "

" This is absurd, you know," said Mr. Bultitude. " You can't think how absurd it is ! Now, you'll be a very foolish little girl if you cry. You're making a mistake. I'm not the Dick you used to know ! "

" I know you're not ! " sobbed Dulcie. " But oh, Dick, you will be. Promise me you will be ! " And, to Paul's horror and alarm, she put her arms round his neck, and cried piteously on his shoulder.

" Good gracious ! " he cried, " let me go. Don't do that, for Heaven's sake ! I can hear some one coming. If it's your father, it will ruin me ! "

But it was too late. Over her head he saw Tipping enter the room, and stand glaring at them menacingly. Dulcie saw him too, and sprang away to the window, where she tried to dry her eyes unperceived, and then ran past him with a hurried good morning, and escaped, leaving Paul alone with the formidable Tipping.

There was an awkward silence at first, which Tipping broke by saying, " What have you been saying to make her cry, eh ? "

" What's that to you, sir ? " said Paul, trying to keep his voice firm.

" Why, it's just this to me," said Tipping, " that I've been spoons on Dulcie myself ever since I came, and she never would have a word to say to me. I never could think why, and now it turns out to be you ! What do you mean by cutting me out like this ? I heard her call you ' dear Dick.' " "

" Don't be an ass, sir ! " said Paul angrily.

" Now, none of your cheek, you know ! " said Tipping, edging up against him with a dangerous inclination first to jostle aggressively, and then maul his unconscious rival. " You just mind what I say. I'm not going to have Dulcie bothered by a young beggar in the second form ; she deserves something better than that, anyway, and I tell you that if I once catch you talking to her in the way you did just now, or if I hear of her favouring you more than any other fellows, I'll give you the very juiciest licking you ever had in your life. So look out! "

At this point the other boys began to straggle down and cluster round the fire, and Paul withdrew from the aggrieved Tipping, and looked drearily out of the window on the hard road and bare black trees outside.

" I *must* tell the Doctor how I'm situated ! " he thought; " and yet directly I open my mouth, he threatens to flog me. If I stay here, that little girl will be always trying to speak to me, and I shall be thrashed by the red-haired boy. If I could only manage to speak out after breakfast! "

It was not without satisfaction that he remembered that he paid extra for " meat for breakfast " in his son's school-bills, for he was beginning to look forward to meal-time with the natural desire of a young and healthy frame for nourishment.

At eight o'clock the Doctor came in and announced

VICE VERSA

breakfast, leading the way himself to what was known in the school as the " Dining Hall." It scarcely deserved so high-sounding a name perhaps, being a long low room on the basement floor, with a big fireplace, fitted with taps, and baking ovens, which provoked the suspicion that it had begun existence as a back kitchen.

The Doctor took his seat alone at a cross table forming the top of one of the two rows of tables, set with white cups and saucers, and plates well heaped with the square pieces of bread and butter, while Mrs. Grimstone with Dulcie and Tom, sat at the foot of the same row, behind two ugly urns of dull block-tin.

But when Mr. Bultitude, more hungry than he had felt for years, found his place at one of the tables, he was disgusted to find upon his plate—not, as he had confidently expected, a couple of plump poached eggs, with their appetising contrast of ruddy gold and silvery white, not a crisp and crackling sausage or a mottled omelette, not even the homely but luscious rasher, but a brace of chill forbidding sardines, lying grim and headless in bilious green oil !

It was a fish he positively loathed, nor could it be reasonably expected that the confidence necessary for a declaration was to be forgotten by so sepulchral a form of nutriment.

He roused himself, however, to swallow them, together with some of the thin and tin-flavoured coffee. But the meal as a whole was so different from the plentiful well-cooked breakfasts he had sat down before for years as a matter of course, that it made him feel extremely unwell.

No talking was allowed during the meal. The Doctor now and then looked up from his dish of kidneys on toast (at which envious glances were occasionally cast) to address a casual remark to his wife across the long row of plates and cups, but, as a rule, the dull champing sound of boys solemnly and steadily munching was all that broke the silence.

Towards the end, when the plates had been generally cleared, and the boys sat staring with the stolidity of repletion at one another across the tables, the junior house-master, Mr. Tinkler, made his appearance. He had lately left a small and little-known college at Cambridge, where he had contrived, contrary to expectation, to evade the uncoveted wooden spoon by just two places, which enabled the Doctor to announce himself as being "assisted by a graduate of the University of Cambridge who has taken honours in the Mathematical Tripos."

For the rest, he was a small insignificant-looking person, who evidently disliked the notice his late appearance drew upon himself.

"Mr. Tinkler," said the Doctor in his most awful voice, "if it were my custom to rebuke my assistants before the school (which it is not), I should feel forced to remind you that this tardiness in rising is a bad beginning of the day's work, and sets a bad example to those under your authority."

Mr. Tinkler made no articulate reply, but sat down with a crushed expression, and set himself to devour bread and butter with an energy which he hoped would divert attention from his blushes; and almost immediately the Doctor looked at his watch and said, "Now, boys, you have half-an-hour for 'chevy'—make the most of it. When you come in I shall have something to say to you all. Don't rise, Mr. Tinkler, unless you have quite finished."

Mr. Tinkler preferred leaving his breakfast to continuing it under the trying ordeal of his principal's inspection. So, hastily murmuring that he had "made an excellent breakfast"—which he had not—he followed the others, who clattered upstairs to put on their boots and go out into the playground.

It was noticeable that they did so without much of the enthusiasm which might be looked for from boys dismissed to their sports. But the fact was that this

VICE VERSA

particular sport, " chevy," commonly known as " prisoners' base," was by no means a popular amusement, being of a somewhat monotonous nature, and calling for no special skill on the part of the performers. Besides this, moreover, it had the additional disadvantage (which would have been fatal to a far more fascinating diversion) of being in a great measure compulsory.

Football and cricket were of course reserved for half-holidays, and played in a neighbouring field rented by the Doctor, and in the playground he restricted them to " chevy," which he considered, rightly enough, both gave them abundant exercise and kept them out of mischief. Accordingly, if any adventurous spirit started a rival game, it was usually abandoned sooner or later in deference to suggestions from headquarters which were not intended to be disregarded.

This, though undoubtedly well meant, did not serve to stimulate their affection for the game, an excellent one in moderation, but one which, if played " by special desire " two or three hours a day for weeks in succession is apt to lose its freshness and pall upon the youthful mind.

It was a bright morning. There had been a hard frost during the night, and the ground was hard, sparkling with rime and ringing to the foot. The air was keen and invigorating, and the bare black branches of the trees were outlined clear and sharp against the pale pure blue of the morning sky.

Just the weather for a long day's skating over the dark green glassy ice, or a bracing tramp on country roads into cheery red-roofed market towns. But now it had lost all power to charm. It was almost depressing by the contrast between the boundless liberty suggested, and the dull reality of a round of uninteresting work which was all it heralded.

So they lounged listlessly about, gravitating finally towards the end of the playground, where a deep furrow marked the line of the base. There was no attempt to play. They stood gossiping in knots, grumbling and

stamping their feet to keep warm. By-and-by the day-boarders began to drop in one by one, several of them, from a want of tact in adapting themselves to the general tone, earning decided unpopularity at once by a cheerful briskness and an undisguised satisfaction at having something definite to do once more.

If Mr. Tinkler, who had joined one of the groups, had not particularly distinguished himself at breakfast, he made ample amends now, and by the grandeur and manliness of his conversation succeeded in producing a decided impression upon some of the smaller boys.

"The bore of a place like this, you know," he was saying with magnificent disdain, "is that a fellow can't have his pipe of a morning. I've been used to it, and so, of course, I miss it. If I chose to insist on it Grimstone couldn't say anything; but with a lot of young fellows like you, you see, it wouldn't look well!"

It could hardly have looked worse than little Mr. Tinkler himself would have done, if he had ventured upon more than the mildest of cigarettes, for he was a poor but pertinacious smoker, and his love for the weed was chastened by wholesome fear. There, however, he was in no danger of betraying this, and indeed it would have been injudicious to admit it.

"Talking of smoking," he went on, with a soft chuckle, as at recollections of unspeakable devilry, "did I ever tell you chaps of a tremendous scrape I very nearly got into up at the 'Varsity? Well, you must know there's a foolish rule there against smoking in the streets. Not that that made any difference to some of us! Well, one night about nine, I was strolling down Petty Cury with two other men, smoking (Bosher of "Pothouse," and Peebles of "Cats," both pretty well known up there for general rowdiness, you know—great pals of mine!) and, just as we turned the corner, who should we see coming straight down on us but a Proctor with his bulldogs (not dogs, you know, but the strongest 'gymps' in college). Bosher said, 'Let's cut it!' and he and

VICE VERSA

Peebles bolted. (They were neither of them funks, of course, but they lost their heads.) I went calmly on, smoking my cigar as if nothing was the matter. That put the Proctor in a bait, I can tell you ! He came fuming up to me. ' What do you mean, sir,' says he, quite pale with anger (he was a great bull-headed fellow, one of the strongest dons of his year, that's why they made him a Proctor)—' what do you mean by breaking the University Statutes in this way ? ' ' It is a fine evening,' said I (I was determined to keep cool). ' Do you mean to insult me ? ' said he. ' No, old boy,' said I, I don't ; have a cigar ? ' He couldn't stand that, so he called up his bull-dogs. ' I give him in charge ! ' he screamed out. ' I'll have him sent down ! ' ' I'll send you down first,' said I, and I just gave him a push—I never meant to hurt the fellow—and over he went. I rolled over a bull-dog to keep him company, and, as the other fellow didn't want any more and stood aside to let me pass, I finished my stroll and my cigar."

" Was the Proctor hurt, sir ? " inquired a small boy with great respect.

" More frightened than hurt, I always said," said Mr. Tinkler lightly, " but somehow he never would proctorise any more—it spoilt his nerve. He was a good deal chaffed about it, but of course no one ever knew I'd had anything to do with it ! "

With such tales of Homeric exploit did Mr. Tinkler inculcate a spirit of discipline and respect for authority. But although he had indeed once encountered a Proctor, and at night, he did himself great injustice by this version of the proceedings, which were, as a matter of fact, of a most peaceable and law-abiding character, and though followed by a pecuniary transaction the next day in which six-and-eightpence changed pockets, the Proctors continued their duties much as before, while Mr. Tinkler's feelings towards them, which had ever been reverential in the extreme, were, if anything, intensified by the experience.

Upon this incident, however, he had gradually embroidered the above exciting episode, until he grew to believe at intervals that he really had been a devil of a fellow in his time, which, to do him justice, was far from the case.

He might have gone on still further to calumniate himself, and excite general envy and admiration thereby, if at that moment Dr. Grimstone had not happened to appear at the head of the cast-iron staircase that led down into the playground ; whereupon Mr. Tinkler affected to be intensely interested in the game, which, as a kind of involuntary compliment to the principal, about this time was galvanised into a sort of vigour.

But the Doctor, after frowning gloomily down upon them for a minute or so, suddenly called " All in ! "

He had several ways of saying this. Sometimes he would do so in a half-regretful tone, as one himself obeying the call of duty ; sometimes he would appear for some minutes, a benignant spectator, upon the balcony, and summon them to work at length with a lenient pity—for he was by no means a hard-hearted man ; but at other times he would step sharply and suddenly out and shout the word of command with a grim and ominous expression. On these last occasions the school generally prepared itself for a rather formidable quarter of an hour.

This was the case now and, as a further portent, Mr. Blinkhorn was observed to come down and, after a few words with Mr. Tinkler, withdrew with him through the school gate.

" He's sent them out for a walk," said Siggers, who was skilled in omens. " It's a row ! "

Rows at Crichton House, although periodical, and therefore things to be forearmed against in some degree, were serious matters. Dr. Grimstone was a quick-tempered man, with a copious flow of words and a taste for indulging it. He was also strongly prejudiced against many breaches of discipline which others might have considered trifling, and whenever he had dis-

VICE VERSA

covered any such breach he could not rest until by all the means in his power he had ascertained exactly how many were implicated in the offence, and to what extent.

His usual method of doing this was to summon the school formally together and deliver an elaborate harangue, during which he worked himself by degrees into such a state of indignation that his hearers were most of them terrified out of their senses, and very often conscience-stricken offenders would give themselves up as hopelessly detected and reveal transgressions altogether unsuspected by him—much as a net brings up fish of all degrees of merit, or as heavy firing will raise drowned corpses to the surface.

Paul naturally knew nothing of this peculiarity ; he had kept himself as usual apart from the others, and was now trying to compel himself to brave the terrors of an avowal at the first opportunity. He followed the others up the steps with an uneasy wonder whether, after all, he would not find himself ignominiously set down to learn lessons.

The boys filed into the schoolroom in solemn silence, and took their seats at the desks and along the brown tables. The Doctor was there before them, standing up with one elbow resting upon a reading-stand, and with a suggestion of coming thunder in his look and attitude that, combined with the oppressive silence, made some of the boys feel positively ill.

Presently he began. He said that, since they had come together again, he had made a discovery concerning one among them which, astounding as it was to him, and painful as he felt it to be compelled to make it known, concerned them all to be aware of.

Mr. Bultitude could scarcely believe his ears. His secret was discovered, then ; the injury done him by Dick about to be repaired, and open restitution and apology offered him ! It was not perhaps precisely delicate on the Doctor's part to make so public an affair of it, but so long as it ended well, he could afford to overlook that.

So he settled himself comfortably on a form with his back against a desk and his legs crossed, his expression indicating plainly that he knew what was coming and, on the whole, approved of it.

" Ever since I have devoted myself to the cause of tuition," continued the Doctor, " I have made it my object to provide boys under my roof with fare so abundant and so palatable that they should have no excuse for obtaining extraneous luxuries. I have presided myself at their meals, I have superintended their very sports with a fatherly eye——"

Here he paused, and fixed one or two of those nearest him with the fatherly eye in such a manner that they writhed with confusion.

" He's wandering from the point," thought Paul, a little puzzled.

" I have done all this on one understanding—that the robustness of your constitutions, acquired by the plain, simple, but abundant regimen of my table, shall not be tampered with by the indulgence in any of the pampering products of confectionery. They are absolutely and unconditionally prohibited—as every boy who hears me now knows perfectly well !

" And yet " (here he began gradually to relax his self-restraint and lash himself into a frenzy of indignation), " what do I find ? There are some natures so essentially base, so incapable of being affected by kindness, so dead to honour and generosity, that they will not scruple to conspire or set themselves individually to escape and baffle the wise precautions undertaken for their benefit. I will not name the dastards at present—they themselves can look into their hearts and see their guilt reflected there——"

At this every boy, beginning to see the tendency of his denunciations, tried hard to assume an air of conscious innocence and grieved interest, the majority achieving conspicuous failure.

" I do not like to think," said Dr. Grimstonc, " that the

VICE VERSA

evil has a wider existence than I yet know of. It may be so ; nothing will surprise me now. There may be some before me trembling with the consciousness of secret guilt. If so, let those boys make the only reparation in their power, and give themselves up in an honourable and straightforward manner ! "

To this invitation, which indeed resembled that of the duck-destroying Mrs. Bond, no one made any response. They had grown too wary, and now preferred to play a waiting game.

" Then let the being—for I will not call him boy—who is known to me, step forth and confess his fault publicly, and sue for pardon ! " thundered the Doctor, now warmed to his theme.

But the being declined from a feeling of modesty, and a faint hope that somebody else might, after all, be the person aimed at.

" Then I name him ! " stormed Dr. Grimstone ;
" Cornelius Coggs—stand up ! "

Coggs half rose in a limp manner, whimpering feebly,
" Me, sir ? Oh, please sir—no, not me, sir ! "

" Yes, you, sir, and let your companions regard you with the contempt and abhorrence you so richly merit ! " Here, needless to say, the whole school glared at poor Coggs with as much virtuous indignation as they could summon up at such short notice ; for contempt is very infectious when communicated from high quarters.

" So, Coggs," said the Doctor, with a slow and withering scorn, " so you thought to defy me ; to smuggle compressed illness and concentrated unhealthiness into this school with impunity ? You flattered yourself that after I had once confiscated your contraband poisons, you would hear no more of it ! You deceived yourself, sir ! I tell you, once for all, that I will not allow you to contaminate your innocent schoolmates with your gifts of surreptitious sweetmeats ; they shall not be perverted with your pernicious peppermints, sir ; you shall not deprave them by jujubes, or enervate them with Tur-

kish Delight ! I will not expose myself or them to the inroads of disease invited here by a hypocritical inmate of my walls. The traitor shall have his reward ! "

All of which simply meant that the Doctor, having once had a small boy taken seriously ill from the effects of overeating himself, was naturally anxious to avoid such an inconvenience for the future. " Thanks to the fearless honesty of a youth," continued the Doctor, " who, in an eccentric manner, certainly, but with, I do not doubt, the best of motives, opened my eyes to the fell evil, I am enabled to cope with it at its birth. Richard Bultitude, I take this occasion of publicly thanking and commending you ; your conduct was noble ! "

Mr. Bultitude was too angry and disappointed to speak. He had thought his path was going to be made smooth, and now all this ridiculous fuss was being made about a few peppermint lozenges. He wished he had never mentioned them. It was not the last time he breathed that wish. " As for you, Coggs," said the Doctor, suddenly producing a lithe brown cane, " I shall make a public example of you."

Coggs stared idiotically and protested, but after a short and painful scene, was sent off up to his bedroom, yelping like a kicked puppy.

" One word more," said the Doctor, now almost calm again. " I know that you all think with me in your horror of the treachery I have just exposed. I know that you would scorn to participate in it." (A thrill and murmur, expressive of intense horror and scorn, went round the benches.) " You are anxious to prove that you do so beyond a doubt." (Again a murmur of assent.) " I give you all that opportunity. I have implicit trust and confidence in you—let every boarder go down into the box-room and fetch up his playbox, just as it is, and open it here before me."

There was a general fall of jaws at this very unexpected conclusion ; but contriving to overcome their dismay, they went outside and down through the play-

VICE VERSA

ground into the box-room, Paul amongst the rest, and amidst universal confusion, everyone opened his box, and, with a consideration especially laudable in heedless boyhood, thoughtfully and carefully removed from it all such dainties as might be calculated to shock or pain their preceptor.

Mr. Bultitude found a key which was labelled "play-box," and began to open a box which bore Dick's initials cut upon the lid ; without any apprehensions, however, for he had given too strict orders to his daughter, to fear that any luxuries would be concealed there.

But no sooner had he raised the lid than he staggered back with disgust. It was crammed with cakes, butter-scotch, hardbake, pots of jam, and even a bottle of ginger wine—enough to compromise a chameleon !

He set himself to pitch them all out as soon as possible with feverish haste, but Tipping was too quick for him. " Hallo ! " he cried : " oh, I say, you fellows, come here ! Just look at this ! Here's this impudent young beggar, who sneaked of poor old Coggs for sucking jujubes, and very nearly got us all into a jolly good row, with his own box full all the time ; butterscotch, if you please, and jam, and ginger wine ! You'll just put 'em all back again, will you, you young humbug ! "

" Do you use those words to me, sir ? " said Paul angrily, for he did not like to be called a humbug.

" Yes, sir, please, sir," jeered Tipping ; " I did venture to take such a liberty, sir."

" Then it was like your infernal impudence," growled Paul. " You be kind enough to leave my affairs alone. Upon my word, what boys are coming to nowadays ! "

" Are you going to put that tuck back ? " said Tipping impatiently.

" No, sir, I'm not. Don't interfere with what you're not expected to understand ! "

" Well, if you won't," said Tipping easily, " I suppose we must. Biddlecomb, kindly knock him down, and sit on his head while I fill his playbox for him."

This was neatly and quickly done. Biddlecomb tripped Mr. Bultitude up, and sat firmly on him, while Tipping carefully replaced the good things in Dick's box, after which he locked it, and courteously returned the key. "As the box is heavy," he said, with a wicked wink, "I'll carry it up for you myself," which he did, Paul following, more dead than alive, and too shaken even to expostulate.

"Bultitude's box was rather too heavy for him, sir," he explained as he came in ; and Dr. Grimstone, who had quite recovered his equanimity, smiled indulgently, and remarked that he "liked to see the strong assisting the weak."

All the boxes had by this time been brought up, and were ranged upon the tables, while the Doctor went round, making an almost formal inspection, like a Custom House officer searching compatriots, and becoming milder and milder as box after box opened to reveal a fair and innocent interior.

Paul's turn was coming very near, and his heart seemed to shrivel like a burst bladder. He fumbled with his key, and tried hard to lose it. It was terrible to have oneself to apply the match which is to blow one to the winds. If—if—the idea was almost too horrible—but if he, a blameless and respectable city merchant, were actually to find himself served like the miserable Coggs !

At last the Doctor actually stood by him. "Well, my boy," he said, not unkindly, "I'm not afraid of anything wrong here, at any rate."

Mr. Bultitude, who had the best reasons for not sharing his confidence, made some inarticulate sounds, and pretended to have a difficulty in turning the key.

"Eh ? Come, open the box," said the Doctor with an altered manner. "What are you fumbling at it for in this—this highly suspicious manner ? I'll open it myself."

He took the key and opened the lid, when the cakes and wine stood revealed in all their damning profusion.

VICE VERSA

The Doctor stepped back dramatically. " Hardbake ! " he gasped ; " wine, pots of strawberry jam ! Oh, Bultitude, this is a revelation indeed ! So I have nourished one more viper in my bosom, have I ? A crawling reptile which curries favour by denouncing the very crime it conceals in its play box ! Bultitude, I was not prepared for such duplicity as this ! "

" I — I swear I never put them in ! " protested the unhappy Paul. " I — I never touch such things : they would bring on my gout in half-an-hour. It's ridiculous to punish me. I never knew they were there ! "

" Then why were you so anxious to avoid opening the box ? " rejoined the Doctor. " No, sir, you're too ingenious ; your guilt is clear. Go to your dormitory, and wait there till I come to you ! "

Paul went upstairs, feeling utterly abandoned and helpless. Though a word as to his real character might have saved him, he could not have said it, and, worse still, knew now that he could not.

" I shall be caned," he told himself, and the thought nearly drove him mad. " I know I shall be caned ! What on earth shall I do ? "

He opened the door of his bedroom. Coggs was rocking and moaning on his bed in one corner of the room, but looked up with red furious eyes as Paul came in.

" What do you want up here ? " he said savagely. " Go away, can't you ! "

" I wish I *could* go away," said Paul dolefully ; " but I'm—hum—I'm sent up here too," he explained, with some natural embarrassment.

" What ! " cried Coggs, slipping off his bed and staring wildly : " you don't mean to say you're going to catch it too ? "

" I've—ah—every reason to fear," said Mr. Bultitude stiffly, " that I am indeed going to ' catch it,' as you call it."

" Hooray ! " shouted Coggs hysterically : " I don't

care now. And I'll have some revenge on my own account as well. I don't mind an extra licking, and you're in for one as it is. Will you stand up to me or not ? "

" I don't understand you," said Paul. " Don't come so near. Keep off, you young demon, will you ! " he cried presently, as Coggs, exasperated by all his wrongs, was rushing at him with an evidently hostile intent. " There, don't be annoyed, my good boy," he pleaded, catching up a chair as a bulwark. " It was a misunderstanding. I wish you no harm. There, my dear young friend ! Don't ! "

The " dear young friend " was grappling with him and attempting to wrest the chair away by brute force. " When I get at you," he said, his hot breath hissing through the chair rungs, " I'll jolly well teach you to sneak of me ! "

" Murder ! " Paul gasped, feeling his hold on the chair relaxing. " Unless help comes this young fiend will have my blood ! "

They were revolving slowly round the chair, watching each other's eyes like gladiators, when Paul noticed a sudden blankness and fixity in his antagonist's expression, and, looking round, saw Dr. Grimstone's awful form framed in the doorway, and gave himself up for lost.

6. *Learning and Accomplishments*

" I subscribe to Lucian : 'tis an elegant thing which cheareth up the mind, exerciseth the body, delights the spectators, which teacheth many comely gestures, equally affecting the ears, eyes and soulitself."—BURTON, *on Dancing*.

WHAT is this ? " asked Dr. Grimstone in his most blood-curdling tone, after a most impressive pause at the dormitory door.

Mr. Bultitude held his tongue, but kept fast hold of his chair, which he held before him as a defence against either party, while Coggs remained motionless in the

VICE VERSA

centre of the room, with crooked knees and hands dangling impotently.

" Will one of you be good enough to explain how you come to be found struggling in this unseemly manner ? I sent you up here to meditate on your past behaviour."

" I should be most happy to meditate, sir," protested Paul, lowering his chair on discovering that there was no immediate danger, " if that—that bloodthirsty young ruffian there would allow me to do so. I am going about in bodily fear of him, Dr. Grimstone. I want him bound over to keep the peace. I decline to be left alone with him—he's not safe ! "

" Is that so, Coggs ? Are you mean and base enough to take this cowardly revenge on a boy who has had the moral courage to expose your deceit—for your ultimate good—a boy who is unable to defend himself against you ? "

" He can fight when he chooses, sir/' said Coggs ; " he blacked my eye last term, sir ! "

" I assure you," said Paul, with the convincing earnestness of truth, " that I never blacked anybody's eye in the whole course of my life. I am not—ah—a pugnacious man. My age, and—hum—my position, ought to protect me from these scandals——"

" You've come back this year, sir," said Dr. Grimstone, " with a very odd way of talking of yourself—an exceedingly odd way. Unless I see you abandoning it, and behaving like a reasonable boy again, I shall be forced to conclude you intend some disrespect and open defiance by it."

" If you would allow me an opportunity of explaining my position, sir," said Paul, " I would undertake to clear your mind directly of such a monstrous idea. I am trying to assert my rights, Dr. Grimstone—my rights as a citizen, as a householder ! This is no place for me, and I appeal to you to set me free. If you only knew one tenth——"

" Let us understand one another, Bultitude," inter-

LEARNING AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

rupted the Doctor. " You may think it an excellent joke to talk nonsense to me like this. But let me tell you there is a point where a jest becomes an insult. I've spared you hitherto out of consideration for the feelings of your excellent father, who is so anxious that you should become an object of pride and credit to him ; but if you dare to treat me to any more of this bombast about ' explaining your rights/ you will force me to exercise one of mine—the right to inflict corporal punishment, sir—which you have just seen in operation upon another."

" Oh ! " said Mr. Bultitude faintly, feeling utterly crestfallen—and he could say nothing more.

" As for those illicit luxuries in your play box," continued the Doctor, " the fact that you brought the box up as it was is in your favour; and I am inclined on reflection to overlook the affair, if you can assure me that you were no party to their being put there ? "

" On the contrary," said Paul, " I gave the strictest orders that there was to be no such useless extravagance. I objected to have the kitchen and house-keeper's room ransacked to make a set of rascally boys ill for a fortnight at my expense ! "

The Doctor stared slightly at this creditable but unnatural view of the subject. However, as he could not quarrel with the sentiment, he let the manner of expressing it pass unrebuked for the present, and, after sentencing Coggs to two days' detention and the copying of innumerable French verbs, he sent the ill-matched pair down to the schoolroom to join their respective classes.

Paul went resignedly downstairs and into the room, where he found Mr. Blinkhorn at the head of one of the long tables, taking a class of about a dozen boys.

" Take your Livy and Latin Primer, Bultitude," said Mr. Blinkhorn mildly, " and sit down."

Mr. Blinkhorn was a tall angular man, with a long neck and slightly drooping head. He had thin wiry brown hair, and a plain face, with shortsighted kind

VICE VERSA

brown eyes. In character he was mild and reserved, too conscientious to allow himself the luxury of either favourites or aversions among the boys, all of whom in his secret soul he probably disliked about equally, though he neither said nor did anything to show it.

Paul took a book—any book, for he did not know or care to know one from another—and sat down at the end furthest from the master, inwardly rebelling at having education thus forced upon him at his advanced years, but seeing no escape.

"At dinner time," he resolved desperately, "I will insist on speaking out, but just now it is simply prudent to humour them."

The rest of the class drew away from him with marked coldness and occasionally saluted him (when Mr. Blinkhorn's attention was called away) with terms and grimaces which Paul, although he failed thoroughly to understand them, felt instinctively were not intended as compliments.

Mr. Blinkhorn's notions of discipline were qualified by a sportsmanlike instinct which forbade him to harass a boy already in trouble, as he understood young Bultitude had been, and so he forbore from pressing him to take any share in the class work.

Mr. Bultitude therefore was saved from any necessity of betraying his total ignorance of his author, and sat gloomily on the hard form, impatiently watching the minute-hand skulk round the mean dull face of the clock above the chimney-piece, while around him one boy after another droned out a listless translation of the work before him, interrupted by mild corrections and comments from the master.

What a preposterous change from all his ordinary habits! At this very time, only twenty-four hours since, he was stepping slowly and majestically towards his accustomed omnibus, which was waiting with deference for him to overtake it; he was taking his seat, saluted respectfully by the conductor and cheerily by

LEARNING AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

his fellow-passengers, as a man of recognised mark and position.

Now that omnibus would halt at the corner of Westbourne Terrace in vain, and go on its way Bankwards without him. He was many miles away—in the very last place where anyone would be likely to look for him, occupying the post of " whipping-boy " to his miserable son !

Was ever an inoffensive and respectable gentleman placed in a more false and ridiculous position ?

If he had only kept his drawer locked, and hidden the abominable *Garuda* Stone away from Dick's prying eyes ; if he had let the moralising alone ; if Boaler had not been so long fetching that cab, or if he had not happened to faint at the critical moment—what an immense difference any one of these apparent trifles would have made.

And now what was he to do to get out of this incongruous and distasteful place ? It was all very well to say that he had only to insist upon a hearing from the Doctor, but what if, as he had very grave reason to fear, the Doctor should absolutely refuse to listen, should even proceed to carry out his horrible threat ? Must he remain there till the holidays came to release him ? Suppose Dick—as he certainly would unless he was quite a fool—declined to receive him during the holidays ? It was absolutely necessary to return home at once ; every additional hour he passed in imprisonment made it harder to regain his lost self.

Now and then he roused himself from all these gloomy thoughts to observe his companions. The boys at the upper end, near Mr. Blinkhorn, were fairly attentive, and he noticed one small smug-faced boy about half-way up, who, while a class-mate was faltering and blundering over some question, would cry " I know, sir. Let me tell him. Ask me, sir ! " in a restless agony of superior information.

Down by Paul, however, the discipline was relaxed enough, as perhaps could only be expected on the first

VICE VERSA

day of term. One wild-eyed long-haired boy had brought out a small china figure with which, and the assistance of his right hand draped in a pocket handkerchief, and wielding a penholder, he was busy enacting a drama based on the lines of Punch and Judy, to the breathless amusement of his neighbours.

Mr. Bultitude might have hoped to escape notice by a policy of judicious self-effacement, but unhappily his long, blank, uninterested face was held by his companions to bear an implied reproach; and being delicately sensitive on this point, they kicked his legs viciously, which made him extremely glad when dinner-time came, although he felt too faint and bilious to be tempted by anything but the lightest and daintiest luncheon.

But at dinner he found, with a shudder, that he was expected to swallow a thick ragged section of boiled mutton which had been carved and helped so long before he sat down to it, that the stagnant gravy was chilled and congealed into patches of greasy white.

He managed to swallow it with many pauses of invincible disgust—only to find it replaced by a solid slab of pale brown suet pudding, sparsely bedewed with unctuous black treacle.

This, though a plentiful, and by no means unwholesome fare for growing boys, was not what he had been accustomed to, and feeling far too heavy and unwell after it to venture upon an encounter with the Doctor, he wandered slow and melancholy round the bare gravelled playground during the half-hour after dinner devoted to the inevitable "chevy," until the Doctor appeared at the head of the staircase.

It is always sad for the historian to have to record a departure from principle, and I have to confess with shame on Mr. Bultitude's account that, feeling the Doctor's eye upon him, and striving to propitiate him, he humiliated himself so far as to run about with an elaborate affection of zest, and his exertions Were

LEARNING AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

rewarded by hearing himself cordially encouraged to further efforts.

It cheered and emboldened him. " I've put him in a good temper," he told himself ; " if I can only keep him in one till the evening, I really think I might be able to go up and tell him what a ridiculous mess I've got into. Why should I care, after all ? At least I've done nothing to be ashamed of. It's an accident that might have happened to any man ! "

It is a curious and unpleasant thing that, however reassuring and convincing the arguments may be with which we succeed in bracing ourselves to meet or disregard unpleasantness, the force of those arguments seldom or never outlasts the frame of mind in which they are composed, and when the unpleasantness is at hand, there we are, just as unreasonably alarmed at it as ever.

Mr. Bultitude's confidence faded away almost as soon as he found himself in the schoolroom again. He found himself assigned to a class at one end of the room, where Mr. Tinkler presently introduced a new rule in Algebra to them, in such a manner as to procure for it a lasting unpopularity with all those who were not too much engaged in drawing duels and railway trains upon their slates to attend.

Although Paul did not draw upon his slate, his utter ignorance of Algebra prevented him from being much edified by the cabalistic signs on the blackboard, which Mr. Tinkler seemed to chalk up dubiously, and rub out again as soon as possible, with an air of being ashamed of them. So he tried to nerve himself for the coming ordeal by furtively watching and studying the Doctor, who was taking a Xenophon class at the upper end of the room, and, being in fairly good humour, was combining instruction with amusement in a manner peculiarly his own.

He stopped the construing occasionally to illustrate some word or passage by an anecdote ; he condescended to enliven the translation here and there by a familiar

VICE VERSA

and colloquial paraphrase ; he magnanimously refrained from pressing any obviously inconvenient questions ; and his manner generally was marked by a geniality which was additionally piquant from its extreme uncertainty.

Mr. Bultitude could not help thinking it a rather ghastly form of gaiety, but he hoped it might last.

Presently, however, some one brought him a blue envelope on a tray. He read it, and a frown gathered on his face. The boy who was translating at the time went on again in his former slipshod manner (which had hitherto provoked only jovial criticism and correction) with complete self-complacency, but found himself sternly brought to book, and burdened by a heavy imposition, before he quite realised that his blunders had ceased to amuse.

Then began a season of sore trial and tribulation for the class. The Doctor suddenly withdrew the light of his countenance from them, and sunshine was succeeded by blackest thunderclouds. The wind was no longer tempered to the more closely shorn of the flock ; the weakest vessels were put on unexpectedly at crucial passages, and, coming hopelessly to grief, were denounced as impostors and idlers, till half the class was dissolved in tears.

A few of the better grounded stood the fire, like a remnant of the Old Guard. With faces pale from alarm, and trembling voices, but perfect accuracy, they answered all the Doctor's searching inquiries after the paradigms of Greek verbs that seemed irregular to the verge of impropriety.

Paul saw it all with renewed misgiving. " If I were there," he thought, " I should have been run out and flogged long ago ! How angry those stupid young idiots are making him ! How can I go up and speak to him when he's like that ? And yet I must. I'm sitting on dynamite as it is. The very first time they want me to answer any questions from some of their books, I shall be ruined ! Why wasn't I better educated when I

LEARNING AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

was a boy, or why didn't I make a better use of my opportunities ! It will be a bitter thing if they thrash me for not knowing as much as Dick. Grimstone's coming this way now ; it's all over with me ! "

The Greek class had managed to repel the enemy, with some loss to themselves, and the Doctor now left his place for a moment, and came down towards the bench on which Paul sat trembling.

The storm, however, had passed over for the present, and he only said with restored calmness, " Who were the boys who learnt dancing last term ? "

One or two of them said they had done so, and Dr. Grimstone continued : " Mr. Burdekin was unable to give you the last lesson of his course last term, and has arranged to take you to-day, as he will be in the neighbourhood. So be off at once to Mrs. Grimstone and change your shoes. Bultitude, you learnt last term, too. Go with the others."

Mr. Bultitude was too overcome by this unexpected attack to contradict it, though of course he was quite able to do so ; but then, if he had, he must have explained all, and he felt strongly that just then was neither the time nor the place for particulars.

It would have been wiser perhaps, it would certainly have brought matters to a crisis, if he could have forced himself to tell everything—the whole truth in all its outrageous improbability—but he could not.

Let those who feel inclined to blame him for lack of firmness consider how difficult and delicate a business it must almost of necessity be for anyone to declare openly, in the teeth of common sense and plain facts, that there has been a mistake, and, in point of fact, he is not his own son, but his own father.

" I suppose I must go," he thought. " I needn't dance. Haven't danced since I was a young man. But I can't afford to offend him just now."

And so he followed the rest into a sort of cloak-room, where the tall hats which the boys wore on Sundays

VICE VERSA

were all kept on shelves in white bandboxes ; and there his hair was brushed, his feet were thrust into very shiny patent leather shoes, and a pair of kid gloves was given out to him to put on.

The dancing lesson was to be held in the " Dining Hall," from which the savour of mutton had not altogether departed. When Paul came in he found the floor cleared and the tables and forms piled up on one side of the room.

Biddlecomb and Tipping and some of the smaller boys were there already, their gloves and shiny shoes giving them a feeling of ceremony and constraint which they tried to carry off by an uncouth parody of politeness.

Siggers was telling stories of the dances he had been to in town, and the fine girls whose step had exactly suited his own, and Tipping was leaning gloomily against the wall listening to something Chawner was whispering in his ear.

There was a rustle of dresses down the stairs outside, and two thin little girls, looking excessively proper and prim, came in with an elderly gentlewoman who was their governess and wore a *pince-nez* to impart the necessary suggestion of a superior intellect. They were the Miss Mutlows, sisters of one of the day-boarders, and attended the course by special favour as friends of Dulcie's, who followed them in with a little gleam of shy anticipation in her eyes.

The Miss Mutlows sat stiffly down on a form, one on each side of her governess, and all three stared solemnly at the boys, who began to blush vividly under the inspection, to unbutton and rebutton their gloves with great care, and to shift from leg to leg in an embarrassed manner.

Dulcie soon singled out poor Mr. Bultitude, who, mindful of Tipping's warning, was doing his very best to avoid her.

She ran straight to him, laid her hand on his arm and looked into his face pleadingly. " Dick," she said, " you're not sulky still, are you ? "

LEARNING AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Mr. Bultitude had borne a good deal already, and, not being remarkably sweet-natured, he shook the little hand away, half petulant and half alarmed. " I do wish you wouldn't do this sort of thing in public. You'll compromise me, you know ! " he said nervously.

Dulcie opened her grey eyes wide, and then a flush came into her cheeks, and she made a little disdainful upward movement of her chin.

" You didn't mind it once," she said. " I thought you might want to dance with me. You liked to last term. But I'm sure I don't care if you choose to be disagreeable. Go and dance with Mary Mutlow if you want to, though you did say she danced like a pair of compasses, and I shall tell her you said so, too. And you know you're not a good dancer yourself. *Are you going to dance with Mary ?* "

Paul stamped. " I tell you I never dance," he said. " I can't dance any more than a lamp-post. You don't seem an ill-natured little girl, but why on earth can't you let me alone ? "

Dulcie's eyes flashed. " You're a nasty sulky boy," she said in an angry undertone (all the conversation had, of course, been carried on in whispers). " I'll never speak to you or look at you again. You're the most horrid boy in the school—and the ugliest! "

And she turned proudly away, though anyone who looked might have seen the fire in her eyes extinguished as she did so. Perhaps Tipping did see it, for he scowled at them from his corner.

There was another sound outside, as of fiddlestrings being twanged by the finger, and, as the boys hastily formed up in two lines down the centre of the room and the Miss Mutlows and Dulcie prepared themselves for the curtsy of state, there came in a little fat man, with mutton-chop whiskers and a white face, upon which was written an unalterable conviction that his manner and deportment were perfection itself.

The two rows of boys bent themselves stiffly from the

VICE VERSA

back, and Mr. Burdekin returned the compliment by an inclusive and stately inclination.

" Good afternoon, madam. Young ladies, I trust I find you well. (The curtsey just a leetle lower, Miss Mutlow—the right foot less drawn back. Beautiful! Feet closer at the recovery. Perfect !) Young gentlemen, good evening. Take your usual places, please, all of you, for our preliminary exercises. Now, the *chasse* round the room. Will you lead off, please, Dummer ; the hands just lightly touching the shoulders, the head thrown negligently back to balance the figure ; the whole deportment easy, but not careless. Now, please ! "

And, talking all the time with a metrical fluency, he scraped a little jig on the violin, while Dummer led off a procession which solemnly capered round the room in sundry stages of conscious awkwardness. Mr. Bultitude shuffled along somehow after the rest, with rebellion at his heart and a deep sense of degradation. " If my clerks were to see me now ! " he thought.

After some minutes of this, Mr. Burdekin stopped them and directed sets to be formed for " The Lancers."

" Bultitude," said Mr. Burdekin, " you will take Miss Mutlow, please."

" Thank you," said Paul, " but—ah—I don't dance."

" Nonsense, nonsense, sir, you are one of my most promising pupils. You mustn't tell me that. Not another word ! Come, select your partners."

Paul had no option. He was paired off with the tall and rather angular young lady mentioned, while Dulcie looked on pouting, and snubbed Tipping, who humbly asked for the pleasure of dancing with her, by declaring that she meant to dance with Tom.

The dance began to a sort of rhythmical accompaniment by Mr. Burdekin, who intoned " Tops advance, retire and cross. Balance at corners. (Very nice, Miss Grimstone !) More ' *abandon*,' Chawner ! Lift the feet more from the floor. Not so high as that ! Oh, dear me ! that last figure over again. And slide the

LEARNING AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

feet, oh, slide the feet ! (Bultitude, you're leaving out all the steps ! ")

Paul was dragged, unwilling but unresisting, through it all by his partner, who jerked and pushed him into his place without a word, being apparently under strict orders from the governess not on any account to speak to the boys.

After the dance the couples promenaded in a stiff but stately manner round the room to a dirge-like march scraped upon the violin, the boys taking the parts of ladies jibbing away from their partners in a highly unlady-like fashion, and the boy burdened with the companionship of the younger Miss Mutlow walking along in a very agony of bashfulness.

" I suppose," thought Paul, as he led the way with Miss Mary Mutlow, " if Dick were ever to hear of this, he'd think it *funny*. Oh, if I ever get the upper hand of him again——How much longer, I wonder, shall I have to play the fool to this infernal fiddle ! "

But, if this was bad, worse was to come.

There was another pause, in which Mr. Burdekin said blandly, " I wonder now if we have forgotten our sailor's hornpipe. Perhaps Bultitude will prove the contrary. If I remember right, he used to perform it with singular correctness. And, let me tell you, there are a great number of spurious hornpipe steps in circulation. Come, sir, oblige me by dancing it alone ! "

This was the final straw. It was not to be supposed for one moment that Mr. Bultitude would lower his dignity in such a preposterous manner. Besides, he did not know how to dance the hornpipe.

So he said, " I shall do nothing of the sort. I've had quite enough of this—ah—tomfoolery ! "

" That is a very impolite manner of declining, Bultitude ; highly discourteous and unpolished. I must insist now—really, as a personal matter—upon your going through the sailor's hornpipe. Come, you won't make a scene, I'm sure. You'll oblige me, as a gentleman ? "

VICE VERSA

" I tell you I can't ! " said Mr. Bultitude sullenly. " I never did such a thing in my life ; it would be enough to kill me at my age ! "

" This is untrue, sir. Do you mean to say you will not dance the hornpipe ? "

" No," said Paul, " I'll be damned if I do ! "

There was unfortunately no possible doubt about the nature of the word used—he said it so very distinctly, The governess screamed and called her charges to her. Dulcie hid her face, and some of the boys tittered.

Mr. Burdekin turned pink. " After that disgraceful language, sir, in the presence of the fairer sex, I have no more to do with you. You will have the goodness to stand in the centre of that form. Gentlemen, select your partners for the Highland schottische ! "

Mr. Bultitude, by no means sorry to be freed from the irksome necessity of dancing with a heart ill-attuned for enjoyment, got up on the form and stood looking, sullenly enough, upon the proceedings. The governess glowered at him now and then as a monster of youthful depravity ; the Miss Mutlows glanced up at him as they tripped past, with curiosity not unmingled with admiration, but Dulcie steadily avoided looking in his direction.

Paul was just congratulating himself upon his escape when the door opened wide, and the Doctor marched slowly and imposingly into the room.

He did this occasionally, partly to superintend matters, and partly as an encouraging mark of approbation. He looked round the class at first with benignant toleration, until his glance took in the bench upon which Mr. Bultitude was set up. Then his eye slowly travelled up to the level of Paul's head, his expression changing meanwhile to a petrifying glare.

It was not, as Paul instinctively felt, exactly the position in which a gentleman who wished to stand well with those in authority over him would prefer to be found. He felt his heart turn to water within him, and stared limp and helpless at the Doctor.

LEARNING AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

There was an awful silence (Dr. Grimstone was addicted to awful silences; and, indeed, if seldom strictly "golden," silence may often be called "iron"), but at last he inquired, "And pray what may you be doing up there, sir?"

"Upon my soul I can't say," said Mr. Bultitude feebly. "Ask that gentleman there with the fiddle—he knows."

Mr. Burdekin was a good-natured, easy-tempered little man, and had already forgotten the affront to his dignity. He was anxious not to get the boy into more trouble.

"Bultitude was a little inattentive and, I may say, wanting in respect, Dr. Grimstone," he said, putting it as mildly as he could with any accuracy; "so I ventured to place him there as a punishment."

"Quite right, Mr. Burdekin," said the Doctor: "quite right. I am sorry that any boy of mine should have caused you to do so. You are again beginning your career of disorder and rebellion, are you, sir? Go up into the schoolroom at once, and write a dozen copies before tea-time! A very little more eccentricity and insubordination from you, Bultitude, and you will reap a full reward—a full reward, sir!"

So Mr. Bultitude was driven out of the dancing class in dire disgrace—which would not have distressed him particularly, being only one more drop in his bitter cup—but that he recognised that now his hopes of approaching the Doctor with his burden of woe were fallen like a card castle. They were fiddled and danced away for at least twenty-four hours—perhaps for ever!

Bitterly did he brood over this as he slowly and laboriously copied out sundry vain repetitions of such axioms as, "Cultivate Habits of Courtesy and Self-control," and "True Happiness is to be sought in Contentment." He saw the prospect of a tolerably severe flogging growing more and more distinct, and felt that he could not present himself to his family with the consciousness of having suffered such an indelible

VICE VERSA

disgrace. His family ! What would become of them in his absence ? Would he ever see his comfortable home in Bayswater again ?

Tea-time came, and after it evening preparation, when Mr. Tinkler presided in a feeble and ineffective manner, perpetually suspecting that the faint sniggers he heard were indulged in at his own expense, and calling perfectly innocent victims to account for them.

Paul sat next to Jolland and, in his desperate anxiety to avoid further unpleasantness, found himself, as he could not for his life have written a Latin or a German composition, reduced to copy down his neighbour's exercises. This Jolland (who had looked forward to an arrangement of a very opposite kind) nevertheless cheerfully allowed him to do, though he expressed doubts as to the wisdom of a servile imitation—more, perhaps, from prudence than conscientiousness.

Jolland, in the intervals of study, was deeply engaged in the production of a small illustrated work of fiction, which he was pleased to call *The Adventures of Ben Buterkin at School*. It was in a great measure an autobiography, and the cuts depicting the hero's flagellations—which were frequent in the course of the narrative—were executed with much vigour and feeling.

He turned out a great number of these works in the course of the term, as well as faces in pen and ink with moving tongues and rolling eyes, and these he would present to a few favoured friends with a secretive and self-depreciatory giggle.

Amidst scenes and companions like these, Paul sat out the evening hours on his hard seat, which was just at the junction of two forms—an exquisitely uncomfortable position, as all who have tried it will acknowledge—until the time for going to bed came round again. He dreaded the hours of darkness, but there was no help for it—to protest would have been madness just then, and, once more, he was forced to pass a night under the roof of Crichton House.

LEARNING AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

It was even worse than the first, though this was greatly owing to his own obstinacy.

The boys, if less subdued, were in better temper than the evening before, and found it troublesome to keep up a feud when the first flush of resentment had died out. There was a general disposition to forget his departure from the code of schoolboy honour, and give him an opportunity of retrieving the past.

But he would not meet them half-way ; his repeated repulses by the Doctor and all the difficulties that beset his return to freedom had made him very sulky and snappish. He had not patience or adaptability enough to respond to their advances, and only shrank from their rough good nature—which naturally checked the current of good feeling.

Then, when the lights were put out, some one demanded a story. Most of the bedrooms possessed a professional story-teller, and in one there was a young romancist who began a stirring history the very first night of the term, which always ran on until the night before the holidays, and, if his hearers were apt to yawn at the sixth week of it, he himself enjoyed and believed in it keenly from beginning to end.

Dick Bultitude had been a valued *raconteur*, it appeared, and his father found accordingly, to his disgust, that he was expected to amuse them with a story. When he clearly understood the idea, he rejected it with so savage a snarl, that he soon found it necessary to retire under the bedclothes to escape the general indignation that followed.

Finding that he did not actively resent it (the real Dick would have had the occupant of the nearest bed out by the ears in a minute !), they profited by his prudence to come to his bedside, where they pillowed his weary head (with their own pillows) till the slight offered them was more than avenged.

After that, Mr. Bultitude, with the breath half beaten out of his body, lay writhing and spluttering on

VICE VERSA

his hard, rough bed till long after silence had fallen over the adjoining beds, and the sleepy hum of talk in the other bedrooms had died away.

Then he, too, drifted off into wild and troubled dreams, which, at their maddest, were scattered into blankness by a sudden and violent shock, which jerked him, clutching and grasping at nothing, on to the cold, bare boards, where he rolled, shivering.

"An earthquake!" he thought, "an explosion . . . gas—or dynamite! He must go and call the children . . . Boaler . . . the plate!"

But the reality to which he woke was worse still. Tipping and Coker had been patiently pinching themselves to keep awake until their enemy should be soundly asleep, in order to enjoy the exquisite pleasure of letting down the mattress; and, too dazed and frightened even to swear, Paul gathered up his bed-clothes and tried to draw them about him as well as he might, and seek sleep, which had lost its security.

The Garuda Stone had done one grim and cruel piece of work at least in its time.

7. *Cutting the Knot*

"A Crowd is not Company; And Faces are but a Gallery of Pictures;

And Talke but a *Tinckling Cymbal!*, where there is no *Love*."

—BACON.

ONCE more Mr. Bultitude rose betimes, dressed noiselessly, and stole down to the cold schoolroom, where one gas-jet was burning palely—for the morning was raw and foggy.

This time, however, he was not alone. Mr. Blinkhorn was sitting at his little table in the corner, correcting exercises, with his chilly hands cased in worsted mittens. He looked up as Paul came in, and nodded kindly.

Paul went straight to the fire, and stood staring into it with lack-lustre eye, too apathetic even to be hopeless, for the work of enlightening the Doctor seemed more

terrible and impossible than ever, and he began to see that, if the only way of escape lay there, he had better make up his mind with what philosophy he could to adapt himself to his altered circumstances, and stay on for the rest of the term.

But the prospect was so doleful and so blank, that he drew a heavy sigh as he thought of it. Mr. Blinkhorn heard it, and rose awkwardly from the rickety little writing-table, knocking over a pile of marble-covered copy-books as he did so.

Then he crossed over to Paul and laid a hand gently on his shoulder. "Look here," he said: "why don't you confide in me? Do you think I'm blind to what has happened to you? I can see the change in you—if others cannot. Why not trust me?"

Mr. Bultitude looked up into his face, which had an honest interest and kindness in it, and his heart warmed with a faint hope. If this young man had been shrewd enough to guess at his unhappy secret, might he not be willing to intercede with the Doctor for him? He looked good-natured—he would trust him.

"Do you mean to say really," he asked, with more cordiality than he had spoken for a long time, "that you—see—the—a—the difference?"

"I saw it almost directly," said Mr. Blinkhorn, with mild triumph.

"That's the most extraordinary thing," said Paul, "and yet it ought to be evident enough, to be sure. But no, you can't have guessed the real state of things!"

"Listen, and stop me if I'm wrong. Within the last few days a great change has been at work within you. You are not the idle, thoughtless, mischievous boy who left here for his holidays——"

"No," said Paul, "I'll swear I'm not!"

"There is no occasion for such strong expressions. But, at all events, you come back here an altogether different being. Am I right in saying so?"

"Perfectly," said Paul, overjoyed at being so

VICE VERSA

thoroughly understood, " perfectly. You're a very intelligent young man, sir. Shake hands. Why, I shouldn't be surprised, after that, if you knew how it all happened ? "

" That too," said Mr. Blinkhorn smiling, " I can guess. It arose, I doubt not, in a wish ? "

" Yes," cried Paul, " you've hit it again. You're a conjurer, sir, by Gad you are ! "

" Don't say ' by Gad,' Bultitude ; it's inconsistent. It began, I was saying, in a wish, half unconscious perhaps, to be something other than what you had been——"

" I was a fool," groaned Mr. Bultitude, " yes, that was the way it began ! "

" Then insensibly the wish worked a gradual transformation in your nature (you are old enough to follow me ?)."

" Old enough for him to follow *me* ! " thought Paul ; but he was too pleased to be annoyed. " Hardly gradual I should say," he said aloud. " But go on, sir, pray go on. I see you know all about it."

" At first the other part of you struggled against the new feelings. You strove to forget them—you even tried to resume your old habits, your former way of life—but to no purpose ; and when you came here, you found no fellowship amongst your companions——"

" Quite out of the question ! " said Paul.

" Their pleasures give you no delight——"

" Not a bit ! "

" They, on their side, perhaps misunderstand your lack of interest in their pursuits. They cannot see—how should they ?—that you have altered your mode of life, and when they catch the difference between you and the Richard Bultitude they knew, why, they are apt to resent it."

" They are," agreed Mr. Bultitude : " they resent it in a confounded disagreeable way, you know. Why, I assure you, that only last night I was——"

CUTTING THE KNOT

" Hush," said Mr. Blinkhorn, holding up one hand, " complaints are unmanly. But I see you wonder at my knowing all this ? "

" Well," said Paul, " I am rather surprised."

" What would you say if I told you I had undergone it myself in my time ? "

" You don't mean to tell me there are *two* Garuda Stones in this miserable world ! " cried Paul, thoroughly astonished.

" I don't know what you mean now, but I can say with truth that I too have had my experiences—my trials. Months ago, from certain signs, I noticed, I foresaw that this was coming upon you."

" Then," said Mr. Bultitude, " I think, in common decency, you might have warned me. A post-card would have done it. I should have been better prepared to meet this, then ! "

" It would have been worse than fruitless to attempt to hurry on the crisis. It might have even prevented what I fondly hoped would come to pass."

" Fondly hoped ! " said Paul, " upon my word you speak plainly, sir."

" Yes," said Mr. Blinkhorn. " You see I knew the Dick Bultitude that was, so well; he was frolicksome, impulsive, mischievous even, but under it all there lay a nature of sterling worth."

" Sterling worth ! " cried Paul. " A scoundrel, I tell you, a heartless, selfish young scoundrel. Call things by their right names, if you please."

" No, no," said Mr. Blinkhorn, " this extreme self-depreciation is morbid, very morbid. There was no actual vice."

" No actual vice ! Why, God bless my soul, do you call ingratitude—the basest, most unfilial, most treacherous ingratitude—no vice, sir ? **You** may be a **very** excellent young man, but if you gloss over things **in that** fashion, your moral sense must be perverted, **sir**—strangely perverted,"

VICE VERSA

" There were faults on both sides, I fear," said Mr. Blinkhorn, growing a little scandalised by the boy's odd warmth of expression. " I have heard something of what you had to bear with. On the one hand, a father, undemonstrative, stern, easily provoked ; on the other, a son, thoughtless, forgetful, and at times it may be even wilful. But you are too sensitive ; you think too much of what seems to me a not unnatural (although of course improper) protest against coldness and injustice. I should be the last to encourage a child against a parent, but, to comfort your self-reproach, I think it right to assure you that, in my judgment, the outburst you refer to was very excusable."

" Oh," said Paul, " you do ? You call that comfort ? Excusable ! Why, what the dooce do you mean, sir ? You're taking the other side now ! "

" This is not the language of penitence, Bultitude," said poor Mr. Blinkhorn, disheartened and bewildered. " Remember, you have put off the Old Man now ! "

" I'm not likely to forget *that*," said Paul; " I only wish I could see my way to putting him on again ! "

" You want to be your old self again ? " gasped Mr. Blinkhorn.

" Why, of course I do," said Paul angrily ; " I 'm not an idiot! "

" You are weary of the struggle so soon ? " said the other with reproach.

" Weary ? I tell you I'm sick of it ! If I had only known what was in store for me before I had made such a fool of myself! "

" This is horrible ! " said Mr. Blinkhorn—" I ought not to listen to you."

" But you must," urged Paul; " I tell you I can't stand it any longer. I'm not fit for it at my age. You must see that yourself, and you must make Grimstone see it too ! "

" Never ! " said Mr. Blinkhorn firmly. " Nor do I see how that would help you. I will not let you go back in this deplorable way. You must nerve yourself to go on

CUTTING THE KNOT

now in the path you have chosen ; you must force your schoolfellows to love and respect you in your new character. Come, take courage ! After all, in spite of your altered life, there is no reason why you should not be a frank and happy-hearted boy, you know."

" A frank and happy-hearted fiddlestick ! " cried Paul rudely (he was so disgusted at the suggestion) ; " don't talk rubbish, sir ! I thought you were going to show me some way out of all this, and instead of that, knowing the shameful way I've been treated, you can stand there and calmly recommend me to stay on here and be happy-hearted and frank ! "

" You must be calm, Bultitude, or I shall leave you. Listen to reason. You are here for your good. Youth, it has been beautifully said, is the springtime of life. Though you may not believe it, you will never be happier than you are now. Our schooldays are——"

But Mr. Bultitude could not tamely be mocked with the very platitudes that had brought him all his misery—he cut the master short in a violent passion. " This is too much ! " he cried—" you shall not palm off that miserable rubbish on me. I see through it. It's a plot to keep me here, and you're in it. It's false imprisonment, and I'll write to the *Times*. I'll expose the whole thing ! "

" This violence is only ridiculous," said Mr. Blinkhorn. " If I were not too pained by it, I should feel it my duty to report your language to the Doctor. As it is, you have bitterly disappointed me ; I can't understand it at all. You seemed so subdued, so softened lately. But until you come to me and say you regret this, I must decline to have anything more to say to you. Take your book and sit down in your place ! "

And he went back to his exercises, looking puzzled and pained. The fact was, he was an ardent believer in the Good Boy of a certain order of school tales—the boy who is seized with a sudden conviction of the intrinsic baseness of boyhood, and does all in his power to get rid

VICE VERSA

of the harmful taint; the boy who renounces his old comrades and his natural tastes (which after all seldom have any serious harm in them), to don a panoply of priggishness which is too often kick-proof.

This kind of boy is rare enough at most English schools, but Mr. Blinkhorn had been educated at a large Nonconformist College, where " Revivals " and " Awakenings " were periodical, and undoubtedly did produce changes of character violent enough, but sadly short in duration.

He was always waiting for some such boy to come to him with his confession of moral worthlessness and vows of unnatural perfection, and was too simple and earnest and good himself to realise that such states of the youthful mind are not unfrequently merely morbid and hysterical, and too often degenerate into Pharisaism, or worse still, hypocrisy.

So when he noticed Mr. Bultitude's silence and depression, his studied withdrawal from the others and his evident want of sympathy with them, he believed he saw the symptoms of a conscience at work, and that he had found his reformed boy at last.

It was a very unfortunate misunderstanding, for it separated Paul from, perhaps, the only person who would have had the guilelessness to believe his incredible story, and the good nature to help him to find escape **from** his misfortunes.

Mr. Bultitude on his part was more angry and disgusted than ever. He began to see that there was a muddle somewhere, and that his identity was unsuspected still. This young man, for all his fair speaking and pretended shrewdness, was no conjurer after all. He was left to rely on his own resources, and he had begun to lose all confidence in their power to extricate him.

As he brooded over this, the boys straggled down as before, and looked over their lessons for the day in a dull, lifeless manner. The cold, unsatisfying breakfast, and the half-hour assigned to " chevy," followed in due

CUTTING THE KNOT

course, and after that Paul found himself set down with a class to await the German master, Herr Stohwasser.

He had again tried to pull himself together and approach the Doctor with his protest, but no sooner did he find himself near his presence than his heart began to leap wildly and then retired down towards his boots, leaving him hoarse, palpitating, and utterly blank of ideas.

It was no use—and he resigned himself for yet another day of unwelcome instruction.

The class was in a little room on the basement floor, with a linen-press taking up one side, some bare white deal tables and forms, and, on the walls, a few coloured German prints. They sat there talking and laughing, taking no notice of Mr. Bultitude, until the German master made his appearance.

He was by no means a formidable person, though stout and tall. He wore big round owlsh spectacles, and his pale broad face and long nose, combined with a wild crop of light hair and a fierce beard, gave him the incongruous appearance of a sheep looking out of a gun-port.

He took his place with an air of tremendous determination to enforce a hard morning's work on the book they were reading—a play of Schiller's, of the plot of which, it is needless to say, no one of his pupils had or cared to have the vaguest notion, having long since condemned the whole subject, with insular prejudice, as rot.

"Now, please," said Herr Stohwasser, "where we left off last term. Third act, first scene—Court before Tell's house. Tell is vid the carpenter axe, Hedwig vid a domestig labour occupied. Walter and Wilhelm in the depth sport with a liddle gross-bow. Biddlegom, you begin. Walter (sings)."

But Biddlecomb was in a conversational mood, and willing to postpone the task of translation, so he merely inquired, with an air of extreme interest, how Herr Stohwasser's German Grammar was getting on.

VICE VERSA

This was a subject on which (as he perhaps knew) the German never could resist enlarging, for in common with most German masters, he was giving birth to a new Grammar, which, from the daring originality of its plan, and its extreme simplicity, was destined to supersede all other similar works.

"Ach," he said, "it is brogressing. I haf just gompleted a gomprensive table of ze irregular virps, vith ze eggserzizes upon zem. And zere is further an appendeeks which in itself gontains a goncise view of all ze vort-blays possible in the Charman tong. But, come, let us gontinue vith our Tell !"

"What are vort-blays ?" persisted Biddlecomb insidiously, having no idea of continuing with his Tell just yet.

"A vort-blay," exclaimed Herr Stohwasser ; "it is English, nicht so ? A sporting vid vorts—a 'galem-bour '—a—Gott pless me, vat you call a 'pon.'"

"Like the one you made when you were a young man ?" Jolland called out from the lower end of the table.

"Yes ; tell us the one you made when you were a young man," the class entreated, with flattering eagerness.

Herr Stohwasser began to laugh with slow, deep satisfaction ; the satisfaction of a successful achievement. "Hah, you remember dat!" he said, "ah, yes, I make him when a yong man ; but, mind you, he was not a pon—he was a 'choke.' I haf told you all about him before."

"We've forgotten it," said Biddlecomb : "tell it us again."

As a matter of fact this joke, in all its lights, was tolerably familiar to most of them by this time, but, either on its individual merits, or perhaps because it compared favourably with the sterner alternative of translating, it was periodically in request, and always met with evergreen appreciation.

Herr Stohwasser beamed with the pride of authorship. Like the celebrated Scotchman, he "jocked wi'

deeficulty," and the outcome of so much labour was dear to him.

" I zent him into ze Charman *Kladderadatch* (it is a paper like your *Pouch*). It—mein choke—was upon ze Schleswig-Holstein gomplication; ze beginning was in this way——"

And he proceeded to set out in great length all the circumstances which had given materials for his "choke," with the successive processes by which he had shaped and perfected it, passing on to a recital of the masterpiece itself, and ending up by a philosophical analysis of the same, which must have placed his pupils in full possession of the point, for they laughed consumedly.

" I dell you zis," he said, " not to aggustom your minds vid frivolity and lightness, but as a lesson in ze gonstruction of ze langwitch. If you can choke in Charman, you will be able also to gonverse in Charman."

" Did the German what's-its-name print your joke ? " inquired Coggs.

" It has not appeared yet," Herr Stohwasser confessed ; " it takes a long time to get an imbortant choke like that out in brint. But I vait—I write to ze editor every week—and I vait."

" Why don't you put it in your Grammar ? " suggested Tipping.

" I haf—ze greater part of it—(it vas a long choke, but I gompessed him). If I haf time, some day I will make anozer liddle choke to aggompany, begause I vant my Crammar to be a goot Grammar, you understands And now to our Tell. Really you people do noding but chadder ! "

All this, of course, had no interest for Mr. Bultitude, but it left him free to pursue his own thoughts in peace, and indeed this lesson would never have been recorded here, but for two circumstances which will presently appear, both of which had no small effect on his fortunes.

He sat nearest the window, and looked out on the

VICE VERSA

pinched and drooping laurels in the enclosure, which were damp with frost melting in the sunshine. Over the wall he could see the tops of passing vehicles, the country carrier's cart, the railway parcels van, the fly from the station. He envied even the drivers ; their lot was happier than his !

His thoughts were busy with Dick. Oddly enough, it had scarcely occurred to him before to speculate on what he might be doing in his absence ; he had thought chiefly about himself. But now he gave his attention to the subject, what new horrors it opened up ! What might not become of his well-conducted household under the rash rule of a foolish schoolboy ! The office, too—who could say what mischief Dick might not be doing there, under the cover of his own respectable form ?

Then it might seem good to him any day to smash the GarudS Stone, and after that there would be no hope of matters being ever set right again !

And yet, miserable coward and fool that he was, with everything depending upon his losing no time to escape, he could not screw up his courage, and say the words that were to set him free.

All at once—and this is one of the circumstances that make the German lesson an important stage in this story—an idea suggested itself to him quite dazzling by its daring and brilliancy.

Some may wonder, when they hear what it was, why he never thought of it before, and it is somewhat surprising, but by no means without precedent. Artemus Ward has told us somewhere of a ferocious bandit who was confined for sixteen years in solitary captivity, before the notion of escape ever occurred to him. When it did, he opened the window and got out.

Perhaps a similar passiveness on Mr. Bultitude's part was due to a very natural and proper desire to do everything without scandal, and in a legitimate manner ; to march out, as it were, with the honours of war. Perhaps it was simple dullness. The fact remains that it

was not till then that he saw a way of recovering his lost position, without the disagreeable necessity of disclosing his position to anyone at Crichton House.

He had still—thank Heaven—the five shillings he had given Dick. He had not thrown them away with the other articles in his mad passion. Five shillings was not much, but it was more than enough to pay for a third-class fare to town. He had only to watch his opportunity, slip away to the station, and be at home again, defying the usurper, before anyone at Crichton House had discovered his absence.

He might go that very day, and the delight of this thought—the complete reaction from blank despair to hope—was so intense that he could not help rubbing his hands stealthily under the table, and chuckling with glee at his own readiness of resource.

When we are most elated, however, there is always a counteracting agent at hand to bring us down again to our proper level, or below it. The Roman general in the triumph never really needed the slave in the chariot to dash his spirits—he had his friends there already ; the guests at an Egyptian dinner must have brought their own skeletons.

There was a small flaxen-haired little boy sitting next to Mr. Bultitude, seemingly a quite inoffensive being, who at this stage served to sober him by furnishing another complication.

" Oh, I say, Bultitude," he piped shrilly in Paul's ear, " I forgot all about it. Where's my rabbit ? "

The unreasonable absurdity of such a question annoyed him excessively. " Is this a time," he said reprovingly, " to talk of rabbits ? Mind your book, sir."

" Oh, I daresay," grumbled little Porter, the boy in question : " it's all very well, but I want my rabbit."

" Hang it, sir," said Paul angrily, " do you suppose I'm sitting on it ? "

" You promised to bring me back a rabbit," persisted Porter doggedly ; " you know you did, and it's a beastly

VICE VERSA

shame. I mean to have that rabbit, or know the reason why."

At the other end of the table Biddlecomb had again dexterously allured Herr Stohwasser into the meshes of conversation ; this time upon the question (*a propos de bottes*) of street performances. " I vill tell you a gurious thing," he was saying, " vat happened to me de oder day ven I vas valking down de Strandt. I saw a leedle gommon dirty boy with a tall round hat on him, and he stand in a side street right out in de road, and he take off his tall round hat, and he put it on de ground, and he stand still and look zo at it. So I shtop too, to see vat he vould do next. And bresently he take out a large sheet of baper and tear it in four pieces very garefully, and stick zem round de tall round hat, and put it on his head again, and zen he set it down on de grount and look at it vonce more, and all de time he never speak von vort. And I look and look and vonder vat he vould do next. And a great growd of beoples com, and zey look and vonder too. And zen all at once de leedle dirty boy he take out all de paper and put on de hat, and he valk away, laughing altogetter foolishly at zomzing I did not understand at all. I haf been thinking efer since vat in the vorldt he do all zat nonsense for. And zere is von ozer gurious thing I see in your London streets zat very same day. Zere vas a poor house cat dat had been by a cab overrun as I passed by, and von man vith a kind varm heart valk up and stamp it on de head for to end its pain. And anozer man vith anozer kind heart, he gom up directly and had not seen de cat overrun, but he see de first man stamping and he knock him down for ill-treating animals ; it was quite gurious to see ; till de policeman arrest dem both for fighting. Goggs, degline ' Katze,' and gif me ze berfect and bast barticiple of ' kampfen,' to fight." This last relapse into duty was caused by the sudden entrance of the Doctor, who stood at the door looking on for some time with a general air of being intimately acquainted with Schiller

CUTTING THE KNOT

as an author, before suggesting graciously that it was time to dismiss the class.

Wednesday was a half-holiday at Crichton House, and so, soon after dinner, Paul found himself marshalled with the rest in a procession bound for the football field. They marched two and two, Chawner and three of the other elder boys leading with the ball and four goal-posts ornamented with coloured calico flags, and Mr. Blinkhorn and Mr. Tinkler bringing up the rear.

Mr. Bultitude was paired with Tom Grimstone, who, after eyeing him askance for some time, could control his curiosity no longer.

" I say, Dick," he began, " what's the matter with you this term ? "

" My name is not Dick," said Paul stiffly.

" Oh, if you're so particular then," said Tom : " but, without humbug, what is the matter ? "

" You see a change then," said Paul, " you do see a difference, eh ? "

" Rather ! " said Tom expressively. " You've come back what I call a beastly sneak, you know, this term. The other fellows don't like it; they'll send you to Coventry unless you take care."

" I wish they would," said Paul.

" You don't talk like the same fellow either," continued Tom ; " you use such fine language, and you're always in a bait, and yet you don't stick up for yourself as you used to. Look here, tell me (we were always chums), is it one of your larks ? "

" Larks ! " said Paul. " I'm in a fine mood for larks. No, it's not one of my larks."

" Perhaps your old governor has been making a cad of himself then, and you're out of sorts about it."

" I'll thank you not to speak about him in that way," said Paul, " in my presence."

" Why," grumbled Tom, " I'm sure you said enough about him yourself last term. It's my belief you're imitating him now."

VICE VERSA

" Ah," said Paul, " and what makes you think that ? "

" Why, you go about strutting and swelling just like he did when he came about sending you here. I say, do you know what Mums said about him after he went away?"

" No," said Paul, " your mother struck me as a very sensible and agreeable woman—if I may say so to her son."

" Well, Mums said your governor seemed to leave you here just like they leave umbrellas at picture galleries, and she believed he had a large-sized money-bag inside him instead of a heart."

" Oh ! " said Paul, with great disgust, for he had thought Mrs. Grimstone a woman of better taste ; " your mother said that, did she ? Vastly entertaining to be sure—ha, ha ! He would be pleased to know she thought that, I'm sure."

" Tell him, and see what he says," suggested Tom ; "he is an awful brute to you though, isn't he ? "

" If," growled Mr. Bultitude, " slaving from morning till night to provide education and luxury for a thankless brood of unprofitable young vipers is 'being a brute,' I suppose he is."

" Why, you're sticking up for him now !" said Tom. " I thought he was so strict with you. Wouldn't let you have any fun at home, and never took you to pantomimes ?"

" And why should he, sir, why should he ? Tell me that. Tell me why a man is to be hunted out of his comfortable chair after a well-earned dinner, to go and sit in a hot theatre and a thorough draught, yawning at the miserable drivel managers choose to call a pantomime ? Now in my young days there *were* pantomimes. I tell you, sir, I've seen——"

" Oh, if you're satisfied, I don't care ! " said Tom, astonished at this apparent change of front. " If you choose to come back and play the corker like this, it's your look-out. Only, if you knew what Sproule major said about you just now——"

" I don't want to know," said Paul ; " it doesn't concern me."

CUTTING THE KNOT

" Perhaps it doesn't concern you what pa thinks either ? Dad told Mums last night that he was altogether at a loss to know how to deal with you, you had come back so queer and unruly. And he said, let me see, oh, he said that ' if he didn't see an alteration very soon he should resort to more drastic measures '—drastic measures is Latin for a whopping."

" Good gracious ! " thought Paul, " I haven't a moment to lose ! he might ' resort to drastic measures ' this very evening. I can't change my nature at my time of life. I must run for it, and soon."

Then he said aloud to Tom, " Can you tell me, my—my young friend, if, supposing a boy were to ask to leave the field—saying for instance that he was not well and thought he should be better at home—whether he would be allowed to go ? "

" Of course he would," said Tom, " you ought to know that by this time. You've only to ask Blinkhorn or Tinkler ; they'll let you go right enough."

Paul saw his course quite clearly now, and was overcome with relief and gratitude. He wrung the astonished Tom's hand warmly ; " Thank you," he said, briskly and cheerfully, " thank you. I'm really uncommonly obliged to you. You're a very intelligent boy. I should like to give you sixpence."

But although Tom used no arguments to dissuade him, Mr. Bultitude remembered his position in time, and prudently refrained from such ill-judged generosity. Sixpences were of vital importance now, when he expected to be starting so soon on his perilous journey.

And so they reached the field where the game was to be played, and where Paul was resolved to have one desperate throw for liberty and home. He was more excited than anxious as he thought of it, and it certainly did seem as if all the chances were in his favour, and that fortune must have forsaken him indeed, if anything were allowed to prevent his escape.

8. *Unbending the Bow*

" I pray you, give me leave to go from hence,
I am not well ; "

Merchant of Venice.

" He will not blush, that has a father's heart,
To take in childish plays a childish part;
But bends his sturdy back to any toy
That youth takes pleasure in,—to please his boy."

THE football field was a large one, bounded on two sides by tall wooden palings, and on the other two by a hedge and a new shingled road, separated from the field by a post and rails.

Two of the younger boys, proud of their office, raced down to the further end to set up the goal-posts. The rest lounged idly about without attempting to begin operations, except the new boy Kiffin, who was seen walking apart from the rest, diligently studying the " rules of the game of football," as laid down in a small *Boy's Own Pocket Book and Manual of Outdoor Sports*, with which he had been careful to provide himself.

At last Tipping suggested that they had better begin, and proposed that Mr. Blinkhorn and himself should toss up for the choice of sides, and this being done, Mr. Bultitude presently, to his great dismay, heard his name mentioned. " I'll have young Bultitude," said Tipping ; " he used to play up decently. Look here, you young beggar, you're on my side, and if you don't play up it will be the worse for you ! "

It was not worth while, however, to protest, since he would so soon be rid of the whole crew for ever, and so Paul followed Tipping and his train with dutiful submission, and the game began.

It was not a spirited performance. Mr. Tinkler, who was not an athlete, retired at once to the post and rails, on which he settled himself to enjoy a railway novel with a highly stimulating cover. Mr. Blinkhorn, who had more conscientious views of his office, charged

about vigorously, performing all kinds of wonders with the ball, though evidently more from a sense of duty than with any idea of enjoyment.

Tipping occasionally took the trouble to oppose him, but as a concession merely, and with a parade of being under no necessity to do so ; and these two, with a very small following of enthusiasts on either side, waged a private and confidential kind of warfare in different parts of the field, while the others made no pretence of playing for the present, but strolled about in knots, exchanging and bartering the treasures valuable in the sight of schoolboys, and gossiping generally.

As for Paul, he did not clearly understand what " playing up " might mean. He had not indulged in football since he was a genuine boy, and then only in a rudimentary and primitive form, and without any particular fondness for the exercise. But being now, in spirit at all events, a precise elderly person, with a decided notion of taking care of himself, he was resolved that not even Tipping should compel him to trust his person within range of that dirty brown globe, which whistled past his ear or seemed spinning towards his stomach with such a hideous suggestion of a cannon-ball about it.

All the ghastly instances, too, of accidents to life and limb in the football field came unpleasantly into his memory, and he saw the inadvisability of mingling with the crowd and allowing himself to be kicked violently on the shins.

So he trotted industriously about at a safe distance in order to allay suspicion, while waiting for a good opportunity to put his scheme of escape into execution.

At last he could wait no longer, for the fearful thought occurred to him, that if he remained there much longer, the Doctor—who, as he knew from Dick, always came to superintend, if not to share the sports of his pupils—might make his appearance, and then his chance would be lost for the present, for he knew too well that he should never find courage to ask permission from *him*.

VICE VERSA

With a beating heart he went up to Mr. Tinkler, who was still on the fence with his novel, and asked as humbly as he could bring himself to do :

" If you please, sir, will you allow me to go home ? I'm—I'm not feeling at all well."

" Not well ! What's the matter with you ? " said Mr. Tinkler, without looking up.

Paul had not prepared himself for details, and the sudden question rather threw him off his guard.

" A slight touch of liver," he said at length. " It takes me after meals sometimes."

" Liver ! " said Mr. Tinkler, " you've no right to such a thing at your age ; it's all nonsense, you know. Run in and play, that'll set you up again."

" It's fatal, sir," said Paul. " My doctor expressly warned me against taking any violent exercise soon after luncheon. If you knew what liver is, you wouldn't say so ! "

Mr. Tinkler stared, as well he might, but making nothing of it, and being chiefly anxious not to be interrupted any longer, only said, " Oh, well, don't bother me ; I daresay it's all right. Cut along ! "

So Mr. Bultitude 'as free ; the path lay open to him now⁷. He knew he would have little difficulty in finding his way to the station, and, once there, he would have the whole afternoon in which to wait for a train to town.

" I've managed that excellently," he thought, as he ran blithely off, almost like the boy he seemed. " Not the slightest hitch. I defy the fates themselves to stop me now ! "

But the fates are ladies, and—not of course that it follows—occasionally spiteful. It is very rash indeed to be ungallant enough to defy them—they have such an unpleasant habit of accepting the challenge.

Mr. Bultitude had hardly got clear of the groups scattered about the field, when he met a small flaxen-haired boy, who was just coming down to join the game. It was Porter, his neighbour of the German lesson.

UNBENDING THE BOW

" There you are, Bultitude, then," he said in his squeaky voice : " I want you."

" I can't stop," said Paul, " Fm in a hurry—another time."

" Another time won't do," said little Porter, laying hold of him by his jacket. " I want that rabbit."

This outrageous demand took Mr. Bultitude's breath away. He had no idea what rabbit was referred to, or why he should be required to produce such an animal at a moment's notice. This was the second time an inconvenient small boy had interfered between him and liberty. He would not be baffled twice. He tried to shake off his persecutor.

" I tell you, my good boy, I haven't such a thing about me. I haven't indeed. I don't even know what you're talking about."

This denial enraged Porter.

" I say, you fellows," he called out, " come here ! Do make Bultitude give me my rabbit. He says he doesn't know anything about it now ! "

At this several of the loungers came up, glad of a distraction.

" What's the matter ? " some of them asked.

" Why," whined Porter, " he promised to bring me back a rabbit this term, and now he pretends he does not know anything about it. Make him say what he's done with it ! "

Mr. Bultitude was not usually ready of resource, but now he had what seemed a happy thought.

" Gad ! " he cried, pretending to recollect it, " so I did—to be sure, a rabbit, of course, how could I forget it ? It's—it's a splendid rabbit. I'll go and fetch it ! "

" Will you ? " cried Porter, half-relieved. " Where is it, then ? "

" Where ? " said Paul sharply (he was growing positively brilliant). " Why, in my playbox to be sure ; where should it be i "

" It isn't in your playbox, I know," put in Siggers :

VICE VERSA

" because I saw it turned out yesterday and there was no rabbit then. Besides, how could a rabbit live in a play-box ? He's telling lies. I can see it by his face. He hasn't any rabbit ! "

" Of course I haven't ! " said Mr. Bultitude. " How should I ? I'm not a conjurer. It's not a habit of mine to go about with rabbits concealed on my person. What's the use of coming to me like this ? It's absurd, you know ; perfectly absurd ! "

The crowd increased until there was quite a ring formed round Mr. Bultitude and the indignant claimant, and presently Tipping came bustling up.

" What's the row here, you fellows ? " he said. " Bultitude again, of course. What's he been doing now ? "

" He had a rabbit he said he was keeping for me," explained little Porter : " and now he won't give it up or tell me what he's done with it. "

" He has some mice he ought to give us, too," said one or two new-comers, edging their way to the front.

Mr. Bultitude was of course exceedingly annoyed by this unlooked-for interruption, and still more by such utterly preposterous claims on him for animals ; however, it was easy to explain that he had no such things in his possession, and after that of course no more could be said. He was beginning to disclaim all liability, when Siggers stopped him.

" Keep that for the present," he said. " I say, we ought to have a regular trial over this, and get at the truth of it properly. Let's fetch him along to the goal-posts and judge him ! "

He fixed upon the goal-posts as being somehow more formal, and, as his proposal was well received, two of them grasped Mr. Bultitude by the collar and dragged him along in procession to the appointed spot between the two flags, while Siggers followed in what he conceived to be a highly judicial manner, and evidently enjoying himself prodigiously.

Paul, though highly indignant, allowed himself to be

led along without resistance. It was safest to humour them, for after all it would not last long, and when they were tired of baiting him he could watch his time and slip quietly away.

When they reached the goal-posts Siggers arranged them in a circle, placing himself, the hapless Paul, and his accusers in the centre. " You chaps had better all be jurymen," he said. " I'll be judge, and unless he makes a clean breast of it," he added with judicial impartiality, " the court will jolly well punch his ugly young head off."

Siggers' father was an Old Bailey barrister in good and rather sharp practice, so that it was clearly the son's mission to preside on this occasion. But unfortunately his hour of office was doomed to be a brief one, for Mr. Blinkhorn, becoming aware that the game was being still more scantily supported, and noticing the crowd at the goal, came up to know the reason of it at a long camel-like trot, his hat on the back of his head, his mild face flushed with exertion, and his pebble glasses gleaming in the winter sunshine.

" What are you all doing here ? Why don't you join the game ? I've come here to play football with you, and how can I do it if you all slink off and leave me to play by myself ? " he asked with pathos.

" Please, sir," said Siggers, alarmed at the threatened loss of his dignity, " it's a trial, and I'm judge."

" Yes, sir," the whole ring shouted together. " We're trying Bultitude, sir."

On the whole, perhaps, Mr. Bultitude was glad of this interference. At least justice would be done now, although this usher had blundered so unpardonably that morning.

" This is childish, you know," said Mr. Blinkhorn, " and it's not football. The Doctor will be seriously angry if he comes and sees you trifling here. Let the boy go."

" But he's cheated some of the fellows, sir," grumbled Tipping and Siggers together.

" Well, youWt no right to punish him if he has. Leave him to me."

VICE VERSA

" Will you see fair play between them, sir ? He oughtn't to be let off without being made to keep his word."

" If there is any dispute between you and Bultitude," said Mr. Blinkhorn, " I have no objection to settle it—provided it is within my province."

" Settle it without me," said Paul hurriedly. " I've leave to go home. I'm ill."

" Who gave you leave to go home ? " asked the master.

" That young man over there on the rails," said Paul.

" I am the proper person to apply to for leave ; you know that well enough," said Mr. Blinkhorn, with a certain coldness in his tone. " Now then, Porter, what is all this business about ? "

" Please, sir," said Porter, " he told me last term he had a lot of rabbits at home, and if I liked he would bring me back a lop-eared one and let me have it cheap, and I gave him two shillings, sir, and sixpence for a hutch to keep it in ; and now he pretends he doesn't know anything about it ! "

To Paul's horror two or three other boys came forward with much the same tale. He remembered now that during the holidays he had discovered that Dick was maintaining a sort of amateur menagerie in his bedroom, and that he had ordered the whole of the livestock to be got rid of or summarily destroyed.

Now it seemed that the wretched Dick had already disposed of it to these clamorous boys, and, what was worse, had stipulated with considerable forethought for payment in advance. For the first time he repented his paternal harshness. Like the netted lion, a paltry white mouse or two would have set him free ; but, less happy than the beast in the fable, he had not one !

He tried to stammer out excuses. " It's extremely unfortunate," he said, " but the fact is I'm not in a position to meet this—this sudden call upon me. Some other day, perhaps——"

" None of your long words, now," growled Tipping.

(Boys hate long words as much as even a Saturday Reviewer.) " Why haven't you brought the rabbits ? "

" Yes," said Mr. Blinkhorn. " Why, having promised to bring the rabbits with you, haven't you kept your word ? You must be able to give some explanation."

" Because," said Mr. Bultitude, wriggling with embarrassment, " I—that is my father—found out that my young rascal of a son—I mean his young rascal of a son (*me*, you know) was, contrary to my express orders, keeping a couple of abominable rabbits in his bedroom, and a quantity of filthy little white mice which he tried to train to climb up the banisters. And I kept finding the brutes running about my bath-room, and—well, of course, I put a stop to it ; and—no, what am I saying ? —my father, of course, he put a stop to it ; and, in point of fact, had them all drowned in a pail of water."

It might be thought that he had an excellent opportunity here of avowing himself, but there was the risk that Mr. Blinkhorn would disbelieve him, and, with the boys, he felt that the truth would do anything but increase his popularity. But dissembling fails sometimes outside the copy-books, and Mr. Bultitude's rather blundering attempt at it only landed him in worse difficulties.

There was a yell of rage and disappointment from the defrauded ones, who had cherished a lingering hope that young Bultitude had those rabbits somewhere, but (like Mr. Barkis and his wooden lemon) found himself unable to part with them when the time came to fulfil his contract. And as contempt is a frame of mind highly stimulating to one's self-esteem, even those who had no personal interest in the matter joined in the execrations with hearty goodwill and sympathy.

" Why did you let him do it ? They were ours, not his. What right had your governor to go and drown our rabbits, eh ? " they cried wrathfully.

" What right ? " said Paul. " Mustn't a man do as he

VICE VERSA

pleases in his own house, then ? I—he was not obliged to see the house overrun with vermin, I suppose ? "

But this only made them angrier, and they resented his defence with hoots, and groans, and hisses.

Mr. Blinkhorn meanwhile was pondering the affair conscientiously. At last he said, " But you know the Doctor would never allow animals to be kept in the school, if Bultitude had brought them. The whole thing is against the rules, and I shall not interfere."

" Ah, but," said Chawner, " he promised them all to day-boarders. The Doctor couldn't object to that, could he, sir ? "

" True," said Mr. Blinkhorn, " true. I was not aware of that. Well then, Bultitude, since you are prevented from performing what you promised to do, I'm sure you won't object to do what is fair and right in the matter ? "

" I don't think I quite follow you," said Mr. Bultitude. But he dreaded what was coming next.

" It's very simple. You have taken money from these boys, and if you can't give them value for it, you ought to return all you took from them. I'm sure you see that yourself."

" I don't admit that I owe them anything," said Paul ; " and at all events it is highly inconvenient to pay them now."

" If your own sense of honour isn't enough," said Mr. Blinkhorn, " I must take the matter into my own hands. Let every boy who has any claim upon him tell me exactly what it is."

One boy after another brought forward his claim. One had entrusted Dick, it appeared, with a shilling, for which he was to receive a mouse with a " plum saddle," and two others had invested ninepence each in white mice. With Porter's half-crown, the total came to precisely five shillings—all Paul had in the world, the one rope by which he could ever hope to haul himself up to his lost pinnacle !

UNBENDING THE BOW

Mr. Blinkhorn, naturally enough, saw no reason why the money, being clearly due, should not be paid at once. " Give me any money you have about you, Bultitude," he said, " and I'll satisfy your debts with it, as far as it goes."

Paul clasped his arm convulsively. " No ! " he cried hoarsely, " not that ! Don't make me do that ! I — I can't pay them—not now. They don't understand. If they only give me time they shall have double their money back—waggon-loads of rabbits, the best rabbits money can buy—if they'll wait. Tell them to wait. My dear sir, don't see me wronged ! I won't pay now ! "

" They have waited long enough," said Mr. Blinkhorn ; " you must pay them."

" I tell you I won't ! " cried Paul ; " do you hear ? Not one sixpence. Oh, if you knew ! That infernal Garuda Stone ! What fools people are ! "

Then in his despair he did the most fatal thing possible. He tried to save himself by flight, and with a violent plunge broke through the circle and made for the road which led towards the station.

Instantly the whole school, only too glad of the excitement, was at his heels. The unhappy Colonial Produce merchant ran as he had not run for a quarter of a century, faster even than he had on his first experience of Coggs' and Coker's society on that memorable Monday night. But in spite of his efforts the chase was a short one. Chawner and Tipping very soon had him by the collar, and brought him back, struggling and kicking out viciously, to Mr. Blinkhorn, whose good opinion he had now lost for ever.

" Please, sir," said Chawner, " I can feel something like a purse in his pocket. Shall I take it out, sir ? "

" As he refuses to act with common honesty—yes," said Mr. Blinkhorn.

It was Dick's purse, of course ; and in spite of Paul's frantic efforts to retain it, it was taken from him, its

VICE VERSA

contents equitably divided amongst the claimants, and the purse itself returned to him—empty.

" Now, Bultitude," said Mr. Blinkhorn, " if you really wish to leave the field, you may."

Mr. Bultitude lost what little temper he had yet to lose ; he flung the useless purse from him and broke away from them all in a condition little removed from insanity.

Leave the field ! What a mockery the permission was now. How was he to get home, a distance of more than fifty miles, without a penny in his pocket ? Ten minutes before, and freedom was within his grasp, and now it had eluded him and was as hopelessly out of reach as ever !

No one pitied him ; no one understood the real extent of his loss. Mr. Blinkhorn and the few enthusiasts went back to their unobtrusive game, while the rest of the school discussed the affair in groups, the popular indignation against young Bultitude's hitherto unsuspected meanness growing more marked every instant.

It might have even taken some decided and objectionable form before long, but when it was at its height there was a sudden cry of alarm. " *Cave*, you fellows, here's Grim ! " and indeed in the far distance the Doctor's portly and imposing figure could be seen just turning the corner into the field.

Mr. Bultitude felt almost cheered. This coming to join his pupils' sports showed a good heart ; the Doctor would almost certainly be in a good humour, and he cheated himself into believing that, at some interval in the game, he might perhaps find courage to draw near and seek to interest him in his incredible woes.

It was quite extraordinary to see how the game, which had hitherto decidedly languished and hung fire, now quickened into briskness and became positively spirited. Everyone developed a hearty interest in it, and it would almost seem as if the boys, with more delicacy than they are generally credited with, were

UNBENDING THE BOW

unwilling to let their master guess how little his indulgence was really appreciated. Even Mr. Tinkler, whose novel had kept him spell-bound on his rail all through the recent excitement, now slipped it hurriedly into his pocket and rushed energetically into the fray, shouting encouragement rather indiscriminately to either side, till he had an opportunity of finding out privately to which leader he had been assigned.

Dr. Grimstone came down the field at a majestic slow trot, calling out to the players as he came on—"Well done, Mutlow! Finely played, sir! Dribble it along now. Ah, you're afraid of it! Run into it, sir, run into it! No running with the ball now, Siggers; play without those petty meannesses, or leave the game! There, leave the ball to me, will you—leave it to me!"

And, as the ball had rolled in his direction, he punted it up in an exceedingly dignified manner, the whole school keeping respectfully apart, until he had brought it to a reasonable distance from the goal, when he kicked it through with great solemnity, amidst faint, and it is to be feared somewhat sycophantic applause, and turned away with the air of a man surfeited of success.

"For which side did I win that?" he asked presently, whereupon Tipping explained that his side had been the favoured one. "Well then," he said, "you fellows must all back me up, or I shall not play for you any more;" and he kicked off the ball for the next game.

It was noticeable that the party thus distinguished did not seem precisely overwhelmed with pleasure at the compliment, which, as they knew from experience, implied considerable exertion on their part, and even disgrace if they were unsuccessful.

The other side too looked unhappy, feeling themselves in a position of extreme delicacy and embarrassment. For if they played their best, they ran some risk of offending the Doctor, or, what was worse, drawing him over into their ranks; while if, on the other hand, they allowed themselves to be too easily

VICE VERSA

worsted, they might be suspected of sulkiness and temper—offences which he was very ready to discover and resent.

Dr. Grimstone for his part enjoyed the exercise, and had no idea that he was not a thoroughly welcome and valued playmate. But though it was pleasant to outsiders to see a schoolmaster permitting himself to share in the recreation of his pupils, it must be owned that to the latter the advantages of the arrangement seemed something more than dubious.

Mr. Bultitude, being on the side adopted by the Doctor, found too soon that he was expected to bestir himself. More than ever anxious now to conciliate, he did his very best to conquer his natural repugnance and appear more interested than alarmed as the ball came in his way ; but although (in boating slang) he " sugared " with some adroitness, he was promptly found out, for his son had been a dashing and plucky player.

It was bitter for him to run meekly about while scathing sarcasms and comments on his want of courage were being hurled at his head. It shattered the scanty remnants of his self-respect, but he dared not protest or say a single word to open the Doctor's eyes to the injustice he was doing him.

He was unpleasantly reminded, too, of the disfavour he had acquired amongst his companions, by some one or other of them running up to him every moment when the Doctor's attention was called elsewhere, and startling his nerves by a sly jog or pinch, or an abusive epithet hissed viciously into his ears—Chawner being especially industrious in this respect.

And in this unsatisfactory way the afternoon dragged along until the dusk gathered and the lamps were lighted, and it became too dark to see goal-posts or ball.

By the time play was stopped and the school re-formed for the march home, Mr. Bultitude felt that he was glad even to get back to labour as a relief from such a form of enjoyment. It was perhaps the most miserable

afternoon he had ever spent in his whole easy-going life. In the course of it he had passed from brightest hope to utter despair ; and now nothing remained to him but to convince the Doctor, which he felt quite unequal to do, or to make his escape without money—which would inevitably end in a recapture.

May no one who reads this ever be placed upon the horns of such a dilemma !

9. *A Letter from Home*

" Here are a few of the unpleasantest words
That ever blotted paper. . . .

A letter,
And every word in it a gaping wound."
Merchant of Venice.

IF it were not that it was so absolutely essential to the interest of this story, I think I should almost prefer to draw a veil over the sufferings of Mr. Bultitude during the rest of that unhappy week at Crichton House ; but it would only be false delicacy to do so.

Things went worse and worse with him. The real Dick in his most objectionable moods could never have contrived to render himself one quarter so disliked and suspected as his substitute was by the whole school—masters and boys.

It was in a great measure his own fault, too ; for to an ordinary boy the life there would not have had any-intolerable hardships, if it held out no exceptional attractions. But he would not accommodate himself to circumstances, and try, during his enforced stay, to get as much instruction and enjoyment as possible out of his new life.

Perhaps, in his position, it would be too much to expect such a thing and, at all events, it never even occurred to him to attempt it. He consumed himself instead with inward raging and chafing at his hard lot, and his utter powerlessness to break the spell which bound him.

VICE VERSA

Sometimes, indeed, he would resolve to bear it no longer, and would start up impulsively to impart his misfortunes to some one in minor authority—not the Doctor, he had given that up in resigned despair long since. But as surely as ever he found himself coming to the point, the words would stick fast in his throat, and he was only too thankful to get away, with his tale untold, on any frivolous pretext that first suggested itself.

This, of course, brought him into suspicion, for such conduct had the appearance of a systematic course of practical joking, and even the most impartial teachers will sometimes form an unfavourable opinion of a particular boy on rather slender grounds, and then find fresh confirmation of it in his most insignificant actions.

As for the school generally, his scowls and his sullenness, his deficiency in the daring and impudence that had warmed their hearts towards Dick, and, above all, his strange knack of getting them into trouble—for he seldom received what he considered an indignity without making a formal complaint—all this brought him as much hearty dislike and contempt as, perhaps, the most unsympathetic boy ever earned since boarding-schools were first invented.

The only boy who still seemed to retain a secret tenderness for him, as the Dick he had once looked up to and admired, was Jolland, who persisted in believing, and in stating his belief, that this apparent change of demeanour was a perverted kind of joke on Bultitude's part, which he would condescend to explain some day when it had gone far enough, and he wearied and annoyed Paul beyond endurance by perpetually urging him to abandon his ill-judged experiment and discover the point of the jest.

But for Jolland's help, which he persevered in giving in spite of the opposition and unpopularity it brought upon himself, Mr. Bultitude would have found it impossible to make any pretence of performing the tasks required of him.

A LETTER FROM HOME

He found himself expected, as a matter of course, to have a certain familiarity with Greek paradigms and German conversation scraps, propositions in Euclid and Latin gerunds, of all of which, having had a strict commercial education in his young days, he had not so much as heard before his metamorphosis. But by carefully copying Jolland's exercises, and introducing enough mistakes of his own to supply the necessary local colour, he was able to escape to a great degree the discovery of his blank ignorance on all these subjects—an ignorance which would certainly have been put down as mere idleness and obstinacy.

But it will be readily believed that he lived in constant fear of such discovery, and as it was, his dependence on a little scamp like his son's friend was a sore humiliation to one who had naturally supposed hitherto that any knowledge he had not happened to acquire could only be meretricious and useless.

He led a nightmare sort of existence for some days, until something happened which roused him from his state of passive misery into one more attempt at protest.

It was Saturday morning, and he had come down to breakfast, after being knocked about as usual in the dormitory over night, with a dull wonder how long this horrible state of things could possibly be going to last, when he saw on his plate a letter with the Paddington post-mark, addressed in a familiar hand—his daughter Barbara's.

For an instant his hopes rose high. Surely the impostor had been found out at last, and the envelope would contain an urgent invitation to him to come back and resume his rights—an invitation which he might show to the Doctor as his best apology.

But when he looked at the address, which was "Master Richard Bultitude," he felt a misgiving. It was unlikely that Barbara would address him thus if she knew the truth ; he hesitated before tearing it open.

Then he tried to persuade himself that of course she

VICE VERSA

would have the sense to keep up appearances for his own sake on the outside of the letter, and he compelled himself to open the envelope with fingers that trembled nervously.

The very first sentences scattered his faint expectations to the winds. He read on with staring eyes, till the room seemed to rock with him like a packet-boat and the sprawling school-girl handwriting, crossed and recrossed on the thin paper, changed to letters of scorching flame. But perhaps it will be better to give the letter in full, so that the reader may judge for himself whether it was calculated or not to soothe and encourage the exiled one.

Here it is :

" M Y DEAREST DARLING DICK,—I hope you have not been expecting a letter from me before this, but I had such lots to tell you that I waited till I had time to tell it all at once. For I have such news for you ! You can't think how pleased you will be when you hear it. Where shall I begin ? I hardly know, for it still seems so funny and strange—almost like a dream—only I hope we shall never wake up.

"I think I must tell you anyhow, just as it comes. Well, ever since you went away, dear Father has been completely changed ; you would hardly believe it unless you saw him. He is quite jolly and boyish—only fancy ! and we are always telling him he is the biggest baby of us all, but it only makes him laugh. Once, you know, he would have been awfully angry if we had even hinted at it.

" Do you know, I really think that the real reason he was so cross and sharp with us that last week was because you were going away ; for now the wrench of parting is over, he is quite light-hearted again. You know how he always hates showing his feelings.

" He is so altered now, you can't think. He has actually only once been up to the city since you left,

A LETTER FROM HOME

and then he came home at four o'clock, and he seems to quite like to have us all about him. Generally he stays at home all the morning and plays at soldiers with baby in the dining-room. You would laugh to see him loading the cannons with real powder and shot, and he didn't care a bit when some of it made holes in the side-board and smashed the looking-glass.

" We had such fun the other afternoon ; we played at brigands—papa and all of us. Papa had the upper conservatory for a robber-cave, and stood there keeping guard with your pop-gun ; and he wouldn't let the servants go by without a kiss, unless they showed a written pass from us ! Miss McFadden called in the middle of it, but she said she wouldn't come in, as papa seemed to be enjoying himself so. Boaler has given warning, but we can't think why. We have been out nearly every evening—once to Hengler's and once to the Christy Minstrels, and last night to the Pantomime, where papa was so pleased with the clown that he sent round afterwards and asked him to dme here on Sunday, when Sir Benjamin and Lady Bangle and Alderman Fishwick are coming. Won't it be jolly to see a clown close to ? Should you think he'd come in *his* evening dress ? Miss Mangnall has been given a month's holiday, because papa didn't like to see us always at lessons. Think of that !

" We are going to have the whole house done up and refurnished at last. Papa chose the furniture for the drawing-room yesterday. It is all in yellow satin, which is rather bright, I think. I haven't seen the carpet yet, but it is to match the furniture ; and there is a lovely hearthrug, with a lion-hunt worked on it.

" But that isn't the best of it ; we are going to have the big children's party after all ! No one but children invited, and everyone to do exactly what they like. I wanted so much to have you home for it, but papa says it would only unsettle you and take you away from your work.

VICE VERSA

" Had Dulcie forgotten you ? I should like to see her so much. Now I really must leave off, as I am going to the Aquarium with papa. Mind you write me as good a letter as this is, if that old Doctor lets you. Minnie and Roly send love and kisses, and papa sends his kind regards, and I am to say he hopes you are settling down steadily to work.

" With best love, your affectionate sister,

" BARBARA BULTITUDE."

" P.S.—I nearly forgot to say that Uncle Duke came the other day and has stayed here ever since. He is going to make papa's fortune ! I believe by a gold mine he knows about somewhere, and a steam tramway in Lapland. But I don't like him very much—he is so polite."

It would be nothing short of an insult to the reader's comprehension, if I were to enter into an elaborate explanation of the effect this letter had upon Mr. Bultitude. He took it in by degrees, trying to steady his nerves at each additional item of poor Barbara's well-meant intelligence by a sip at his tin-flavoured coffee. But when he came to the postscript, in spite of its purport being mercifully broken to him gradually by the extreme difficulty of making it out from two undercurrents of manuscript, he choked convulsively and spilt his coffee.

Dr. Grimstone visited this breach of etiquette with stern promptness. " This conduct at table is disgraceful, sir—perfectly disgraceful—unworthy of a civilised being. I have been a teacher of youth for many years, and never till now did I have the pain of seeing a pupil of mine choke in his breakfast-cup with such deplorable ill-breeding. It's pure greediness, sir, and you will have the goodness to curb your indecent haste in consuming your food for the future. Your excellent father has frequently complained to me, with tears in his eyes, of the impossibility of teaching you to behave at meals with common propriety ! "

A LETTER FROM HOME

There was a faint chuckle along the tables, and several drank coffee with studied elegance and self-repression either as a valuable example to Dick, or as a personal advertisement. But Paul was in no mood for reproof and instruction. He stood up in his excitement, flourishing his letter wildly.

" Dr. Grimstone ! " he said ; " never mind my behaviour now. Fve something to tell you. I can't bear it any longer. I must go home at once—at once, sir ! "

There was a general sensation at this, for his manner was peremptory and almost dictatorial. Some thought he would get a licking on the strength of it, and most hoped so. But the Doctor dismissed them to the playground, keeping Paul back to be dealt with in privacy.

Mrs. Grimstone played nervously with her dry toast at the end of the table, for she could not endure to see the boys in trouble and dreaded a scene, while Dulcie looked on with wide bright eyes.

" Now, sir," said the Doctor, looking up from his marmalade, " why must you go home at once ? "

" I've just had a letter," stammered Paul.

" No one ill at home, I hope ? "

" No, no," said Paul. " It's not that ; it's worse ! She doesn't know what horrible things she tells me ! "

" Who is ' she ' ? " said the Doctor—and Dulcie's eyes were larger still and her face paled.

" I decline to say," said Mr. Bultitude. It would have been absurd to say * my daughter,' and he had not presence of mind just then to transpose the relationships with neatness and success. " But indeed I am wanted most badly ! "

" What are you wanted for, pray ? "

" Everything ! " declared Paul ; " it's all going to rack and ruin without me ! "

" That's absurd," said the Doctor ; " you're not such an important individual as all that, Bultitude. But let me see the letter."

Show him the letter—lay bare all those follies of

VICE VERSA

Dick's, the burden of which he might have to bear himself very shortly—never ! Besides, what would be the use of it ? It would be no argument in favour of sending him home—rather the reverse—so Paul was obliged to say, " Excuse me, Dr. Grimstone, it is—ah—of a private nature. I don't feel at liberty to show it to anyone."

" Then, sir," said the Doctor, with some reason, " if you can't tell me who or what it is that requires your presence at home, and decline to show me the letter which would presumably give me some idea on the subject, how do you expect that I am to listen to such a preposterous demand—eh ? Just tell me that ! "

Once more would Paul have given worlds for the firmness and presence of mind to state his case clearly and effectively ; and he could hardly have had a better opportunity, for schoolmasters cannot always be playing the tyrant, and the Doctor was, in spite of his attempts to be stern, secretly more amused than angry at what seemed a peculiarly precocious piece of effrontery.

But Paul felt the dismal absurdity of his position. Nothing he had said, nothing he could say, short of the truth, would avail him, and the truth was precisely what he felt most unable to tell. He hung his head resignedly, and held his tongue in confusion.

" Pooh! " said the Doctor at last; "let me have no more of this tomfoolery, Bultitude. It's getting to be a positive nuisance. Don't come to me with any more of these ridiculous stories, or some day I shall be annoyed. There, go away, and be contented where you are, and try to behave like other people."

" ' Contented ! ' " muttered Paul, when out of hearing, as he went upstairs and through the empty schoolroom into the playground. " ' Behave like other people ! ' Ah, yes, I suppose I shall have to come to that in time. But that letter——Everything upside down——Bangle asked to meet a common clown ! That fellow Duke letting me in for gold-mines and tramways ! It's

A LETTER FROM HOME

all worse than I ever dreamed of; and I must stay here and be ' contented ! ' It's—it's perfectly damnable ! "

All through that morning his thoughts ran in the same doleful groove, until the time for work came to an end, and he found himself in the playground, and free to indulge his melancholy for a few minutes in solitude ; for the others were still loitering about in the schoolroom, and a glass outhouse originally intended for a conservatory, but now devoted to boots and slates, and the books liberally besmeared with gilt, and telling of the exploits of boy-heroes so beloved of boys.

Mr. Bultitude, only too delighted to get away from them for a little while, was leaning against the parallel bars in dull despondency, when he heard a rustling in the laurel hedge which cut off the house garden from the gravelled playground, and looking up, saw Dulcie slip through the shrubs and come towards him with an air of determination in her proud little face.

She looked prettier and daintier than ever in her grey hat and warm fur tippet ; but of course Paul was not of the age or in the mood to be much affected by such things—he turned his head pettishly away.

" It's no use doing that, Dick," she said : " I'm tired of sulking. I shan't sulk any more till I have an explanation."

Paul made the sound generally written " Pshaw ! "

" You ought to tell me everything. I will know it. Oh, Dick, you might tell me ! I always told you anything you wanted to know ; and I let mamma think it was I broke the clock-shade last term, and you know you did it. And I want to know something so very badly ! "

" It's no use coming to *me* you know," said Paul. " I can't do anything for you."

" Yes, you can ; you know you can ! " said Dulcie impulsively. " You can tell me what was in that letter you had at breakfast—and you shall too ! "

" What an inquisitive little girl you are," said Paul

VICE VERSA

sententiously. " It's not nice for little girls to be so inquisitive—it doesn't look well."

" I knew it ! " cried Dulcie ; " you don't want to tell me—because—because it's from that other horrid girl you like better than me. And you promised to belong to me for ever and ever, and now it's all over ! Say it isn't ! Oh, Dick, promise to give the other girl up. I'm sure she's not a nice girl. She's written you an unkind letter ; now hasn't she ? "

" Upon my word," said Paul, " this is very forward ; at your age too. Why, my Barbara——"

" Your Barbara ! you dare to call her that ? Oh, I knew I was right ; I *will* see that letter now. Give it me this instant ! " said Dulcie imperiously ; and Paul really felt almost afraid of her.

" No, no," he said, retreating a step or two, " it's all a mistake ; there's nothing to get into such a passion about—there isn't indeed ! And—don't cry—you're really a pretty little girl. I only wish I could tell you everything ; but you'd never believe me ! "

" Oh, yes, I would, Dick ! " protested Dulcie, only too willing to be convinced of her boy-lover's constancy ; " I'll believe anything, if you'll only tell me. And I'm sorry I was so angry. Sit down by me and tell me from the very beginning. I promise not to interrupt."

Paul thought for a moment. After all, why shouldn't he ? It was much pleasanter to tell his sorrows to her little ear and hear her childish wonder and pity than face her terrible father—he had tried that. And then she might tell her mother ; and so his story might reach the Doctor's ears after all, without further effort on his part.

" Well," he said at last, " I think you're a good-natured little girl ; you won't laugh. Perhaps I will tell you ! "

So he sat down on the bench by the wall, and Dulcie, quite happy again now at this proof of good faith, nestled up against him confidently, waiting for his first words with parted lips and eager sparkling eyes.

A LETTER FROM HOME

" Not many days ago," began Paul, " I was somebody very different from——"

" Oh, indeed," said a jarring, sneering voice close by ; " was you ? " And he looked up and saw Tipping standing over him with a plainly hostile intent.

" Go away, Tipping," said Dulcie ; " we don't want you. Dick is telling me a secret."

" He's very fond of telling, I know," retorted Tipping. " If you knew what a sneak he was you'd have nothing to do with him, Dulcie. I could tell you things about him that——"

" He's not a sneak," said Dulcie. " Are you, Dick ? Why don't you go, Tipping. Never mind what he says, Dick ; go on as if he wasn't there. I don't care what he says ! "

It was a most unpleasant situation for Mr. Bultitude, but he did not like to offend Tipping. " I—I think—some other time, perhaps," he said nervously. " Not now."

" Ah, you're afraid to say what you were going to say now I'm here," said the amiable Tipping, nettled by Dulcie's little air of haughty disdain. " You're a coward ; you know you are. You pretend to think such a lot of Dulcie here, but you daren't fight ! "

" Fight ! " said Mr. Bultitude. " Eh, what for ? "

" Why, for her, of course. You can't care much about her if you daren't fight for her. I want to show her who's the best man of the two ! "

" I don't want to be showm," wailed poor Dulcie piteously, clinging to the reluctant Paul ; " I know. Don't fight with him, Dick. I say you Ye not to."

" Certainly not ! " said Mr. Bultitude with great decision. " I shouldn't think of such a thing ! " and he rose from the bench and was about to walk away, when Tipping suddenly pulled off his coat and began to make sundry demonstrations of a martial nature, such as dancing aggressively towards his rival and clenching his fists.

VICE VERSA

By this time most of the other boys had come down into the playground, and were looking on with great interest. There was an element of romance in this promised combat which gave it additional attractions. It was like one of the struggles between knightly champions in the Waverley novels. Several of them would have fought till they couldn't see out of their eyes if it would have given them the least chance of obtaining favour in Dulcie's sight, and they all envied Dick, who was the only boy that was not unmercifully snubbed by their capricious little princess.

Paul alone was blind to the splendour of his privileges. He examined Tipping carefully, as the latter was still assuming a hostile attitude and chanting a sort of war-cry supposed to be an infallible incentive to strife. "Yah, you're afraid!" he sang very offensively. "I wouldn't be a funk!"

"Pooh!" said Paul at last; "go away, sir, go away!"

"Go away, eh?" jeered Tipping. "Who are you to tell me to go away? Go away yourself!"

"Certainly," said Paul, only too happy to oblige. But he found himself prevented by a ring of excited backers.

"Don't funk it, Dick!" cried some, forgetting recent ill-feeling in the necessity for partisanship. "Go in and settle him as you did that last time. I'll second you. You can do it!"

"Don't hit each other in the face," pleaded Dulcie, who had got upon a bench and was looking down into the ring—not, if the truth must be told, without a certain pleasurable excitement in the feeling that it was all about her.

And now Mr. Bultitude discovered that he was seriously expected to fight this great hulking boy, and that the sole reason for any disagreement was an utterly unfounded jealousy respecting this little girl Dulcie. He had not a grain of chivalry in his disposition—chivalry being an eminently unpractical virtue—and naturally he saw no advantage in letting himself be

mauled for the sake of a child younger than his own daughter.

Dulcie's appeal enraged Tipping, who took it as addressed solely to himself. " You ought to be glad to stick up for her/' he said between his teeth. " I'il mash you for this—see if I don't ! "

Paul thought he saw his way clear to disabuse Tipping of his mistaken idea. " Are you proposing," he asked politely, " to—to ' mash ' me on account of that little girl there on the seat ? "

" You'll soon see," growled Tipping. " Shut your head, and come on ! "

" No, but I want to know," persisted Mr. Bultitude. " Because," he said with a sickly attempt at jocularity which delighted none, " you see, I don't want to be mashed. I'm not a potato. If I understand you aright, you want to fight me because you think me likely to interfere with your claim to that little girl's—ah—affections ? "

" That's it," said Tipping gruffly ; " so you'd better waste no more words about it, and come on."

" But I don't care about coming on," protested Paul earnestly. " It's all a mistake. I've no doubt she's a very nice little girl, but I assure you, my good boy, I've no desire to stand in your way for one instant. She's nothing to me—nothing at all ! I give her up to you. Take her, young fellow, with my blessing ! There, now, that's all settled comfortably—eh ? "

He was just looking round with a self-satisfied and relieved air, when he began to be aware that his act of frank unselfishness was not as much appreciated as it deserved. Tipping, indeed, looked baffled and irresolute for one moment, but a low murmur of disgust arose from the bystanders, and even Jolland declared that it was " too beastly mean."

As for Dulcie, she had been looking on incredulously at her champion's unaccountable tardiness in coming to the point. But this public repudiation was too much for her. She gave a little low wail as she heard the

VICE VERSA

shameless words of recantation, and then, without a word, jumped lightly down from her bench and ran away to hide herself somewhere and cry.

Even Paul, though he knew that he had done nothing but what was strictly right, and had acted purely in self-protection, felt unaccountably ashamed of himself as he saw this effect of his speech. But it was too late now.

10. *The Complete Letter-Writer*

" Accelerated by ignominious shovings—nay, as it is written, by smittings, twitchings, spurnings *a posteriori* not to be named."
—*French Revolution.*

" This letter being so excellently ignorant will breed no terror in the youth."—*Twelfth Night.*

MR. BULTITUDE had meant to achieve a double stroke of diplomacy—to undeceive Dulcie and conciliate the lovesick Tipping. But whatever his success may have been in the former respect, the latter object failed conspicuously.

" You shan't get off by a shabby trick like that," said Tipping, exasperated by the sight of Dulcie's emotion ; " you've made her cry now, and you shall smart for it. So, now, are you going to stand up to me like a man, or will you take a licking ? "

" I'm not going to help you to commit a breach of the peace," said Paul with great dignity. " Go away, you quarrelsome young ruffian ! Get one of your school-fellows to fight you, if you must fight. I don't want to be mixed up with you in any way."

But at this Tipping, whose blood was evidently at boiling point, came prancing down on him in a Zulu-like fashion, swinging his long arms like a windmill, and finding that his enemy made no attempt at receiving him, but only moved away apprehensively, he seized him by the collar as a prelude to dealing him a series of kicks behind.

THE COMPLETE LETTER-WRITER

Although Mr. Bultitude, as we have seen, was opposed to fighting as a system he could not submit to this sort of thing without at least some attempt to defend himself ; and judging it of the highest importance to disable his adversary in the most effectual manner before the latter had time to carry out his offensive designs, he turned sharply round and hit him a very severe blow in the lower part of his waistcoat.

The result fulfilled his highest expectations. Tipping collapsed like a pocket-rule, and staggered away speechless, and purple with pain, while Paul stood calm and triumphant. He had shown these fellows that he wasn't going to stand any nonsense. They would leave him alone after this, perhaps.

But once more there were cries and murmurs of " Shame ! " " No hitting below the belt ! " " Cad-coward ! "

It appeared that, somehow, he had managed to offend their prejudices even in this. " It's very odd," he thought; " when I didn't fight they called me a coward, and now, when I do, I don't seem to have pleased them much. I don't care, though. I've settled *him*."

But after a season of protracted writhing by the parallel bars, Tipping came out, still gasping and deadly pale, leaning on Biddlecomb's shoulder, and was met with universal sympathy and condolence.

" Thanks ! " he said with considerable effort. " Of course—I'm not going—to fight him after a low trick like that ; but perhaps you fellows will see that he doesn't escape quite as easily as he fancies ? "

There was a general shout. " No ; he shall pay for it ! We'll teach him to fight fair ! We'll see if he tries that on again ! "

Paul heard it with much uneasiness. What new devilry were they about to practise upon him ? He was not left long in doubt.

" I vote," suggested Biddlecomb, as if he were proposing a testimonial, " we make him run the gauntlet.

VICE VERSA

Grim won't come out and catch us. I saw him go out for a drive an hour ago." And the idea was very favourably entertained.

Paul had heard of "running the gauntlet," and dimly suspected that it was not an experience he was likely to enjoy, particularly when he saw everyone busying himself with tying the end of his pocket-handkerchief into a hard knot. He tried in vain to excuse himself, declaring again and again that he had never meant to injure the boy. He had only defended himself, and was under the impression that he was at perfect liberty to hit him wherever he could, and so on. But they were in no mood for excuses.

With a stern magisterial formality worthy of a Vehm-Gericht, they formed in two long lines down the centre of the playground; and while Paul was still staring in wonder at what this strange manoeuvre might mean, somebody pounced upon him and carried him up to one end of the ranks, where Tipping had by this time sufficiently recovered to be able to "set him going," as he chose to call it, with a fairly effective kick.

After that he had a confused sense of flying madly along the double line of avengers under a hail of blows which caught him on every part of his head, shoulders, and back till he reached the end, where he was dexterously turned and sent spinning up to Tipping again, who in his turn headed him back on his arrival, and forced him to brave the terrible lane once more.

Never before had Mr. Bultitude felt so sore and insulted. But they kept it up long after the thing had lost its first freshness—until at last exhaustion made them lean to mercy, and they cuffed him ignominiously into a corner, and left him to lament his ill-treatment there till the bell rang for dinner, for which, contrary to precedent, his recent violent exercise had excited little appetite.

"I shall be killed soon if I stay here," he moaned; "I know I shall. These young brigands would murder me

THE COMPLETE LETTER-WRITER

cheerfully, if they were not afraid of being caned for it. I'm a miserable man, and I wish I was dead ! "

Although that afternoon, being Saturday, was a half-holiday, Mr. Bultitude was spared the ordeal of another game at football; for a smart storm of rain and sleet coming on about three o'clock kept the school—not altogether unwilling prisoners—within doors for the day.

The boys sat in their places in their schoolroom, amusing themselves after their several fashions—some reading, some making libellous copies of drawings that took their fancy in the illustrated papers, some playing games ; others, too listless to play and too dull to find pleasure in the simplest books, filled up the time as well as they could by quarrelling and getting into various depths of hot water. Paul sat in a corner pretending to read a story relating the experiences of certain infants of phenomenal courage and coolness in the Arctic regions. They killed bears and tamed walruses all through the book ; but for the first time, perhaps, since their appearance in print their exploits fell flat. Not, however, that this reflected any discredit upon the author's powers, which are justly admired by all healthy-minded boys ; but it was beyond the power of literature just then to charm Mr. Bultitude's thoughts from the recollection of his misfortunes.

As he took in all the details of his surroundings—the warm close room ; the raw-toned desks and tables at which a rabble of unsympathetic boys were noisily whispering and chattering, with occasional glances in his direction, from which, taught by experience, he augured no good ; the high uncurtained windows, blurred with little stars of half-frozen rain, and the bare, bleak branches of the trees outside tossing drearily against a low leaden sky—he tried in vain to cheat himself into a dreamy persuasion that all this misery could not be real, but would fade away as suddenly and mysteriously as it had stolen upon him.

Towards the close of the afternoon the Doctor came

VICE VERSA

in and took his place at the writing-table, where he was apparently very busy with the composition of some sort of document, which he finished at last with evident satisfaction at the result of his labour. Then he observed that, according to their custom of a Saturday afternoon, the hour before tea-time should be devoted to "writing home."

So the books, chess-boards, and dominoes were all put away, and a new steel pen and a sheet of notepaper, neatly embossed with the heading "Crichton House School" in old English letters, having been served out to everyone, each boy prepared himself to write down such things as filial affection, strict truthfulness, and the desire of imparting information might inspire between them.

Paul felt, as he clutched his writing materials, much as a shipwrecked mariner might be expected to do at finding on his desolate island a good-sized flag and a case of rockets. His hopes revived once more; he forgot the smarts left by the knots in the handkerchiefs, he had a whole hour before him—it was possible to set several wires in motion for his release in an hour.

Yes, he must write several letters. First, one to his solicitor detailing, as calmly and concisely as his feelings would allow, the shameful way in which he had been treated, and imploring him to take measures of some sort for getting him out of his false and awkward position; one to his head clerk, to press upon him the necessity of prudence and caution in dealing with the impostor; notes to Bangle and Fishwick putting them off—they should not be outraged by an introduction to a vulgar pantomime clown under his roof; and lastly (this was an outburst he could not deny himself), a solemn impressive appeal to the common humanity, if not to the ordinary filial instincts, of his undutiful son.

His fingers tingled to begin. Sentences of burning, indignant eloquence crowded confusedly into his head—he would write such letters as would carry instant con-

viction to the most practical and matter-of-fact minds. The pathos and dignity of his remonstrances should melt even Dick's selfish, callous heart.

Perhaps he overrated the power of his pen—perhaps it would have required more than mere ink to persuade his friends to disbelieve their own senses, and see a portly citizen of over fifty packed into the frame of a chubby urchin of fourteen. But, at all events, no one's faith was put to so hard a test—those letters were never written.

"Don't begin to write yet, any of you," said the Doctor; "I have a few words to say to you first. In most cases, and as a general rule, I think it wisest to let every boy commit to paper whatever his feelings may dictate to him. I wish to claim no censorship over the style and diction of your letters. But there have been so many complaints lately from the parents of some of the less advanced of you, that I find myself obliged to make a change. Your father particularly, Richard Bultitude," he added, turning suddenly upon the unlucky Paul, "has complained bitterly of the slovenly tone and phrasing of your correspondence; he said very justly that they would disgrace a stable-boy, and unless I could induce you to improve them, he begged he might not be annoyed by them in future."

It was by no means the least galling part of Mr. Bultitude's trials, that former forgotten words and deeds of his in his original condition were constantly turning up at critical seasons, and plunging him deeper into the morass just when he saw some prospect of gaining firm ground.

So, on this occasion, he did remember that, being in a more than usually bad temper one day last year, he had, on receiving a sprawling, ill-spelt application from Dick for more pocket-money, to buy fireworks for the 5th of November, written to make some such complaint to the schoolmaster. He waited anxiously for the Doctor's next words; he might want to read the letters

VICE VERSA

before they were sent off, in which case Paul would not be displeased, for it would be an easier and less dangerous way of putting the Doctor in possession of the facts.

But his complaints were to be honoured by a much more effectual remedy, for it naturally piqued the Doctor to be told that boys instructed under his auspices wrote like stable-boys. "However," he went on, "I wish your people at home to be assured from time to time of your welfare, and to prevent them from being shocked and distressed in future by the crudity of your communications, I have drawn up a short form of letter for the use of the lower boys in the second form—which I shall now proceed to dictate. Of course all boys in the first form, and all in the second above Bultitude and Jolland, will write as they please, as usual. Richard, I expect you to take particular pains to write this out neatly. Are you all ready? Very well then, . . . now;" and he read out the following letter, slowly—

"My dear Parents (or parent according to circumstances) comma" (all of which several took down most industriously)—"You will be rejoiced to hear that, having arrived with safety at our destination, we have by this time fully resumed our customary regular round of earnest work relieved and sweetened by hearty play. ('Have you all got "hearty play" down?') inquired the Doctor rather suspiciously, while Jolland observed in an undertone that it would take some time to get *that* down.) "I hope, I trust I may say without undue conceit, to have made considerable progress in my school-tasks before I rejoin the family circle for the Easter vacation, as I think you will admit when I inform you of the programme we intend" ('D.V. in brackets and capital letters'—as before, this was taken down verbatim by Jolland, who probably knew very much better), "intend to work out during the term.

"In Latin, the class of which I am a member propose to thoroughly master the first book of Virgil's magnificent Epic, need I say I refer to the soul-moving story of

THE COMPLETE LETTER-WRITER

the Pious Æneas ? " (Jolland was understood by his near neighbours to remark that he thought the explanation distinctly advisable), " whilst, in Greek, we have already commenced the thrilling account of the ' Anabasis ' of Xenophon, that master of strategy ! nor shall we, of course, neglect in either branch of study the syntax and construction of those two noble languages "—" noble languages," echoed the writers mechanically, contriving to insinuate a touch of irony into the words).

" In German under the able tutelage of Herr Stohwasser, who, as I may possibly have mentioned to you in casual conversation, is a graduate of the University of Heidelberg " (" and a silly old hass," added Jolland parenthetically), " we have resigned ourselves to the spell of the Teutonian Shakespeare " (there was much difference of opinion as to the manner of spelling the " Teutonian Shakespeare "), " as, in my opinion, Schiller may be not inaptly termed, and our French studies comprise such exercises, and short poems and tales, as are best calculated to afford an insight into the intricacies of the Gallic tongue.

" But I would not have you imagine, my dear parents (or parent, as before), that, because the claims of the intellect have been thus amply provided for, the requirements of the body are necessarily overlooked !

" I have no intention of becoming a mere bookworm, and, on the contrary, we have had one excessively brisk and pleasant game at football already this season, and should, but for the unfortunate inclemency of the weather, have engaged again this afternoon in the mimic warfare.

" In the playground our favourite diversion is the game of ' chevvy,' so called from the engagement famed in ballad and history (I allude to the battle of Chevy Chase), and indeed, my dear parents, in the rapid alternations of its fortunes and the diversity of its incident, the game (to my mind) bears a striking resemblance to the accounts of that ever-memorable contest.

VICE VERSA

" I fear I must now relinquish my pen, as the time allotted for correspondence is fast waning to its close, and tea-time is approaching. Pray give my kindest remembrance to all my numerous friends and relatives, and accept my fondest love and affection for yourselves, and the various other members of the family circle.

" I am, I am rejoiced to say, in the enjoyment of excellent health, and surrounded as I am by congenial companions, and employed in interesting and agreeable pursuits, it is superfluous to add that I am happy.

" And now, my dear parents, believe me, your dutiful and affectionate son, so and so."

The Doctor finished his dictation with a roll in his voice, as much as to say, " I think that will strike your respective parents as a chaste and classical composition ; I think so ! "

But unexceptionable as its tone and sentiments undoubtedly were, it was far from expressing the feelings of Mr. Bultitude. The rest accepted it not unwillingly as an escape from the fatigue of original composition, but to him the neat, well-balanced sentences seemed a hollow mockery. As he wrote down each successive phrase, he wondered what Dick would think of it, and when at last it was finished, the precious hour had gone for another week !

In speechless disgust but without protest, for his spirit was too broken by this last cruel disappointment, he had to fold, put into an envelope and direct this most misleading letter under the Doctor's superintending eye, which of course allowed him no chance of introducing a line or even a word to counteract the tone of self-satisfaction and contentment which breathed in every sentence of it.

He saw it stamped, and put into the postbag, and then his last gleam of hope flickered out; he must give up struggling against the Inevitable ; he must resign himself to be educated, and perhaps flogged here, while Dick was filling his house with clowns and pantaloons,

destroying his reputation and damaging his credit at home. Perhaps, in course of time, he would grow accustomed to it, and, meanwhile, he would be as careful as possible to do and say nothing to make himself remarkable in any way, by which means he trusted, at least, to avoid any fresh calamity.

And with this resolution he went to bed on Saturday night, feeling that this was a dreary finish to a most unpleasant week.

II. *A Day of Rest*

" There was a letter indeed to be intercepted by a man's fat! do him good with him ! "—*Every Man in his Humour*.

" I cannot lose the thought yet of this letter,
Sent to my son ; nor leave t' admire the change
Of manners, and the breeding of our youth
Within the kingdom, since myself was one."—*Ibid*.

UNDAY came—a day which was to begin a new week for Mr. Bultitude, and, of course, for the rest of the Christian world as well. Whether that week would be better or worse than the one which had just passed away he naturally could not tell—it could hardly be much worse.

But the Sunday itself, he anticipated, without, however, any very firm grounds for such an assumption, would be a day of brief but grateful respite ; a day on which he might venture to claim much the same immunity as was enjoyed in former days by the insolvent; a day, in short, which would glide slowly by with the rather drowsy solemnity peculiar to the British sabbath as observed by all truly respectable persons.

And yet that very Sunday, could he have foreseen it, was destined to be the most eventful day he had yet spent at Crichton House, where none had proved wanting in incident. During the next twelve hours he was to pass through every variety of unpleasant sensation. Embarrassment, suspense, fear, anxiety, dismay, and terror

VICE VERSA

were to follow each other in rapid succession, and to wind up, strangely enough, with a delicious ecstasy of pure relief and happiness—a fatiguing programme for any middle-aged gentleman who had never cultivated his emotional faculties.

Let me try to tell how this came about. The getting-up bell rang an hour later than on week-days, but the boys were expected to prepare certain tasks suitable for the day before they rose. Mr. Bultitude found that he was required to learn by heart a hymn in which the rhymes "join" and "divine," "throne" and "crown," were so happily wedded that either might conform to the other—a graceful concession to individual taste which is not infrequent in this class of poetry. Trivial as such a task may seem in these days of School Boards, it gave him infinite trouble and mental exertion, for he had not been called upon to commit anything of the kind to memory for many years, and after mastering that, there still remained a long chronological list (the dates approximately computed) of the leading events before and immediately after the Deluge, which was to be repeated "without looking at the book."

While he was wrestling desperately with these, for he was determined, as I have said before, to do all in his power to keep himself out of trouble, Mrs. Grimstone, in her morning wrapper, paid a visit to the dormitories and, in spite of all Paul's attempts to excuse himself, insisted upon pomatuming his hair—an indignity which he felt acutely.

"When she knows who I really am," he thought, "she'll be sorry she made such a point of it. If there's one thing upon earth I loathe more than another, it's marrow-oil pomade!"

Then there was breakfast, at which Dr. Grimstone appeared, resplendent in glossy broadcloth, and dazzling shirt-front and semi-clerical white tie, and after breakfast, an hour in the schoolroom, during which the boys (by the aid of repeated references to the text)

A DAY OF REST

wrote out " from memory " the hymn they had learnt, while Paul managed somehow to stumble through his dates and events to the satisfaction of Mr. Tinkler, who, to increase his popularity, made a point of being as easily satisfied with such repetitions as he decently could.

After that came the order to prepare for church. There was a general rush to the little room with the shelves and bandboxes, where church books were procured, and great-coats and tight kid gloves put on.

When they were almost ready the Doctor came in, wearing his blandest and most paternal expression.

" A—it's a collection Sunday to-day, boys," he said. " Have you all got your threepenny-bits ready ? I like to see my boys give cheerfully and liberally of their abundance. If any boy does not happen to have any small change, I can accommodate him if he comes to me."

And this he proceeded to do from a store he had with him of that most convenient coin—the chosen expression of a congregation's gratitude—the common silver threepence, for the school occupied a prominent position in the church, and had acquired a great reputation amongst the churchwardens for the admirable uniformity with which one young gentleman after another " put into the plate " ; and this reputation the Doctor was naturally anxious that they should maintain.

I am sorry to say that Mr. Bultitude, fearing lest he should be asked if he had the required sum about him, and thus his penniless condition might be discovered and bring him trouble, got behind the door at the beginning of the money-changing transactions and remained there till it was over—it seemed to him that it would be too paltry to be disgraced for want of threepence.

Now, being thus completely furnished for their devotions, the school formed in couples in the hall and filed solemnly out for the march to church.

Mr. Bultitude walked nearly last with Jolland, whose

VICE VERSA

facile nature had almost forgotten his friend's shortcomings on the previous day. He kept up a perpetual flow of chatter which, as he never stopped for an answer, permitted Paul to indulge his own thoughts unrestrained.

"Are you going to put your threepenny-bit in?" said Jolland; "I won't if you don't. Sometimes, you know, when the plate comes round, old Grim squints down the pews to see we don't shirk. Then I put in sixpence. Have you done your hymn? I do hate a hymn. What's the use of learning hymns? They won't mark you for them, you know, in any exam. I ever heard of, and it can't save you the expense of a hymnbook unless you learnt all the hymns in it, and that would take you years. Oh, I say, look! there's young Mutlow and his governor and mater. I wonder what Mutlow's governor does? Mutlow says he's a 'gentleman' if you ask him, but I believe he lies. See that fly driving past? Mother Grim" (the irreverent youth always spoke of Mrs. Grimstone in this way) "and Dulcie are in it. I saw Dulcie look at you, Dick. It's a shame to treat her as you did yesterday. There's young Tom on the box; don't his ears stick out rummily? I wonder if the 'ugly family' will be at church to-day? You know the ugly family; all with their mouths open and their eyes goggling, like a jolly old row of pantomime heads. And oh, Dick, suppose Connie Davenant's people have changed their pew—that'll be a sell for you rather, won't it?"

"I don't understand you," said Mr. Bultitude stiffly; "and, if you don't object, I prefer not to be called upon to talk just now."

"Oh, all right!" said Jolland, "there aren't so many fellows who will talk to you; but just as you please—/ don't want to talk."

And so the pair walked on in silence; Jolland with his nose in the air, determined that after this he really must cut his former friend as the other fellows had done, since his devotion was appreciated so little, and Paul

watching the ascending double line of tall chimney-pot hats as they surged before him in regular movement, and feeling a dull wonder at finding himself setting out to church in such ill-assorted company.

They entered the church, and Paul was sent down to the extreme end of a pew next to the one reserved for the Doctor and his family. Dulcie was sitting there already on the other side of the partition ; but she gave no sign of having noticed his arrival, being apparently absorbed in studying the rose-window over the altar.

He sat down in his corner with a sense of rest and almost comfort, though the seat was not a cushioned one. He had the inoffensive Kiffin for a neighbour, his chief tormentors were far away from him in one of the back pews, and here at least he thought no harm could come to him. He could allow himself safely to do what I am afraid he generally did do under the circumstances—snatch a few intermittent but sweet periods of dreamless slumber.

But, while the service was proceeding, Mr. Bultitude was suddenly horrified to observe that a young lady, who occupied a pew at right angles to and touching that in which he sat, was deliberately making furtive signals to him in a most unmistakable manner.

She was a decidedly pretty girl of about fifteen, with merry and daring blue eyes and curling golden hair, and was accompanied by two small brothers (who shared the same book and dealt each other stealthy and vicious kicks throughout the service), and by her father, a stout, short-sighted old gentleman in gold spectacles, who was perpetually making the wrong responses in a loud and confident tone.

To be signalled to in a marked manner by a strange young lady of great personal attractions might be a coveted distinction to other schoolboys, but it simply gave Mr. Bultitude coldthrills.

" I suppose *that's* ' Connie Davenant,' " he thought, shocked beyond measure as she caught his eye and

VICE VERSA

coughed demurely for about the fourth time. " A very forward young person ! I think somebody ought to speak seriously to her father."

" Good gracious ! she's writing something on the fly-leaf of her prayer-book," he said to himself presently. " I hope she's not going to send it to *me*. I won't take it. She ought to be ashamed of herself! "

Miss Davenant was indeed busily engaged in pencilling something on a blank sheet of paper ; and, having finished, she folded it deftly into a cocked-hat, wrote a few words on the outside, and placed it between the leaves of her book.

Then, as the congregation rose for the Psalms, she gave a meaning glance at the blushing and scandalised Mr. Bultitude and by dexterous management of her prayer-book shot the little cocked-hat, as if unconsciously, into the next pew.

By a very unfortunate miscalculation, however, the note missed its proper object, and, clearing the partition, fluttered deliberately down on the floor by Dulcie's feet.

Paul saw this with alarm ; he knew that at all hazards he must get that miserable note into his own possession and destroy it. It might have his name somewhere about it ; it might seriously compromise him.

So he took advantage of the noise the congregation made in repeating a verse aloud (it was not a high church) to whisper to Dulcie : " Little Miss Grimstone, excuse me, but there's a—a note in the pew down by your feet. I believe it's intended for me."

Dulcie had seen the whole affair and had been not a little puzzled by it, a clandestine correspondence being a new thing in her short experience ; but she understood that in this golden-haired girl, her elder by several years, she saw her rival, for whom Dick had so basely abandoned her yesterday, and she was old enough to feel the slight and the sweetness of revenge.

So she held her head rather higher than usual, with her firm little chin projecting wilfully, and waited for

the next verse but one before retorting, " Little Master Bultitude, I know it is."

" Could you—can you manage to reach it ? " whispered Paul entreatingly.

" Yes," said Dulcie, " I could."

" Then will you—when they sit down ? "

" No," said Dulcie firmly, " I shan't."

The other girl, she noticed with satisfaction, had become aware of the situation and was evidently uneasy. She looked as imploringly as she dared at remorseless little Dulcie, as if appealing to her not to get her into trouble ; but Dulcie bent her eyes obstinately on her book and would not see her.

If the letter had been addressed to any other boy in the school, she would have done her best to shield the culprits ; but this she could not bring herself to do here. She found a malicious pleasure in remaining absolutely neutral, which of course was very wrong and ill-natured of her.

Mr. Bultitude began now to be seriously alarmed. The fatal paper must be seen by some one in the Doctor's pew as soon as the congregation sat down again ; and, if it reached the Doctor's hands, it was impossible to say what misconstruction he might put upon it or what terrible consequences might not follow.

He was innocent, perfectly innocent; but though the consciousness of innocence is frequently a great consolation, he felt that unless he could imbue the Doctor with it as well, it would not save him from a flogging.

So he made one more desperate attempt to soften Dulcie's resolution : " Don't be a naughty little girl," he said, very injudiciously for his purpose, " I tell you I must have it. You'll get me into a terrible mess if you're not careful! "

But although Dulcie had been extremely well brought up, I regret to say that the only answer she chose to make to this appeal was that slight contortion of the

VICE VERSA

features, which with a pretty girl is euphemised as a "*moue*," and with a plain one is called "making a face." When he saw it he knew that all hope of changing her purpose must be abandoned.

Then they all sat down, and, as Paul had foreseen, there the white cocked-hat lay on the dark pew-carpet, hideously distinct, with *billet donx* in every fold of it !

It could only be a question of time now. The curate was reading the first lesson for the day, but Mr. Bultitude heard not a verse of it. He was waiting with bated breath for the blow to fall.

It fell at last. Dulcie, either with the malevolent idea of hastening the crisis, or (which I prefer to believe for my own part) finding that her ex-lover's visible torments were too much for her desire of vengeance, was softly moving a heavy hassock towards the guilty note. The movement caught her mother's eye, and in an instant the compromising paper was in her watchful hands.

She read it with incredulous horror, and handed it at once to the Doctor.

The golden-haired one saw it all without betraying herself by any outward confusion. She had probably had some experience in such matters, and felt tolerably certain of being able, at the worst, to manage the old gentleman in the gold spectacles. But she took an early opportunity of secretly conveying her contempt for the traitress Dulcie, who continued to meet her angry glances with the blindest unconsciousness.

Dr. Grimstone examined the cocked-hat through his double eyeglasses, with a heavy thunder-cloud gathering on his brows. When he had mastered it thoroughly, he bent forward and glared indignantly past his wife and daughter for at least half a minute into the pew where Mr. Bultitude was cowering, until he felt that he was coming all to pieces under the piercing gaze.

The service passed all too quickly after that. Paul sat down and stood up almost unconsciously with the

A DAY OF REST

rest; but for the first time in his life he could have wished the sermon many times longer.

The horror of his position quite petrified him. After all his prudent resolutions to keep out of mischief and to win the regard and confidence of his gaoler by his good conduct, like the innocent convict in a melodrama, this came as nothing less than a catastrophe. He walked home in a truly dismal state of limp terror.

Fortunately for him none of the others seemed to have noticed his misfortune, and Jolland made no further advances. But even the weather tended to increase his depression, for it was a bleak, cheerless day, with a bitter and searching wind sweeping the gritty roads where yesterday's rain was turned to black ice in the ruts, and the sun shone with a dull coppery glitter that had no warmth or geniality about it.

The nearer they came to Crichton House the more abjectly miserable became Mr. Bultitude's state of mind. It was as much as he could do to crawl up the steps to the front door, and his knees positively clapped together when the Doctor, who had driven home, met them in the hall and said in a still grave voice, "Bultitude, when you have taken off your coat, I want you in the study."

He was as long about taking off his coat as he dared, but at last he went trembling into the study, which he found empty. He remembered the room well, with its ebony-framed etchings on the walls, bookcases and blue china over the draped mantelpiece, even to a large case of elaborately carved Indian chessmen in bullock-carts and palanquins, on horses and elephants, which stood in the window-recess. It was the very room to which he had been shown when he first called about sending his son to the school. He had little thought then that the time would come when he would attend there for the purpose of being flogged; few things would have seemed less probable. Yet here he was.

But his train of thought was abruptly broken by the

VICE VERSA

entrance of the Doctor. He marched solemnly in, holding out the offending missive. "Look at this, sir!" he said, shaking it angrily before Paul's eyes. "Look at this! what do you mean by receiving a flippant communication like this in a sacred edifice? What do you mean by it?"

"I — I didn't receive it," said Paul, at his wits' end.

"Don't prevaricate with me, sir; you know well enough it was intended for you. Have the goodness to read it now, and tell me what you have to say for yourself!"

Paul read it. It was a silly little school-girl note, half slang and half sentiment, signed only with the initials C D. "Well, sir?" said the Doctor.

"It's very forward and improper—very," said Paul; "but it's not my fault—I can't help it. I gave the girl no encouragement. I never saw her before in all my life!"

"To my own knowledge, Bultitude, she has sat in that pew regularly for a year."

"Very probably," said Paul, "but I don't notice these matters. I'm past that sort of thing, my dear sir."

"What is her name? Come, sir, you know that."

"Connie Davenant," said Paul, taken unawares by the suddenness of the question. "At least, I — I heard so to-day." He felt the imprudence of such an admission as soon as he had made it.

"Very odd that you know her name if you never noticed her before," said the Doctor.

"That young fellow—what's-his-name—Jolland told me," said Paul.

"Ah, but it's odder still that she knows yours, for I perceive it is directed to you by name."

"It's easily explained, my dear sir," said Paul; "easily explained. I've no doubt she's heard it somewhere. At least, I never told her; it is not likely. I do assure you I'm as much distressed and shocked by this affair as you can be yourself. I am indeed. I don't know what girls are coming to nowadays."

" Do you expect me to believe that you are perfectly innocent ? " said the Doctor.

" Yes, I do," said Mr. Bultitude. " I can't prevent fast young ladies from sending me notes. Why, she might have sent *you* one ! "

" We won't go into hypothetical cases," said the Doctor, not relishing the war being carried into his own country ; " she happened to prefer you. But, although your virtuous indignation seems to me a trifle overdone, sir, I don't see my way clear to punishing you on the facts, especially as you tell me you never encouraged these—these overtures, and my Dulcie, I am bound to say, confirms your statement that it was all the other young lady's doing. But if I had had any proof that you had begun or responded to her—hem—advances, nothing could have saved you from a severe flogging at the very least—so be careful for the future."

" Ah ! " said Paul rather feebly, quite overwhelmed by the narrowness of his escape. Then with a desperate effort he found courage to add, " May I—ah—take advantage of this—this restored cordiality to—to—in fact to make a brief personal explanation ? It—it's what I've been trying to tell you for a long time, ever since I first came, only you never will hear me out. It's highly important. You've no notion how serious it is ! "

" There's something about you this term, Richard Bultitude," said the Doctor slowly, " that I confess I don't understand. This obstinacy is unusual in a boy of your age, and if you really have a mystery it may be as well to have it out and have done with it. But I can't be annoyed with it now. Come to me after supper to-night, and I shall be willing to hear anything you may have to say."

Paul was too overcome at this unexpected favour to speak his thanks. He got away as soon as he could. His path was smoothed at last!

That afternoon the boys, or all of them who had disposed of the work set them for the day, were sitting in

VICE VERSA

the schoolroom, after a somewhat chilly dinner of cold beef, cold tarts, and cold water, passing the time with that description of literature known as " Sunday reading."

And here, at the risk of being guilty of a digression, I must pause to record my admiration for this exceedingly happy form of compromise, which is, I think, peculiar to the British and, to a certain extent, the American nations.

It has many developments ; ranging from the mild Transatlantic compound of cookery and camp-meetings, to the semi-novel, redeemed and chastened by an arrangement which sandwiches a sermon or a biblical lecture between each chapter of the story—a great convenience for the race of skippers.

Then there are one or two illustrated magazines which it is always allowable to read on the Sabbath without fear of rebuke from the strictest—though it is not quite easy to see why.

Open any one of the monthly numbers, and the chances are that you may possibly find at one part a neat little doctrinal essay by a literary bishop ; the rest of the contents will consist of nothing more serious than a paper upon " cockroaches and their habits " by an eminent savant; a description of foreign travel, done in a brilliant and wholly secular vein ; and, further on again, an article on aesthetic furniture—while the balance of the number will be devoted to instalments of two thrilling novels by popular authors, whose theology is seldom their strongest point.

Oddly enough, too, when these very novels come out later in three-volume form, with the " mark of the beast " in the shape of a circulating library ticket upon them, they will be fortunate if they are not interdicted altogether by some of the serious families who take in the magazines as being " so suitable for Sundays."

Mr. Bultitude, at all events, had reason to be grateful for this toleration, for in one of the bound volumes

supplied to him he found a most interesting and delightfully unsectarian novel, which appealed to his tastes as a business man, for it was all about commerce and making fortunes by blockade-running ; and though he was no novel reader as a rule, his mind was so relieved and set at rest by the prospect of seeing the end of his trouble at last, that he was able to occupy his mind with the fortunes of the hero.

He naturally detected technical errors here and there. But that pleased him, and he was becoming so deeply absorbed in the tale that he felt seriously annoyed when Chawner came softly up to the desk at which he was sitting, and sat down close to him, crossing his arms before him, and leaning forward upon them with his fallow face towards Paul.

" Dickie," he began, in a cautious, oily tone, " did I hear the Doctor say before dinner that he would hear anything you have to tell him after supper ? Did I ? "

" I really can't say, sir," said Paul ; " if you were near the keyhole at the time, very likely you did."

" The door was open," said Chawner, " and I was in the cloak-room, so I heard, and I want to know. What is it you're going to tell the Doctor ? "

" Mind your own business, sir," said Paul sharply.

" It is my own business," said Chawner ; " but I don't want to be told what you're going to tell him. I know."

" Good heavens ! " said Mr. Bultitude, annoyed to find his secret in possession of this boy of all others.

" Yes," repeated Chawner. " I know, and I tell you what—I won't have it ! "

" Won't have it ! and why ? "

" Never mind why. Perhaps I don't choose that the Doctor shall be told just yet ; perhaps I mean to go up and tell him myself some other day. I want to have a little more fun out of it before I've done."

" But—but," said Paul, " you young ghoul, do you mean to say that all you care for is to see other people's sufferings ? "

VICE VERSA

Chawner grinned maliciously. " Yes," he said suavely ; " it amuses me."

" And so," said Paul, " you want to hold me back a little longer—because it's so funny ; and then, when you're quite tired of your sport, you'll go up and tell the Doctor my—my unhappy story yourself, eh ? No, my friend ; I'd rather not tell him myself—but I'll be shot if I let *you* have a finger in it. I know my own interests better than that! "

" Don't get in a passion, Dickie," said Chawner ; " it's Sunday. You'll have to let me go up instead of you—when I've frightened them a little more."

" Who do you mean by them, sir ? " said Paul, growing puzzled.

" As if you didn't know ! Oh, you're too clever for me, Dickie, I can see," sniggered Chawner.

" I tell you I don't know! " said Mr. Bultitude. " Look here, Chawner—your confounded name is Chawner, isn't it ?—there's a mistake somewhere, I'm sure of it. Listen to me. I'm not going to tell the Doctor what you think I am ! "

" What do I think you are going to tell him ? "

" I haven't the slightest idea ; but, whatever it is, you're wrong."

" Ah, you're too clever, Dickie ; you won't betray yourself; but other people want to pay Coker and Tipping out as well as you, and I say you must wait."

" I shan't say anything to affect anyone but myself," said Paul; " if you know all about it, you must know that—it won't interfere with your amusement that I can see."

" Yes, it will," said Chawner irritably, " it will—you mayn't mean to tell of anyone but yourself ; but directly Grimstone asks you questions, it all comes out. I know all about it. And, anyway, I forbid you to go up till I give you leave."

" And who the dooce are you ? " said Mr. Bultitude, nettled at this assumption of authority. " How are you going to prevent me, may I ask ? "

" S'sh! here's the Doctor," whispered Chawner hurriedly. " I'll tell you after tea. What am I doing out of my place, sir ? Oh, I was only asking Bultitude what was the collect for to-day, sir. Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany ? thank you, Bultitude."

And he glided back to his seat, leaving Paul in a state of vague uneasiness. Why did this fellow, with the infernal sly face and glib tongue, want to prevent him from righting himself with the world, and how could he possibly prevent him ? It was absurd ; he would take no notice of the young scoundrel—he would defy him.

But he could not banish the uneasy feeling ; the cup had slipped so many times before at the critical moment that he could not be sure whose hand would be the next to jog his elbow. And so he went down to tea with renewed misgivings.

12. *Against Time*

" There is a kind of Followers likewise, which are dangerous, being indeed Espials ; which enquire the Secrets of the House and bearc Tales of them."—BACON.

" Then give me leave that I may turn the key,
That no man enter till my tale be done."

VERY possibly Chawner's interference in Mr. Bultitude's private affairs has surprised others besides the victim of it ; but the fact is that there was a most unfortunate misunderstanding between them from the very first, which prevented the one from seeing, the other from explaining, the real state of the case.

Chawner, of course, no more guessed Paul's true name and nature than anyone else who had come in contact with him in his impenetrable disguise, and his motive for attempting to prevent an interview with the Doctor can only, I fear, be explained by another slight digression.

The Doctor, from a deep sense of his responsibility for the morals of those under his care, was perhaps a trifle over-anxious to clear his moral garden of every noxious

VICE VERSA

would keep them on tenterhooks of suspense for days and weeks, until he was tired of the amusement—for this practising on the fears of weaker natures is a horribly keen delight to some—or until some desperate little dog, unable to bear his torture any longer, would threaten to give himself up and make an end of it.

Then Chawner, to do him justice, always relieved him from so disagreeable a necessity, and would go softly into the Doctor's study, and, in a subdued and repentant tone, pour out his general confession for the public good.

Probably the Doctor did not altogether respect the instruments he saw fit to use in this way ; some would have declined to hear the informer out, flogged him well, and forgotten it ; but Dr. Grimstone—though he was hardly likely to be impressed by these exhibitions of noble candour, and did not fail to see that the prospect of obtaining better terms for the penitent himself had something to do with them—yet encouraged the system as a matter of policy, went thoroughly into the whole affair, and made it the cause of an explosion which he considered would clear the moral atmosphere for some time to come.

I hope that, after this explanation, Chawner's opposition to Mr. Bultitude's plans will be better understood.

After tea, he made Paul a little sign to follow him, and the two went out together into the little glass-house beyond the schoolroom ; it was dark, but there was light enough from the room inside for them to see each other's face.

" Now, sir," began Paul, with dignity, when he had closed the glass door behind him, " perhaps you'll be good enough to tell me how you mean to prevent me from seeing Dr. Grimstone, and telling him—telling him what I have to tell him ? "

" I'll tell you, Dickie," said Chawner, with an evil smirk. " You shall know soon enough."

" Don't stand grinning at me like that, sir," said the angry Mr. Bultitude ; " say it out at once ; it will make no difference to me, I give you warning ! "

" Oh, yes it will, though. I think it will. Wait. I heard all you said to Grimstone in the study to-day about that girl—Connie Davenant, you know."

" I don't care ; I am innocent. I have nothing to reproach myself with."

" What a liar you are ! " said Chawner, more in admiration than rebuke. " You told him you never gave her any encouragement, didn't you ? And he said if he ever found you had, nothing could save you from a licking, didn't he ? "

" He did," said Paul, " he was quite right from his point of view—what then ? "

" Why, this," said Chawner : " Do you remember giving Jolland, the last Sunday of last term, a note for that very girl ? "

" I never did ! " said poor Mr. Bultitude, " I never saw the wretched girl before."

" Ah ! " said Chawner, " but I've got the note in my pocket ! Jolland was seedy and asked me to take it for you, and I read it, and it was so nicely written that I thought I should like to keep it myself, and so I did—and here it is ! "

And he drew out with great caution a piece of crumpled paper, and showed it to the horrified old gentleman. " Don't snatch . . . it's rude ; there it is, you see : ' My dear Connie ' . . . ' yours ever, Dick Bultitude.' No, you don't come any nearer . . . there, now it's safe. . . . Now what do you mean to do ? "

" I—I don't know," said Paul, feeling absolutely checkmated. " Give me time."

" I tell you what I mean to do ; I shall keep my eye on you, and directly I see you making ready to go to Grimstone, I shall get up first and take him this . . . then you'll be done for. You'd better give in, really, Dickie ! "

VICE VERSA

The note was too evidently genuine ; Dick must have written it (as a matter of fact he had ; in a moment of pique, no doubt, at some caprice of his real enslaver Dulcie's—but his fickleness brought fatal results on his poor father's undeserving head)—if this diabolical Chawner carried out his threats he would indeed be " done for " ; he did not yet fully understand the other's motive, but he thought that he feared lest Paul, in declaring his own sorrows, might also accuse Tipping and Coker of acts of cruelty and oppression, which Chawner proposed to denounce himself at some more convenient opportunity ; he hesitated painfully.

" Well ? " said Chawner, " make up your mind ; are you going to tell him, or not ? "

" I must ! " said Paul hoarsely. " I promise you I shall not bring any other names in . . . I don't want to . . . I only want to save myself—and I can't stand it any longer. Why should you stand between me and my rights in this currish way ? I didn't know there were boys like you in the world, sir ; you're a young monster ! "

" I don't mean you to tell the Doctor anything at all," said Chawner. " I shall do what I said."

" Then do your worst ! " said Paul, stung to defiance.

" Very well, then," returned Chawner meekly, " I will—and we'll see who wins ! "

And they went back to the schoolroom again, where Mr. Bultitude, boiling with rage and seriously alarmed as well, tried to sit down and appear as if nothing had happened.

Chawner sat down too, in a place from which he could see all Paul's movements, and they both watched one another anxiously from the corners of their eyes till the Doctor came in.

" It's a foggy evening," he said as he entered : " the younger boys had better stay in. Chawner, you and the rest of the first form can go to church ; get ready at once."

Paul's heart leaped with triumph ; with his enemy out of the way, he could carry out his purpose unhindered.

The same thing apparently occurred to Chawner, for he said mildly, " Please, sir, may Richard Bultitude come too ? "

" Can't Bultitude ask leave for himself ? " said the Doctor.

" I, sir ! " said the horrified Paul, " it's a mistake—I don't want to go. I—I don't feel very well this evening ! "

" Then you see, Chawner, you misunderstood him. By the way, Bultitude, there was something you were to tell me, I think ? "

Chawner's small glittering eyes were fixed on Paul menacingly as he managed to stammer that he did want to say something in private.

" Very well, I am going out to see a friend for an hour or so—when I come back I will hear you," and he left the room abruptly.

Chawner would very probably have petitioned to stay in that evening as well, had he had time and presence of mind to do so ; as it was, he was obliged to go away and get ready for church, but when his preparations were made he came back to Paul, and leaning over him said with an unpleasant scowl, " If I get back in time, Bultitude, we'll see whether you baulk me quite so easily, If I come back and find you've done it—I shall take in that letter ! "

" You may do what you please then," said Paul, in a high state of irritation, " I shall be well out of your reach by that time. Now have the goodness to take yourself off."

As he went, Mr. Bultitude thought, " I never in all my life saw such a fellow as that, never ! It would give me real pleasure to hire someone to kick him."

The evening passed quietly ; the boys left at home sat in their places, reading or pretending to read. Mr. Blinkhorn, left in charge of them, was at his table in the corner noting up his diary. Paul was free for a time to think over his position.

VICE VERSA

At first he was calm and triumphant; his dearest hopes, his long-wished-for opportunity of a fair and unprejudiced hearing, were at last to be fulfilled—Chawner was well out of the way for the best part of two hours—the Doctor was very unlikely to be detained nearly so long over one call ; his one anxiety was lest he might not be able, after all, to explain himself in a thoroughly effective manner—he planned out a little scheme for doing this.

He must begin gradually of course, so as not to alarm the schoolmaster or raise doubts of his sincerity or, worse still, his sanity. Perhaps a slight glance at instances of extraordinary interventions of the supernatural from the earliest times, tending to show the extreme probability of their survival on rare occasions even to the present day, might be a prudent and cautious introduction to the subject—only he could not think of any, and, after all, it might weary the Doctor.

He would start somewhat in this manner : " You cannot, my dear sir, have failed to observe since our meeting this year, a certain difference in my manner and bearing"—one's projected speeches are somehow generally couched in finer language than, when it comes to the point, the tongue can be prevailed upon to utter. Mr. Bultitude learned this opening sentence by heart, he thought it taking and neat, the sort of thing to fix his hearer's attention from the first.

After that he found it difficult to get any further ; he knew himself that all he was about to describe was plain, unvarnished fact—but how would it strike a stranger's ear ? He found himself seeking ways in which to tone down the glaring improbability of the thing as much as possible, but in vain ; " I don't know how I shall ever get it all out," he told himself at last ; " if I think about it much longer I shall begin to disbelieve in it myself."

Here Biddlecomb came up in a confidential manner

and sat down by Paul; " Dick," he began, in rather a trembling voice, " did I hear the Doctor say something about your having something to tell him ? "

" Oh Lord, here's another of them now ! " thought Paul. " You are right, young sir," he said : " have you any objection ? mention it, you know, if you have, pray mention it. It's a matter of life and death to me, but if you at all disapprove, of course that ought to be final ! "

" No, but," protested Biddlecomb, " I, I daresay I've not treated you very well lately, I——"

" You were kind enough to suggest several very uncommonly unpleasant ways of annoying me, sir," said Paul resentfully, " if you mean that. You've kicked me more than once, and your handkerchief, unless I am very much mistaken, had the biggest and the hardest knot in it yesterday. If that gives you the right to interfere and dictate to me now, like your amiable friend, Master Chawner, I suppose you have it."

" Now you're angry," said Biddlecomb humbly ; " I don't wonder at it. I've behaved like a cad, I know, but, and this is what I wanted to say, I was sorry for you all the time."

" That's very comforting," said Paul drily ; " thank you. I'm vastly obliged to you."

" I was, though," said Biddlecomb. " I, I was led away by the other fellows—I always liked you, you know, Bultitude."

" You've a very odd way of showing your affection," remarked Mr. Bultitude ; " but go on, let me hear all you have to say."

" It isn't much," said Biddlecomb, quite broken down ; " only don't sneak of me this time, Dick, let me off, there's a good fellow. I'll stick up for you after this, I will really. You used not to be a fellow for sneaking once. It's caddish to sneak ! "

" Don't be alarmed, my good friend," said Paul ; " I won't poach on that excellent young man Chawner's

VICE VERSA

preserves. What I am going to tell the Doctor has nothing to do with you."

" On your honour ? " said Biddlecomb eagerly.

" Yes," said Paul testily, " on my honour. Now, perhaps, you'll let me alone. No, I won't shake hands, sir. I've had to accept your kicks, but I don't want your friendship."

Biddlecomb went off, looking slightly ashamed of himself but visibly relieved from a haunting fear. " Thank goodness ! " thought Paul, " he wasn't as obstinate as the other fellow. What a set they are ! I knew it, there's another boy coming up now ! "

And indeed one boy after another came up in the same way as Biddlecomb had done, some cringing more than others, but all vowing that they had never intended to do any harm, and entreating him to change his mind about complaining of his ill-treatment. They brought little offerings to propitiate him and prove the depth of their unaltered regard—pencil-cases and pocket-knives, and so forth, until they drove Paul nearly to desperation. However, he succeeded in dispelling their fears after some hot arguments, and had just sent away the last suppliant, when he saw Jolland too rise and come towards him.

Jolland leaned across Paul's desk with folded arms and looked him full in the face with his shallow light green eyes. " I don't know what you've said to all those chaps," he began ; " they've come back looking precious glum, but they won't tell me what you said " (Mr. Bultitude had in satisfying their alarm taken care to let them know his private opinion of them, which was not flattering), " but I've got something to say to you, and it's this. I never thought you would quite come down to this sort of thing ! "

" What sort of thing ? " said Paul, who was beginning to have enough of it.

" Why, going up and letting on against all of us—it's mean, you know. If you have got bashed about pretty

well since you came back, it's been all your own fault, and you know it. Last term you got on well enough—this time you began to be queer and nasty the very first day you came. I thought it was one of your larks at first, but I don't know what it is now, and I don't care. I stood up for you as long as I could, till you acted like a funk yesterday. Then I took my share in lamming you, and I'd do it again. But if you are cad enough to pay us all out in this way, I'll have no more to do with you—mind that. That's all I came to say."

This was an unpalatable way of putting things, but Paul could not help seeing that there was some truth in it. Jolland had been kind to him, too, in a careless sort of way, and at some cost to himself ; so it was with more mildness than temper that he answered him.

" You're on the wrong tack, my boy, the wrong tack. I've no wish to tell tales of anyone, as I've been trying to explain to your friends. There's something the matter with me which you wouldn't understand if I told you."

" Oh, I didn't know," said Jolland, mollified ; " if it's only physic you want."

" Whatever it is," said Paul, not caring to deceive him, " it won't affect you or anyone here, but myself. You're not a bad young fellow, I believe. I don't want to get you into trouble, sir ; you don't want much assistance, I'm afraid, in that department. So be off, like a good fellow, and leave me in peace."

All these *interviews* had taken time. He was alarmed on looking atn?clock to see that it was nearly eight; the Doctor was a long time over that call—for the first time he began to feel uneasy—he made hurried mental calculations as to the probability of the Doctor or Chawner being the first to return.

The walk to church took about twenty minutes ; say the service took an hour, allowing for the return, he might expect Chawner by about half-past eight; it was striking the hour now—half an hour only in which he could hope for any favourable result from the interview !

VICE VERSA

For he saw this plainly, that if Chawner were once permitted to get the Doctor's ear first and show him that infamous love-note, no explanation of his (even if he had nerve to make it then, which he doubted) could possibly seem anything more than a desperate and far-fetched excuse ; if he could anticipate Chawner, on the other hand, and once convince the Doctor of the truth of his story, the informer's malice would fall flat.

And still the long hand went rapidly on, as Mr. Bultitude sat staring stupidly at it with a faint sick feeling—it had passed the quarter now—why did the Doctor delay in this unwarrantable manner ? What a farce social civilities were—if he had allowed himself to be prevailed on to stay to supper ! Twenty minutes past ; Chawner and the others might return at any moment—a ring at the bell ; they were there ! all was over now—no, he was saved, that was Dr. Grimstone's voice in the hall—what an unconscionable time he was taking off his greatcoat and gloves.

But all comes to the man who waits. In another moment the Doctor looked in, singled out Mr. Bultitude with a sharp glance, and a, " Now, Bultitude, I will hear you ! " and led the way to his study.

Paul staggered rather than walked after him : as usual at the critical moment his carefully prepared opening had deserted him—his head felt heavy and crowded—he wanted to run away, but forced himself to overcome such a suicidal proceeding and follow to the study.

There was a lighted reading-lamp with a green glass shade upon the table. The Doctor sat down by it in an armchair by the fire, crossed his legs, and joined the tops of his fingers together. " Now, Bultitude," he said again.

" Might I—might I sit down ? " said poor Mr. Bultitude in a thick voice ; it was all that occurred to him to say.

" Sit by all means," said the Doctor blandly.

So Paul drew a chair opposite the Doctor and sat

down. He tried desperately to clear his head and throat and begin ; but the only distinct thought in his mind just then was that the green lamp-shade lent a particularly ghastly hue to the Doctor's face.

" Take your time, Bultitude," said the latter, after a long minute, in which a little skeleton clock on the mantelpiece ticked loudly—" there's no hurry, my boy."

But this only reminded Paul that there was every need for hurry—Chawner might come in, and follow him here, unless he made haste.

Still, he could only say, " You see me in a very agitated state, Dr. Grimstone—a very agitated state, sir."

The Doctor gave a short, dry cough. " Well, Bultitude," he said.

" The fact is, sir, I'm in a most unfortunate position, and—and the worst of it is, I don't know how to begin." Here he made another dead stop, while the Doctor raised his heavy eyebrows, and looked at the clock.

" Do you see any prospect of your finding yourself able to begin soon ? " he inquired at last, with rather suspicious suavity. " Perhaps if you came to me later on——"

" Not for the world ! " said Paul, in a highly nervous condition. " I shall begin very soon, Doctor, I shall begin directly. Mine is such a very singular case ; it's difficult, as you see, to, to open it ! "

" Have you anything on your mind ? " asked the Doctor suddenly.

Paul could hear steps and voices in the adjoining cloakroom—the churchgoers had returned. " Yes—no ! " he answered, losing his head completely now.

" That's a somewhat extraordinary, not to say an ambiguous, reply," said the Doctor ; " what am I to understand by——"

There was a tap at the door. Paul started to his feet in a panic. " Don't let him in ! " he shrieked, finding his voice at last. " Hear me first—you shall hear me first! Say that other rascal is not to come in. He wants to ruin me ! "

VICE VERSA

" I was going to say I was engaged," said the Doctor ;
" but there's something under this I must understand.
Come in, whoever you are."

And the door opened softly, and Chawner stepped meekly in ; he was rather pale and breathed hard, but was otherwise quite composed.

" Now, then, Chawner," said the Doctor impatiently,
" what is it ? Have you something on your mind, too ? "

" Please, sir," said Chawner, " has Bultitude told you anything yet ? "

" No, why ? Hold your tongue, Bultitude. I shall hear Chawner now—not you ! "

" Because, sir," explained Chawner, " he knew I had made up my mind to tell you something I thought you ought to know about him, and so he threatened to come first and tell some falsehood (I'm sure I don't know what) about me, sir. I think I ought to be here too."

" It's a lie ! " shouted Paul, " What a villain that boy is ! Don't believe a word he says, Dr. Grimstone ; it's all false—all ! "

" This is very suspicious," said the Doctor ; " if your conscience were good, Bultitude, you could have no object in preventing me from hearing Chawner. Chawner, in spite of some obvious defects in his character," he went on, with a gulp (he never could quite overcome a repulsion to the boy), " is, on the whole, a right-minded and, ah, conscientious boy. I hear Chawner first."

" Then, sir, if you please," said Chawner, with an odious side smirk of triumph at Paul, who, quite crushed by the horror of the situation, had collapsed feebly on his chair again, " I thought it was my duty to let you see this. I found it to-day in Bultitude's prayerbook, sir." And he handed Dick's unlucky scrawl to the Doctor, who took it to the lamp and read it hurriedly through.

After that there was a terrible moment of dead silence ; then the Doctor looked up and said shortly,

" You did well to tell me of this, Chawner ; you may go now."

When they were alone once more he turned upon the speechless Paul with furious scorn and indignation. " Contemptible liar and hypocrite," he thundered, pacing restlessly up and down the room in his excitement, till Paul felt very like Daniel, without his sense of security, " you are unmasked—unmasked, sir ! You led me to believe that you were as much shocked and pained at this girl's venturing to write to you as I could be myself. You called it, quite correctly, ' forward and improper ' ; you pretended you had never given her the least encouragement—had not heard her name even—till to-day. And here is a note, written, as I should imagine, some time since, in which you address her as ' Connie Davenant,' and have the impudence to admire the hat she wore the Sunday before ! I shudder, sir, to think of such duplicity, such precocious and shameless depravity. It astounds me. It deprives me of all power to think ! "

Paul made some faint and inarticulate remark about being a family man—always most particular, and so forth—luckily it passed unheard.

" What shall I do with you ? " continued the Doctor ; " how shall I punish such monstrous misconduct ? "

" Don't ask *me*, sir," said Paul, desperately—" only, for heaven's sake, get it over as soon as possible."

" If I linger, sir," retorted the Doctor, " it is because I have grave doubts whether your offence can be expiated by a mere flogging—whether that is not altogether too light a retribution."

" He can't want to *torture* me," thought Paul.

" Yes," said the Doctor again, " the doubt has prevailed. On a mind so hardened the cane would leave no lasting impression. I cannot allow your innocent companions to run the risk of contamination from your society. I must not permit this serpent to glide uncrushed, this cockatrice to practise his epistolary wiles,

VICE VERSA

within my graceful fold. My mind is made up—at whatever cost to myself—however it may distress and grieve your good father, who is so pathetically anxious for you to do him credit, sir. I must do my duty to the parents of the boys entrusted to my care. I shall not flog you, sir, for I feel it would be useless. I shall expel you."

"What!" Paul leaped up incredulous. "Expel me? Do I hear you aright, Dr. Grimstone? Say it again—you will expel me?"

"I have said it," the Doctor said sternly; "no expostulations can move me now" (as if Mr. Bultitude was likely to expostulate!) "Mrs. Grimstone will see that your boxes are packed the first thing to-morrow moning, and I shall take you myself to the station and consign you to the home you have covered with blushes and shame, by the 9.15 train, and I shall write a letter to-night explaining the causes for your dismissal."

Mr. Bultitude covered his face with his hands, to hide, not his shame and distress, but his indecent rapture. It seemed almost too good to be true! He saw himself about to be provided with every means of reaching home in comfort and safety. He need dread no pursuit now. There was no chance, either, of his being forced to return to the prison-house—the Doctor's letter would convince even Dick of the impossibility of that. And, best of all, this magnificent stroke of good luck had been obtained without the ignominy and pain of a flogging, without even the unpleasant necessity of telling his strange secret.

But (having gained some experience during his short stay at the school) he had the duplicity to pretend to sob bitterly.

"But one night more, sir," continued the Doctor, "shall you pass beneath this roof, and that apart from your fellows. You will occupy the spare bedroom until the morning, when you quit the school in disgrace—for ever."

I said in another chapter that this Sunday would find

Paul, at its close, after a trying course of emotions, in a state of delicious ecstasy of pure relief and happiness—and really that scarcely seems too strong an expression for his feelings.

When he found himself locked securely into a comfortable, warm bedroom, with curtains and a carpet in it, safe from the persecutions of all those terrible boys, and when he remembered that this was actually the last night of his stay here—that he would certainly see his own home before noon next day, the reaction was so powerful that he could not refrain from skipping and leaping about the room in a kind of hysterical gaiety.

And as he laid his head down on a yielding lavender-scented pillow, his thoughts went back without a pang to the varied events of the day ; they had been painful, very painful, but it was well worth while to have gone through them to appreciate fully the delightful intensity of the contrast. He freely forgave all his tormentors, even Chawner—for had not Chawner procured his release ?—and he closed his eyes at last with a smile of Sybaritic satisfaction and gentle longing for the Monday's dawn to break.

And yet some, after his experiences, would have had their misgivings.

13. *A Respite*

" Discipulorum inter jubeo plorare cathedras."

BLITHE and gay was Mr. Bultitude when he opened his eyes on Monday morning and realised his incredible good fortune ; in a few hours he would be travelling safely and comfortably home, with every facility for regaining his rights. He chuckled—though his sense of humour was not large—he chuckled, as he lay snugly in bed, to think of Dick's discomfiture on seeing him return so unexpectedly ; he began to put it down, quite unwarrantably, to his own cleverness, as having con-

VICE VERSA

ceived and executed such a stroke of genius as procuring his own expulsion.

He remained in bed until long after the getting-up bell had rung, feeling that his position ensured him perfect impunity in this, and when he rose at length it was in high spirits, and he dressed himself with a growing toleration for things in general, very unlike his ordinary frame of mind. When he had finished his toilet, the Doctor entered the room.

"Bultitude," he said gravely, "before sending you from us, I should like to hear from your own lips that you are not altogether without contrition for your conduct."

Mr. Bultitude considered that such an acknowledgment could not possibly do any harm, so he said—as, indeed, he might with perfect truth—that "he very much regretted what had passed."

"I am glad to hear that," said the Doctor, more briskly, "very glad; it relieves me from a very painful responsibility. It may not impossibly induce me to take a more lenient view of your case."

"Oh!" gasped Mr. Bultitude, feeling very uncomfortable all at once.

"Yes; it is a serious step to ruin a boy's career at its outset by unnecessary harshness. Nothing, of course, can palliate the extreme baseness of your behaviour. Still from certain faint indications in your character of better things, I do not despair even yet (after you have received a public lesson at my hands, which you will never forget) of rearing you to become in time an ornament to the society in which it will be your lot to move. I will not give up in despair—I will persevere a little longer."

"Thank you!" Paul faltered, with a sudden sinking sensation.

"Mrs. Grimstone, too," said the Doctor, "has been interceding for you; she has represented to me that a public expression of my view of your conduct, together with a sharp, severe dose of physical pain, would be

more likely to effect a radical improvement in your character, and to soften your perverted heart, than if I sent you away in hopeless disgrace, without giving you an opportunity of showing a desire to amend."

"It's—very kind of Mrs. Grimstone," said Paul faintly.

"Then I hope you will show your appreciation of her kindness. Yes, I will not expel you. I will give you one more chance to retrieve your lost reputation. But, for your own sake, and as a public warning, I shall take notice of your offence in public. I shall visit it upon you by a sound flogging before the whole school at eleven o'clock. You need not come down till then—your breakfast will be sent up to you."

Paul made a frantic attempt to dissuade him from his terrible determination. "Dr. Grimstone," he said, "I—I should much prefer being expelled, if it is all the same to you."

"It is not all the same to me," said the Doctor. "This is mere pride and obstinacy, Bultitude ; I should do wrong to take any notice of it."

"I—I tell you I have great objection to—to being flogged," said Paul eagerly ; "it wouldn't improve me at all ; it would harden me, sir,—harden me. I—I cannot allow you to flog me, Dr. Grimstone. I have strong prejudices against the system of corporal punishment. I object to it on principle. Expulsion would make me quite a different being, I assure you ; it would reform me—save me—it would indeed."

"So, to escape a little personal inconvenience, you would be content to bring sorrow upon your worthy father's grey head, would you, sir ?" said the Doctor. "I shall not oblige you in this. Nor, I may add, will your cowardice induce me to spare you in your coming chastisement. I leave you, sir—we shall meet again at eleven !"

And he stalked out of the room. Perhaps, though he did not admit this even to himself, there were more

VICE VERSA

considerations for commuting the sentence of expulsion than those he had mentioned. Boys are not often expelled from private schools, except for especially heinous offences, and in this case there was no real reason why the Doctor should be Quixotic enough to throw up a portion of his income—particularly if he could produce as great a moral effect by other means.

But his clemency was too much for Mr. Bultitude ; he threw himself on the bed and raved at the hideous fate in store for him ; ten short minutes ago, and he had been so happy—so certain of release—and now, not only was he as far from all hope of escape as ever, but he had the certainty before him of a sound flogging in less than two hours !

Just after something has befallen us which, for good or ill, will make a great change in our lives, what a totally new aspect the common everyday things about us are apt to wear—the book we were reading, the letter we had begun, the picture we knew—what a new and tender attraction they may have for us, or what a grim and terrible irony !

Something of this Paul felt dimly, as he finished dressing, in a dazed, unconscious manner. The comfortable bedroom, with its delicately-toned wall-paper and flowery cretonnes, had become altogether hateful in his eyes now. Instead of feeling grateful (as he surely ought to have been) for the one night of perfect security and comfort he had passed there, he only loathed it for the delusive peace it had brought him.

There was a gentle tap at the door, and Dulcie came in, bearing a tray with his breakfast, and looking like a little Royalist bearing food to a fugitive Cavalier ; though Paul did not quite carry out his share of the simile.

" There ! " she said, almost cheerfully ; " I got Mummy to let me take up your breakfast ; and there's an egg for you, and muffins."

Mr. Bultitude sat on a chair and groaned.

" You might say ' thank you,' " said Dulcie, pouting. " That other girl wouldn't have brought you up much breakfast if she'd been in my place. I was going to tell you that I'd forgiven you, because very likely you never meant her to write to you " (Dulcie had not been told the sequel to the Davenant episode, which was quite as well for Paul). " But you don't seem to care whether I do or not."

" I feel so miserable ! " sighed Paul.

" Then you must drink some coffee," prescribed Dulcie decidedly; " and you must eat some breakfast. I brought an egg on purpose ; it's so strengthening, you know."

" Don't ! " cried Paul, with a short howl of distress at this suggestion. " Don't talk about the—the flogging, I can't bear it."

" But it's not papa's *new* cane, you know, Dick," said Dulcie consolingly. " I've hidden that; it's only the old one, and you always said that didn't hurt so very much, after a little while. It isn't as if it was the horse-whip, either. Daddy lost that out riding in the holidays."

" Oh, the horsewhip's worse, is it ? " said Paul, with a sickly smile.

" Tom says so," said Dulcie. " After all, Dick, it will be all over in five minutes, or, perhaps, a little longer, and I do think you oughtn't to mind that so much, now, after mamma and I have begged you off from being expelled. We might never have seen one another again, Dick ! "

" You begged me off ! " cried Paul.

" Yes," said Dulcie ; " Daddy wouldn't change his mind for ever so long—till I coaxed him. I couldn't bear to let you go."

" You've done a very cruel thing," said Paul. " For such a little girl as you are, you've done an immense amount of mischief. But for you, that letter would not have been found out. You need not have spoilt my only chance of getting out of this horrible place ! "

VICE VERSA

Dulcie set down the tray, and, putting her hands behind her, leaned against a corner of a wardrobe.

" And is that all you say to me ! " she said, with a little tremble in her voice.

" That is all," said Paul. " I've no doubt you meant well, but you shouldn't have interfered. All this has come upon me through that. Take away the breakfast. It makes me ill even to look at it."

Dulcie shook out her long brown hair, and clenched her small fist in an undeniable passion, for she had something of her father's hot temper when roused. " Very well, then," she said, moving with great dignity towards the door. " I'm very sorry I ever did interfere. I wish I'd let you be sent home to your papa, and see what he'd do to you. But I'll never, never interfere one bit with you again. I won't say one single word to you any more. . . . I'll never even look at you if you want me to ever so much. . . . I shall tell Tipping he can hit you as much as ever he likes, and I shall show Tom where I put the new cane—and I only hope it will hurt ! " And with this parting shot she was gone.

Mr. Bultitude wandered disconsolately about the upper part of the house after this, not daring to go down, and not able to remain in any one place. The maids who came up to make the beds looked at him with pitiful interest, but he was too proud to implore help from them. To hide would only make matters worse, for, as he had not a penny in his pocket, and no probability of being able to borrow one, he must remain in the house till hunger forced him from his hiding-place—supposing they did not hunt him out long before that time.

The shouts of the boys in the playground during their half-hour's play had long since died away ; he heard the clock in the hall strike eleven—time for him to seek his awful rendezvous. The Doctor had not forgotten him, he found, for presently the butler came up and cere-

moniously announced that the Doctor " would see him now, if he pleased."

He stumbled downstairs in a half-unconscious condition, the butler threw open the two doors which led to the schoolroom, and Paul tottered in, more dead than alive with shame and fear.

The whole school were at their places, with no books before them, and arranged as if to hear a lecture. Mr. Blinkhorn alone was absent, for, not liking these exhibitions, he had taken an opportunity of slipping out into the playground, round which he was now solemnly trotting at the " double " with elbows squared and head up ; an exercise which he said was an excellent thing for the back and lungs. He had a habit of suddenly leaving the class he was taking to indulge in it for a few minutes, returning breathless but refreshed.

Mr. Tinkler was at his seat, wearing that faint grin on his face with which he might have prepared to see a pig killed or a bull-fight, and all the boys fixed their eyes expectantly on Mr. Bultitude as he appeared at the doorway.

" Stand there, sir," said the Doctor, who was standing at his writing-table in an attitude ; " out there in the middle, where your schoolfellows can see you." Paul obeyed and stood where he was told, looking, as he felt, absolutely boneless.

" Some of those here," began the Doctor in an impressive bass, " may wonder why I have called you all together on this, the first day of the week ; most of those who reside under my roof are acquainted with, and I trust execrate, the miserable cause of my doing so.

" If there is one virtue which I have striven to implant more than any other in your breasts," he continued, " it is the cultivation of a modest and becoming reserve in your intercourse with those of the opposite sex.

" With the majority I have, I hope, been successful, and it is as painful for me to tell as for you to hear, that there exists in your midst a youthful reprobate,

VICE VERSA

trained in all the arts of ensnaring the vagrant fancies of innocent but giddy girlhood.

" See him as he cowers there before your gaze, in all the bared hideousness of his moral depravity " (the Doctor on occasions like these never spared his best epithets, and Paul soon began to feel himself a very villain) ; " a libertine, young in years, but old in—in everything else, who has not scrupled to indite an amatory note, so appalling in its familiarity, and so outrageous in the warmth of its sentiments, that I cannot bring myself to shock your ears with its contents.

" You do well to shun him as a moral leper ; but how shall I tell you that, not satisfied with pressing his effusions upon the shrinking object of his precocious affections, the impious wretch has availed himself of the shelter of a church to cloak his insidious advances, and even force a response to them from a heedless and imprudent girl !

" If," continued the Doctor, now allowing his powerful voice to boom to its full compass—" if I can succeed in bringing this coward, this unmanly dallier in a sentiment which the healthy mind of boyhood rejects as premature, to a sense of his detestable conduct ; if I can score the lesson upon his flesh so that some faint notion of its force and purport may be conveyed to what has been supplied to him as a heart, then I shall not have lifted this hand in vain !

" He shall see whether he will be allowed to trail the fair name of the school for propriety and correctness of deportment in the dust of a pew-floor, and spurn my reputation as a preceptor like a church hassock beneath his feet !

" I shall say no more ; I will not prolong these strictures, deserved though they be, beyond their proper limits . . . I shall now proceed to act. Richard Bultitude, remain there till I return to mete out to you with no sparing hand the punishment you have so richly merited."

With these awful words the Doctor left the room, leaving Paul in a state of abject horror and dread which need not be described. Never, never again would he joke, as he had been wont to do with Dick in lighter moods, on the subject of corporal punishment under any circumstances—it was no fit theme for levity ; if this—this outrage were really done to him, he could never be able to hold up his head again. What if it were to get about in the city !

The boys, who had sunk, as they always did, into a state of torpid awe under the Doctor's eloquence, now recovered spirits enough to rally Paul with much sprightly humour.

" He's gone to fetch his cane," said some, and imitated for Paul's instruction the action of caning by slapping a ruler upon a copy-book with a dreadful fidelity and resonance ; others sought to cross-examine him upon the love-letter, it appearing from their casual remarks that not a few had been also honoured by communications from the artless Miss Davenant.

It is astonishing how unfeeling even ordinary good-natured boys can be at times.

Chawner sat at his desk with raised shoulders, rubbing his hands, and grinning like some malevolent ape : " I told you, Dickie, you know," he murmured, " that it was better not to cross me."

And still the Doctor lingered. Some kindly suggested that he was " waxing the cane." But the more general opinion was that he had been detained by some visitor ; for it appeared that (though Paul had not noticed it) several had heard a ring at the bell. The suspense was growing more and more unbearable.

At last the door opened in a slow ominous manner, and the Doctor appeared. There was a visible change in his manner, however. The white heat of his indignation had died out: his expression was grave but distinctly softened—and he had nothing in his hand.

" I want you outside, Bultitude," he said ; and Paul,

VICE VERSA

still uncertain whether the scene of his disgrace was only about to be shifted, or what else this might mean, followed him into the hall.

" If anything can strike shame and confusion into your soul, Richard," said the Doctor, when they were outside, " it will be what I have to tell you now. Your unhappy father is here, in the dining-room."

Paul staggered. Had Dick the brazen effrontery to come here to taunt him in his slavery ? What was the meaning of it ? What should he say to him ? He could not answer the Doctor but by a vacant stare.

" I have not seen him yet," said the Doctor. " He has come at a most inopportune moment " (here Mr. Bultitude could *not* agree with him). " I shall allow you to meet him first, and give you the opportunity of breaking your conduct to him. I know how it will wring his paternal heart ! " and the Doctor shook his head sadly, and turned away.

With a curious mixture of shame, anger, and impatience, Paul turned the handle of the dining-room door. He was to meet Dick face to face once more. The final duel must be fought out between them here. Who would be the victor ?

It was a strange sensation on entering to see the image of what he had so lately been standing by the mantelpiece. It gave a shock to his sense of his own identity. It seemed so impossible that that stout substantial frame could really contain Dick. For an instant he was totally at a loss for words, and stood pale and speechless in the presence of his unprincipled son.

Dick on his side seemed at least as much embarrassed. He giggled uneasily, and made a sheepish offer to shake hands, which was indignantly declined.

As Paul looked he saw distinctly that his son's fraudulent imitation of his father's personal appearance had become deteriorated in many respects since that unhappy night when he had last seen it. It was then a

AN ERROR OF JUDGMENT

copy, faultlessly accurate in every detail. It was now almost a caricature, a libel !

The complexion was nearly sallow, with the exception of the nose, which had rather deepened in colour. The skin was loose and flabby, and the eyes dull and a little bloodshot. But perhaps the greatest alteration was in the dress. Dick wore an old light tweed shooting-coat of his, and a pair of loose trousers of blue serge ; while, instead of the formally tied black neckcloth his father had worn for a quarter of a century, he had a large scarf round his neck of some crude and gaudy colour ; and the conventional chimney-pot hat had been discarded for a shabby old wide-brimmed felt wideawake.

Altogether, it was by no means the costume which a British merchant, with any self-respect whatever, would select, even for a country visit.

And thus they met, as perhaps never, since this world was first set spinning down the ringing grooves of change, met father and son before !

14. *An Error of Judgment*

" The Survivorship of a worthy Man in his Son is a Pleasure scarce inferior to the Hopes of the Continuance of his own Life." *Spectator.*

" Du hist ein Knabe—sei es immerhin
Und fahre fort, den Frohlichen zu spielen."

SCHILLER, *Don Carlos.*

PAUL was the first to break a very awkward silence. " You young scoundrel ! " he said, with suppressed rage. " What the devil do you mean by laughing like that ? It's no laughing matter, let me tell you, sir, for one of us ! "

" I can't help laughing," said Dick ; " you do look so queer ! "

" Queer ! I may well look queer. I tell you that I have never, never in my whole life, spent such a perfectly infernal week as this last ! "

VICE VERSA

" When I do go up, I wear them," said Dick composedly. " Why not ? It's a roomy suit, and I hate a great topper on my head ; I've had enough of that here on Sundays. But it's slow up at your office. The chaps there aren't half up to any larks. I made a first-rate booby-trap, though, one day for an old yellow buffer who came in to see you. He was in a bait when he found the waste-paper basket on his head ! "

" What was his name ? " said Paul, with forced calm.

" Something like ' Shells.' He said he was a very old friend of mine, and I told him he lied."

" Shellack—my Canton correspondent—a man I was anxious to be of use to when he came over ! " moaned Mr. Bultitude. " Miserable young cub, you don't know what mischief you've done ! "

" Well, it won't matter much to you now," said Dick ; " you're out of it all."

" Do you—do you mean to keep me out of it for ever, then ? " asked Paul.

" As long as ever I can ! " returned Dick frankly. " It will be rather interesting to see what sort of a fellow you'll grow into—if you ever do grow. Perhaps you will always be like that, you know. This magic is a rum thing to meddle with."

This suggestion almost maddened Paul. He made one stride forward, and faced his son with blazing eyes. " Do you think I will put up with it ? " he said, between his teeth. " Do you suppose I shall stand calmly by and see you degrading and ruining me ? I may never be my old self again, but I don't mean to play into your hands for all that. You can't always keep me here, and wherever I go I'll tell my tale. I know you, you clumsy rogue, you haven't the sense to play your part with common intelligence now. You would betray yourself directly I challenged you to deny my story. . . . You know you would. . . . You couldn't face me for five minutes. By Gad ! **I'll** do it now^T. I'll expose you before the Doctor—**before** the whole school. You shall

AN ERROR OF JUDGMENT

see if you can dispose of me quite so easily as you imagine ! "

Dick had started back at first in unmistakable alarm at this unexpected defiance, probably feeling his self-possession unequal to such a test ; but, when Paul had finished, he said doggedly : " Well, you can do it if you choose, I suppose. I can't stop you. But I don't see what good it would do."

" It would show people you were an impudent impostor, sir," said Paul sternly, going to the door as if to call the Doctor, though he shrank secretly from so extreme and dangerous a measure.

There was a hesitation in his manner, in spite of the firmness of his words, which Dick was not likely to miss. " Stop ! " he said. " Before you call them in, just listen to me for a minute. Do you see this ? " And, opening his coat, he pulled out from his waistcoat pocket one end of his watch-chain. Hanging to it, attached by a cheap gilt fastening of some sort, was a small grey tablet. Paul knew it at once—it was the Garuda Stone. " You know it, I see," said Dick, as Paul was about to move towards him—with what object he scarcely knew himself. " Don't trouble to come any closer. Well, I give you fair warning. You can make things very nasty for me if you like. I can't help that—but, if you do—if you try to score off me in any way, now or at any time—if you don't keep it up when the Doctor comes in—I tell you what I shall do. I shall go straight home and find young Roly. I shall give him this stone, and just tell him to say some wish after me. I don't believe there are many things it can't do, and all I can say is—if you find yourself and all this jolly old school (except Dulcie) taken off somewhere and stuck down all at once thousands of miles away on a desolate island, or see yourself turned into a Red Indian, or, or a cabhorse, you'll have yourself to thank for it—that's all. Now you can have them all up and fire away."

" No," said Paul, in a broken voice, for, wild as the

VICE VERSA

threat was, he could not afford to despise it after his experiences of the stone's power, " I — I was joking, Dick ; at least I didn't mean it. I know of course I'm helpless. It's a sad thing for a father to say, but you've got the best of it. . . . I give in . . . I won't interfere with you. There's only one thing I ask. You won't try any more experiments with that miserable stone. . . . You'll promise me that, at least ? "

" Yes," said Dick : " it's all right. I'll play fair. As long as you behave yourself and back me up I won't touch it. I only want to stay as I am. I don't want to hurt you."

" You won't lose it ? " said Paul anxiously. " Couldn't you lock it up ? that fastening doesn't look very safe."

" It will do well enough," said Dick. " I got it done at the watchmaker's round the corner, for sixpence. But I'll have a stronger ring put in somewhere, if I think of it."

There was a pause, in which the conversation seemed about to flag hopelessly, but at last Dick said, almost as if he felt some compunction for his present unfilial attitude : " Now, you know, it's much better to take things quietly. It can't be altered now, can it ? And it's not such bad fun being a boy after all—for some things. You'll get into it by-and-by, you see if you don't, and be as jolly as a sandboy. We shall get along all right together, too. I shan't be hard on you. It isn't my fault that you happen to be at this particular school—you chose it ! And after this term you can go to any other school you like—Eton or Rugby, or anywhere. I don't mind the expense. Of, if you'd rather, you can have a private tutor. And I'll buy you a pony, and you can ride in the Row. You shall have a much better time of it than I ever had, as long as you let me go on my own way."

But these dazzling bribes had no influence upon Mr. Bultitude ; nothing short of complete restitution would ever satisfy him, and he was too proud and too angry at

AN ERROR OF JUDGMENT

his crushing defeat to even pretend to be in the least pacified.

" I don't want your pony," he said bitterly ; " I might as well have a white elephant, and I don't suppose I should enjoy myself much more at a public school than I do here. Let's have no humbug, sir. You're up and I'm down—there's no more to be said—I shall tell the Doctor nothing, but I warn you, if ever the time comes——"

" Oh, of course," said Dick, feeling tolerably secure, now he had disposed of the main difficulty. " If you can turn me out, I suppose you will—that's only fair. I shall take care not to give you the chance. And, oh, I say, do you want any tin ? How much have you got left ? "

Paul turned away his head, lest Dick should see the sudden exultation he knew it must betray, as he said, with an effort to appear unconcerned, " I came away with exactly five shillings, and I haven't a penny now ! "

" I say," said Dick, " you are a fellow ; you must have been going it. How did you get rid of it all in a week ? "

" It went, as far as I can understand," said Mr. Bultitude, " in rabbits and mice. Some boys claimed it as money they paid you to get them, I believe."

" Ail your own fault," said Dick, " you would have them drowned. But you'd better have some tin to get along with. How much do you want ? Will half-a-crown do?"

" Half-a-crown is not much, Dick," said his father, almost humbly.

" It's—ahem—a handsome allowance for a young fellow like you," said Dick, rather unkindly ; " but I haven't any half-crowns left. I must give you this, I suppose."

And he held out a sovereign, never dreaming what it signified to Paul, who clutched it with feelings too great for words, though gratitude was not a part of them, for was it not his own money ?

" And now look out," said Dick, " I hear Grim. Remember what I told you ; keep it up."

VICE VERSA

Dr. Grimstone came in with the air of a man who has a painful duty to perform ; he started slightly as his eye noted the change in his visitor's dress and appearance. " I hope," he began gravely, " that your son has spared me the pain of going into the details of his misbehaviour ; I wish I could give you a better report of him."

Dick was plainly, in spite of his altered circumstances, by no means at ease in the schoolmaster's presence ; he stood, shifting from foot to foot on the hearth-rug, turning extremely red and obstinately declining to raise his eyes from the ground.

" Oh, ah," he stammered at last, " you were just going to swish him, weren't you, when I turned up, sir ? "

" I found myself forced," said the Doctor, slightly shocked at this coarse way of putting things, " forced to contemplate administering to him (for his ultimate benefit) a sharp corrective in the presence of his school-fellows. I distress you, I see, but the truth must be told. He has no doubt confessed his fault to you ? "

" No," said Dick, " he hasn't though. What's he been up to now ? "

" I had hoped he would have been more open, more straightforward, when confronted with the father who has proved himself so often indulgent and anxious for his improvement ; it would have been a more favourable symptom, I think. Well, I must tell you myself. I know too well what a shock it will be to your scrupulously sensitive moral code, my dear Mr. Bultitude " (Dick showed a painful inclination to giggle here) ; " but I have to break to you the melancholy truth that I detected this unhappy boy in the act of conducting a secret and amorous correspondence with a young lady in a sacred edifice ! "

Dick whistled sharply : " Oh, I say ! " he cried, " that's bad " (and he wagged his head reprovingly at his disgusted father, who longed to denounce his hypocrisy, but dared not) ; " that's bad . . . he shouldn't do that

AN ERROR OF JUDGMENT

sort of thing you know, should he ? At his age too . . . the young dog ! "

" This horror is what I should have expected from you," said the Doctor (though he was in truth more than scandalised by the composure with which his announcement was received). " Such boldness is indeed characteristic of the dog, an animal which, as you are aware, was with the ancients a synonym for shamelessness. No boy, however abandoned, should hear such words of unequivocal condemnation from a father's lips without a pang of shame ! "

Paul was only just able to control his rage by a great effort.

" You're right there, sir," said Dick ; " he ought to be well ragged for it . . . he'll break my heart, if he goes on like this, the young beggar. But we mustn't be too hard on him, eh ? After all, it's nature, you know, isn't it ? "

" I beg your pardon ? " said Dr. Grimstone very stiffly.

" I mean," explained Dick, with a perilous approach to digging the other in the ribs, " we did much the same sort of thing in our time, eh ? I'm sure I did—lots of times ! "

" I can't reproach myself on that head, Mr. Bultitude ; and permit me to say, that such a tone of treating the affair is apt to destroy the effect, the excellent moral effect, of your most impressively conveyed indignation just now. I merely give you a hint, you understand ! "

" Oh, ah," said Dick, feeling that he had made a mistake, " yes, I didn't mean that. But I say, you haven't given him a—whopping yet, have you ? "

" I had just stepped out to procure a cane for that purpose," said the Doctor, " when your name was announced."

" Well, look here, you won't want to start again when I'm gone, will you ? "

" An ancient philosopher, my dear sir, was accustomed to postpone the correction of his slaves until the first

VICE VERSA

glow of his indignation had passed away. He found that he could——"

" Lay it on with more science," suggested Dick, while Paul writhed where he stood. " Perhaps so, but you might forgive him now, don't you think ? he won't do it again. If he goes writing any more love-letters, tell me, and I'll come and talk to him ; but he's had a lesson, you know. Let him off this time."

" I have no right to resist such an entreaty," said the Doctor, " though I may be inclined myself to think that a few strokes would render the lesson more permanent. I must ask you to reconsider your plea for his pardon."

Paul heard this with indescribable anxiety ; he had begun to feel tolerably sure that his evil hour was postponed *sine die*, but might not Dick be cruel and selfish enough to remain neutral, or even side with the enemy, in support of his assumed character ?

Luckily he was not. " I'd rather let him off," he said awkwardly ; " I don't approve of caning fellows myself. It never did me any good, I know, and I got enough of it to tell."

" Well, well, I yield. Richard, your father has interceded for you ; and I cannot disregard his wishes, though I have my own view in the matter. You will hear no more of this disgraceful conduct, sir, unless you do something to recall it to my memory. Thank your father for his kindness, which you so little deserved, and take your leave of him."

" Oh, there, it's all right ! " said Dick ; " he'll behave himself after this, I know. And oh ! I say, sir," he added hastily, " is—is Dulcie anywhere about ? "

" My daughter ? " asked the Doctor. " Would you like to see her ? "

" I shouldn't mind," said Dick, blushing furiously.

" I'm sorry to say she has gone out for a walk with her mother," said the Doctor. " I'm afraid she cannot be back for some time. It's unfortunate."

AN ERROR OF JUDGMENT

Dick's face fell. " It doesn't matter," he muttered awkwardly. " She's all right, I hope ? "

" She is very seldom ailing, I'm happy to say ; just now she is particularly well, thank you."

" Oh, is she ? " said Dick gloomily, probably disappointed to find that he was so little missed, and not suspecting that his father had been accepted as a substitute.

" Well, do you mind—could I see the fellows again for a minute or two—I mean I should rather like to inspect the school, you know."

" See my boys ? Certainly, my dear sir, by all means ; this way," and he took Dick out to the schoolroom—Paul following out of curiosity. " You'll find us at our studies, you see," said the Doctor, as he opened the first baize door. There was a suspicious hubbub and hum of voices from within ; but as they entered every boy was bent over his books with the rapt absorption of the devoted student—an absorption that was the direct effect of the sound the door-handle made in turning.

" Our workshop," said the Doctor airily, looking round, " My first form, Mr. Bultitude. Some good workers here, and some idle ones."

Dick stood in the doorway, looking (if the truth must be told) uncommonly foolish. He had wanted, in coming there, to enjoy the contrast between the past and present—which accounts for a good many visits of " old boys " to the scene of their education. But, confronted with his former schoolfellows, he was seized at first with an utterly unreasonable fear of detection.

The class behaved as classes usually do on such occasions. The good boys smirked and the bad ones stared—the general expression being one of uneasy curiosity. Dick said never a word, feeling strangely bashful and nervous.

" This is Tipping, my head boy," touching that young gentleman on the shoulder, and making him several degrees more uncomfortable. " I expect solid results from Tipping some day."

VICE VERSA

" He looks as if his head was pretty solid," said Dick, who had once cut his knuckles against it.

" My second boy, Biddlecomb. If he applies himself, he too will do me credit in the world."

" How do, Biddlecomb ? " said Dick. " I owe you ninepence—I mean—oh hang it, here's a shilling for you ! Hallo, Chawner ! " he went on, gradually overcoming his first nervousness, " how are you getting on, eh ? Doing much in the sneaking way lately ? "

" You know him ! " exclaimed the Doctor with naive surprise.

" No, no ; I don't know him. I've heard of him, you know—heard of him ! " Chawner looked down his nose with a feeble attempt at a gratified simper, while his neighbours giggled with furtive relish.

" Well," said Dick at last, after a long look at all the old familiar objects, " I must be off, you know. Got some important business at home this evening to look after. The fellows look very jolly and contented, and all that sort of thing. Enough to make one want to be a boy again almost, eh ? Good-bye, you chaps—ahem, young gentlemen, I wish you good morning ! "

And he went out, leaving behind him the impression that " young Bultitude's governor wasn't half such a bad old buffer."

He paused at the open front door, to which Paul and the Doctor had accompanied him. " Good-bye," he said ; " I wish I'd seen Dulcie. I should like to see your daughter, sir ; but it can't be helped. Good-bye ; and you," he added in a lower tone to his father, who was standing by, inexpressibly pained and disgusted by his utter want of dignity, " you mind what I told you. Don't try any games with me ! "

And, as he skipped jauntily down the steps to the gateway, the Doctor followed his unwieldy, oddly-dressed form with his eyes, and, inclining his head gravely to Dick's sweeping wave of the hand, asked with a compassionate tone in his voice. " You don't

happen to know, Richard, my boy, if your father has had any business troubles lately—anything to disturb him ? "

And Mr. Bultitude's feelings prevented him from making any intelligible reply.

15. *The Rubicon*

" My three schoolfellows,
Whom I will trust—as I will adders fanged ;
They bear the mandate."

PAUL never quite knew how the remainder of that day passed at Crichton House. He was ordered to join a class which was more or less engaged with some kind of work : he had a hazy idea that it was Latin, though it may have been Greek ; but he was spared the necessity of taking any active part in the proceedings, as Mr. Blinkhorn was not disposed to be too exacting with a boy who in one short morning had endured a sentence of expulsion, a lecture, the immediate prospect of a flogging, and a paternal visit, and, as before, mercifully left him alone.

His classmates, however, did not show the same chivalrous delicacy ; and Paul had to suffer many unmannerly jests and gibes at his expense, frequent and anxious inquiries as to the exact nature of his treatment in the dining-room, with sundry highly imaginative versions of the same, while there was much candid and unbiassed comment on the appearance and conduct of himself and his son.

But he bore it unprotesting—or, rather, he scarcely noticed it ; for all his thoughts were now entirely taken up by one important subject—the time and manner of his escape.

Thanks to Dick's thoughtless liberality, he had now ample funds to carry him safely home. It was hardly likely that any more unexpected claims could be brought against him now, particularly as he had no intention of

VICE VERSA

publishing his return to solvency. He might reasonably consider himself in a position to make his escape at the very first favourable opportunity.

When would that opportunity present itself ? It must come soon. He could not wait long for it. Any hour might yet see him pounced upon and flogged heartily for some utterly unknown and unsuspected transgression ; or the golden key which would unlock his prison bars might be lost in some unlucky moment ; for his long series of reverses had made him loth to trust to Fortune, even when she seemed to look smilingly once more upon him.

Fortune's countenance is apt to be so alarmingly mobile with some unfortunates.

But in spite of the new facilities given him for escape, and his strong motives for taking advantage of them, he soon found to his utter dismay that he shrank from committing himself to so daring and dangerous a course, just as much as when he had tried to make a confidant of the Doctor.

For, after all, could he be sure of himself ? Would his ill-luck suffer him to seize the one propitious moment, or would that fatal self-distrust and doubt that had paralysed him for the past week seize him again just at the crisis ?

Suppose he did venture to take the first irrevocable step, could he rely on himself to go through the rest of his hazardous enterprise ? Was he cool and wary enough ? He dared not expect an uninterrupted run. Had he ruses and expedients at command on any sudden check ?

If he could not answer all these doubts favourably, was it not sheer madness to take to flight at all ?

He felt a dismal conviction that his success would have to depend, not on his own cunning, but on the forbearance or blindness of others. The slightest *contre-temps* must infallibly upset him altogether.

The fact was, he had all his life been engaged in the

less eventful and contentious branches of commerce. His will had seldom had to come in contact with others, and when it did so, he had found means, being of a prudent and cautious temperament, of avoiding disagreeable personal consequences by timely compromises or judicious employment of delegates. He had generally found his fellow-men ready to meet him reasonably as an equal or a superior.

But now he must be prepared to see in everyone he met a possible enemy, who would hand him over to the tyrant on the faintest suspicion. They were spies to be baffled or disarmed, pursuers to be eluded. The smallest slip in his account of himself would be enough to undo him.

No wonder that, as he thought over all this, his heart quailed within him.

They say—the paradox-mongers say—that it requires a far higher degree of moral courage for a soldier in action to leave the ranks under fire and seek a less distinguished position towards the rear, than would carry him on with the rest to charge a battery.

This may be true, though it might not prove a very valuable defence at a court-martial; but, at all events, Mr. Bultitude found, when it came to the point, that it was almost impossible for him to screw up his courage to run away.

It is not a pleasant state, this indecision whether to stay passively and risk the worst or avoid it by flight, and the worst of it is that, whatever course is eventually forced upon us, it finds us equally unprepared, and more liable from such indecision to bungle miserably in the sequel.

Paul might never have gained heart to venture, but for an unpleasant incident that took place during dinner and a discovery he made after it.

They happened to have a particularly unpopular pudding that day ; a pallid preparation of suet, with an infrequent currant or two embalmed in it, and Paul was

VICE VERSA

staring at his portion of this delicacy disconsolately enough, wondering how he should contrive to consume and, worse still, digest it, when his attention was caught by Jolland, who sat directly opposite him.

That young gentleman, who evidently shared the general prejudice against the currant pudding, was inviting Mr. Bultitude's attention to a little contrivance of his own for getting rid of it, which consisted in delicately shovelling the greater part of what was on his plate into a large envelope held below the table to receive it.

This struck Paul as a heaven-sent method of avoiding the difficulty, and he had just got the envelope which had held Barbara's letter out of his pocket, intending to follow Jolland's example, when the Doctor's voice made him start guiltily and replace the envelope in his pocket.

"Jolland," said the Doctor, "what have you got there?"

"An envelope, sir," explained Jolland, who had now got the remains of his pudding safely bestowed.

"What is in that envelope?" said the Doctor, who happened to have been watching him.

"In the envelope, sir? Pudding, sir," said Jolland, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to send bulky portions of pudding by post.

"And why did you place pudding in the envelope?" inquired the Doctor in his deepest tone.

Jolland felt a difficulty in explaining that he had done so because he wished to avoid eating it, and with a view to interring it later on in the playground: he preferred silence.

"Shall I tell you why you did it, sir?" thundered the Doctor. "You did it, because you were scheming to obtain a second portion—because you did not feel yourself able to eat both portions at your leisure here, and thought to put by a part to devour in secret at a future time. It's a most painful exhibition of pure piggishness. There shall be no pocketing at this table, sir."

You will eat that pudding under my eye at once, and you will stay in and write out French verbs for two days. That will put an end to any more gorging in the garden for a time, at least."

Jolland seemed stupefied, though relieved, by the unexpected construction put upon his conduct, as he gulped down the intercepted fragments of pudding, while the rest diligently cleared their plates with as much show of appreciation as they could muster.

Mr. Bultitude shuddered at this one more narrow escape. If he had been detected—as he must have been in another instant—in smuggling pudding in an envelope he might have incautiously betrayed his real motives, and then, as the Doctor was morbidly sensitive concerning all complaints of the fare he provided, he would have got into worse trouble than the unfortunate Jolland, to say nothing of the humiliation of being detected in such an act.

It was a solemn warning to him of the dangers he was exposed to hourly, while he lingered within those walls ; but his position was still more strongly brought home to him by the terrible discovery he made shortly afterwards.

He was alone in the schoolroom, for the others had all gone down into the playground, except Jolland, who was confined in one of the class-rooms below, when the thought came over him to test the truth of Dick's hint about a name cut on the Doctor's writing-table.

He stole up to it guiltily, and, lifting the slanting desk which stood there, examined the surface below. Dick had been perfectly correct. There it was, glaringly fresh and distinct, not large but very deeply cut and fearfully legible. " R. Bultitude." It might have been done that day. Dick had probably performed it out of bravado, or under the impression that he was not going to return after the holidays.

Paul dropped the desk over the fatal letters with a shudder. The slightest accidental shifting of it must

VICE VERSA

disclose them—nothing but a miracle could have kept them concealed so long. When they did come to light, he knew from what he had seen of the Doctor, that the act would be considered as an outrage of the blackest and most desperate kind. He would most unquestionably get a flogging for it !

He fetched a large pewter ink-pot, and tried nervously to blacken the letters with the tip of a quill, to make them, if possible, rather less obtrusive than they were. All in vain ; they only stood out with more startling vividness when picked out in black upon the brown-stained deal. He felt very like a conscience-stricken murderer trying to hide a corpse that *wouldn't* be buried. He gave it up at last, having only made a terrible mess with the ink.

That settled it. He must fly. The flogging must be avoided at all hazards. If an opportunity delayed its coming, why, he must do without the opportunity—he must make one. For good or ill, his mind was made up now for immediate flight.

All that afternoon, while he sat trying to keep his mind upon long sums in Bills of Parcels, which disgusted him as a business man, by the glaring improbability of their details, his eye wandered furtively down the long tables to where the Doctor sat at the head of the class. Every chance movement of the principal's elbow filled him with a sickening dread. A hundred times did those rudely carved letters seem at tooyt to start forth and denounce him.

It was a disquieting afternoon Tor Paul.

But the time dragged wearily on, and still the desk loyally kept its secret. The dusk drew on and the gas-burners were lit. The younger boys came up from the lower class-room and were sent out to play ; the Doctor shortly afterwards dismissed his own class to follow them, and Paul and his companions had the room to themselves.

He sat there on the rough form with his slate before

him, hearing half-unconsciously the shouts, laughter, and Ting of feet coming up from the darkness outside, and the faint notes of a piano, which filtered through the double doors from one of the rooms, where a boy was practising Haydn's " Surprise," from Hamilton's exercise book, a surprise which he rendered as a mildly interjectional form of astonishment.

All the time Paul was racked with an intense burning desire to get up and run for it then, before it became too late ; but cold fits of doubt and fear preserved him from such lunacy—he would wait, his chance might come before long.

His patience was rewarded ; the Doctor came in, looking at his watch, and said, " I think these boys have had enough of it, Mr. Tinkler, eh ? You can send them out now till tea-time."

Mr. Tinkler, who had been entangling himself frightfully in intricate calculations upon the blackboard, without making a single convert, was only too glad to take advantage of the suggestion, and Paul followed the rest into the playground with a sense of relief.

The usual " chevy " was going on there, with more spirit than usual, perhaps, because the darkness allowed of practical jokes and surprises, and offered great facilities for paying off old grudges with secrecy and despatch, and as the Doctor had come to the door of the greenhouse, and was looking on, the players exerted themselves still more, till the " prison " to which most of one side had been consigned by being run down and touched by their fleeter enemies was filled with a long line of captives holding hands and calling out to be released.

Paul, who had run out vaguely from his base, was promptly pursued and made prisoner by an unnecessarily vigorous thump in the back, after which he took his place at the bottom of the line of imprisoned ones.

But the enemy's spirit began to slacken ; one after another of the players still left to the opposite side

VICE VERSA

succeeded in outrunning pursuit and touching the foremost prisoner for the time being, so as to set him free by the rules of the game. The Doctor went in again, and the enemy relapsed as usual into total indifference, so that Paul, without exactly knowing how, soon found himself the only one left in gaol, unnoticed and apparently forgotten.

He could not see anything through the darkness, but he heard the voices of the boys disputing at the other side of the playground ; he looked round ; at his right was the indistinct form of a large laurel bush, behind that he knew was the playground gate. Could it be that his chance had come at last ?

He slipped behind the laurel and waited, holding his breath ; the dispute still went on ; no one seemed to have noticed him, probably the darkness prevented all chance of that ; he went on tip-toe to the gate—it was not locked.

He opened it very carefully a little way ; it was forbearing enough not to creak, and the next moment he was outside, free to go where he would !

Escape, after all, was simple enough when he came to try it ; he could hardly believe at first that he really was free at last ; free with money enough in his pocket to take him home, with the friendly darkness to cover his retreat ; free to go back and confront Dick on his own ground, and, by force, or fraud, get the Garuda Stone into his own hands once more.

As yet he never doubted that it would be easy enough to convince his household, if necessary, of the truth of his story, and enlist them one and all on his side ; all that he required, he thought, was caution ; he must reach the house unobserved, and wait and watch, and the deuce would be in it if the stone were not safe in his pocket again before twelve hours had gone by.

All this time he was still within a hundred yards or so of the playground wall ; he must decide upon some particular route, some definite method of ordering his

flight ; to stay where he was any longer would clearly be unwise, yet, where should he go first ?

If he went to the station at once, how could he tell that he should be lucky enough to catch a train without having to wait long for it, and unless he did that, he would almost certainly be sought for first on the station platform, and might be caught before a train was due ?

At last, with an astuteness he had not suspected himself of possessing, which was probably the result of the harrowing experiences he had lately undergone, he hit upon a plan of action. " I'll go to a shop," he thought, " and change this sovereign, and ask to look at a timetable—then, if I find I can catch a train at once, I'll run for it ; if one is not due for some time, I can hang about near the station till it comes in,"

With this intention he walked on towards the town till he came to a small terrace of shops, when he went into the first, which was a stationer's and toy-dealer's, with a stock in trade of cheap wooden toys and incomprehensible games, drawing slates, penny packets of stationery and cards of pen and pencil-holders, and a particularly stuffy atmosphere ; the proprietor, a short man with a fat white face with a rich glaze all over it and a fringe of ragged brown whisker meeting under his chin, was sitting behind the counter posting up his ledger.

Paul looked round the shop in search of something to purchase, and at last said, more nervously than he expected to do, " I want a pencil-case, one which screws up and down." He thought a pencil-case would be an innocent, unsuspecting thing to ask for. The man set rows of cards containing pencil-cases of every imaginable shape on the counter before him, and when Mr. Bultitude had chosen and paid for one, the stationer asked if there would be anything else, and if he might send it for him. " You're one of Dr. Grimstone's young gentlemen up at Crichton House, aren't you, sir ? " he added.

VICE VERSA

A guilty dread of discovery made Paul anxious to deny this at once. "No," he said; "oh no; no connection with the place. Ah, could you allow me to look at a time-table?"

"Certainly, sir; expectin' some one to-night or tomorrow p'raps. Let me see," he said, consulting a table which hung behind him. "There's a train from Pancras comes in in half an hour from now, 6.5 that is; there's another doo at 8.15, and one at 9.30. Then from Liverpool Street they run——"

"Thank you," said Mr. Bultitude, "but—but I want the up-trains."

"Ah," said the man, with a rather peculiar intonation, "I thought maybe your par or mar was comin' down. Ain't Dr. Grimstone got the times the trains go?"

"Yes," said Paul desperately, without very well knowing what he said, "yes, he has, but ah, not for this month; he—he sent me to inquire."

"Did he though?" said the stationer. "I thought you wasn't one of his young gentlemen?"

Mr. Bultitude saw what a fearful trap he had fallen into and stood speechless.

"Go along with you!" said the little stationer at last, with a not unkindly grin. "Lor bless you, I knew your face the minnit you come in. To go and tell me a brazen story like that! You're a young pickle, you are!"

Mr. Bultitude began to shuffle feebly towards the door. "Pickle, eh?" he protested in great discomposure. "No, no. Heaven knows I'm no pickle. It's of no consequence about those trains. Don't trouble. Good evening to you."

"Stop," said the man, "don't be in such a nurry now. You tell me what you want to know straightforward, and I don't mean to say as I won't help you so far as I can. Don't be afraid of my telling no tales. I've bin a schoolboy myself in my time, bless your 'art. I shouldn't wonder now if I couldn't make a pretty good

guess without telling at what you're after. You've bin a catchin' of it hot, and you want to make a clean bolt of it. I ain't very far off, now, am I ? "

" No," said Paul ; for something in the man's manner inspired confidence. " I do want to make a bolt of it. I've been most abominably treated."

" Well, look here, I ain't got no right to interfere ; and if you're caught, I look to you not to bring my name in. I don't want to get into trouble up at Crichton House and lose good customers, you see. But I like the looks of you, and you've always dealt 'ere pretty regular. I don't mind if I give you a lift. Just see here. You want to get off to London, don't you ? What for is your business, not mine. Well, there's a train, express, stops at only one station on the way, in at 5.50. It's twenty minnits to six now. If you take that road just oppersite, it'll bring you out at the end of the Station Road ; you can do it easy in ten minnits and have time to spare. So cut away, and good luck to you ? "

" I'm vastly obliged to you," said Paul, and he meant it. It was a new experience to find anyone offering him assistance. He left the close little shop, crossed the road, and started off in the direction indicated to him at a brisk trot.

His steps rang out cheerfully on the path ironbound with frost. He was almost happy again under the exhilarating glow of unusual exercise and the excitement of escape and regained freedom.

He ran on, past a series of villa residences enclosed in varnished palings and adorned with that mediaeval abundance of turrets, balconies, and cheap stained-glass, which is accepted nowadays as a guarantee of the tenant's culture, and a satisfactory substitute for effective drainage. After the villas came a church, and a few yards farther on the road turned with a sharp curve into the main thoroughfare leading to the station.

He was so near it that he could hear the shrill engine whistles, and the banging of trucks on the railway sidings

VICE VERSA

echoed sharply from the neighbouring houses. He was saved, in sight of haven at last!

Full of delight at the thought, he put on a still greater pace, and turning the corner without looking, ran into a little party of three, which was coming in the opposite direction.

Fate's vein of irony was by no means worked out yet. As he was recovering from the collision, and preparing to offer or accept an apology, as the case might be, he discovered to his horror that he had fallen amongst no strangers.

The three were his old acquaintances, Coker, Coggs, and the virtuous Chawner—of whom he had fondly hoped to have seen the last for ever !

The moral and physical shock of such an encounter took all Mr. Bultitude's remaining breath away. He stood panting under the sickly rays of a street-lamp, the very incarnation of helpless, hopeless dismay.

" Hallo ! " said Coker, " it's young Bultitude ! "

" What do you mean by cannoning into a fellow like this ? " said Coggs. " What are you up to out here, eh ? "

" If it comes to that," said Paul, casting about for some explanation of his appearance, " what are you up to here ? "

" Why," said Chawner, " if you want to know, Dick, we've been to fetch the *St. James' Gazette* for the Doctor. He said I might go if I liked, and I asked for Coker and Coggs to come too ; because there was something I wanted to tell them, very important, and I have told them, haven't I, Corny ? "

Coggs growled sulkily ; Coker gave a tragic groan, and said : " I don't care when you tell, Chawner. Do it to-night if you like. Let's talk about something else. Bultitude hasn't told us yet how he came out here after us."

His last words suggested a pretext to Paul, of which he hastened to make use. " Oh," he said, " I ? I came out here, after you, to say that Dr. Grimstone will not

require the *St. James' Gazette*. He wants the *Globe* and, ah, the *Star* instead."

It did not sound a very probable combination ; but Paul used the first names that occurred to him, and, as it happened, aroused no suspicions, for the boys read no newspapers.

" Well, we've got the other now," said Coker. " We shall have to go back and get the fellow at the bookstall to change it, I suppose. Come on, you fellows ! "

This was at least a move in the right direction ; for the three began at once to retrace their steps. But, unfortunately, all these explanations had taken time, and before they had gone many yards, Mr. Bultitude was horrified to hear the station-bell ring loudly, and immediately after a cloud of white steam rose above the station roof as the London train clanked cumbrously in, and was brought to with a prolonged screeching of brakes.

The others were walking very slowly. At the present pace it would be almost impossible to reach the train in time. He looked round at them anxiously. " H-hadn't we better run, don't you think ? " he asked.

" Run ! " said Coker scornfully. " What for ? I'm not going to run. You can, if you like."

" Why, ah, really," said Paul briskly, very grateful for the permission ; "do you know, I think I will! "

And run he did, with all his might, rushing headlong through the gates, threading his way between the omnibuses and under the Roman noses of the mild fly-horses in the enclosure, until at length he found himself inside the little booking-office.

He was not too late ; the train was still at the platform, the engine getting up steam with a dull roar. But he dared not risk detection by travelling without a ticket. There was time for that, too. No one was at the pigeon-hole but one old lady.

But, unhappily, the old lady considered taking a ticket as a solemn rite to be performed with all due

VICE VERSA

caution and deliberation. She had already catechised the clerk upon the number of stoppages during her proposed journey, and exacted earnest assurances from him that she would not be called upon to change anywhere in the course of it; and as Paul came up she was laying out the purchase-money for her ticket upon the ledge and counting it, which, the fare being high and the coins mostly halfpence, seemed likely to take some time.

"One moment, ma'am, if you please," cried Mr. Bultitude, panting and desperate. "I'm pressed for time."

"Now you've gone and put me out, little boy," said the old lady fussily. "I shall have to begin all over again. Young man, will you take and count the other end and see if it adds up right? There's a halfpenny wrong somewhere; I know there is."

"Now then," shouted the guard from the platform. "Any more going on?"

"I'm going on!" said Paul. "Wait for me. First single to St. Pancras, quick!"

"Drat the boy!" said the old lady angrily. "Do you think the world's to give way for you? Such impudence! Mind your manners, little boy, can't you? You've made me drop a threepenny bit with your scrouging!"

"First single, five shillings," said the clerk, jerking out the precious ticket.

"Right!" cried the guard at the same instant. "Stand back there, will you!"

Paul dashed towards the door of the booking-office which led to the platform; but just as he reached it a gate slammed in his face with a sharp click, through the bars of it he saw, with hot eyes, the tall, heavy carriages which had shelter and safety in them jolt heavily past, till even the red lamp on the last van was quenched in the darkness.

That miserable old woman had shattered his hopes at the very moment of their fulfilment. It was fate again!

HARD PRESSED

As he stood, fiercely gripping the bars of the gate, he heard Coggs' hateful voice again.

"Hallo ! so you haven't got the *Globe* and the other thing after all, then ; they've shut you out ? "

"Yes," said Mr. Bultitude in a hollow voice ; " they've shut me out ! "

16. *Hard Pressed*

" Mark the poor wretch, to overshoot his troubles,
How he outruns the wind, and with what care
He cranks and crosses with a thousand doubles :
The many musets through the which he goes
Are like a labyrinth to amaze his foes."

AS soon as the gate was opened, Paul went through mechanically with the others on to the platform, and waited at the bookstall while they changed the paper. He knew well enough that what had seemed at the time a stroke of supreme cunning would now only land him in fresh difficulties, if indeed it did not lead to the detection of his scheme. But he dared not interfere and prevent them from making the unlucky exchange. Something seemed to tie his tongue, and in sullen leaden apathy he resigned himself to whatever might be in store for him.

They passed out again by the booking-office. There was the old lady still at the pigeon-hole, trying to persuade the much-enduring clerk to restore a lucky sixpence she had given him by mistake, and was quite unable to describe. Mr. Bultitude would have given much just then to go up and shake her into hysterics, or curse her bitterly for the mischief she had done ; but he refrained, either from an innate chivalry, or from a feeling that such an outburst would be ill-judged.

So, silent and miserable, with slow step and hanging head, he set out with his gaolers to render himself up once more at his house of bondage—a sort of involuntary Regulus, without the oath.

VICE VERSA

" Dickie, you were very anxious to run just now," observed Chawner, after they had gone some distance on their homeward way.

" We were late for tea—late for tea," explained Paul hastily.

" If you think the tea worth racing like that for, I don't," said Coggs viciously ; " it's muck."

" You don't catch me racing, except for something worth having," said Coker.

One more flash of distinct inspiration came to Paul's aid in the very depths of his gloom. It was, in fact, a hazy recollection from English history of the ruse by which Edward I. , when a prince, contrived to escape from his captors at Hereford Castle.

" Why—why," he said excitedly, " would you race if you had something worth racing for, hey ? would you now ? "

" Try us ! " said Coker emphatically.

" What do you call' something ' ? " inquired Chawner suspiciously.

" Well," said Mr. Bultitude ; " what do you say to a shilling ? "

" You haven't got a shilling," objected Coggs.

" Here's a shilling, see," said Paul, producing one. " Now then, I'll give this to any boy I see get into tea first ! "

" Bultitude thinks he can run," said Coker, with an amiable unbelief in any disinterestedness, " He means to get in first and keep the shilling himself, I know."

" Fll back myself to run him any day," put in Coggs.

" So will I , " added Chawner.

" Well, is it agreed ? " Paul asked anxiously. " Will you try ? "

" All right," said Chawner. " You must give us a start to the next lamp-post, though. You stay here, and when we're ready we'll say ' off' ! "

They drew a line on the path with their feet to mark Paul's starting point, and went on to the next lamp.

After a moment or two of anxious waiting he heard Coggs shout, all in one breath, " One-two-three-off ! " and the sound of scampering feet followed immediately.

It was a most exciting and hotly contested race. Paul saw them for one brief moment in the lamplight. He saw Chawner scudding down the path like some great camel, and Coker squaring his arms and working them as if they were wings. Coggs seemed to be last.

He ran a little way himself just to encourage them, but, as the sound of their feet grew fainter and fainter, he felt that his last desperate ruse had taken effect, and with a chuckle at his own cleverness, turned round and ran his fastest in the opposite direction. He felt little or no interest in the result of the race.

Once more he entered the booking-office and, kneeling on a chair, consulted the time-board that hung on the wall over the sheaf of texts and the missionary box.

The next train was not until 7.25. A whole hour and twenty-five minutes to wait! What was he to do? Where was he to pass the weary time till then? If he lingered on the platform he would assuredly be recaptured. His absence could not remain long undiscovered and the station would be the first place they would search for him.

And yet he dared not wander away from the neighbourhood of the station. If he kept to the shops and lighted thoroughfares he might be recognised or traced. If, on the other hand, he went out farther into the country (which was utterly unknown to him), he had no watch, and it would be only too easy to lose his way, or miscalculate time and distance in the darkness.

To miss the next train would be absolutely fatal.

He walked out upon the platform, and on past the refreshment and waiting rooms, past the weighing machine, the stacked trucks and the lamp-room, meeting and seen by none—even the boy at the bookstall was busy with bread and butter and a mug of tea in a dark corner, and never noticed him.

VICE VERSA

He went on to the end of the platform where the planks sloped gently down to a wilderness of sheds, coaling stages and sidings ; he could just make out the bulky forms of some tarpaulined cattle-vans and open coal-trucks standing on the lines of metals which gleamed in the scanty gaslights.

It struck him that one of these vans or trucks would serve his purpose admirably, if he could only get into it, and very cautiously he picked his way over the clogging ballast and rails, till he came to a low narrow strip of platform between two sidings.

He mounted it and went on till he came to the line of trucks and vans drawn up alongside ; the vans seemed ail locked, but at the end he found an empty coal-waggon in which he thought he could manage to conceal himself and escape pursuit till the longed-for 7.25 train should arrive to relieve him.

He stepped in and lay down in one corner of it, listening anxiously for any sound of search, but hearing nothing more than the dismal dirge of the telegraph wires overhead ; he soon grew cold and stiff, for his enforced attitude was far from comfortable, and there was more coal-dust in his chosen retreat than he could have wished. Still it was secluded enough ; it was not likely that it would occur to anyone to look for him there. Ten days ago Mr. Paul Bultitude would have found it hard to conceive himself lying down in a hard and grimy coal-truck to escape his son's schoolmaster, but since then he had gone through too much that was unprecedented and abnormal to see much incongruity in his situation—it was all too hideously real to be a nightmare.

But even here he was not allowed to remain undisturbed ; after about half an hour, when he was beginning to feel almost secure, there came a sharp twanging of wires beneath, and two short strokes of a bell in the signal-box hard by.

He heard some one from the platform, probably the

station-master, shout, " Look alive, there, Ing, Pickstones, some of you. There's those three trucks on the A siding to go to Slopsbury by the 6.30 luggage—she'll be in in another five minutes."

There were steps as if some persons were coming out of a cabin opposite—they came nearer and nearer : " These three, ain't it, Tommy ? " said a gruff voice, close to Paul's ear.

" That's it, mate," said another, evidently Tommy's— " get 'em along up to the points there. Can't have the 6.30 standing about on this 'ere line all night, 'cos of the Limited. Now then, all together, shove ! they've got the old 'orse on at the other end."

And to Paul's alarm he felt the truck in which he was begin to move ponderously on the greasy metals, and strike the next with its buffers with a jarring shock and a jangling of coupling chains.

He could not stand this ; unless he revealed himself at once, or managed to get out of this delusive waggon, the six-whatever-it-was train would be up and carry him off to Slopsbury, a hundred miles or so farther from home ; they would have time to warn Dick—he would be expected—ambushes laid for him, and his one chance would be gone for ever !

There was a whistle far away on the down line, and that humming vibration which announces an approaching train : not a moment to lose—he was afraid to attempt a leap from the moving waggons, and resolved to risk all and show himself.

With this intention he got upon his knees, and putting his head above the dirty bulwark, looked over and said softly, " Tommy, I say, Tommy ! "

A porter, who had been laboriously employed below, looked up with a white and scared face, and staggered back several feet; Mr. Bultitude in a sudden panic ducked again.

" Bill ! " Paul heard the porter say hoarsely, " I'll take my Bible oath I've never touched a drop this week, not

VICE VERSA

to speak of—but I've got 'em again, Bill, I've got 'em again ! "

" Got what agin ? " growled Bill. " What's the matter now ? "

" It's the jumps, Bill," gasped the other, " the 'orrors—they've got me and no mistake. As I'm a livin' man, as I was a shovin' of that there truck, I saw a imp—a gashly imp, Bill, stick its hugly 'ed over the side and say, ' Tommy,' it ses, jest like that—it ses, ' Tommy, I wants you ! ' I dursn't go near it, Bill. I'll get leave, and go 'ome and lay up—it glared at me so 'orrid, Bill, and grinned—ugh ! I'll take the pledge after this 'ere, I will—I'll go to chapel Sundays reg'lar ! "

" Let's see if there ain't something there first," said the practical Bill. " Easy with the 'oss up there. Now then," here he stepped on the box of the wheel and looked in. " Shin out of this, whatever y'are, we don't contrack to carry no imps on this line—Well, if ever I—Tommy, old man, it's all right, y'ain't got 'em this time—'ere's yer imp ! "

And, reaching over, he hauled out the wretched Paul by the scruff of his neck in a state of utter collapse, and deposited him on the ground before him.

" That ain't your private kerridge, yer know, that ain't—there wasn't no bed made up there for you, that I know on. You ain't arter no good, now ; you're a waga-bone ! that's about your size, I can see—what d'yer mean by it, eh ? "

" Shet yer 'ed, Bill, will yer ? " said Tommy, whose relief probably softened his temper, " this here's a young gent."

" Young geat, or no young gent," replied Bill sententiously, " he's no call to go 'idin' in our waggins and givin' 'ard-workin' men a turn. 'Old 'im tight, Tommy—here's the luggage down on us."

Tommy held him fast with a grip of iron, while the other porters coupled the trucks, and the luggage train lumbered away with its load.

After this the men slouched up and stood round their captive, staring at him curiously.

" Look here, my men," said Paul, " I've run away from school, I want to go on to town by the next train, and I took the liberty of hiding in the truck, because the schoolmaster will be up here very soon to look for me—you understand ? "

" I understand," said Bill, " and a nice young party you are."

" I — I don't want to be caught," said Paul.

" Naterally," assented Tommy sympathetically.

" Well, can't you hide me somewhere where he won't see me ? Come, you can do that ? "

" What do you say, Bill ? " asked Tommy.

" What'll the Guv'nor say ? " said Bill dubiously.

" Tve got a little money," urged Paul. " I'll make it worth your while."

" Why didn't you say that afore ? " said Bill ; " the Guv'nor needn't know."

" Here's half-a-sovereign between you," said Paul, holding it out.

" That's something like a imp," said Tommy warmly ; " if all bogeys acted as 'andsome as this 'ere, I don't care how often they shows theirselves. We'll have a supper on this, mates, and drink young Delirium Trimminses' jolly good 'ealth. You come along o' me, young shaver, I'll stow you away right enough, and let you out when yer train comes in."

He led Paul on to the platform again and opened a sort of cupboard or closet. " That's where we keeps the brooms and lamp-rags, and them," he said ; " it ain't what you may call tidy, but if I lock you in no one won't trouble you."

It was perfectly dark and the rags smelt unpleasantly, but Mr. Bultitude was very glad of this second ark of refuge, even though he did bruise his legs over the broom-handles ; he was gladder still by-and-by, when he heard a rapid heavy footfall outside, and a voice he

VICE VERSA

knew only too well, saying, " I want to see the station-master. Ha, there he is. Good evening, station-master, you know me—Dr. Grimstone, of Crichton House. I want you to assist me in a very unpleasant affair—the fact is,, one of my pupils has had the folly and wickedness to run away."

" You don't say so ! " said the station-master.

" It's only too true, I'm sorry to say ; he seemed happy and contented enough, too ; it's a black ungrateful business. But I must catch him, you know ; he must be about here somewhere, I feel sure. You don't happen to have noticed a boy who looked as if he belonged to me ? They can't tell me at the booking-office."

How glad Paul was now he had made no inquiries of the station-master !

" No," said the latter, " I can't say I have, sir, but some of my men may have come across him. I'll inquire—here, Ing, I want you ; this gentleman here has lost one of his boys, have you seen him ? "

" What sort of a young gentleman was he to look at ? " Paul heard Tommy's voice ask.

" A bright intelligent-looking boy," said the Doctor, " medium height, about thirteen, with auburn hair."

" No, I ain't seen no intelligent boys with median 'eight," said Tommy slowly, " not leastways, to speak to positive. What might he 'ave on, now, besides his oburn 'air ? "

" Black cloth jacket, with a wide collar," was the answer ; " grey trousers, and a cloth cap with a leather peak."

" Oh," said Tommy, " then I see 'im."

" When—where ? "

" 'Bout arf an 'our since."

" Do you know where he is now ? "

" Well," said Tommy, to Paul's intense horror, for he was listening, quaking, to every word of this conversation, which was held just outside his cupboard door. " I dessay I could give a guess if I give my mind to it."

" Out with it, Ing, now, if you know ; no tricks," said the station-master, who had apparently just turned to go away. " Excuse me, sir, but I've some matters in there to see after."

When he had gone, the Doctor said rather heatedly, " Come, you're keeping something from me, I *will* have it out of you. If I find you have deceived me, I'll write to the manager and get you sent about your business—you'd better tell me the truth."

" You see," said Tommy, very slowly, and reluctantly, " that young gent o' yourn was a gent."

" I tried my very best to render him so," said the Doctor stiffly, " here is the result—how did you discover he was one, pray ? "

" 'Cos he acted like a gent," said Tommy ; " he took and give me a 'arf-suffering."

" Well, I'll give you another," said the Doctor, " if you can tell me where he is."

" Thankee, sir, don't you be afraid—you're a gent right enough, too, though you do 'appen to be a school-master."

" Where is the unhappy boy ?" interrupted the Doctor.

" Seems as if I was a roundin' on 'im, like, don't it a'most, sir ? " said Tommy, with too evident symptoms of yielding in his voice. Paul shook so in his terror that he knocked down a broom or two with a clatter which froze his blood.

" Not at all," said the Doctor, " not at all, my good fellow ; you're—ahem—advancing the cause of moral order."

" Oh, ah," said Tommy, obviously open to conviction. " Well, if I'm a doin' all that, I can't go fur wrong, can I ? And arter all, we mayn't like schools or school-masters, not over above, but we can't get on without 'em, I s'pose. But, look ye here, sir—if I goes and tells you where you can get hold of this here boy, you won't go and wallop him now, will ye ? "

VICE VERSA

" I can make no bargains," said the Doctor ; " I shall act on my own discretion."

" That's it," said Tommy, unaccountably relieved, " spoke like a merciful Christian gen'leman ; if you don't go actin' on nothing more nor your discretion, you can't hurt him much, I take it. Well then, since you've spoke out fair, I don't mind putting you on his track like."

If the door of the cupboard had not been locked, Paul would undoubtedly have burst out and yielded himself up, to escape the humiliation of being sold like this by a mercenary and treacherous porter. As it was, he had to wait till the inevitable words should be spoken.

" Well, you see," went on Tommy, very slowly, as if struggling with the remnants of a conscience, " it was like this here—he comes up to me, and says—your young gen'leman, I mean—says he, ' Porter, I wants to 'ide, I've run away.' And I says to him, says I, ' It's no use your 'anging about 'ere,' I says, ' 'cause, if you do, your guv'nor (meanin' no oifence to you, sir) 'll be comin' up and ketchin' of you on the 'op.' ' Right you are, porter,' says he to me, ' what do you advise ? ' he says. ' Well,' I says, ' I don't know as I'm right in givin' you no advice at all, havin' run away from them as has the care on you,' I says ; ' but if I was a young gen'leman as didn't want to be ketched, I should just walk on to Dufferton ; it ain't on'y three mile or so, and you'll 'ave time for to do it before the up-train comes along there.' ' Thankee, porter,' he says, ' I'll do that,' and away he bolts, and for anything I know, he's 'arf way there by this time."

" A fly ! " shouted the Doctor excitedly, when Tommy had come to the end of his veracious account. " I'll catch the young rascal now—who has a good horse ? Davis, I'll take you. Five shillings if you reach Dufferton before the up-train. Take the——"

The rest was lost in the banging of the fly door and

the rumble of wheels ; the terrible man had been got safely off on a wrong scent, and Paul fell back amongst the lumber in his closet, faint with the suspense and relief.

Presently he heard Tommy's chuckling whisper through the keyhole : " Are you all right in there, sir ? he's safe enough now—orf on a pretty dance. You didn't think I was goin' to tell on ye, did ye now ? I ain't quite sech a cur as that comes to, particular when a young gent saves me from the 'orrors, and gives me a 'arf-suffering. I'll see you through, you make yourself easy about that."

Half an hour went slowly by for Mr. Bultitude in his darkness and solitude. The platform gradually filled, as he could tell by the tread of feet, the voices, and the scent of cigars, and at last, welcome sound, he heard the station bell ringing for the up-train.

It ran in the next minute, shaking the cupboard in which Paul crouched, till the brushes rattled. There was the usual blind hurry and confusion outside as it stopped. Paul waited impatiently inside. The time passed, and still no one came to let him out. He began to grow alarmed. Could Tommy have forgotten him ? Had he been sent away by some evil chance at the critical moment ? Two or three times his excited fancy heard the fatal whistle sound for departure. Would he be left behind after all ?

But the next instant the door was noiselessly unlocked. " Couldn't do it afore," said honest Tommy. " Our guv'nor would have seen me. Now's your time. Here's a empty first-class coach I've kept for ye. In with you now."

He hoisted Paul up the high footboard to an empty compartment, and shut the door, leaving him to sink down on the luxurious cushions in speechless and measureless content. But Tommy had hardly done so before he reappeared and looked in. " I say," he suggested, " if I was you, I'd get under the seat before you

VICE VERSA

gets to Dufferton, otherways your guv'nor 'll be spottin' you. I'll lock you in."

" I'll get under now ; some one might see me here," said Paul ; and, too anxious for safety to thank his preserver, he crawled under the low, blue-cushioned seat, which left just room enough for him to lie there in a very cramped and uncomfortable position. Still he need not stay there after the train had once started, except for five minutes or so at Dufferton.

Unfortunately he had not been long under the seat before he heard two loud imperious voices just outside the carriage door.

" Porter ! guard ! Hi, somebody ! open this door, will you ; it's locked."

" This way, sir," he heard Tommy's voice say outside. " Plenty of room higher up."

" I don't want to go higher up. I'll go here. Just open it at once, I tell you."

The door was opened reluctantly, and two middle-aged men came in. " Always take the middle carriage of a train," said the first. " Safest in any accident, y'know. Never heard of a middle carriage of a train getting smashed up, to speak of."

The other sat heavily down just over Paul, with a comfortable grunt, and the train started, Paul feeling naturally annoyed by this intrusion, as it compelled him to remain in seclusion for the whole of the journey. " Still," he thought, " it is lucky that I had time to get under here before they came in ; it would have seemed odd if I had done it afterwards." And he resigned himself to listen to the conversation which followed.

" What was it we were talking about just now ? " began the first. " Let me see. Ah ! I remember. Yes ; it was a very painful thing—very, indeed, I assure you."

There is a certain peculiar and uncomfortable suspicion that attacks most of us at times, which cannot fairly be set down wholly to self-consciousness or an exaggerated idea of our own importance. I mean the

suspicion that a partly-heard conversation must have ourselves for its subject. More often than not, of course, it proves utterly unfounded, but once in a way, like most presentiments, it finds itself unpleasantly fulfilled.

Mr. Bultitude, though he failed to recognise either of the voices, was somehow persuaded that the conversation had something to do with himself, and listened with eager attention.

" Yes," the speaker continued ; " he was never, according to what I hear, a man of any extraordinary capacity, but he was always spoken of as a man of standing in the City, doing a safe business, not a risky one, and so on, you know. So, of course, his manner, when I called, shocked me all the more."

" Ah ! " said the other. " Was he violent or insulting, then ? "

" No, no ! I can only describe his conduct as eccentric—what one might call reprehensibly eccentric and extravagant. I didn't call exactly in the way of business, but about a poor young fellow in my house, who is, I fear, rather far gone in consumption, and, knowing he was a Life Governor, y'know, I thought he might give me a letter for the hospital. Well, when I got up to Mincing Lane——"

Paul started. It was as he had feared, then ; they were speaking of him !

" When I got there, I sent in my card with a message that, if he was engaged or anything, I would take the liberty of calling at his private house, and so on. But they said he would see me. The clerk who showed me in said : ' You'll find him a good deal changed, if you knew him, sir. We're very uneasy about him here,' which prepared me for something out of the common. Well, I went into a sort of inner room, and there he was, in his shirt-sleeves, busy over some abomination he was cooking at the stove, with the office-boy helping him ! I never was so taken aback in my life. I said something about calling another time, but Bultitude——"

VICE VERSA

Paul groaned. The blow had fallen. Well, it was better to be prepared and know the worst.

" Bultitude says, just like a great awkward schoolboy, y'know, ' What's your name ? How d'ye do ? Have some hardbake, it's just done ? ' Fancy finding a man in his position cooking toffee in the middle of the day, and offering it to a perfect stranger ! "

" Softening of the brain—must be," said the other.

" I fear so. Well, he asked what I wanted, and I told him, and he actually said he never did any business now, except sign his name where his clerks told him. He'd worked hard all his life, he said, and he was tired of it. Business was, I understood him to say, ' all rot ! '

" Then he wouldn't promise me votes or give me a letter or anything, without consulting his head clerk ; he seemed to know nothing whatever about it himself, and when that was over, he asked me a quantity of frivolous questions which appeared to have a sort of catch in them, as far as I could gather, and he was exceedingly angry when I wouldn't humour him."

" What kind of questions ? "

" Well, really I hardly know. I believe he wanted to know whether I would rather be a bigger fool than I looked or look a bigger fool than I was, and he pressed me quite earnestly to repeat some foolishness after him, about ' being a gold key,' when he said ' he was a gold lock.' I was very glad to get away from him, it was so distressing."

" They tell me he has begun to speculate, too, lately," said the other. " You see his name about in some very queer things. It's a pitiful affair altogether."

Paul writhed under his seat with shame. How could he, even if he succeeded in ousting Dick and getting back his old self, how could he ever hold up his head again after this ?

Why, Dick must be mad. Even a schoolboy would have had more caution when so much depended on it. But none would suspect the real cause of the change.

These horrible tales were no doubt being circulated everywhere !

The conversation fell back into a less personal channel again after this ; they talked of " risks," of some one who had only been " writing " a year and was doing seven thousand a week, of losses they had been " on," and of the uselessness of " writing five hundred on everything," and while at this point the train slackened and stopped—they had reached Dufferton.

There was an opening of doors all along the train, and sounds of some inquiry and answer at each. The voices became audible at length, and, as he had expected, Paul found that the Doctor, not having discovered him on the platform, was making a systematic search of the train, evidently believing that he had managed to slip in somewhere unobserved.

It was a horrible moment when the door of his compartment was flung open and a stream of ice-cold air rushed under the blue cloth which, fortunately for Paul, hung down almost to the floor.

Some one held a lantern up outside, and by its rays Paul saw from behind the hanging the upper half of Dr. Grimstone appear, very pale and polite, at the doorway. He remained there for some moments without speaking, carefully examining every corner of the compartment.

The two men on the seats drew their wraps about them and shivered, until at length one said rather testily—" Get in, sir ; kindly get in if you're coming on, please. This draught is most unpleasant ! "

" I do not propose to travel by this train, sir," said the Doctor ; " but, as a person entrusted with the care of youth, permit me to inquire whether you have seen (or, it may be assisted to conceal) a small boy of intelligent appearance——"

" Why should we conceal small boys of intelligent appearance about us, pray ? " demanded the man who had described his visit to Mincing Lane. " And may we

VICE VERSA

ask you to shut that door, and make any communications you wish to make through the window, or else come in and sit down ? "

" That's not an answer to my question, sir," retorted the Doctor. " I notice you carefully decline to say whether you have seen a boy. I consider your manner suspicious, sir ; and I shall insist on searching this carriage through and through till I find that boy ! "

Mr. Bultitude rolled himself up close against the partition at these awful words.

" Guard, guard! " shouted the first gentleman. " Come here. Here's a violent person who will search this carriage for something he has lost. I won't be inconvenienced in this way without any reason whatever ! He says we're hiding a boy in here ! "

" Guard ! " said the Doctor, quite as angrily, " I insist upon looking under these seats before you start the train. I've looked through every other carriage and he must be in here. Gentlemen, let me pass, I'll get him if I have to travel in this compartment to town with you ! "

" For peace and quietness sake, gentlemen," said the guard, " let him look round, just to ease his mind. Lend me your stick a minute, sir, please. I'll turn him out if he's anywhere about this here compartment! "

And with this he pulled Dr. Grimstone down from the footboard and mounted it himself ; after which he began to rummage about under the seats with the Doctor's heavy stick.

Every lunge found out some tender part in Mr. Bultitude's person and caused him exquisite torture ; but he clenched his teeth hard to prevent a sound, while he thought each fresh dig must betray his whereabouts.

" There," said the guard at last; " there really ain't no one there, sir, you see. I've felt everywhere and—— Hello, I certainly did feel something just then, gentlemen ! " he added, in an undertone, after a lunge which took all the breath out of Paul's body. All was lost now !

" You touch that again with that confounded stick if

you dare ! " said one of the passengers. " That's a parcel of mine. I won't have you poking holes through it in that way. Don't tell that lunatic behind you, he'll be wanting it opened to see if his boy's inside ! Now perhaps you'll let us alone ! "

" Well, sir," said the guard at last to the Doctor, as he withdrew, " he ain't in there. There's nothing under any of the seats. Your boy'll be comin' on by the next train, most likely—the 8.40. We're all behind. Right! "

" Good night, sir," said the first passenger as he leant out of the window, to the baffled schoolmaster on the platform. " You've put us to all this inconvenience for nothing, and in the most offensive way too. I hope you won't find your boy till you're in a better temper, for his sake."

" If I had you out on this platform, sir," shouted the angry Doctor, " I'd horsewhip you for that insult. I believe the boy's there and you know it. I——"

But the train swept off and, to Paul's joy and thankfulness, soon left the Doctor, gesticulating and threatening, miles behind it.

" What a violent fellow for a schoolmaster, eh ? " said one of Paul's companions, when they were fairly off again. " I wasn't going to have him turning the cushions inside out here ; we shouldn't have settled down again before we got in ! "

" No ; and if the guard hasn't, as it is, injured that Indian shawl in my parcel, I shall be—— Why, bless my soul, that parcel's not under the seat after all ! It's up in the rack. I remember putting it there now."

" The guard must have fancied he felt something ; and yet——Look here, Goldicutt ; just feel under here with your feet. It certainly does seem as if something soft was——eh ? "

Mr. Goldicutt accordingly explored Paul's ribs with his boot for some moments, which was very painful.

" Upon my word," he said at last, " it really does seem very like it. It's not hard enough for a bag or a hat-box.

VICE VERSA

It yields distinctly when you kick it. Can you fetch it out with your umbrella, do you think ? Shall we tell the guard at the next——? Lord, it's coming out of its own accord. It's a dog ! No, my stars—it's the boy, after all ! "

For Paul, alarmed at the suggestion about the guard, once more felt inclined to risk the worst and reveal himself. Begrimed with coal, smeared with whitewash, and covered with dust and flue, he crawled slowly out and gazed imploringly up at his fellow-passengers.

After the first shock of surprise they lay back in their seats and laughed till they cried.

" Why, you young rascal ! " they said, when they recovered breath, " you don't mean to say you've been under there the whole time ? "

" I have indeed," said Paul. " I — I didn't like to come out before."

" And are you the boy all this fuss was about ? Yes ? And we kept the schoolmaster off without knowing it ! Why, this is splendid, capital ! You're something like a boy, you little dog, you ! This is the best joke I've heard for many a day ! "

" I hope," said Paul, " I haven't inconvenienced you. I could not help it, really."

" Inconvenienced us ? Gad, your schoolmaster came very near inconveniencing us and you too. But there, he won't trouble any of us now. To think of our swearing by all our gods there was no boy in here, and vowing he shouldn't come in, while you were lying down there under the seat all the time ! Why, it's lovely ! The boy's got pluck and manners too. Shake hands, young gentleman, you owe us no apologies. I haven't had such a laugh for many a day ! "

" Then you—you won't give me up ? " faltered poor Paul.

" Well," said the one who was called Goldicutt, and who was a jovial old gentleman with a pink face and white whiskers, " we're not exactly going to take the trouble of getting out at the next station, and bringing

you back to Dufferton, just to oblige that hot-tempered master of yours, you know; he hasn't been so particularly civil as to deserve that."

" But if he were to telegraph and get some one to stop me at St. Pancras ? " said Paul nervously.

" Ah, he might do that, to be sure—sharp boy this—well, as we've gone so far, I suppose we must go through with the business now and smuggle the young scamp past the detectives, eh, Travers ? "

The younger man addressed assented readily enough, for the Doctor had been so unfortunate as to prejudice them both from the first by his unjustifiable suspicions, and it is to be feared they had no scruples in helping to outwit him.

Then they noticed the pitiable state Mr. Bultitude was in, and he had to give them a fair account of his escape and subsequent adventures, at which even their sympathy could not restrain delighted shouts of laughter—though Paul himself saw little enough in it all to laugh at; they asked his name, which he thought more prudent, for various reasons, to give as " Jones," and other details, which I am afraid he invented as he went on, and altogether they reached Kentish Town in a state of high satisfaction with themselves and their protege.

At Kentish Town there was one more danger to be encountered, for with the ticket collector there appeared one of the station inspectors. " Beg pardon, gentlemen," said the latter, peering curiously in, " but does that young gent in the corner happen to belong to either of you ? "

The white-whiskered gentleman seemed a little flustered at this downright inquiry, but the other was more equal to the occasion. " Do you hear that, Johnny, my boy," he said, to Paul (whom they had managed during the journey to brush and scrape into something approaching respectability), " they want to know if you belong to me. I suppose you'll allow a son to belong to his father to a certain extent, eh ? " he asked the inspector.

VICE VERSA

The man apologised for what he conceived to be a mistake. "We've orders to look out for a young gent about the size of yours, sir," he explained; "no offence meant, I'm sure," and he went away satisfied.

A very few minutes more and the train rolled in to the terminus, under the same wide arch beneath which Paul had stood, helpless and bewildered, a week ago.

"Now my advice to you, young man," said Mr. Goldcutt, as he put Paul into a cab, and pressed half-a-sovereign into his unwilling hand, "is to go straight home to Papa and tell him all about it. I daresay he won't be very hard on you—here's my card, refer him to me if you like. Good-night, my boy, good-night, and good luck to you. Gad, the best joke I've had for years!"

And the cab rolled away, leaving them standing chuckling on the platform, and, as Paul found himself plunging once more into the welcome roar and rattle of London streets, he forgot the difficulties and dangers that might yet lie before him in the thought that at last he was beyond the frontier, and, for the first time since he had slipped through the playground gate, he breathed freely.

17. *A Perfidious Ally*

"But homeward—home—what home? had he a home?
His home—he walk'd;
Then down the long street having slowly stolen,
His heart foreshadowing all calamity,
His eyes upon the stones, he reached his home."

PAUL had been careful, whilst in the hearing of his friends, to give the cabman a fictitious address, but as soon as he reached the Euston Road, he stopped the man and ordered him to put him down at the church near the south end of Westbourne Terrace, for he dared not drive up openly to his own door.

At last he found himself standing safely on the pavement, looking down the long line of yellow lamps of his own terrace, only a few hundred yards from home.

But though his purpose was now within easy reach, his spirits were far from high ; his anxiety had returned with tenfold power ; he felt no eagerness or exultation ; on the contrary, the task he had set himself had never before seemed so hopeless, so insurmountable.

He stood for some time by the railing of the church, which was lighted up for evening service, listening blankly to the solemn drone of the organ within, unable to summon up resolution to move from the spot and present himself to his unsuspecting family.

It was a cold night, with a howling wind, and high in the blue black sky fleecy clouds were coursing swiftly along ; he obliged himself to set out at last, and walked down the flags towards his house, shivering as much from nervousness as cold.

There was a dance somewhere in the terrace that evening, a large one ; as far as he could see there were close ranks of carriages with blazing lamps, and he even fancied he could hear the shouts of the link-boys and the whistles summoning cabs.

As he came nearer, he had a hideous suspicion, which soon became a certainty, that the entertainment was at his own house ; worse still, it was of a kind and on a scale calculated to shock and horrify any prudent householder and father of a family.

The balcony above the portico was positively hung with gaudy Chinese lanterns, and there were even some strange sticks and shapes up in one corner that looked suspiciously like fireworks. Fireworks in Westbourne Terrace ! What would the neighbours think or do ?

Between the wall which separates the main road from the terrace and the street front there were no less than four piano-organs, playing, it is to be feared, by express invitation ; and there was the usual crowd of idlers and loungers standing about by the awning stretched over the portico, listening to the music and loud laughter which came from the brilliantly lighted upper rooms.

Paul remembered then, too late, that Barbara in that

VICE VERSA

memorable letter of hers had mentioned a grand children's party as being in contemplation. Dick had held his tongue about it that morning ; and he himself had not thought it was to be so soon.

For an instant he felt almost inclined to turn away and give the whole thing up in sick despair—even to return to Market Rodwell and brave the Doctor's anger ; for how could he hope to explain matters to his family and servants, or get the Garuda Stone safely into his hands again before all these guests, in the whirl and tumult of an evening party ?

And yet he dared not, after all, go back to Crichton House—that was too terrible an alternative, and he obviously could not roam the world to any extent, a runaway schoolboy to all appearance, and with less than a sovereign in his pocket!

After a short struggle, he felt he must make his way in, watch and wait, and leave the rest to chance. It was his evil fate, after all, that had led him on to make his escape on this night of all others, and had allowed him to come through so much, only to be met with these unforeseen complications just when he might have imagined the worst was over.

He forced his way through the staring crowd, and went down the steps into the area ; for he naturally shrank from braving the front door, with its crowd of footmen and hired waiters.

He found the door in the basement open, which was fortunate, and slipped quietly through the pantry, intending to reach the hall by the kitchen stairs. But here another check met him. The glass door which led to the stairs happened to be shut, and he heard voices in the kitchen, which convinced him that if he wished to escape notice he must wait quietly in the darkness until the door was opened for him, whenever that might be.

The door from the pantry to the kitchen was partly open, however, and Mr. Bultitude could not avoid hearing everything that passed there, although every fresh

word added to his uneasiness, until at last he would have given worlds to escape from his involuntary position of eavesdropper.

There were only two persons just then in the kitchen : his cook, who, still in her working dress, was refreshing herself after her labours over the supper with a journal of some sort, and the housemaid, who, in neat gala costume, was engaged in fastening a pin more securely in her white cap.

" They haven't give me a answer yet, Eliza," said the cook, looking up from her paper.

" Lor, cook ! " said Eliza, " you couldn't hardly expect it, seeing you only wrote on Friday."

" No more I did, Eliza. You see it on'y began to come into my mind sudden like this last week. I'm sure I no more dreamt——. But they've answered a lady who's bin in much the same situation as me aperiently. You just 'ark to this a minute." And she proceeded to read from her paper : '*Lady Bird*,—You ask us (1) what are the signs by which you may recognise the first dawnings of your lover's affection. On so delicate a matter we are naturally averse from advising you ; your own heart must be your best guide. But perhaps we may mention a few of the most usual and infallible symptoms '—What sort of a thing is a symptim, Eliza ? "

" A symptim, cook," explained Eliza, " is somethink wrong with the inside. Her at my last place in Cadogan Square had them uncommon bad. She was what they call aesthetical, pore young thing. Them infallible ones are always the worst."

" It don't seem to make sense though, Eliza," objected cook doubtfully. " Hear how it goes on : ' Infallible symptoms. If you have truly inspired him with a genuine and lasting passion ' (don't he write beautiful ?) ' passion, he will continually haunt those places in which you are most likely to be found ' (I couldn't tell you the times master's bin down in my kitching this last

VICE VERSA

week) ; ' he will appear awkward and constrained in your presence ' (anything more awkward than master I never set eyes on. He's knocked down one of the best porcelain vegetables this very afternoon !) ; ' he will beg for any little favours, some trifle, it may be, made by your own hand ' (master's always a-asking if I've got any of those doughnuts to give away) ; ' and, if granted, he will treasure them in secret with pride and rapture ' (I don't think master kep' any of them doughnuts though, Eliza. I saw him swaller five; but you couldn't treasure a doughnut, not to mention—I'll make him a pincushion when I've time, and see what he does with it). ' If you detect all these indications of liking in the person you suspect of paying his addresses to you, you may safely reckon upon bringing him to your feet in a very short space of time. (2) Yes, fuller's earth will make them exquisitely white.' "

" There, Eliza ! " said cook, with some pride, when she had finished ; " i f it had been meant for me it couldn't have been clearer. Ain't it written nice ? And on'y to think of my bringing master to my feet! It seems almost too much for a cook to expect! "

" I wouldn't say so, cook ; I wouldn't. Have some proper pride. Don't let him think he's only to ask and have ! Why, in the *London Journal* last week there was a dook as married a governess ; and I should 'ope as a cook ranked above a governess. Nor yet master ain't a dook ; he's only in the City ! But are you sure he's not only a-trifling with your affections, cook ? He's bin very affable and pleasant with all of us lately."

" It ain't for me to speak too positive, Eliza," said cook almost bashfully, " nor to lay bare the feelings of a bosom, beyond what's right and proper. You're young yet, Eliza, and don't understand these things—leastways, it's to be hoped not " (Eliza having apparently tossed her head) ; " but do you remember that afternoon last week as master stayed at home a-playin' games with the children ? I was a-goin' upstairs to

fetch my thimble, and there, on the bedroom landin', was master all alone, with one of Master Dick's toy-guns in his 'and, and a old slouch 'at on his head.

" ' Have you got a pass, cook ? ' he says, and my 'art came right up into my mouth, he looked that severe and lofty at me. I thought he was put out about something."

" I said I didn't know as it was required, but I could get one, I says, not knowing what he was alludin' to all the same.

" But he says, quite soft and tender-like " (here Paul shivered with shame), " ' No, you needn't do that, cook, there ain't any occasion for it ; only,' he says, ' if you haven't got no pass, you'll have to give me a kiss, you know, cook ! ' I thought I should have sunk through the stairs, I was that overcome. I saw through his rouge with half an eye."

" Why, he said the same to me," said Eliza, " only I had a pass, as luck had it, which Miss Barbara give me. I'd ha' boxed his ears if he'd tried it, too, master or no master ! "

" You talk light, Eliza," said the cook sentimentally, " but you weren't there to see. It wasn't only the words, it was the way he said it, and the 'ug he gave me at the time. It was as good as a proposial. And, I tell you, whatever you may say—and mark my words—I 'ave 'opes ! "

" Then, if I was you, cook," said Eliza, " I'd try if I could get him to speak out plain in writing ; then, whatever came of it, there'd be as good as five hundred pounds in your pockets."

" Love-letters ! " cried the cook, " why, Lord love you, Eliza——Why, William, how you made me jump ! I thought you was up seem' to the supper-table."

" The pastrycook's man is looking after all that, Jane," said Boaler's voice. " I've been up outside the droring-room all this time, lookin' at the games goin' on in there. It's as good as a play to see the way as master

VICE VERSA

is a unbendin' of himself, and such a out and out stiff-un as he used to be, too ! But it ain't what I like to see in a respectable house. I'm glad I give warning. It doesn't do for a man in my position to compromise his character by such goings on. I never see anything like it in any families I lived with before. Just come up and see for yourself. You needn't mind about cleanin' of yourself—they won't see you."

So the cook allowed herself to be persuaded by Boaler, and the two went up to the hall, and, to Mr. Bultitude's intense relief, forgot to close the glazed door which cut him off from the staircase.

As he followed them upstairs at a cautious interval, and thought over what he had just so unwillingly overheard, he felt as one who had just been subjected to a moral showerbath. " That dreadful woman ! " he groaned. " Who would have dreamed that she would get such horrible ideas into her head ? I shall never be able to look either of those women in the face again : they will both have to go—and she made such excellent soup, too. I do hope that miserable Dick has not been fool enough to write to her—but no, that's too absurd."

But more than ever he began to wish that he had stayed in the playground.

When he reached the hall he stood there for some moments in anxious deliberation over his best course of proceeding. His main idea was to lie in wait somewhere for Dick, and try the result of an appeal to his better feelings to acknowledge his outcast parent and abdicate gracefully.

If that failed, and there was every reason to expect that it would fail, he must threaten to denounce him before the whole party. It would cause a considerable scandal no doubt, and be extremely repugnant to his own feelings, but still he must do it, or frighten Dick by threatening to do it, and at all hazards he must contrive during the interview⁷ to snatch or purloin the magic stone ; without that he was practically helpless.

A PERFIDIOUS ALLY

He looked round him : the study was piled up with small boys' hats and coats, and in one corner was a kind of refined bar, where till lately a trim housemaid had been dispensing coffee and weak lemonade ; she might return at any moment, he would not be safe there.

Nor would the dining-room be more secluded, for in it there was an elaborate supper being laid out by the waiters which, as far as he could see through the crack in the door, consisted chiefly of lobsters, trifle, and pink champagne. He felt a grim joy at the sight, more than he would suffer for this night's festivities.

As he stole about, with a dismal sense of the unfitness of his sneaking about his own house in this guilty fashion, he became gradually aware of the scent of a fine cigar, one of his own special Cabanas. He wondered who had the impudence to trespass on his cigar-chest ; it could hardly be one of the children.

He traced the scent to a billiard room which he had built out at the side of the house, which was a corner one, and going down to the door opened it sharply and walked in.

Comfortably imbedded in the depths of a long well-padded lounging chair, with a spirit case and two or three bottles of soda water at his elbow, sat a man who was lazily glancing through the *Field* with his feet resting on the mantelpiece, one on each side of the blazing fire. He was a man of about the middle size, with a face rather bronzed and reddened by climate, a nose slightly aquiline and higher in colour, quick black eyes with an uneasy glance in them, bushy black whiskers, more like the antiquated " Dundreary " type than modern fashion permits, and a wide flexible mouth.

Paul knew him at once, though he had not seen him for some years; it was Paradine, his disreputable brother-in-law—the " Uncle Marmaduke " who, by importing the mysterious GarudS Stone, had brought all these woes upon him ; he noticed at once that his appearance was unusually prosperous, and that the

VICE VERSA

braided smoking coat he wore over his evening clothes was new and handsome. " No wonder," he thought bitterly, " the fellow has been living on me for a week ! " He stood by the cue-rack looking at him for some time, and then he said with a cold ironic dignity that (if he had known it) came oddly from his boyish lips : " I hope you are making yourself quite comfortable ? "

Marmaduke put down his cigar and stared : " Uncommonly attentive and polite of you to inquire," he said at last, with a dubious smile, which showed a row of very white teeth, " whoever you are. If it will relieve your mind at all to know, young man, I'm happy to say I am tolerably comfortable, thanks."

" I — I concluded as much," said Paul, nearly choked with rage.

" You've been very nicely brought up," said Uncle Marmaduke, " I can see that at a glance. So you've come in here, like me, eh ? because the children bore you, and you want a quiet gossip over the world in general ? Sit down then, take a cigar, if you don't think it will make you very unwell. I shouldn't recommend it myself, you know, before supper—but you're a man of the world and know what's good for you. Come along, enjoy yourself till you find yourself getting queer—then drop it."

Mr. Bultitude had always detested the man—there was an underbred swagger and familiarity in his manner that made him indescribably offensive ; just now he seemed doubly detestable, and yet Paul by a strong effort succeeded in controlling his temper.

He could not afford to make enemies just then, and objectionable as the man was, his astuteness made him a valuable ally ; he determined, without considering the risk of making such a confidant, to tell him all and ask his advice and help.

" Don't you know me, Paradine ? "

" I don't think I have the privilege—you're one of Miss Barbara's numerous young friends, I suppose ? "

and yet, now I look at you, you don't seem to be exactly got up for an evening party; there's something in your voice, too, I ought to know."

" You ought," said Paul, with a gulp. " My name is Paul Bultitude ! "

" To be sure ! " cried Marmaduke. " By Jove, then, you're my young nephew, don't you know ; I'm your long-lost uncle, my boy, I am indeed (I'll excuse you from coming to my arms, however ; I never was good at family embraces). But, I say, you little rascal, you've never been asked to these festivities, you ought to be miles away, fast asleep in your bed at school. What in the name of wonder are you doing here ? "

" I've—left school," said Paul.

" So I perceive. Sulky because they left you out of all this, eh ? Thought you'd turn up in the middle of the banquet, like the spectre bridegroom—* the worms they crawled in, and the worms they crawled out,' eh ? Well, I like your pluck, but, ahem—I'm afraid you'll find they've rather an unpleasant way of laying your kind of apparitions."

" Never mind about that," said Paul hurriedly ; " I have something I must tell you—I've no time to lose. I'm a desperate man ! "

" You are," Paradine assented with a loud laugh, " oh, you are indeed ! ' a desperate man.' Capital ! a stern chase, eh ? the schoolmaster close behind with the birch ! It's quite exciting, you know, but, seriously, I'm very much afraid you'll catch it ! "

" If," began Mr. Bultitude in great embarrassment, " if I was to tell you that I was not myself at all—but somebody else, a—in fact, an entirely different person from what I seem to you to be—I suppose you would laugh ? "

" I beg your pardon," said his brother-in-law politely, " I don't thifrk I quite catch the idea."

" When I assure you now, solemnly, as I stand here before you, that I am not the miserable boy whose

VICE VERSA

form I am condemned to—to wear, you'll say it is incredible ? "

" Not at all—by no means, I quite believe you. Only (really it's a mere detail), but I should rather like to know, if you're not that particular boy, what other boy you may happen to be. You'll forgive my curiosity."

" I'm not a boy at all—I'm your own unhappy brother-in-law, Paul ! You don't believe me, I see."

" Oh, pardon me, it's perfectly clear !)'ou're not your own son, but your own father—it's a little confusing at first, but no doubt common enough. I'm glad you mentioned it, though."

" Go on," said Paul bitterly, " make light of it—you fancy you are being very clever, but you will find out the truth in time ! "

" Not without external assistance, I'm afraid," said Paradine calmly. " A more awful little liar for your age I never saw ! "

" I'm tired of this," said Paul. " Only listen to reason and common sense ! "

" Only give me a chance."

" I tell you," protested Paul earnestly, " it's the sober awful truth—Fm not a boy, it's years since I was a boy—I'm a middle-aged man, thrust into this, this humiliating form."

" Don't say that," murmured the other ; " it's an excellent fit—very becoming, I assure you."

" Do you want to drive me mad with your clumsy jeers ? " cried Paul. " Look at me. Do I speak, do I behave, like an ordinary schoolboy ? "

" I really hope not—for the sake of the rising generation," said Uncle Marmaduke, chuckling at his own powers of repartee.

" You are very jaunty to-day—you look as if you were well off," said Paul slowly. " I remember a time when a certain bill was presented to me, drawn by you, and appearing to be accepted (long before I ever saw it) by me. I consented to meet it for my poor Maria's

sake, and because to disown my signature would have ruined you for life. Do you remember how you went down on your knees in my private room and swore you would reform and be a credit to your family yet ? You weren't quite so well off, or so jaunty then, unless I am very much mistaken."

These words had an extraordinary effect upon Uncle Marmaduke ; he turned ashy white, and his quick eyes shifted restlessly as he half rose from his chair and threw away his unfinished cigar.

" You young hound ! " he said, breathing hard and speaking under his breath. " How did you get hold of that—that lying story ? Your father must have let it out ! Why do you bring up bygones like this ? You—you're a confounded, disagreeable little prig ! Who told you to play an ill-natured trick of this sort on an uncle, who may have been wild and reckless in his youth—was in fact—but who never, never misused his relation towards you as—as an uncle ? "

" How did I get hold of the story ? " said Paul, observing the impression he had made. " Do you think if I were really a boy of thirteen I should know as much about you as I do ? Do you want to know more ? Ask, if you dare ! Shall I tell you how it was you left your army coach without going up for examination ? Will you have the story of your career in my old friend Parkinson's counting-house, or the real reason of your trip to New York, or what it was that made your father add that codicil, cutting you off with a set of engravings of the ' Rake's Progress,' and a guinea to pay for framing them ? I can tell you all about it, if you care to hear."

" No ! " shrieked Paradine, " I won't listen. When you grow up, ask your father to buy you a cheap Society journal. You're cut out for an editor of one. It doesn't interest me."

" Do you believe my story or not ? " asked Paul.

" I don't know. Who could believe it ? " said the other sullenly. " How can you possibly account for it ? "

VICE VERSA

" Do you remember giving Maria a little sandal-wood box with a small stone in it ? " said Paul.

" I have some recollection of giving her something of that kind. A curiosity, wasn't it ? "

" I wish I had never seen it. That infernal stone, Paradine, has done all this to me. Did no one tell you it was supposed to have any magic power ? "

" Why, now I think of it, that old black rascal, Bindabun Doss, did try to humbug me with some such story ; said it was believed to be a talisman, but the secret was lost. I thought it was just his stingy way of trying to make the rubbish out as something priceless, as it ought to have been, considering all I did for the old ruffian."

" You told Maria it was a talisman. Bindabun what's-his-name was right. It is a talisman of the deadliest sort. I'll soon convince you, if you will only hear me out."

And then, in white-hot wrath and indignation, Mr. Bultitude began to tell the story I have already attempted to sketch here, dwelling bitterly on Dick's heartless selfishness and cruelty, and piteously on his own incredible sufferings, while Uncle Marmaduke, lolling back in his armchair with an attempt (which was soon abandoned) to retain a smile of amused scepticism on his face, heard him out in complete silence and with all due gravity.

Indeed, Paul's manner left him no room for further unbelief. His tale, wild and improbable as it was, was too consistent and elaborate for any schoolboy to have invented, and, besides, the imposture would have been so entirely purposeless.

When his brother-in-law had come to the end of his sad history, Paradine was silent for some time. It was some relief to know that the darkest secrets of his life had not been ferreted out by a phenomenally sharp nephew ; but the change in the situation was not without its drawbacks—it remained to be seen how it might

affect himself. He already saw his reign in Westbourne Terrace threatened with a speedy determination unless he played his cards well.

" Well," he said at last, with a swift, keen glance at Paul, who sat anxiously waiting for his next words ; " suppose I were to say that I think there may be something in this story of yours, what then ? What is it you want me to do for you ? "

" Why," said Paul, " with all you owe to me, now you know the horrible injustice I have had to bear, you surely don't mean to say that you won't help me to right myself ? "

" And if I did help you, what then ? "

" Why, I should be able to recover all I have lost, of course," said Mr. Bultitude. He thought his brother-in-law had grown very dull.

" Ah, but I mean, what's to become of *me* ? "

" You ? " repeated Paul (he had not thought of that).

" Well, hum, from what I know and what you know that I know about your past life, you can't expect me to encourage you to remain here ? "

" No," said Uncle Marmaduke. " Of course not; very right and proper."

" But," said Paul, willing to make all reasonable concessions, " anything I can do to advance your prospects—such as paying your passage out to New York, you know, and so on—I should be very ready to do."

" Thank you ! " said the other.

" And even, if necessary, provide you with a small fund to start afresh upon—honestly," said Paul; " you will not find me difficult to deal with."

" It's a dazzling proposition," remarked Paradine drily, " You have such an alluring way of putting things. But the fact, is, you'll hardly believe it, but I'm remarkably well off here. I am indeed. Your son, you know, though not you (except as a mere matter of form), really makes, as they say of the marmalade in the advertisements, an admirable substitute. I doubt, I

VICE VERSA

do assure you, whether you yourself would have received me with quite the same warmth and hospitality I have met with from him."

" So do I , " said Paul ; " very much."

" Just so ; for, without your admirable business capacity and extraordinary firmness of character, you know, he has, if you'll excuse my saying so, a more open guileless nature, a more entire and touching faith in his fellow-man and brother-in-law, than were ever yours."

" To say that to me," said Paul hotly, " is nothing less than sheer impudence."

" My dear Paul (it does seem deuced odd to be talking to a little shrimp like you as a grown-up brother-in-law. I shall get used to it presently, I daresay). I flatter myself I am a man of the world. We're dealing with one another now, as the lawyers have it, at arm's length. Just put yourself in my place (you're so remarkably good at putting yourself in other people's places, you know). Look at the thing from my point of view. Accidentally dropping in at your offices to negotiate (if I could) a small temporary loan from anyone I chanced to meet on the premises, I find myself, to my surprise, welcomed with effusion into what I then imagined to be your arms. More than that, I was invited here for an indefinite time, all my little eccentricities unmentioned, overlooked. I was deeply touched (it struck me, I confess, at one time that you must be touched too), but I made the best use of my opportunities. I made hay while the sun shone."

" Do you mean to make me lose my temper ? " interrupted Paul. " It will not take much more."

" I have no objection. I find men as a rule easier to deal with when they have once lost their temper, their heads so often go too. But to return : a man with nerve and his fair share of brains, like myself, only wants a capitalist (he need not be a millionaire) at his back to conquer the world. It's not by any means my first

campaign, and Eve had my reverses, but I see victory in my grasp, sir, in my grasp at last ! "

Paul groaned.

" Now you—it's not your fault, I know, a mere defect of constitution ; but you, as a speculator, were, if I may venture to put it so, not worth your salt ; no boldness, no dash, all caution. But your promising son is a regular whale on speculation, and I may tell you that we stand in together in some little ventures that would very probably make your hair stand on end—vo// wouldn't have touched them. And yet there's money in every one of them."

" My money ! " said Paul savagely ; " and it won't come out again."

" You don't know much about these things, you see," said Marmaduke ; "I tell you I have my eye on some fine openings for capital."

" Your pockets always were very fine openings for capital," retorted Paul.

" Ha, ha, deuced sharp that ! But, to come to the point, you were always a sensible practical kind of a fellow, and you must see, that, for me to back you up and upset this young rascal who has stepped into your slippers, might be morally meritorious enough, but, treating it from a purely pecuniary point of view, it's not business."

" I see," said Mr. Bultitude heavily ; " then you side against me ? "

" Did I ever say I would side against you ? Let us hear first what you propose to do."

Paul, upon this, explained that, as he believed the Stone still retained its power of granting one wish to any other person who happened to get hold of it, his idea was to get possession of it somehow from Dick, who probably would have it about him somewhere, and then pass it on to some one whom he could trust not to misuse it so basely.

" A good idea that, Paul, my boy," said Paradine,

VICE VERSA

smiling ; " but you don't imagine our young friend would be quite such an idiot as not to see your game ! Why, he would pitch the Stone in the gutter or stamp it to powder, rather than let you get hold of it."

" He's quite capable of it," said Paul; " in fact, he threatened to do worse than that. I doubt if I shall ever be able to manage it myself ; but what am I to do ? I must try, and I've no time to lose about it either."

" I tell you this," said Marmaduke, " if you let him see you here, it's all up with you. What you want is some friend to manage this for you, some one he won't suspect. Now, suppose I were willing to risk it for you ? "

" You ! " cried Paul, with involuntary distrust.

" Why not ? " said Marmaduke, with a touch of feeling. " Ah, I see, you can't trust me. You've got an idea into your head that I'm a thorough-paced rascal, without a trace of human feeling about me. I daresay I deserve it, I daresay I do ; but it's not generous, my boy, for all that. I hope to show you your mistake yet, if you give me the chance. You allow yourself to be prejudiced by the past, that's where you make your mistake. I only put before you clearly and plainly what it was I was giving up in helping you. A fellow may have a hard cynical kind of way of putting things, and yet, take my word for it, Paul, have a heart as tender as a spring chicken underneath. I believe I'm something like that myself. I tell you I'm sorry for you. I don't like to see a family man of your position in such a regular deuce of a hole. I feel bound to give you a lift out of it, and let my prospects take their own chance. I leave the gratitude to you. When I've done, kick me down the doorsteps if you like. I shall go out into the world with the glow of self-approval (and rapid motion) warming my system. Take my advice, don't attempt to tackle Master Dick yourself. Leave him to me."

" If I could only make up my mind to trust you ! " muttered Paul.

" The old distrust ! " cried Marmaduke ; " you can't forget. You won't believe a poor devil like me can have any gratitude, any disinterestedness left in him. Never mind, I'll go. I'll leave it to you. I'll send Dick in here, and we shall see whether he's such a fool as you think him."

" No," said Paul, " no ; I feel you're right; that would never do."

" It would be for my advantage, I think," said the other, " but you had better take me while I am in a magnanimous mood, the opportunity may never occur again. Come, am I to help you or not ? Yes or no ? "

" I must accept," said Paul reluctantly ; " I can't find Boaler now, and it might take hours to make him see what I wanted. I'll trust to your honour. What shall I do ? "

" Do ? Get away from this, he'll be coming in here very soon to see me. Run away and play with the children or hide in the china closet—anything but stay here."

" I — I must be here while you are managing him," objected Paul.

" Nonsense ! " said Paradine angrily. " I tell you it will spoil all, unless you—who's that ? it's his step—too late now—dash it all ! Behind that screen, quick—don't move for your life till I tell you you may come out ! "

Mr. Bultitude had no choice ; there was just time to set up an old folding screen which stood in a corner of the room and slip behind it before the door opened.

It might not be the highest wisdom to trust everything to his new ally in this manner ; but what else could he do, except stand by in forced inactivity while the momentous duel was being fought out ? Just then, at all events, he saw no other course.

18. *Run to Earth*

" The is noon in this hous schuld bynde me this night."

—*The Coke's Tale of Gamelyn.*

DICK burst open the door of the billiard-room rather suddenly, and then stood holding on to the handle and smiling down upon his relative in a happy and anectionate but rather weak manner.

" So here you are ! " he said. " Been lookin' for you everywhere. What's good of shutting 'self in here ? Come up and play gamesh. No ? Come in and have shupper. Fve had shupper."

" So I perceive/" observed Uncle Marmaduke ; and the fact was certainly obvious enough.

" Tell y'what I did," giggled the wretched Dick. " You know I never did get what I call regular good blow out—always some one to shay ' had quite 'nough ' 'fore I'd begun. So I thought this time I would have a tuck-in till—till I felt tired, and I—he-he-he—I got down 'fore anybody elsh and helped myself. Had first go-in. No one to help to thingsh. No girlsh to bother. It was prime ! When they've all gone up again you and me'll go in and have shome more, eh ? "

" You're a model host," said his uncle.

" It's a good shupper," Dick went on. " I ought to know. I've had some of everything. It'sh almost too good for kids. But it'sh a good thing I went in first. After I'd been in a little time I saw a sponge-cake on the table, and when I tried it, what d'ye think I found ? It was as full inside of brandy-an'-sherry as it could be. All it could do to shtand ! I saw d'rectly it washn't in condition come to table, and I said, ' Take it away ! take it away ! It'sh drunk ; it'sh a dishgraceful sight for children ! ' But they wouldn't take it away ; sho I had to take it away. But you can't take away a whole tipshy-cake ! "

" I am quite sure you did your best," murmured Paradine.

" Been having such gamesh upstairs ! " said Dick, with another giggle. " That li'l Dolly Merridew's jolly girl. Not sho nice as Dulcie, though. Here, you, let'sh go up and let off fireworksh on balcony, eh ? Letsh have jolly lark ! "

" No, no," said his uncle. " You and I are too old for that sort of thing. You should leave the larks to the young fellows."

" How do you know I'm too old for sorterthing ? " said Dick, with an offended air.

" Well, you're not a young man any longer, you know. You ought to behave like the steady old buffer you look."

" Why ? " demanded Dick ; " why should I behave like shteady ole buffer, when I don't feel shteady ole buffer ? What do you want shpoil fun for ? Tell you I shall do jus' zackly wharriplease. And, if you shay any more, I'll punch y' head ! "

" No, no," said his uncle, slightly alarmed at this intimation. " Come, you're not going to quarrel with me, Fm sure ! "

" All ri'," said Dick. " No ; I won' quarrel. Don' wanter quarrel anybody."

" That's right," said Paradine. " I knew you were a noble fellow ! "

" Sho I am," said Dick, shaking hands with effusion. " Sho are you. Nearly ash noble 'sh me. There, you're jolly good fellow. I say, Fve goo' mind tell you something. Make you laugh. But I won't ; not now."

" Oh, you can tell me," said Marmaduke. " No secrets between friends, you know."

" Shan't tell you now," said Dick. " Keep shcret little longer."

" Do you know, my friend, that there's something very odd about you Fve noticed lately ? Something that makes me almost fancy sometimes you're not what you pretend to be."

Dick sat down heavily on one of the leather benches placed against the wall.

VICE VERSA

" Eh, what d'you shay ?" he gasped. " Shay tharragain."

" You look to me," said Marmaduke slowly, " like some one excellently made up for the part of heavy father, without a notion how to play it. Dick, you young dog, you see I know you ! You can't take me in with all this. You'd better tell me all about it."

Dick seemed almost sobered by this shock.

" You've found me out," he repeated dully. " Then it's all up. If you've found me out, everybody elsh can find me out! "

" No, no ; it's not so bad as that, my boy. I've better eyes than most people, and then I had the privilege of knowing your excellent father rather well once upon a time. You haven't studied his little peculiarities closely enough; but you'll improve. By the way, where is your excellent father all this time ? "

" He's all right," said Dick, beginning to chuckle. " He-he. He's at school, he is ! "

" At school. You mean to say you've put him to school at his time of life ! He's rather old for that sort of thing, isn't he ? They don't take him on the ordinary terms, do they ? "

" Ah," said Dick, " that'sh where it is. He isn't old, you see, now, to look at."

" Not old to look at! Then how on earth——I should like to know how you managed all that. What have you been doing to the poor gentleman ? "

" That'sh my affair," said Dick. " An' if I don' tell you you won' find that out anyway ! "

" There's only one way you could have done it," said Paradine, pretending to hesitate. " It must have been done by some meddling with magic. Now what——Let me see——yes——Surely the Stone I brought your poor mother from India was given to me as a talisman of some sort ? You can't have been sharp enough to get hold of that ! "

" How did you know ? " cried Dick sharply. " Who told you ? "

" I am right, then ? Well, you are a clever fellow. I should like to know how you did it, now ? "

" Did it with the Shtone," said Dick, evidently discomposed by such unexpected penetration, but unable to prevent a little natural complacency. " All my own idea. No one helped me. It—it wasn't sho bad for me, wash it ? "

" Bad ! it was capital ! " cried Marmaduke enthusiastically. " It was a stroke of genius ! And so my Indian Stone has done all this for you. Sounds like an Arabian Night, by Jove ! By-the-by, you don't happen to have it about you, do you ? I should rather like to look at it again. It's a real curiosity after this."

Paul trembled with anxiety. Would Dick be induced to part with it ? If so, he was saved ! But Dick looked at his uncle's outstretched hand, and wagged his head with tipsy cunning.

" I dareshay you would," he said, " but I'm not sho green as all that. Don't let that Stone out of my hands for anyone."

" Why, I only wanted to look at it for a minute or two," said Marmaduke ; " I wouldn't hurt it or lose it."

" You won' get chance," said Dick.

" Oh, very well," said Paradine carelessly, " just as you please, it doesn't matter ; though when we come to talk things over a little, you may find it better to trust me more than that."

" Wha' do you mean ? " said Dick uneasily.

" Well, I'll try to explain as well as I can, my boy (drink a little of this soda water first, it's an excellent thing after supper) ; there, you're better now, aren't you ? Now, I've found you out, as you see ; but only because I knew something of the powers of this Stone of yours, and guessed the rest. It doesn't at all follow that other people, who know nothing at all, will be as sharp ; if you're more careful about your behaviour in future—unless, unless, young fellow——" and here he paused meaningly.

VICE VERSA

" Unless what ? " asked Dick suspiciously.

" Unless I chose to tell them what I've found out."

" What would you tell them ? " said Dick.

" What ? Why, what I know of this talisman ; tell them to use their eyes ; they wouldn't be very long before they found out that something was wrong. And when one or two of your father's friends once get hold of the idea, your game will be very soon over—you know that as well as I do."

" But," stammered Dick, " you wouldn't go and do beastly mean thing like that ? I've not been bad fellow to you."

" The meanness, my dear boy, depends entirely upon the view you take of it. Now, the question with me, as a man of honour (and I may tell you an over-nice sense of honour has been a drawback I've had to struggle against all my life), the question with me is this : Is it not my plain duty to step in and put a stop to this topsy-turvy state of things, to show you up as the barefaced young impostor you are, and restore my unhappy brother-in-law to his proper position ? "

" Very well expressed," thought Paul, who had been getting uncomfortable ; " he has a heart, as he said, after all ! "

" How does that seem to strike you ? " added Paradine.

" It shtrikes me as awful rot," said Dick, with refreshing candour.

" It's the language of conscience, but I don't expect you to see it in the same light. I don't mind confessing to you, either, that I'm a poor devil to whom money and a safe and respectable position (all of which I have here) are great considerations. But whenever I see the finger of duty and honour and family affection all beckoning me along a particular road, I make a point of obeying their monitions—occasionally. I don't mean to say that I never have bolted down a back way, instead, when it was made worth my while, or that I never will."

" I wonder what he's driving at now," thought Paul.

" I don't know about duty and honour, and all that," said Dick ; " my head aches, it's the noise they're making upstairs. Are you goin' to tell ? "

" The fact is, my dear boy, that when one has had a keen sense of honour in constant use for several years, it's like most other articles, apt to become a little the worse for wear. Mine is not what it used to be, Dicky (that's your name, isn't it ?). Our powers fail as we grow old."

" I don' know what you're talking about ! " said Dick helplessly. " Do tell me what you mean to do."

" Well then, your head's clear enough to understand this much, I hope," said Paradine a little impatiently, " that, if I did my duty and exposed you, you wouldn't be able to keep up the farce for a single hour, in spite of all your personal advantages—you know that, don't you ? "

" I shpose I know that," said Dick feebly.

" You know too, that if I could be induced—mind, I don't say I can—to hold my tongue and stay on here and look after you and keep you from betraying yourself by any more of these schoolboy follies, there's not much fear that anyone else will ever find out the secret——"

" Which are you going to do, then ? " said Dick.

" Suppose I say that I like you, that you have shown me more kindness in a single week than ever your respectable father has since I first made his acquaintance ? Suppose I say that I am willing to let the sense of honour and duty, and all the rest of it, go overboard together ; that we two together are a match for Papa, wherever he may be and whatever he chooses to say and **do ?** "

There was a veiled defiance in his voice that seemed meant for more than Dick, and alarmed Mr. Bultitude ; however, he tried to calm his uneasiness and persuade himself that it was part of the plot.

" Will you say that ? " cried Dick excitedly.

" On one condition, which I'll tell you by-and-by.

VICE VERSA

Yes, I'll stand by you, my boy, I'll coach you till I make you a man of business every bit as good as your father, and a much better man of the world. I'll show you how to realise a colossal fortune if you only take my advice. And we'll pack Papa off to some place abroad where he'll have no holidays and give no trouble ! "

" No," said Dick firmly ; "I won't have that. After all, he's my governor."

" Do what you like with him then, he can't do much harm. I tell you, I'll do all this, on one condition—it's a very simple one——"

" What is it ? " asked Dick.

" This. You have, somewhere or other, the Stone that has done all this for you—you may have it about you at this very moment—ah ! " (as Dick made a sudden movement towards his white waistcoat) " I thought so ! Well, I want that Stone. You were afraid to leave it in my hands for a minute or two just now ; you must trust me with it altogether."

Paul was relieved ; of course this was merely an artifice to recover the Garudd Stone, and Marmaduke was not playing him false after all—he waited breathlessly for Dick's answer.

" No," said Dick, " I can't do that; I want it too."

" Why, man, what use is it to you ? it only gives you one wish, you can't use it again."

Dick mumbled something about his being ill, and Barbara wishing him well again.

" I suppose I can do that as well as Barbara," said his uncle. " Come, don't be obstinate, give me the Stone ; it's very important that it should be in safe hands."

" No," said Dick obstinately ; he was fumbling all the time irresolutely in his pockets ; "I mean to keep it myself."

" Very well then, I have done with you. To-morrow morning I shall step up to Mincing Lane, and then to your father's solicitor. I think his offices are in Bedford Row, but I can easily find out at your father's

place. After that, young man, you'll have a very short time to amuse yourself in, so make the best of it."

"No, don't leave me, let me alone for a minute," pleaded Dick, still fumbling.

At this a sudden suspicion of his brother-in-law's motives for wishing to get the Stone into his own hands overcame all Paul's prudence. If he was so clever in deceiving Dick, might he not be cheating *him*, too, just as completely? He could wait no longer, but burst from behind the screen and rushed in between the pair.

"Go back!" screamed Paradine. "You infernal old idiot, you've ruined everything!"

"I won't go back," said Paul, "I don't believe in you. I'll hide no longer. Dick, I forbid you to trust that man."

Dick had risen in horror at the sudden apparition, and staggered back against the wall, where he stood staring stupidly at his unfortunate father with fixed and vacant eyes.

"Badly as you've treated me, I'd rather trust you than that shifty plausible fellow there. Just look at me, Dick, and then say if you can let this cruelty go on. If you knew all I've suffered since I have been among those infernal boys, you would pity me, you would indeed. . . . If you send me back there again, it will kill me. . . . You know as well as I do that it is worse for me than ever it could be for you. . . . You can't really justify yourself because of a thoughtless wish of mine, spoken without the least intention of being taken at my word. Dick, I may not have shown as much affection for you as I might have done, but I don't think I deserve all this. Be generous with me now, and I swear you will never regret it."

Dick's lips moved; there really was something like pity and repentance in his face, muddled and dazed as his general expression was by his recent over-indulgence, but he said nothing.

"Give papa the Stone by all means," sneered Paradine.

VICE VERSA

" If you do, he will find some one to wish the pair of you back again, and then, back you go to school again, the laughing-stock of everybody, you silly young cub ! "

" Don't listen to him, Dick," urged Paul. " Give it to me, for Heaven's sake ; if you let him have it, he'll use it to ruin us all."

But Dick turned his white face to the rival claimants and said, getting the words out with difficulty : " Papa, I'm shorry. It is a shame. If I had the Shtone, I really would give it you, upon my word-an'-honour I would. But—but, now I can't ever give it up to you. It'sh gone. Losht ! "

" Lost! " cried Marmaduke. " When, where ? When do you last recollect seeing it ? you must know ! "

" In the morning," said Dick, twirling his chain, where part of the cheap gilt fastening still hung.

" No ; afternoon. I don't know," he added helplessly.

Paul sank down on a chair with a heartbroken groan ; a moment ago he had felt himself very near his goal, he had regained something of his old influence over Dick, he had actually managed to touch his heart—and now it was all in vain !

Paradine's jaw fell; he, too, had had his dreams of doing wonderful things with the talisman after he had cajoled Dick to part with it. Whether the restoration of his brother-in-law formed any part of his programme, it is better, perhaps, not to inquire. His dreams were scattered now ; the Stone might be anywhere, buried in London mud, lying on railway ballast, or ground to powder by cartwheels. There was little chance, indeed, that even the most liberal rewards would lead to discovery. He swore long and comprehensively.

As for Mr, Bultitude, he sat motionless in his chair> staring in dull, speechless reproach at the conscience-stricken Dick, who stood in the corner blinking and whimpering with an abject penitence, odd and painful to see in one of his portly form. The children had now apparently finished supper, for there were sounds above

as of dancing, and " Sir Roger de Coverley," with its rollicking, never-wearying repetition, was distinctly audible above the din and laughter. Once before, a week ago that very day, had that heartless piano mocked him with its untimely gaiety.

But things were not at their worst even yet, for, while they sat like this, there was a sharp, short peal at the house-bell, followed by loud and rather angry knocking, for carriages being no longer expected, the servants and waiters had now closed the front-door, and left the passage for the supper-room.

" The visitors' bell ! " cried Paul, roused from his apathy ; and he rushed to the window which commanded a side-view of the portico ; it might be only a servant calling for one of the children, but he feared the worst, and could not rest till he knew it.

It was a rash thing to do, for as he drew the blind, he saw a large person in a heavy Inverness cloak standing on the steps, and (which was worse) the person both saw and recognised *him* !

With fascinated horror, Mr. Bultitude saw the Doctor's small grey eyes fixed angrily on him, and knew that he was hunted down at last.

He turned to the other two with a sort of ghastly composure : " It's all over now," he said. " I've just seen Dr. Grimstone standing on my doorstep ; he has come after me,"

Uncle Marmaduke gave a malicious little laugh : " I'm sorry for you, my friend," he said, " but I really can't help it."

" You can," said Paul ; " you can tell him what you know. You can save me."

" Very poor economy that," said Marmaduke airily. " I prefer spending to saving, always did. I have my own interests to consider, my dear Paul."

" Dick," said poor Mr. Bultitude, disgusted at this exhibition of selfishness, " you said you were sorry just now. Will you tell him the truth ? "

VICE VERSA

But Dick was quite unnerved, he cowered away, almost crying ; " I daren't, I daren't," he stammered ; " I — I can't go back to the fellows like this. I'm afraid to tell him. I — I want to hide somewhere."

And certainly he was. in no condition to convince an angry schoolmaster of anything whatever, except that he was in a state very unbecoming to the head of a family.

It was all over ; Paul saw that too well, he dashed frantically from the fatal billiard-room, and in the hall met Boaler preparing to admit the visitor.

" Don't open the door ! " he screamed. " Keep him out, you mustn't let him in. It's Dr. Grimstone."

Boaler, surprised as he naturally was at his young master's unaccountable appearance and evident panic, nevertheless never moved a muscle of his face ; he was one of those perfectly bred servants, who, if they chanced to open the door to a ghoul or a skeleton, would merely inquire, " What name, if you please ? "

" I must go and ask your Par, then, Master Dick ; there's time to 'ook it upstairs while I'm gone. I won't say nothing," he added compassionately.

Paul lost no time in following this suggestion, but rushed upstairs, two or three steps at the time, stumbling at every flight, with a hideous nightmare feeling that some invisible thing behind was trying to trip up his heels.

He rushed blindly past the conservatory, which was lit up by Chinese lanterns and crowded with little " Kate Greenaway " maidens crowned with fantastic headdresses out of the crackers, and comparing presents with boy-lovers ; he upset perspiring waiters with glasses and trays, and scattered the children sitting on the stairs, as he bounded on in his reckless flight, leaving crashes of glass behind him.

He had no clear idea of what he meant to do ; he thought of barricading himself in his bedroom and hiding in the wardrobe ; he had desperate notions of getting

on to the housetop by means of a step-ladder and the sky-light above the nursery landing ; on one point he was resolved—he would not be retaken *alive* !

Never before in this commonplace London world of ours was an unfortunate householder hunted up his own staircase in this distressing manner ; even his terror did not blind him to the extreme ignominy and injustice of his position.

And below he heard the bell ringing more and more impatiently, as the Doctor still remained on the wrong side of the door. In another minute he must be admitted—and then !

Who will not sympathise with Mr. Bultitude as he approaches the crisis of his misfortunes ? I protest, for my own part, that as I am compelled to describe him springing from step to step in wild terror, like a highly respectable chamois before some Alpine marksman, my own heart bleeds for him, and I hasten to end my distressing tale, and make the rest of it as little painful as I may with honesty.

19. *The Reckoning*

MONTR. The father is victorious.

BELF. Let us haste

To gratulate his conquest.

IST CAPT. We to mourn

The fortune of the son.

MASSINGER. *The Unnatural Combat.*

POOOR Mr. Bultitude, springing wildly upstairs in a last desperate effort to avoid capture, had now almost reached his goal. Just above him was the nursery landing, with its little wooden gate, and near it, leaning against the wall, was a pair of kitchen steps, with which he had hopes of reaching the roof, or the cistern loft, or some other safe and inaccessible place. Better a night spent on the slates amongst the chimney-pots than a bed in that terrible No. 6 Dormitory !

VICE VERSA

But here, too, fate was against him. He was not more than half-a-dozen steps from the top, when, to his unspeakable horror, he saw a small form in a white frock and cardinal-red sash come running out of the nursery, and begin to descend slowly and cautiously, clinging to the banisters with one chubby little hand.

It was his youngest son, Roly, and as soon as he saw this, he lost hope once and for all; he could not escape being recognised, the child would probably refuse to leave him, and even if he did contrive to get away from him, it would be hopeless to make Roly understand that he was not to betray his hiding-place.

So he stopped on the stairs, aghast at this new misfortune, and feeling himself at the end of all his resources. Roly knew him at once, and began to dance delightedly up and down on the stair in his little bronze shoes. " Buzzer Dicky," he cried, " dear buzzer Dicky, turn 'ome to party ! "

" It's not brother Dicky," said Paul miserably ; " it's all a mistake."

" Oh, but it is though," said Roly ; " and you don't know what Roly's found."

" No, no," said Paul, trying to pass (which, as Roly persisted in leaping joyously from side to side of the narrow stair, was difficult) ; " you shall show me another time. Fm in a hurry, my boy, I've got an appointment."

" Roly's got something better than that," observed the child.

Mr. Bultitude, in spite of his terror, was too much afraid of hurting him by brushing roughly past to attempt such a thing, so he tried diplomacy. " Well, what has Roly found—a cracker ? "

" No, no, better than a cwacker—you guess."

" I can't guess," said Paul ; " never mind, I don't want to know."

" Well then," said Roly, " there." And he slowly unclosed a fat little fist, and in it Paul saw, with a

THE RECKONING

revulsion of feeling that turned him dizzy and faint, the priceless talisman itself, the identical Garuda Stone, with part of the frail gilt ring still attached to it.

The fastening had probably given way during Master Dick's uproarious revels in the drawing-room, and Roly must have picked it up on the carpet shortly afterwards.

"Isn't it a pitty sing?" said Roly, insisting that his treasure should be duly admired.

"A very pretty thing," said his father, hoar.se and panting; "but it's mine, Roly, it's mine!"

And he tried to snatch it, but Roly closed his fist over it and pouted, "It isn't yours," he said, "it's Roly's. Roly found it."

Paul's fears rose again; would he be wrecked in port after all? His ear, unnaturally strained, caught the sound of the front door being opened, he heard the Doctor's deep voice booming faintly below, then the noise of persons ascending.

"Roly shall have it, then," he said perfidiously, "if he will say after me what I tell him. Say, 'I wish Papa and Brother Dick back as they were before,' Roly."

"Ith it a game?" asked Roly, his face clearing and evidently delighted w^rith his eccentric brother Dick, who had run all the way home from school to play games with him on the staircase.

"No—yes!" cried Paul, "it's a very funny game; only do what I tell you. Now say, 'I wish Papa and Brother Dick back again as they were before.' I'll give you a sugar-plum if you say it nicely."

"What sort of sugar-plum?" demanded Roly, who inherited business instincts.

"Any sort you like best!" almost shrieked Paul; "oh, do get on!"

"Lots of sugar-plums, then. 'I with' — I forget what you told me—oh, 'I with Papa and——' there'th thomebody tummin' upstairs!" he broke off suddenly; "it'h nurth tummin' to put me to bed. I don't want to go to bed yet."

VICE VERSA

" And you shan't go to bed ! " cried Paul, for he too thought he heard some one. " Never mind nurse, finish the—the game."

—' Papa and Buzzy Dicky back again as—as they were before,' repeated Roly at last. " What a funny—ow, ow, it'h Papa ! it'll Papa ! and he told me it wath Dicky. Fm afwaid ! Whereh Dicky gone to ? I want Bab, take me to Bab ! "

For the Stone had done its work once more, and this time with happier results ; with a supreme relief and joy, which no one who has read this book can fail to understand, Mr. Bultitude felt that he actually was his old self again.

Just when all hope seemed cut off and relief was most unlikely, the magic spell that had caused him such intolerable misery for one hideous week was reversed by the hand of his innocent child.

He caught Roly up in his arms and kissed him as he had never been kissed in his whole life before, at least by his father, and comforting him as well as he could, for the poor child had naturally received rather a severe shock, he stepped airily down the staircase, which he had mounted with such different emotions five minutes before.

On his way he could not resist going into his dressing-room and assuring himself by a prolonged examination before the cheval-glass that the Stone had not played him some last piece of jugglery ; but he found everything quite correct; he was the same formal, precise and portly person, wearing the same morning dress even as on that other Monday evening, and he went on with greater confidence.

He took care, however, to stop at the first window, when he managed, after some coaxing, to persuade Roly to give up the Garuda Stone. As soon as he had it in his hands again, he opened the window wide and flung the dangerous talisman far out into the darkness. Not till then did he feel perfectly secure.

THE RECKONING

He passed the groups of little guests gathered about the conservatory, and lower down he met Boaler, the nurse, and one or two servants and waiters, rushing up in a state of great anxiety and flurry ; even Boaler's usual composure seemed shaken. " Please, sir," he asked, " the schoolmaster gentleman, Master Dick—heVe run upstairs, haven't you seen him ? "

Paul had almost forgotten Dick in his new happiness ; there would be a heavy score to settle with him ; he had the upper hand once more, and yet, somehow, he did not feel as much righteous wrath and desire for revenge as he expected to do,

" Don't be alarmed," he said, waving them back with more benignity than he thought he had in him. " Master Dick is safe enough. I know all about it. Where is Dr. Grimstone ? In the library, eh ? Very well, I will see him there."

And leaving Roly with the nurse, he went down to the library ; not, if the truth must be told, without a slight degree of nervousness, unreasonable and unaccountable enough now, but quite beyond his power to control.

He entered the room, and there, surrounded by piles of ticketed hats and coats, under the pale light of one gas-burner, he saw the terrible man before whom he had trembled for the last seven horrible days.

A feeling of self-defence made Paul assume rather more than his old stiffness as he shook hands. " I am very glad to see you, Dr. Grimstone," he said, " but your coming at this time forces me to ask if there is any unusual reason for, for my having the—a—pleasure of seeing you here ? "

" I am exceedingly distressed to have to say that there is," said the Doctor solemnly, " or I should not have troubled you at this hour. Try to compose yourself, my dear sir, to bear this blow."

" I will," said Paul, " I will try."

" The fact is then, and I know how sad a story it must

VICE VERSA

be for a parent's ear, but the fact is, that your unhappy boy has had the inconceivable rashness to quit my roof." And the Doctor paused to watch the effect of his announcement.

" God bless my soul ! " cried Paul. " You don't say so ! "

" I do indeed ; he has, in short, run away. But don't be alarmed, my dear Mr. Bultitude, I think I can assure you he is quite safe at the present moment " (" Thank Heaven, he is ! " thought Paul, thinking of his own marvellous escape). " I should certainly have recaptured him before he could have left the railway station, where he seems to have gone at once, only, acting on information (which I strongly suspect now was intentionally misleading), I drove on to the station on the up-line, thinking to find him there. He was not there, sir, I believe he never went there at all ; but, guessing how matters were, I searched the train, carriage by carriage, compartment by compartment, when it came up."

" I am very sorry you should have had so much trouble," said Paul, with a vivid recollection of the exploring stick ; " and so you found him ? "

" No, sir," said the Doctor passionately, " I did not find him, but he was there ; he must have been there ! but the shameless connivance of two excessively ill-bred persons, who positively refused to allow me access to their compartment, caused him to slip through my fingers."

Mr. Bultitude observed, rather ungratefully, that, if this was so, it was a most improper thing for them to do.

" It was, indeed, but it is of no consequence fortunately. I was forced to wait for the next train, but that was not a very slow one, and so I was able to come on here before a very late hour and acquaint you with what had taken place."

" Thank you very much," said Paul.

" It's a painful thing to occur in a school," observed the Doctor after a pause.

THE RECKONING

" Most unfortunate/' agreed Paul, coughing.

" So apt to lead persons who are not acquainted with the facts to imagine that the boy was unhappy under my care," continued the Doctor.

" In this case, I assure you, I have no doubts," protested Paul with politeness and (seldom a possible combination) perfect truth.

" Very kind of you to say so ; really, it's a great mystery to me. I certainly, as I felt it my duty to inform you at the time, came very near inflicting corporal punishment upon him this morning—very near. But then he was pardoned on your intercession ; and, besides, the boy would never have run away for fear of a flogging."

" Oh, no, perfectly absurd ! " agreed Paul again.

" Such a merry, high-spirited lad, too," said the Doctor, sincerely enough ; " popular with his school-fellows ; a favourite (in spite of his faults) with his teachers."

" No, was he though ? " said Paul with more surprise, for he had not been fortunate enough to reap much vicarious benefit from his son's popularity, as he could not help remembering.

" All this, added to the comforts (or, may I say, the luxuries ?) he enjoyed under my supervision, does make it seem very strange and ungrateful in the boy to take this sudden and ill-considered step."

" Very, indeed ; but do you know, Dr. Grimstone, I can't help thinking—and pray do not misunderstand me if I speak plainly—that, perhaps, he had reasons for being unhappy you can have no idea of ? "

" He would have found me ready to hear any complaints and prompt to redress them, sir," said the Doctor. " But, now I think of it, he certainly did appear to have something on his mind which he wished to tell me ; but his manner was so strange and he so persistently refused to come to the point, that I was forced to discourage him at last."

VICE VERSA

" You did discourage him, indeed ! " said Paul inwardly, thinking of those attempted confidences with a shudder. " Perhaps some of his schoolfellows may have—eh ? " he said aloud.

" My dear sir," exclaimed the Doctor, " quite out of the question ! "

" Do you think so ? " said Paul, not being able to resist the suggestion. " And yet, do you know, some of them did not appear to me to look very—very good-natured, now."

" A more manly, pleasant, and gentlemanly set of youths never breathed ! " said the Doctor, taking up the cudgels for his boys, and, to do him justice, probably with full measure of belief in his statement. " Curious now that they should have struck you so differently ! "

" They certainly did strike me very differently," said Paul. " But I may be mistaken."

" You are, my dear sir. And, pardon me, but you had no opportunity of testing your opinion."

" Oh, pardon me," retorted Paul grimly, " I had indeed ! "

" A cursory visit," said the Doctor, " a formal inspection—you cannot fairly judge boys by that. They will naturally be reserved and constrained in the presence of an elder. But you should observe them without their knowledge—you want to know them, my dear Mr. Bultitude, you want to go among them ! "

It was the very last thing Paul did want—he knew them quite well enough, but it was of no use to say so, and he merely assented politely.

" And now," said the Doctor, " with regard to your misguided boy. I have to tell you that he is here, in this very house. I tracked him here, and, ten minutes ago, saw him with my own eyes at one of your windows.

" Here ! " cried Paul, with a well-executed start; " you astonish me ! "

" It has occurred to me within the last minute," said

THE RECKONING

the Doctor, " that there may be a very simple explanation of his flight. I observe you are giving a—a juvenile entertainment on a large scale."

" I suppose I am," Paul admitted. " And so you think——? "

" I think that your son, who doubtless knew of your intention, was hurt at being excluded from the festivities and, in a fit of mad wilful folly, resolved to be present at them in spite of you."

" My dear Doctor," cried Paul, who saw the conveniences of this theory, " that must be it, of course—that explains it all ! "

" So grave an act of insubordination," said the Doctor, " an act of double disobedience—to your authority and mine—deserves the fullest punishment. You agree with me, I trust ? "

The memory of his wrongs overcame Mr. Bultitude for the moment: " Nothing can be too bad for the little scoundrel ! " he said, between his teeth.

" He shall have it, sir, I swear to you ; he shall be made to repent this as long as he lives. This insult to me (and of course to you also) shall be amply atoned for. If you will have the goodness to deliver him over to my hands, I will carry him back at once to Market Rodwell, and to-morrow, sir, to-morrow, I will endeavour to awaken his conscience in a way he will remember ! "

The Doctor was more angry than an impartial lover of justice might perhaps approve of, but then it must be remembered that he had seen himself completely outwitted and his authority set at nought in a very humiliating fashion.

However, his excessive wrath cooled Paul's own resentment instead of inflaming it; it made him reflect that, after all, it was he who had the best right to be angry.

" Well," he said, rather coldly, " we must find him first, and then consider what shall be done to him. If you will allow me I will ring and——"

VICE VERSA

But before he could lay his hand upon the bell the library door opened, and Uncle Marmaduke made his appearance, dragging with him the unwilling Dick : the unfortunate boy was effectually sobered now, pale and trembling and besmirched with coal-dust—in fact, in very much the same plight as his ill-used father had been in only three hours ago.

There was a brazen smile of triumph on Mr. Paradine's face as he met Paul's eyes with a knowing wink, which the latter did not at all understand.

Such audacity astonished him, for he could hardly believe that Paradine, after his perfidious conduct in the billiard-room, could have the clumsy impudence to try to propitiate him now.

" Here he is, my boy," shouted Paradine ; " here's the scamp who has given us all this trouble ! He came into the billiard-room just now and told me who he was, but I would have nothing to do with him of course. Not my business, as I told him at the time. Then—(I think I have the pleasure of seeing Dr. Grimstone ? just so) well, then you, sir, arrived—and he made himself scarce. But when I saw him in the act of making a bolt up the area, where he had been taking shelter apparently in the coal-cellar, I thought it was time to interfere, and so I collared him. I have much pleasure in handing him over now to the proper authorities."

And, letting Dick go, he advanced towards his brother-in-law, still with the same odd expression of having a secret understanding with him, which made Paul's blood boil.

" Stand where you are, sir," said Paul to his son. " No, Dr. Grimstone, allow me—leave him to me for the present, please."

" That's much better," whispered Paradine approvingly ; " capital. Keep it up, my boy ; keep it up ! Papa's as quiet as a lamb now. Go on."

Then Paul understood ; his worthy brother-in-law had not been present at the last transformation and was

THE RECKONING

under a slight misapprehension : he evidently imagined that he had by this last stroke made himself and Dick masters of the situation—it was time to undeceive him.

" Have the goodness to leave my house at once, will you ! " he said sternly.

" You young fool ! " said Marmaduke, under his breath, " after all I have done for you, too ! Is this your gratitude ? You know you can't get on without me. Take care what you're about ! "

" If you can't see that the tables are turned at last, said Paul slowly, " you're a duller knave than I take you to be."

Marmaduke started back with an oath : " It's a trick," he said savagely ; " you want to get rid of me."

" I certainly intend to," said Paul. " Are you satisfied ? Do you want proofs—shall I give them—I did just now in the billiard-room ? "

Paradine went to Dick and shook him angrily : " You young idiot ! " he said, in a furious aside, " why didn't you tell me ? What did you let me make a fool of myself like this for, eh ? "

" I did tell you," muttered Dick, " only you wouldn't listen. It just serves you right ! "

Marmaduke soon collected himself after this unexpected shock ; he tried to shake Paul's hands with an airy geniality. " Only my little joke," he said, laughing ; " ha, ha, I thought I should take you in ! . . . Why, I knew it directly. . . . I've been working for you all the time—but it wouldn't have done to let you see my line."

" No," said Paul ; " it was not a very straight one, as usual."

" Well," said Marmaduke, " I shouldn't have stopped Master Dick there if I hadn't been on your side, should I now ? I knew you'd come out of it all right, but I had a difficult game to play, don't you know ? I don't wonder that you didn't follow me just at first."

" You've lost your game," said Paul ; " it's no use to say any more. So now, perhaps, you'll go ? "

VICE VERSA

" Go, eh ? " said Paradine, without showing much surprise at the failure of so very forlorn a hope, " oh, very well, just as you please, of course. Let your poor wife's only brother go from your doors without a penny in the world !—but I warn you that a trifle or so laid out in stopping my mouth would not be thrown away. Some editors would be glad enough of a sensation from real life just now, and I could tell some very odd tales about this little affair ! "

" Tell them, if a character for sanity is of no further use to you," said Paul. " Tell them to anyone you can get to believe you—tell the crossing-sweeper and the policemen, tell your grandmother, tell the horse-marines—it will amuse them. Only, you shall tell them on the other side of my front door. Shall I call anyone to show you out ? "

Paradine saw his game was really played out, and swaggered insolently to the door : " Not on my account, I beg," he said. " Good-bye, Paul, my boy, no more dissolving views. Good-bye, my young friend Richard, it was good fun while it lasted, eh ? like the Servian crown—always a pleasant reminiscence ! Good evening to you, Doctor. By the way, for educational purposes let me recommend a ' Penang lawyer '—buy one as you go back for the boys—just to show them you haven't forgotten them ! "

And, having little luggage to impede him, the front door closed upon him shortly afterwards—this time for ever.

When he had gone, Dick looked imploringly at his father and then at the Doctor, who, until Paradine's parting words had lashed him into fury again, had been examining the engravings on the walls with a studied delicacy during the recent painful scene, and was now leaning against the chimney-piece with his arms folded and a sepulchral gloom on his brow.

" Richard," said Mr. Bultitude, in answer to the look, " you have not done much to deserve consideration at my hands."

THE RECKONING

" Or at mine ! " added the Doctor ominously.

" No," said Dick, " I know I haven't. I've been a brute. I deserve a jolly good licking."

" You do," said his father, but in spite of his indignation, the broken-down look of the boy, and the memory of his own sensations when waiting to be caned that morning, moved him to pity. And then Dick had shown some compunction in the billiard-room : he was not entirely lost to feeling.

" Well," he said at last, " you've acted very wrongly. Because I thought it best that you should not—ahem, leave your studies for this party, you chose to disobey me and alarm your master by defying my orders and coming home by stealth—that was your object, I presume ? "

" Y—yes," said Dick, looking rather puzzled, but seeing that he was expected to agree ; " that was it."

" You know as well as I do what good cause I have to be angry ; but, if I consent to overlook your conduct this time, if I ask Dr. Grimstone to overlook it too " (the Doctor made an inarticulate protest, while Dick stared, incredulous), " will you undertake to behave better for the future—will you ? "

Dick's voice broke at this, and his eyes swam—he was effectually conquered. " Oh, I will ! " he cried, " I will, really. I never meant to go so far when I began."

" Then, Dr. Grimstone," said Paul, " you will do me a great favour if you will take no further notice of this. You see the boy is sorry, and I am sure he will apologise to you amply for the grave slight he has done you. And by the way—I should have mentioned it before—but he will have to leave your care at the end of the term for a public school—I intend to send him to Harrow, so he will require some additional preparation, perhaps : I may leave that in your hands ? "

Dr. Grimstone looked deeply offended, but he only said, " I will see to that myself, my dear sir. I am sorry you did not tell me this earlier. But, may I suggest

VICE VERSA

that a large public school has its pitfalls for a boy of your son's disposition ? And I trust this leniency may not have evil consequences, but I doubt it—I greatly doubt it."

As for Dick, he ran to his father, and hung gratefully on to his arm with a remorseful hug, a thing he had never dared to do, or thought of attempting, in his life till then.

"Dad," he said in a choked voice, "you're a brick ! I don't deserve any of it, but I'll never forget this as long as I live."

Mr. Bultitude too, felt something spring up in his heart which drew him towards the boy in an altogether novel manner, but no one will say that either was the worse for it.

"Well," he said mildly, "prove to me that I have made no mistake. Go back to Crichton House now, work and play well, and try to keep out of mischief for the rest of the term. I trust to you," he added, in a lower tone, "while you remain at Market Rodwell, to keep my—my connection with it a secret; you owe that at least to me. You may probably have—ahem, some inconveniences to put up with—inconveniences you are not prepared for. You must bear them as your punishment."

And soon afterwards a cab was called, and Dr. Grimstone prepared to return to Market Rodwell, with the deserter, by the last train.

As Paul shook hands through the cab window with his prodigal son, he repeated his warning. "Mind," he said, "you have been at school all this past week ; you have run away to attend this party, you understand ? Good-bye, my boy, and here's something to put in your pocket, and another for Jolland ; but he need not know it comes from me." And when Dick opened his hand afterwards, he found two half-sovereigns in it.

So the cab rolled away, and Paul went up to the drawing-room, where, although he certainly allowed the

fireworks on the balcony and in the garden to languish forgotten on their sticks, he led all the other revels up to an advanced hour with jovial *abandon* quite worthy of Dick, and none of his little guests ever suspected the change of host.

When it was all over, and the sleepy children had driven off, Paul sat down in an easy chair by the bright fire which sparkled frostily in his bedroom, to think gratefully over all the events of the day—events which were beginning already to take an unreal and fantastic shape.

Bitterly as he had suffered, and in spite of the just anger and thirst for revenge with which he had returned, I am glad to say he did not regret the spirit of mildness that had stayed his hand when his hour of triumph came.

His experiences, unpleasant as they had been, had had their advantages : they had drawn him and his family closer together.

In his daughter Barbara, as she wished him good-night (knowing nothing, of course, of the escape), he had suddenly become aware of a girlish freshness and grace he had never looked for or cared to see before. Roly after this, too, had a claim upon him he could never wish to forget, and even with the graceless Dick there was a warmer and more natural feeling on both sides—a strange result, no doubt, of such unfilial behaviour, but so it was.

Mr. Bultitude would never after this consider his family as a set of troublesome and thankless incumbrances ; thanks to Dick's offices during the interregnum, they would henceforth throw off their reserve and constraint in their father's presence, and in so doing, open his eyes to qualities of which he had hitherto been in contented ignorance.

It would be pleasanter perhaps to take leave of Mr. Bultitude thus, as he sits by his bedroom fire in the first flush of supreme and unalloyed content.

VICE VERSA

But I feel almost bound to point out a fact which few will find any difficulty in accepting, namely, that, although the wrong had been retrieved without scandal or exposure, for which Paul could not be too thankful, there were many consequences which could not but survive it.

Neither father nor son found himself exactly in the same position as before their exchange of characters.

It took Mr. Bultitude considerable time and trouble to repair all the damage his son's boyish excesses had wrought both at Westbourne Terrace and in the City. He found the discipline of his clerks' room and counting-house sorely relaxed, and his office-boy in particular attempted a tone towards him of such atrocious familiarity that he was indignantly dismissed, much to his astonishment, the very first day. And probably Paul will never quite clear himself of the cloud that hangs over a man of business who, in the course of however well regulated a career, is known to have been at least once "a little odd."

And his home, too, was distinctly demoralised : his cook was an artist, unrivalled at soups and entrees ; but he had to get rid of her notwithstanding.

It was only too evident that she looked upon herself as the prospective mistress of his household, and he did not feel called upon as a parent to fulfil any expectations which Dick's youthful cupboard love had unintentionally excited.

For some time, as fresh proof of Dick's extravagances came home to him, Paul found it cost him no little effort to restrain a tendency to his former bitterness and resentment, but he valued the new understanding between himself and his son too highly to risk losing it again by any open reproach, and so with each succeeding discovery the victory over his feelings became easier.

As for Dick, he found the inconveniences at which his father had hinted anything but imaginary, as will perhaps be easily understood.

It was an unpleasant shock to discover that in one short week his father had contrived somehow to procure him a lasting unpopularity. He was obviously looked upon by all, masters and boys, as a confirmed coward and sneak. And although some of his companions could not fairly reproach him on the latter score, the imputation was particularly galling to Dick, who had always treated such practices with sturdy contempt.

He was sorely tempted at times to right himself by declaring the real state of the case ; but he remembered his promise and his father's unexpected clemency and his gratitude always kept him silent.

He never quite understood how it was that the whole school seemed to have an impression that they could kick and assault him generally with perfect impunity ; but a few very unsuccessful experiments convinced them that this was a popular error on their part.

Although, however, in everything else he did gradually succeed in recovering all the ground his father had lost him, yet there was one respect in which, I am sorry to say, he found all his efforts to retrieve himself hopeless.

His little sweetheart, with the grey eyes and soft brown hair, cruelly refused to have anything more to do with him. For Dulcie's pride had been wounded by what she considered his shameless perfidy on that memorable Saturday by the parallel bars ; the last lingering traces of affection had vanished before Paul's ingratitude on the following Monday, and she never forgave him.

She did not even give him an opportunity of explaining himself, never by word or sign up to the last day of the term showing that she was even aware of his return. What was worse, in her resentment she transferred her favour to Tipping, who became her humble slave for a too brief period ; after which he was found wanting in polish, and was ignominiously thrown over for the shy new boy Kiffin, whose head Dick found a

VICE VERSA

certain melancholy pleasure in punching in consequence.

This was Dick's punishment, and a very real and heavy one he found it. He is at Harrow now, where he is doing fairly well; but I think there are moments even yet when Dulcie's charming little face, her pretty confidences, and her chilling disdain, are remembered with something as nearly resembling a heartache as a healthy unsentimental boy can allow himself.

Perhaps, if some day he goes back once more to Crichton House "to see the fellows," this time with the mysterious glamour of a great public school about him, he may yet obtain forgiveness, for she is getting horribly tired of Kiffin, who, to tell the truth, is something of a milksop.

As for the Garuda Stone, I really cannot say what has become of it. Perhaps it was dashed to pieces on the cobble-stones of the stables behind the terrace, and a good thing too. Perhaps it was not, and is still in existence, with all its dangerous powers as ready for use as ever it was; and in that case the best I can wish my readers is, that they may be mercifully preserved from finding it anywhere, or if they are unfortunate enough to come upon it, that they may at least be more careful with it than Mr. Paul Bultitude, by whose melancholy example I trust they will take timely warning.

And with these very sincere wishes I beg to bid them a reluctant farewell.

THE TINTED VENUS

" To you,
Free and ingenious spirits, he doth now
In me, present his service, with his vow
He hath done his best ; and, though he cannot glory
In his invention (this work being a story
Of reverend antiquity), he doth hope
In the proportion of it, and the scope,
You may observe some pieces drawn like one
Of a steadfast hand ; and with the whiter stone
To be marked in your fair censures. More than this
I am forbid to promise."

MARSINGER.

i. In *Pursuit of Pleasure*

" Ther hopped Hawkyn,
Ther daunsed Dawkyn,
Ther trumped Tomkyn . . ."
The Tournament of Tottenham.

I N Southampton Row, Bloomsbury, there is a small alley or passage leading into Queen Square, and rendered inaccessible to all but foot passengers by some iron posts. The shops in this passage are of a subdued exterior, and are overshadowed by a dingy old edifice dedicated to St. George the Martyr, which seems to have begun its existence as a rather handsome chapel, and to have improved itself, by a sort of evolution, into a singularly ugly church.

Into this alley, one Saturday afternoon late in October, came a short stout young man, with sandy hair, and a perpetual grin denoting anticipation rather than enjoyment. Opposite the church he stopped at a hairdresser's shop, which bore the name of Tweddle. The display in the window was chastely severe ; the conventional half-lady revolving slowly in fatuous self-satisfaction, and the gentleman bearing a piebald beard with waxen resignation, were not to be found in this shop-front, which exhibited nothing but a small pile of toilet remedies and a few lengths of hair of graduated tints. It was doubtful, perhaps, whether such self-restraint on the part of its proprietor was the result of a distaste for empty show, or a conviction that the neighbourhood did not expect it.

Inside the shop there was nobody but a small boy, corking and labelling bottles; but before he could answer any question as to the whereabouts of his

THE TINTED VENUS

employer, that artist made his appearance. Leander Tweddle was about thirty, of middle height, with a luxuriant head of brown hair, and carefully-trimmed whiskers that curled round towards his upper lip, where they spent themselves in a faint moustache. His eyes were rather small, and his nose had a decided upward tendency ; but, with his pink-and-white complexion and compact well-made figure, he was far from ill-looking, though he thought himself even farther.

" Well, Jauncy," he said, after the first greetings, " so you haven't forgot our appointment ? "

" Why, no," explained his friend; " but I never thought I should get away in time to keep it. We've been in court all the morning with motions and short causes, and the old Vice sat on till past three ; and when we did get back to chambers, Splitter kep' me there discussing an opinion of his I couldn't agree with, and I was ever so long before I got him to alter it my way."

For he was clerk to a barrister in good practice, and it was Jauncy's pride to discover an occasional verbal slip in some of his employer's more hastily written opinions on cases, and suggest improvements.

" Well, James," said the hairdresser, " I don't know that I could have got away myself any earlier. I've been so absorbed in the laborrit'ry, what with three rejuvenators and an elixir all on the simmer together, I almost gave way under the strain of it ; but they're set to cool now, and I'm ready to go as soon as you please."

" Now," said Jauncy, briskly, as they left the shop together, " if we're to get up to Rosherville Gardens to-night, we mustn't dawdle."

" I just want to look in here a minute," said Tweddle, stopping before the window of a working-jeweller, who sat there in a narrow partition facing the light, with a great horn lens protruding from one of his eyes like a monstrous growth. " I left something there to be altered, and I may as well see if it's done."

Apparently it was done, for he came out almost im-

IN PURSUIT OF PLEASURE

mediately, thrusting a small cardboard box into his pocket as he rejoined his friend. " Now, we'd better take a cab up to Fenchurch Street," said Jauncy. " Can't keep those girls standing about on the platform."

As they drove along, Tweddle observed, " I didn't understand that our party was to include the fair sect, James ? "

" Didn't you ? I thought my letter said so plain enough. I'm an engaged man now, you know, Tweddle. It wouldn't do if I went out to enjoy myself and left my young lady at home ! "

" No," agreed Leander Tweddle, with a moral twinge, " no, James. I'd forgot you were engaged. What's the lady's name, by-the-by ? "

" Parkinson ; Bella Parkinson," was the answer.

Leander had turned a deeper colour. " Did you say," he asked, looking out of the window on his side of the hansom, " that there was another lady going down ? "

" Only Bella's sister, Ada. She's a regular jolly girl, Ada is, you'll——Hullo ! "

For Tweddle had suddenly thrust his stick up the trap and stopped the cab. " I'm very sorry, James," he said, preparing to get out, " but—but you'll have to excuse me being of your company."

" Do you mean that my Bella and her sister are not good enough company for you ? " demanded Jauncy. " You were a shop-assistant yourself, Tweddle, only a short while ago ! "

" I know that, James ; and it isn't that—far from it. I'm sure they are two as respectable girls, and quite the ladies in every respect, as I'd wish to meet. Only the fact is——"

The driver was listening through the trap, and before Leander would say more he told him to drive on till further orders, after which he continued—

" The fact is—we haven't met for so long that I dare say you're unaware of it—but I'm engaged, James, too ! "

THE TINTED VENUS

" Wish you joy with all my heart, Tweddle ; but what then ? "

" Why," exclaimed Leander, " my Matilda (that's *her* name) is the dearest girl, James ; but she's most uncommon partickler, and I don't think she'd like my going to a place of open-air entertainment where there's dancing—and I'll get out here, please ! "

" Gammon ! " said Jauncy. " That isn't it, Tweddle ; don't try and humbug me. You were ready enough to go just now. You've a better reason than that ! "

" James, I'll tell you the truth ; I have. In earlier days, James, I used constantly to be meeting Miss Parkinson and her sister in serciety, and I dare say I made myself so pleasant and agreeable (you know what a way that is of mine), that Miss Ada (not *your* lady, of course) may have thought I meant something special by it, and there's no saying but what it might have come in time to our keeping company, only I happened just then to see Matilda, and—and I haven't been near the Parkinsons ever since. So you can see for yourself that a meeting might be awkward for all parties concerned ; and I really must get out, James ! "

Jauncy forced him back. " It's all nonsense, Tweddle," he said, " you can't back out of it now ! Don't make a fuss about nothing. Ada don't look as if she'd been breaking her heart for you ! "

" You never can tell with women," said the hair-dresser, sententiously ; " and meeting me sudden, and learning it could never be—no one can say how she mightn't take it ! "

" I call it too bad ! " exclaimed Jauncy. " Here have I been counting on you to make the ladies enjoy themselves—for I haven't your gift of entertaining conversation, and don't pretend to it—and you go and leave me in the lurch, and .spoil their evening for them ! "

" If I thought I was doing that——" said Leander, hesitating.

" You are, you know you are ! " persisted Jauncy, who

IN PURSUIT OF PLEASURE

was naturally anxious to avoid the reduction of his party to so inconvenient a number as three.

" And see here, Tweddle, you needn't say anything of your engagement unless you like. I give you my word I won't, not even to Bella, if you'll only come ! As to Ada, she can take care of herself, unless I'm very much mistaken in her. So come along, like a good chap ! "

" I give in, James ; I give in," said Leander. " A promise is a promise, and yet I feel somehow I'm doing wrong to go, and as if no good would come of it. I do indeed ! "

And so he did not stop the cab a second time, and allowed himself to be taken without further protest to Fenchurch Street Station, on the platform of which they found the Miss Parkinsons waiting for them.

Miss Bella Parkinson, the elder of the two, who was employed in a large toy and fancy goods establishment in the neighbourhood of Westbourne Grove, was tall and slim, with pale eyes and auburn hair. She had some claims to good looks, in spite of a slightly pasty complexion, and a large and decidedly unamiable mouth.

Her sister Ada was the more pleasing in appearance and manner, a brunette with large brown eyes, an impertinent little nose, and a brilliant healthy colour. She was an assistant to a milliner and bonnet-maker in the Edgware Road.

Both these young ladies, when in the fulfilment of their daily duties, were models of deportment; in their hours of ease, the elder's cold dignity was rather apt to turn to peevishness, while the younger sister, relieved from the restraints of the showroom, betrayed a lively and even frivolous disposition.

It was this liveliness and frivolity that had fascinated the hairdresser in days that had gone by ; but if he had felt any self-distrust now in venturing within their influence, such apprehensions vanished with the first sight of the charms which had been counteracted before they had time to prevail.

THE TINTED VENUS

She was well enough, this Miss Ada Parkinson, he thought now; a nice-looking girl in her way, and stylishly dressed. But his Matilda looked twice the lady she ever could, and a vision of his betrothed (at that time taking a week's rest in the country) rose before him, as if to justify and confirm his preference.

The luckless James had to undergo some amount of scolding from Miss Bella for his want of punctuality, a scolding which merely supplied an object to his grin; and during her remarks, Ada had ample time to rally Leander Tweddle upon his long neglect, and used it to the best advantage.

Perhaps he would have been better pleased by a little less insensibility, a touch of surprise and pleasure on her part at meeting him again, as he allowed himself to show in a remark that his absence did not seem to have affected her to any great extent.

" I don't know what you expected, Mr. Tweddle," she replied. " Ought I to have cried both my eyes out? You haven't cried out either of yours, you know! "

" ' Men must work, and women must weep,' as Shakespeare says," he observed, with a vague idea that he was making rather an apt quotation. But his companion pointed out that this only applied to cases where the women had something to weep about.

The party had a compartment to themselves, and Leander, who sat at one end opposite to Ada, found his spirits rising under the influence of her lively sallies.

" That's the only thing Matilda wants," he thought, " a little more liveliness and go about her. I like a little chaff myself, now and then, I must say."

At the other end of the carriage, Bella had been suggesting that the gardens might be closed so late in the year, and regretting that they had not chosen the new melodrama at the Adelphi instead; which caused Jauncy to draw glowing pictures of the attractions of Rosherville Gardens.

" I was **there a year ago** last summer," **he said**, " and

it was first-rate : open-air dancing, summer theatre, rope-walking, fireworks, and supper out under the trees. You'll enjoy yourself, Bella, right enough when you get there ! "

" If that isn't enough for you, Bella," cried her sister, " you must be difficult to please ! I'm sure I'm quite looking forward to it ; aren't you, Mr. Tweddle ? "

The poor man was cursed by the fatal desire of pleasing, and unconsciously threw an altogether unnecessary degree of *empressement* into his voice as he replied, " In the company I am at present, I should look forward to it, if it was a wilderness with a funeral in it."

" Oh dear me, Mr. Tweddle, that is a pretty speech ! " said Ada, and she blushed in a manner which appalled the conscience-stricken hairdresser.

" There I go again," he thought remorsefully, " putting ideers in the poor girl's head—it ain't right. I'm making myself too pleasant! "

And then it struck him that it would be only prudent to make his position clearly understood, and, carefully lowering his voice, he began a speech with that excellent intention. " Miss Parkinson," he said huskily, " there's something I have to tell you about myself, very particular. Since I last enjoyed the pleasure of meeting with you my prospects have greatly altered, I am no longer——"

But she cut him short with a little gesture of entreaty. " Oh, not here, please, Mr. Tweddle," she said ; " tell me about it in the gardens ! "

" Very well," he said, relieved ; " remind me when we get there—in case I forget, you know."

" Remind you ! " cried Ada ; " the *idea*, Mr. Tweddle ! I certainly shan't do any such thing."

" She thinks I am going to propose to her ! " he thought ruefully ; " it will be a delicate business un-deceiving her. I wish it was over and done with ! "

It was quite dark by the time they had crossed the river by the ferry, and made their way up to the entrance to the pleasure gardens, imposing enough, with its white colonnade, its sphinxes, and lines of coloured lamps.

THE TINTED VENUS

But no one else had crossed with them ; and, as they stood at the turnstiles, all they could see of the grounds beyond seemed so dark and silent that they began to have involuntary misgivings. " I suppose," said Jauncy to the man at the ticket-hole, " the gardens are open—eh?"

" Oh yes," he said gruffly, " *they're* open—they're *open* ; though there ain't much going on out-of-doors, being the last night of the season."

Bella again wished that they had selected the Adelphi for their evening's pleasure, and remarked that Jauncy " might have known."

" Well," said the latter to the party generally, " what do you say—shall we go in, or get back by the first train home ? "

" Don't be so ridiculous, James ! " said Bella, peevishly. " What's the good of going back, to be too late for everything. The mischief's done now."

" Oh, let's go in ! " advised Ada ; " the amusements and things will be just as nice indoors—nicer on a chilly evening like this " ; and Leander seconded her heartily.

So they went in ; Jauncy leading the way with the still complaining Bella, and Leander Tweddle bringing up the rear with Ada. They picked their way as well as they could in the darkness, caused by the closely planted trees and shrubs, down a winding path, where the sopped leaves gave a slippery foothold, and the branches flicked moisture insultingly in their faces as they pushed them aside.

A dead silence reigned everywhere, broken only by the wind as it rustled amongst the bare twigs, or the whistling of a flaring gas-torch protruding from some convenient tree.

Jauncy occasionally shouted back some desperate essay at jocularities, at which Ada laughed with some perseverance, until even she could no longer resist the influence of the surroundings.

On a hot summer's evening those grounds, brilliantly

IN PURSUIT OF PLEASURE

illuminated and crowded by holiday-makers, have been the delight of thousands of honest Londoners, and will be so again ; but it was undeniable that on this particular occasion they were pervaded by a decent melancholy.

Ada had slipped a hand, clad in crimson silk, through Leander's arm as they groped through the gloom together, and shrank to his side now and then in an alarm which was only half pretended. But if her light pressure upon his arm made his heart beat at all the faster, it was only at the fancy that the trusting hand was his Matilda's, or so at least did he account for it to himself afterwards.

They followed on, down a broad promenade, where the ground glistened with autumn damps, and the unlighted lamps looked wan and spectral. There was a bear-pit hard by, over the railings of which Ada leaned and shouted a defiant " Boo " ; but the bears had turned in for the night, and the stone re-echoed her voice with a hollow ring. Indistinct bird forms were roosting in cages ; but her umbrella had no effect upon them.

Jauncy was waiting for them to come up, perhaps as a protection against his *fiancee's* reproaches. " In another hour," he said, with an implied apology, " you'll see how different this place looks. We—we're come a little too early. Suppose we fill up the time by a nice little dinner at the Restorong—eh, Ada ? What do you think, Tweddle ? "

The suggestion was received favourably, and Jauncy, thankful to retrieve his reputation as leader, took them towards the spot where food was to be had.

Presently they saw lights twinkling through the trees, and came to a place which was clearly the focus of festivity. There was the open-air theatre, its drop-scene lowered, its proscenium lost in the gloom ; there was the circle for *al-fresco* dancing, but it was bare, and the clustered lights were dead ; there was the restaurant, dark and silent like all else.

Jauncy stood there and rubbed his chin. " This is

THE TINTED VENUS

where I dined when we were here last," he said, at length; " and a capital little dinner they gave us too ! "

" What / should like to know," said the elder Miss Parkinson, " is, where are we to dine to-night ? "

" Yes," said Jauncy, encouragingly ; " don't you fret yourself, Bella. Here's an old party sweeping up leaves, we'll ask him."

They did so, and were referred to a large building, in the Gothic style, with a Tudor doorway, known as the " Baronial 'All," where lights shone behind the painted windows.

Inside, a few of the lamps around the pillars were lighted, and the body of the floor was roped in as if for dancing ; but the hall was empty, save for a barmaid, assisted by a sharp little girl, behind the long bar on one of its sides.

Jauncy led his dejected little party up to this, and again put his inquiry with less hopefulness. When he found that the only available form of refreshment that evening was bitter ale and captain's biscuits, mitigated by occasional caraway seeds, he became a truly pitiable object.

" They—they don't keep this place up on the same scale in the autumn, you see," he explained weakly. " It's very different in summer ; what they call' an endless round of amusements.' "

" There's an endless round of amusement now," observed Ada ; " but it's a naught! "

" Oh, there'll be something going on by-and-by, never fear," said Jauncy, determined to be sanguine ; " or else they wouldn't be open."

" There'll be dancing here this evening," the barmaid informed him. " That is all we open for at this time of year ; and this is the last night of the season."

" Oh ! " said Jauncy, cheerfully ; " you see we only came just in time, Bella ; and I suppose you'll have a good many down here to-night—eh, miss ? "

IN PURSUIT OF PLEASURE

" How much did we take last Saturday, Jenny ? " said the barmaid to the sharp little girl.

" Seven and fourpence 'ap'ny—most of it beer," said the child. " Margaret, I may count the money again to-night, mayn't I ? "

The barmaid made some mental calculation, after which she replied to Jauncy's question. " We may have some fifteen couples or so down to-night," she said ; " but that won't be for half an hour yet."

" The question is," said Jauncy, trying to bear up under this last blow ; " the question is, How are we to amuse ourselves till the dancing begins ? "

" I don't know what others are going to do," Bella announced ; " but I shall stay here, James, and keep warm—if I can ! " and once more she uttered her regret that they had not gone to the Adelphi.

Her sister declined to follow her example. " I mean to see all there is to be seen," she declared, " since we are here ; and perhaps Mr. Tweddle will come and take care of me. Will you, Mr. Tweddle ? "

He was not sorry to comply, and they wandered out together through the grounds, which offered considerable variety. There were alleys lined with pale plaster statues, and a grove dedicated to the master minds of the world, represented by huge busts, with more or less appropriate quotations. There were alcoves, too, and neatly ruined castles.

Ada talked almost the whole time in a sprightly manner, which gave Leander no opportunity of introducing the subject of his engagement, and this continued until they had reached a small battlemented platform on some rising ground ; below were the black masses of trees, with a faint fringe of light here and there ; beyond lay the Thames, in which red and white reflections quivered, and from whose distant bends and reaches came the dull roar of fog-horns and the pantings of tugs.

Ada stood here in silence for some time ; at last she said, " After all, I'm not sorry we came—are you ? "

THE TINTED VENUS

" If I don't take care what I say, I *may* be ! " he thought, and answered guardedly, " On the contrary, I'm glad, for it gives me the opportunity of telling you something I — I think you ought to know."

" What was he going to say next ? " she thought. Was a declaration coming, and if so, should she accept him ? She was not sure ; he had behaved very badly in keeping so long away from her, and a proposal would be a very suitable form of apology ; but there was the gentleman who travelled for a certain firm in the Edgware Road, he had been very " particular " in his attentions of late. Well, she would see how she felt when Leander had spoken ; he was beginning to speak now.

" I don't want to put it too abrupt," he said ; " I'll come to it gradually. There's a young lady that I'm now looking forward to spending the whole of my future life with."

" And what is she called ? " asked Ada. (" He's rather a nice little man, after all ! " she was thinking.)

" Matilda," he said ; and the answer came like a blow in the face. For the moment she hated him as bitterly as if he had been all the world to her ; but she carried off her mortification by a rather hysterical laugh.

" Fancy you being engaged ! " she said, by way of explanation of her merriment ; " and to anyone with the name of Matilda—it's such a stupid-sounding sort of name ! "

" It ain't at all ; it all depends how you say it. If you pronounce it like I do, *Matilda*, it has rather a pretty sound. You try now."

" Well, we won't quarrel about it, Mr. Tweddle ; I'm glad it isn't my name, that's all. And now tell me all about your young lady. What's her other name, and is she very good-looking ? "

" She's a Miss Matilda Collum," said he ; " she is considered handsome by competent judges, and she keeps the books at a florist's in the vicinity of Bayswater."

IN PURSUIT OF PLEASURE

" And, if it isn't a rude question, why didn't you bring her with you this evening ? "

" Because she's away for a short holiday, and isn't coming back till the last thing to-morrow night."

" And I suppose you've been wishing I was Matilda all the time ? " she said audaciously ; for Miss Ada Parkinson was not an over-scrupulous young person, and did not recognise in the fact of her friend's engagement any reason why she should not attempt to reclaim his vagrant admiration.

Leander *had* been guilty of this wish once or twice ; but though he was not absolutely overflowing with tact, he did refrain from admitting the impeachment.

" Well, you see," he said, in not very happy evasion, " Matilda doesn't care about this kind of thing ; she's rather particular, Matilda is."

" And I'm not! " said Ada. " I see ; thank you, Mr. Tweddle ! "

" You do take one up so ! " he complained. " I never intended nothing of the sort—far from it."

" Well, then, I forgive you ; we can't all be Matildas, I suppose. And now, suppose we go back ; they will be beginning to dance by now ! "

" With pleasure," he said ; " only you must excuse me dancing, because, as an engaged man, I have had to renounce (except with one person) the charms of Terpsy-chore. I mean," he explained condescendingly, " that I can't dance in public save with my intended."

" Ah, well," said Ada, " perhaps Terpsy-chore will get over it ; still I should like to see the Terpsy-choring, if you have no objection."

And they returned to the Baronial Hall, which by this time presented a more cheerful appearance. The lamps round the mirror-lined pillars were all lit, and the musicians were just striking up the opening bars of the Lancers ; upon which several gentlemen amongst the assembly, which now numbered about forty, ran out into

THE TINTED VENUS

the open and took up positions like colour-sergeants at drill, to be presently joined, in some bashfulness, by such ladies as desired partners.

The Lancers were performed with extreme conscientiousness ; and when it was over, every gentleman with any *savoir faire* to speak of presented his partner with a glass of beer.

Then came a waltz, to which Ada beat time impatiently with her foot, and bit her lip, as she had to look on by Leander's side.

" There's Bella and James going round," she said ; " I've never had to sit out a waltz before ! "

He felt the implied reproach, and thought whether there could be any harm, after all, in taking a turn or two ; it would be only polite. But, before he could recant in words, a soldier came up, a medium-sized warrior with a large nose and round little eyes, who had been very funny during the Lancers in directing all the figures by words of military command.

" Will you allow me the honour, miss, of just one round ? " he said to Ada, respectfully enough.

The etiquette of this ballroom was not of the strictest ; but she would not have consented but for the desire of showing Leander that she was not dependent upon him for her amusement. As it was, she accepted the corporal's arm a little defiantly.

Leander watched them round the hall with an odd sensation, almost of jealousy-r-it was quite ridiculous, because he could have danced with Ada himself had he cared to do so ; and besides, it was not she, but Matilda, whom he adored.

But, as he began to notice, Ada was looking remarkably pretty that evening, and really was a partner who would bring anyone credit; and her corporal danced villainously, revolving with stiff and wooden jerks, like a toy soldier. Now Leander flattered himself he could waltz—having had considerable practice in bygone days in a select assembly, where the tickets were two shillings

IN PURSUIT OF PLEASURE

each, and the gentlemen, as the notices said ambiguously enough, " were restricted to wearing gloves."

So he felt indignantly that Ada was not having justice done to her. " I've a good mind to give her a turn," he thought, " and show them all what waltzing is ! "

Just then the pair happened to come to a halt close to him. " Shockin' time they're playing this waltz in," he heard the soldier exclaim with humorous vivacity (he was apparently the funny man of the regiment, and had brought a silent but appreciative comrade with him as audience), " abominable ! excruciatin' ! comic ! ! 'orrible ! ! ! "

Leander seized the opportunity. "Excuse me," he said politely, " but if you don't like the music, perhaps you wouldn't mind giving up this young lady to me ? "

" Oh come, I say ! " said the man of war, running his fingers through his short curly hair ; " my good feller, you'd better see what the lady says to that ! " (He evidently had no doubt himself.)

" I'm very well content as I am, thank you all the same, Mr. Tweddle," said Ada, unkindly adding in a lower tone, " If you're so anxious to dance, dance with Terpsy-chore ! "

And again he was left to watch the whirling couples with melancholy eyes. The corporal's brother-in-arms was wheeling round with a plain young person, apparently in domestic service, whose face was overspread by a large red smile of satiated ambition. James and Bella flitted by, dancing vigorously, and Bella's discontent seemed to have vanished for the time. There were jiggling couples and prancing couples ; couples that bounced round like imprisoned bees, and couples that glided past in calm and conscious superiority. He alone stood apart, excluded from the happy throng, and he began to have a pathetic sense of injury.

But the music stopped at last, and Ada, dismissing her partner, came towards him. " You don't seem to be enjoying yourself, Mr. Tweddle," she said maliciously.

THE TINTED VENUS

" Don't I ? " he replied. " Well, so long as you are, it don't matter, Miss Parkinson—it don't matter."

" But I'm not—at least, I didn't that dance," she said. " That soldier man did talk such rubbish, and he trod on my feet twice. I'm so hot! I wonder if it's cooler outside ? "

" Will you come and see ? " he suggested, and this time she did not disdain his arm, and they strolled out together.

Following a path they had hitherto left unexplored, they came to a little enclosure surrounded by tall shrubs ; in the centre, upon a low pedestal, stood a female statue, upon which a gas lamp, some paces off, cast a flickering gleam athwart the foliage.

The exceptional grace and beauty of the figure would have been apparent to any lover of art. She stood there, her right arm raised, partly in gracious invitation, partly in queenly command, her left hand extended, palm downwards, as if to be reverentially saluted. The hair was parted in boldly indicated waves over the broad low brow, and confined by a fillet in a large loose knot at the back. She was clad in a long chiton, which lapped in soft zig-zag folds over the girdle and fell to the feet in straight parallel lines, and a chlamys hanging from her shoulders concealed the left arm to the elbow, while it left the right arm free.

In the uncertain light one could easily fancy soft eyes swimming in those wide blank sockets, and the ripe lips were curved by a dreamy smile, at once tender and disdainful.

Leander Tweddle and Miss Ada Parkinson, however, stood before the statue in an unmoved, not to say critical mood.

" Who's she supposed to be, I wonder ? " asked the young lady, rather as if the sculptor were a harmless lunatic whose delusions took a marble shape occasionally. This, by the way, is a question which may frequently be heard in picture galleries, and implies an enlightened tolerance.

IN PURSUIT OF PLEASURE

" I don't know," said Leander ; "a foreign female, I fancy—that's Russian on the pedestal." He inferred this from a resemblance to the characters on certain packets of cigarettes.

" But there's some English underneath," said Ada ; " I can just make it out. Ap—Apro—Aprodyte. What a funny name ! "

" You haven't pronounced it quite correckly," he said ; " out there they sound the ph like a f, and give all the syllables—Afroddity." He felt a kind of intuition that this was nearer the correct rendering.

" Well," observed Ada, " she's got a silly look, don't you think ? "

Leander was less narrow, and gave it as his opinion that she had been " done from a fine woman."

Ada remarked that she herself would never consent to be taken in so unbecoming a costume. " One might as well have no figure at all in things hanging down for all the world like a sack," she said.

Proceeding to details, she was struck by the smallness of the hands ; and it must be admitted that, although the statue as a whole was slightly above the average female height, the arms from the elbow downwards, and particularly the hands, were by no means in proportion, and almost justified Miss Parkinson's objection, that " no woman could have hands so small as that."

" I know some one who has—quite as small," said he softly.

Ada instantly drew off one of the crimson gloves and held out her hand beside the statue's. It was a well-shaped hand, as she very well knew, but it was decidedly larger than the one with which she compared it. " I said so," she observed ; " now are you satisfied, Mr. Tweddle ? "

But he had been thinking of a hand more slender and dainty than hers, and allowed himself to admit as much. " I—I wasn't meaning you at all," he said bluntly.

THE TINTED VENUS

She laughed a little jarring laugh. " Oh, Matilda, of course ! Nobody is like Matilda now ! But come, Mr. Tweddle, you're not going to stand there and tell me that this wonderful Matilda of yours has hands no bigger than those ? "

" She has been endowed with quite remarkable small hands," said he ; " you wouldn't believe it without seeing. It so happens," he added suddenly, " that I can give you a very fair ideer of the size they are, for I've got a ring of hers in my pocket at this moment. It came about this way : my aunt (the same that used to let her second floor to James, and that Matilda lodges with at present), my aunt, as soon as she heard of our being engaged, nothing would do but I must give Matilda an old ring with a posy inside it, that was in our family, and we soon found the ring was too large to keep on, and I left it with old Vidler, near my place of business, to be made tighter, and called for it on my way here this very afternoon, and fortunately enough it was ready."

He took out the ring from its bed of pink cotton wool, and offered it to Miss Parkinson.

" You see if you can get it on," he said ; " try the little finger ! "

She drew back, offended. " I don't want to try it, thank you," she said (she felt as if she might fling it into the bushes if she allowed herself to touch it). " If you *must* try it on somebody, there's the statue ! You'll find no difficulty in getting it on any of her fingers—or thumbs," she added.

" You shall see," said Leander. " My belief is, it's too small for her, if anything."

He was a true lover ; anxious to vindicate his lady's perfections before all the world, and perhaps to convince himself that his estimate was not exaggerated. The proof was so easy, the statue's left hand hung temptingly within his reach ; he accepted the challenge, and slipped the ring up the third finger, that was slightly raised as if to receive it. The hand struck no chill, so moist and

mild was the evening, but felt warm and almost soft in his grasp.

" There," he said triumphantly, " it might have been made for her ! "

" Well," said Ada, not too consistently, " I never said it mightn't ! "

" Excuse me," said he, " but you said it would be too large for her ; and, if you'll believe me, it's as much as I can do to get it off her finger, it fits that close."

" Well, make haste and get it off, Mr. Tweddle, do," said Ada, impatiently. " I've stayed out quite long enough."

" In one moment," he replied ; " it's quite a job, I declare, quite a job ! "

" Oh, you men are so clumsy ! " cried Ada. " Let me try."

" No, no ! " he said, rather irritably ; " I can manage it," and he continued to fumble.

At last he looked over his shoulder and said, " It's a singler succumstance, but I can't get the ring past the bend of the finger."

Ada was cruel enough to burst out laughing. " It's a judgment upon you, Mr. Tweddle ! " she cried.

" You dared me to it ! " he retorted. " It isn't friendly of you, I must say, Miss Parkinson, to set there enjoying of it—it's bad taste ! "

" Well, then, I'm very sorry, Mr. Tweddle ; I won't laugh any more ; but, for goodness' sake, take me back to the Hall now."

" It's coming ! " he said ; " I'm working it over the joint now—it's coming quite easily."

" But I can't wait here while it comes," she said. " Do you want me to go back alone ? You're not very polite to me this evening, I must say."

" What am I to do ? " he said distractedly. " This ring is my engagement ring ; it's valuable. I can't go away without it ! "

" The statue won't run away—you can come back

THE TINTED VENUS

again, by-and-by. You don't expect me to spend the rest of the evening out here ? I never thought you could be rude to a lady, Mr. Tweddle."

" No more I can," he said. " Your wishes, Miss Ada, are equivocal to commands ; allow me the honour of reconducting you to the Baronial Hall."

He offered his arm in his best manner ; she took it, and together they passed out of the enclosure, leaving the statue in undisturbed possession of the ring.

2. Pleasure in Pursuit

" And you, great sculptor, so you gave
A score of years to Art, her slave,
And that's your Venus, whence we turn
To yonder girl——"

ANOTHER waltz had just begun as they re-entered the Baronial Hall, and Ada glanced up at her companion from her daring brown eyes. " What would you say if I told you you might have this dance with me ? " she inquired.

The hairdresser hesitated for just one moment. He had meant to leave her there and go back for his ring ; but the waltz they were playing was a very enticing one. Ada was looking uncommonly pretty just then ; he could get the ring equally well a few minutes later.

" I should take it very kind of you," he said, gratefully, at length.

" Ask for it, then," said Ada ; and he did ask for it.

He forgot Matilda and his engagement for the moment ; he sacrificed all his scruples about dancing in public ; but he somehow failed to enjoy this pleasure, illicit though it was.

For one thing, he could not long keep Matilda out of his thoughts. He was doing nothing positively wrong ; still, it was undeniable that she would not approve of his being there at all, still less if she knew that the gold ring

given to him by his aunt for the purposes of his betrothal had been left on the finger of a foreign statue, and exposed to the mercy of any passer-by, while he waltzed with a bonnet-maker's assistant.

And his conscience was awakened still further by the discovery that Ada was a somewhat disappointing partner. " She's not so light as she used to be," he thought, " and then she jumps. I'd forgotten she jumped."

Before the waltz was nearly over he led her back to a chair, alleging as his excuse that he was afraid to abandon his ring any longer, and hastened away to the spot where it was to be found.

He went along the same path, and soon came to an enclosure ; but no sooner had he entered it than he saw that he must have mistaken his way ; this was not the right place. There was no statue in the middle.

He was about to turn away, when he saw something that made him start ; it was a low pedestal in the centre, with the same characters upon it that he had read with Ada. It was the place, after all ; yes, he could not be mistaken ; he knew it now.

Where was the statue which had so lately occupied that pedestal ? Had it fallen over amongst the bushes ? He felt about for it in vain. It must have been removed for some purpose while he had been dancing ; but by whom, and why ?

The best way to find out would be to ask some one in authority. The manager was in the Baronial Hall, officiating as M.C. ; he would go and inquire whether the removal had been by his orders.

He was fortunate enough to catch him as he was coming out of the hall, and he seized him by the arm with nervous haste. " Mister," he began, " if you've found one of your plaster figures with a gold ring on, it's mine. I—I put it on in a joking kind of way, and I had to leave it for awhile ; and now, when I come back for it, it's gone ! "

THE TINTED VENUS

" I'm sorry to hear it, sir," returned the manager ;
" but really, if you will leave gold rings on our statues,
we can't be responsible, you know."

" But you'll excuse me," pursued Leander ; " I don't
think you quite understood me. It isn't only the ring
that's gone—it's the statue ; and if you've had it put up
anywhere else——"

" Nonsense ! " said the manager ; " we don't move our
statues about like chessmen ; you've forgotten where you
left it, that's all. What was the statue "like ? "

Leander described it as well as he could, and the
manager, with a somewhat altered manner, made him
point out the spot where he believed it to have stood,
and they entered the grove together.

The man gave one rapid glance at the vacant pedestal
and then gripped Leander by the shoulder, and
looked at him long and hard by the feeble light.
" Answer me," he said, roughly ; " is this some lark of
yours ? "

" I look larky, don't I ? " said poor Tweddle, dolefully.
" I thought you'd be sure to know where it was."

" I wish to heaven I did!" cried the manager,
passionately ; " it's those impudent blackguards. . . .
They've done it under my very nose ! "

" If it's any of your men," suggested Leander, " can't
you make them put it back again ? "

" It's not any of my men. I was warned, and, like a
fool, I wouldn't believe it could be done at a time like
this ; and now it's too late, and what am I to say to the
inspector ? I wouldn't have had this happen for a
thousand pounds ! "

" Well, it's kind of you to feel so put out about it,"
said Leander. " You see, what makes the ring so
valuable to me——"

The manager was pacing up and down impatiently,
entirely ignoring his presence.

" I say," Tweddle repeated, " the reason why that
ring's of partickler importance——"

PLEASURE IN PURSUIT

" Oh, don't bother *me* ! " said the other, shaking him off. " I don't want to be uncivil, but Fve got to think this out. . . . Infernal rascals ! " he went on muttering.

" Have the goodness to hear what Fve got to say, though," persisted Leander. " I'm mixed up in this, whether you like it or not. You seem to know who's got this figure, and I've a right to be told too. I won't go till I get that ring back ; so now you understand me ! "

" Confound you and your ring ! " said the manager. " What's the good of coming bully-ragging me about your ring ? I can't get you your ring ! You shouldn't have been fool enough to put it on one of our statues. You make me talk to you like this, coming bothering when I've enough on my mind as it is ! Hang it ! Can't you see I'm as anxious to get that statue again as ever you can be ? If I don't get it, I may be a ruined man, for all I know ; ain't that enough for you ? Look here, take my advice, and leave me alone before we have words over this. You give me your name and address, and you may rely on hearing from me as soon as anything turns up. You can do no good to yourself or anyone else by making a row ; so go away quiet like a sensible chap ! "

Leander felt stunned by the blow ; evidently there was nothing to be done but follow the manager's advice. He went to the office with him, and gave his name and address in full, and then turned back alone to the dancing-hall.

He had lost his ring—no ordinary trinket which he could purchase anywhere, but one for which he would have to account—and to whom ? To his aunt and Matilda. How could he tell, when there was even a chance of seeing it again ?

If only he had not allowed himself that waltz ; if only he had insisted upon remaining by the statue until his ring was removed ; if only he had not been such an idiot as to put it on ! None of these acts was wrong exactly ; but between them they had brought him to this.

And the chief person responsible was Miss Ada

THE TINTED VENUS

Parkinson, whom he dared not reproach ; for he was naturally unwilling that this last stage of the affair should become known. He would have to dissemble, and he rejoined his party with what he intended for a jaunty air.

" We've been waiting for you to go away," said Bella. " Where have you been all this time ? "

He saw with relief that Ada did not appear to have mentioned the statue, and so he said he had been " strolling about."

" And Ada left to take care of herself ! " said Bella, spitefully. " You are polite, Mr. Tweddle, I must say ! "

" I haven't complained, Bella, that I know of," said Ada. " And Mr. Tweddle and I quite understand each other, don't we ? "

" Oh ! " said Bella, with an altered manner and a side-glance at James, " I didn't know. I'm very glad to hear it, I'm sure."

And then they left the gardens, and, after a substantial meal at a riverside hotel, started on the homeward journey, with the sense that their expedition had not been precisely a success.

As before, they had a railway compartment to themselves. Bella declined to talk, and lay back in her corner with closed eyes and an expression of undeserved suffering, whilst the unfortunate Jauncy sat silent and miserable opposite.

Leander would have liked to be silent too, and think out his position ; but Ada would not hear of this. Her jealous resentment had apparently vanished, and she was extremely lively and playful in her sallies.

This reached a pitch when she bent forward, and, in a whisper, **which** she did not, perhaps, intend to be quite confidential said " Oh, Mr. Tweddle, you never told me what became of the ring ! Is it off at last ? "

" Off ? yes ! " he said irritably, very nearly adding, " and the statue too."

PLEASURE IN PURSUIT

" Weren't you very glad ! " said she.

" Uncommonly," he replied grimly.

" Let me see it again, now you've got it back," she pleaded.

" You'll excuse me," he said ; " but after what has taken place, I can't show that ring to anybody."

" Then you're a cross thing ! " said Ada, pouting.

" What's the matter with you two, over there ? " asked Bella, sleepily.

Ada's eyes sparkled with mischief. " Let me tell them ; it is too awfully funny. I *must* ! " she whispered to Leander. " It's all about a ring," she began, and enjoyed poor Tweddle's evident discomfort.

" A ring ? " cried Bella, waking up. " Don't keep all the fun to yourselves ; we've not had so much of it this evening."

" Miss Ada," said Leander, in great agitation, " I ask you, as a lady, to treat what has happened this evening in the strictest confidence for the present ! "

" Secrets, Ada ? " cried her sister ; " upon my word ! "

" Why, where's the harm, Mr. Tweddle, now it's all settled ? " exclaimed Ada. " Bella, it was only this : he went and put a ring (now do wait till I've done, Mr. Tweddle !) on a certain person's finger out in those Rosherville Gardens (you see, I've not said *whose* finger)."

" Hullo, Tweddle ! " cried Jauncy, in some bewilderment.

Leander could only cast a look of miserable appeal at him.

" Shall I tell them any more, Mr. Tweddle ? " said Ada, persistently.

" I don't think there's any necessity," he pleaded.

" No more do I , " put in Bella, archly. " I think we can guess the rest."

Ada did not absolutely make any further disclosures that evening ; but for the rest of the journey she amused herself by keeping the hairdresser in perpetual torment

THE TINTED VENUS

by her pretended revelations, until he was thoroughly disgusted.

No longer could he admire her liveliness ; he could not even see that she was good-looking now. " She's nothing but chaff, chaff, chaff ! " he thought. " Thank goodness, Matilda isn't given that way. Chaff before marriage means nagging after ! "

They reached the terminus at last, when he willingly said farewell to the other three.

" Good-bye, Mr. Tweddle," said Bella, in rather a more cordial tone ; " I needn't hope *you've* enjoyed yourself ! "

" You needn't ! " he replied, almost savagely.

" Good night," said Ada ; and added in a whisper, " Don't go and dream of your statue-woman ! "

" If I dream to-night at all," he said, between his teeth, " it will be a nightmare ! "

" I suppose, Tweddle, old chap," said Jauncy, as he shook hands, " you know your own affairs best ; but, if you meant what you told me coming down, you've been going it, haven't you ? "

He left Leander wondering impatiently what he meant. Did he know the truth ? Well, everybody might know it before long ; there would probably be a fuss about it all, and the best thing he could do would be to tell Matilda at once, and throw himself upon her mercy. After all, it was innocent enough—if she could only be brought to believe it.

He did not look forward to telling her ; and by the time he reached the Bank and got into an omnibus, he was in a highly nervous state, as the following incident may serve to show.

He had taken one of those uncomfortable private omnibuses, where the passengers are left in unlightened gloom. He sat by the door, and, occupied as he was by his own misfortune, paid little attention to his surroundings.

But by-and-by, he became aware that the conductor,

PLEASURE IN PURSUIT

in collecting the fares, was trying to attract the notice of some one who sat in the further corner of the vehicle. " Where are you for, lady, please ? " he asked repeatedly, and at last, " *Will* somebody ask the lady up the end where I'm to set her down ? " to all of which the eccentric person addressed returned no reply whatever.

Leander's attention was thus directed to her ; but, although in the obscurity he could make out nothing but a dim form of grey, his nerves were so unsettled that he felt a curiously uneasy fancy that eyes were being fixed upon him in the darkness.

This continued until a moment when some electric lights suddenly flashed into the omnibus as it passed, and lit up the whole interior with a ghastly glare, in which the grey female became distinctly visible.

He caught his breath and shrank into the corner ; for in that moment his excited imagination had traced a strange resemblance to the figure he had left in Rosher-ville Gardens. The inherent improbability of finding a classical statue seated in an omnibus did not occur to him, in the state his mind was in just then. He sat there fascinated, until lights shone in once more, and he saw, or thought he saw, the figure slowly raise her hand and beckon to him.

That was enough ; he started up with a smothered cry, thrust a coin into the conductor's hand, and, without waiting for change, flung himself from the omnibus in full motion.

When its varnished sides had ceased to gleam in the light of the lamps, and its lumbering form had been swallowed up in the autumn haze, he began to feel what a coward his imagination had made of him.

" My nightmare's begun already," he thought. " Still, she was so surprisingly like, it did give me a turn. They oughtn't to let such crazy females into public conveyances ! "

Fortunately his panic had not seized him until he was within a short distance from Bloomsbury, and it did not

THE TINTED VENUS

take him long to reach Queen Square and his shop in the passage. He let himself in, and went up to a little room on an upper floor, which he used as his sitting-room. The person who "looked after him" did not sleep on the premises ; but she had laid a fire and left out his tea-things. "I'll have some tea," he thought, as he lit the gas and saw them there. "I feel as if I want cheering up, and it can't make me any more shaky than I am."

And when his fire was crackling and blazing up, and his kettle beginning to sing, he felt more cheerful already. What, after all, if it did take some time to get his ring again ? He must make some excuse or other ; and, should the worst come to the worst, "I suppose," he thought, "I could get another made like it—though, when I come to think of it, I'll be shot if I remember exactly what it was like, or what the words inside it were, to be sure about them ; still, very likely old Vidler would recollect, and I dessay it won't turn out to be necessa———What the devil's that ?"

He had the house to himself after nightfall, and he remembered that his private door could not be opened now without a special key ; yet he could not help a fancy that some one was groping his way up the staircase outside.

"It's only the boards creaking, or the pipes leaking through," he thought. "I must have the place done up. But I'm as nervous as a cat to-night."

The steps were nearer and nearer—they stopped at the door—there was a loud commanding blow on the panels.

"Who's here at this time of night ?" cried Leander, aloud. "Come in, if you want to !"

But the door remained shut, and there came another rap, even more imperious.

"I shall go mad if this goes on !" he muttered, and making a desperate rush to the door, threw it wide open, and then staggered back panic-stricken.

Upon the threshold stood a tall figure in classical

drapery. His eyes might have deceived him in the omnibus ; but here, in the crude gaslight, he could not be mistaken. It was the statue he had last seen in Rosherville Gardens—now, in some strange and wondrous way, moving—alive !

3. *A Distinguished Stranger*

" How could it be a dream ? Yet there
She stood, the moveless image fair ! "

The Earthly Paradise.

WITH slow and stately tread the statue advanced towards the centre of the hairdresser's humble sitting-room, and stood there awhile, gazing about her with something of scornful wonder in her calm cold face. As she turned her head, the wide, deeply-cut sockets seemed the home of shadowy eyes ; her face, her bared arms, and the long straight folds of her robe were all of the same greyish-yellow hue ; the boards creaked under her sandalled feet, and Leander felt that he had never heard of a more appallingly massive ghost—if ghost indeed she were.

He had retired step by step before her to the hearth-rug, where he now stood shivering, with the fire hot at his back, and his kettle still singing on undismayed. He made no attempt to account for her presence there on any rationalistic theory. A statue had suddenly come to life, and chosen to pay him a nocturnal visit; he knew no more than that, except that he would have given worlds for courage to show it the door.

The spectral eyes were bent upon him, as if in expectation that he would begin the conversation, and, at last, with a very unmanageable tongue, he managed to observe—

" Did you want to see me on—on business, mum ? "

But the statue only relaxed her lips in a haughty smile.

THE TINTED VENUS

" For goodness' sake, say something ! " he cried wildly ; " unless you want me to jump out of the window ! What is it you've come about ? "

It seemed to him that in some way a veil had lifted from the stone face, leaving it illumined by a strange light, and from the lips came a voice which addressed him in solemn far-away tones, as of one talking in sleep. He could not have said with certainty that the language was his own, though somehow he understood her perfectly.

" You know me not ? " she said, with a kind of sad indifference.

" Well," Leander admitted, as politely as his terror would allow, " you certainly have the advantage of me for the moment, mum."

" I am Aphrodite the foam-born, the matchless seed of Ægis-bearing Zeus. Many names have I amongst the sons of men, and many temples, and I sway the hearts of all lovers ; and gods—yea, and mortals—have burned for me, a goddess, with an unconsuming, unquenchable fire !"

" Lor ! " said Leander. If he had not been so much flurried, he might have found a remark worthier of the occasion, but the announcement that she was a goddess took his breath away. He had quite believed that goddesses were long since " gone out."

" You know wherefore I am come hither ? " she said.

" Not at this minute, I don't," he replied. " You'll excuse me, but you can't be the statue out of those gardens ? You really are so surprisingly like, that I couldn't help asking you."

" I am Aphrodite, and no statue. Long—how long I know not—have I lain entranced in slumber in my sea-girt isle of Cyprus, and now again has the living touch of a mortal hand upon one of my sacred images called me from my rest, and given me power to animate this marble shell. Some hand has placed this ring upon my finger. Tell me, was it yours ? "

Leander was almost reassured ; after all, he could

A DISTINGUISHED STRANGER

forgive her for terrifying him so much, since she had come on so good-natured an errand.

" Quite correct, mum—miss ! " (he wished he knew the proper form for addressing a goddess) " that ring is my property. I'm sure it's very civil and friendly of you to come all this way about it," and he held out his hand for it eagerly.

" And think you it was for this that I have visited the face of the earth and the haunts of men, and followed your footsteps hither by roads strange and unknown to me ? You are too modest, youth."

" I don't know what there is modest in expecting you to behave honest ! " he said, rather wondering at his own audacity.

" How are you called ? " she inquired suddenly on this ; and after hearing the answer, remarked that the name was known to her as that of a goodly and noble youth who had perished for the sake of Hero.

" The gentleman may have been a connection of mine, for all I know," he said ; " the Tweddles have always kep' themselves respectable. But I'm not a hero myself, I'm a hairdresser."

She repeated the word thoughtfully, though she did not seem to quite comprehend it ; and indeed it is likely enough that, however intelligible she was to Leander, the understanding was far from being entirely reciprocal.

She extended her hand to him, smiling not ungraciously. " Leander," she said, " cease to tremble, for a great happiness is yours. Bold have you been ; yet am I not angered, for I come. Cast, then, away all fear, and know that Aphrodite disdains not to accept a mortal's plighted troth ! "

Leander entrenched himself promptly behind the armchair. " I don't know what you're talking about ! " he said. " How can I help fearing, with you coming down on me like this ? Ask yourself."

" Can you not understand that your prayer is heard ? " she demanded.

THE TINTED VENUS

" *What prayer ?* " cried Leander.

" Crass and gross-witted has the world grown ! " said she ; " a Greek swain would have needed but few words to divine his bliss. Know, then, that your suit is accepted; never yet has Aphrodite turned the humblest from her shrine. By this symbol," and she lightly touched the ring, " you have given yourself to me. I accept the offering—you are mine ! "

Leander was stupefied by such an unlooked-for misconception. He could scarcely believe his ears ; but he hastened to set himself right at once.

" If you mean that you were under the impression that I meant anything in particular by putting that ring on, it was all a mistake, mum," he said. " I shouldn't have presumed to it ! "

" Were you the lowliest of men, I care not," she replied ; " to you I owe the power I now enjoy of life and vision, nor shall you find me ungrateful. But forbear this false humility ; I like it not. Come, then, Leander, at the bidding of Cypris ; come, and fear nothing ! "

But he feared very much, for he had seen the operas of *Don Giovanni* and *Zampa*, and knew that any familiarity with statuary was likely to have unpleasant consequences. He merely strengthened his defences with a chair.

" You must excuse me, mum, you must indeed," he faltered ; " I can't come ! "

" Why ? " she asked.

" Because I've other engagements," he replied.

" I remember," she said slowly, " in the grove, when light met my eyes once more, there was a maid with you, one who laughed and was merry. Answer—is she your love ? "

" No, she isn't," he said shortly. " What if she was ? "

" If she were," observed the goddess, with the air of one who mentioned an ordinary fact, " I should crush her ! "

" Lord bless me ! " cried Leander, in his horror. " What for ? "

A DISTINGUISHED STRANGER

" Would not she be in my path ? and shall any mortal maid stand between me and my desire ? "

This was a discovery. She was a jealous and vengeful goddess ; she would require to be sedulously humoured, or harm would come.

" Well, well," he said soothingly, " there's nothing of that sort about her, I do assure you."

" Then I spare her," said the goddess. " But how, then, if this be truly so, do you still shrink from the honour before you ? "

Leander felt a natural unwillingness to explain that it was because he was engaged to a young lady who kept the accounts at a florist's.

" Well, the fact is," he said awkwardly, " there's difficulties in the way."

" Difficulties ? I can remove them all ! " she said.

" Not *these* you can't, mum. It's like this : You and me, we don't start, so to speak, from the same basin. I don't mean it as any reproach to you, but you can't deny you're an 'Eathen, and, worse than that, an 'Eathen goddess. Now all my family have been brought up as chapel folk, Primitive Methodists, and I've been trained to have a horror of superstition and idolatries, and see the folly of it. So you can see for yourself that we shouldn't be likely to get on together ! "

" You talk words," she said impatiently ; " but empty are they, and meaningless to my ears. One thing I learn from them—that you seek to escape me ! "

" That's putting it too harsh, mum," he protested. " I'm sure I feel the honour of such a call ; and, by the way, do you mind telling me how you got my address—how you found me out, I mean ? "

" No one remains long hid from the searching eye of the high gods," she replied.

" So I should be inclined to say," agreed Leander. " But only tell me this, wasn't it you in the omnibus ? We call our public conveyances omnibuses, as perhaps you mayn't know."

THE TINTED VENUS

" I, sea-born Aphrodite, / in a public conveyance, an omnibus ? There is an impiety in such a question ! "

" Well, I only thought it might have been," he stammered, rather relieved upon the whole that it was not the goddess who had seen his precipitate bolt from the vehicle. Who the female in the corner really was, he never knew ; though a man of science might account for the resemblance she bore to the statue by ascribing it to one of those preparatory impressions projected occasionally by a strong personality upon a weak one. But Leander was content to leave the matter unexplained.

" Let it suffice you," she said, " that I am here ; and once more, Leander, are you prepared to fulfil the troth you have plighted ? "

" I — I can't say I am," he said. " Not that I don't feel thankful for having had the refusal of so very 'igh-class an opportunity ; but, as I'm situated at present—what with the state of trade, and unbelief so rampant, and all—I'm obliged to decline with respectful thanks."

He trusted that after this she would see the propriety of going.

" Have a care ! " she said ; " you are young and not uncomely, and my heart pities you. Do nothing rash. Pause, ere you rouse the implacable ire of Aphrodite ! "

" Thank you," said Leander ; " i f you'll allow me, I will. I don't want any ill-feeling, I'm sure. It's my wish to live peaceable with all men."

" I leave you, then. Use the time before you till I come again in thinking well whether he acts wisely who spurns the proffered hand of Idalian Aphrodite. For the present, farewell, Leander ! "

He was overjoyed at his coming deliverance. " Good evening, mum," he said, as he ran to the door and held it open. " If you'll allow me, I'll light you down the staircase—it's rather dark, I'm afraid."

" *Fool!* " she said with scorn, and without stirring from her place ; and, as she spoke the word, the veil seemed to descend over her face again, the light faded

out, and, with a slight shudder, the figure imperceptibly resumed its normal attitude, the drapery stiffened once more into chiselled folds, and the statue was soulless as are statues generally.

4. *From Bad to Worse*

" And the shadow flits and fleets,
And will not let me be,
And I loathe the squares and streets ! " *Maud.*

FOR some time after the statue had ceased to give signs of life, the hairdresser remained gaping, incapable of thought or action. At last he ventured to approach cautiously, and on touching the figure, found it perfectly cold and hard. The animating principle had plainly departed, and left the statue a stone.

" She's gone," he said, " and left her statue behind her ! Well, of all the *goes*——She's come out without her pedestal, too ! To be sure, it would have been in her way, walking."

Seating himself in his shabby old armchair, he tried to collect his scattered wits. He scarcely realised, even yet, what had happened ; but, unless he had dreamed it all, he had been honoured by the marked attentions of a marble statue, instigated by a heathen goddess, who insisted that his affections were pledged to her.

Perhaps there was a spice of flattery in such a situation—for it cannot fall to the lot of many hairdressers to be thus distinguished—but Leander was far too much alarmed to appreciate it. There had been suggestions of menace in the statue's remarks which made him shudder when he recalled them, and he started violently once or twice when some wavering of the light gave a play of life to the marble mask. " She's coming back ! " he thought. " Oh, I do wish she wouldn't ! " But Aphrodite continued immovable, and at last he concluded that, as he put it, she " had done for the evening."

THE TINTED VENUS

His first reflection was—what had best be done? The wisest course seemed to be to send for the manager of the gardens, and restore the statue while its animation was suspended. The people at the gardens would take care that it did not get loose again.

But there was the ring ; he must get that off first. Here was an unhopèd-for opportunity of accomplishing this in privacy, and at his leisure. Again approaching the figure, he tried to draw off the compromising circle ; but it seemed tighter than ever, and he drew out a pair of scissors and, after a little hesitation, respectfully inserted it under the hoop and set to work to prize it off, with the result of snapping both the points, and leaving the ring entirely unaffected. He glanced at the face ; it wore the same dreamy smile, with a touch of gentle contempt in it. " She don't seem to mind," he said aloud ; " to be sure, she ain't inside of it now, as far as I make it out. I've got all night before me to get the confounded thing off, and I'll go on till I've done it ! "

But he laboured on with the disabled scissors, and only succeeded in scratching the smooth marble a little ; he stopped to pant. " There's only one way," he told himself desperately ; " a little diamond cement would make it all right again ; and you expect cracks in a statue."

Then, after a furtive glance around, he fetched the poker from the fireplace. He felt horribly brutal, as if he were going to mutilate and maltreat a creature that could feel ; but he nerved himself to tap the back of Aphrodite's hand at the dimpled base of the third finger. The shock ran up to his elbow, and gave him acute " pins and needles," but the stone hand was still intact. He struck again—this time with all his force—and the poker flew from his grasp, and his arm dropped paralysed by his side.

He could scarcely lift it again for some minutes, and the warning made him refrain from any further violence. " It's no good," he groaned. " If I go on, I don't know

what may happen to me. I must wait till she comes to, and then ask her for the ring, very polite and civil, and try if I can't get round her that way."

He was determined that he would never give her up to the gardens while she wore his ring ; but, in the meantime, he could scarcely leave the statue standing in the middle of his sitting-room, where it would most assuredly attract the charwoman's attention.

He had little cupboards on each side of his fireplace : one of these had no shelves, and served for storing firewood and bottles of various kinds. From this he removed the contents, and lifting the statue, which, possibly because its substance had been affected in some subtle and inexplicable manner by the vital principle that had so lately permeated it, proved less ponderous than might have been reasonably expected, he pushed it well into the recess, and turned the key on it.

Then he went trembling to bed, and, after an interval of muddled, anxious thinking, fell into a heavy sleep, which lasted until far into the morning.

He woke with the recollection that something unpleasant was hanging over him, and by degrees he remembered what that something was ; but it looked so extravagant in the morning light that he had great hopes all would turn out to be a mere dream.

It was a mild Sunday morning, and there were church bells ringing all around him ; it seemed impossible that he could really be harbouring an animated antique. But to remove all doubt, he stole down, half dressed, to his small sitting-room, which he found looking as usual—the fire burning dull and dusty in the sunlight that struck in through the open window, and his breakfast laid out on the table.

Almost reassured, he went to the cupboard and unlocked the door. Alas ! it held its skeleton—the statue was there, preserving the attitude of queenly command in which he had seen it first. Sharply he shut the door again, and turned the key with a heavy heart.

THE TINTED VENUS

He swallowed his breakfast with very little appetite, after which he felt he could not remain in the house. " To sit here with *that* in the cupboard is more than I'm equal to all Sunday/' he decided.

If Matilda had been at his aunt's, with whom she lodged, he would have gone to chapel with her ; but Matilda did not return from her holiday till late that night. He thought of going to his friend and asking his advice on his case. James, as a barrister's clerk, would presumably be able to give a sound legal opinion on an emergency.

James, however, lived " out Camden Town way," and was certain on so fine a morning to be away on some Sunday expedition with his betrothed : it was hopeless to go in search of him now. If he went to see his aunt, who lived close by in Millman Street, she might ask him about the ring, and there would be a fuss. He was in no humour for attending any place of public worship, and so he spent some hours in aimless wandering about the streets, which, as foreigners are fond of reminding us, are not exhilarating even on the brightest Sabbath, and did not raise his spirits then.

At last hunger drove him back to the passage in Southampton Row, the more quickly as it began to occur to him that the statue might possibly have revived, and be creating a disturbance in the cupboard.

He had passed the narrow posts, and was just taking out his latchkey, when some one behind touched his shoulder and made him give a guilty jump. He dreaded to find the goddess at his elbow ; however, to his relief, he found a male stranger, plainly and respectably dressed.

" You Mr. Tweddle the hairdresser ? " the stranger inquired.

Leander felt a wild impulse to deny it, and declare that he was his own friend, and had come to see himself on business, for he was in no social mood just then ; but he ended by admitting that he supposed he was Mr. Tweddle.

" So did I. Well, I want a little private talk with you, Mr. Tweddle. I've been hanging about for some time ; but though I knocked and rang, I couldn't make a soul hear."

" There isn't a soul inside," protested Tweddle, with unnecessary warmth ; " not a solitary soul ! You wanted to talk with me. Suppose we take a turn round the square ? "

" No, no. I won't keep you out; I'll come in with you ! "

Inwardly wondering what his visitor wanted, Leander led him in and lit the gas in his hair-cutting saloon. " We shall be cosier here," he said ; for he dared not take the stranger up in the room where the statue was concealed, for fear of accidents.

The man sat down in the operating-chair and crossed his legs. " I dare say you're wondering what I've come about like this on a Sunday afternoon ? " he began.

" Not at all," said Leander. " Anything I can have the pleasure of doing for you——"

" It's only to answer a few questions. I understand you lost a ring at the Rosherville Gardens yesterday evening : that's so, isn't it ? "

He was a military-looking person, as Leander now perceived, and he had a close-trimmed iron-grey beard, a high colour, quick eyes, and a stiff hard-lipped mouth—not at all the kind of man to trifle with. And yet Leander felt no inclination to tell him his story ; the stranger might be a reporter, and his adventure would " get into the papers "—perhaps reach Matilda's eyes.

" I — I dropped a ring last night, certainly," he said ; " it may have been in the gardens, for what I know."

" Now, now," said the stranger, " don't you *know* it was in the gardens ? Tell me all about it."

" Begging your pardon," said Leander, " I should like to know first what call you have to *be* told."

" You're quite right—perfectly right. I always deal straightforwardly when I can. I'll tell you who I am.

THE TINTED VENUS

I'm Inspector Bilbow, of the Criminal Investigation Department, Scotland Yard. Now, perhaps, you'll see I'm not a man to be kept in the dark. And I want you to tell me when and where you last saw that ring of yours ; it's to your own interest, if you want to see it again."

But Leander *had* seen it again, and it seemed certain that all Scotland Yard could not assist him in getting it back ; he must manage it single-handed.

" It's very kind of you, Mr. Inspector, to try and find it for me," he said ; " but the fact is, it—it ain't so valuable as I fancied. I can't afford to have it traced—it's not worth it ! "

The inspector laughed. " I never said it was, that I know. The job I'm in charge of is a bigger concern than your trumpery ring, my friend."

" Then I don't see what I've got to do with it," said Leander.

The officer had taken his measure by this time ; he must admit his man into a show of confidence, and appeal to his vanity, if he was to obtain any information he could rely upon.

" You're a shrewd chap, I see ; ' nothing for nothing ' is your motto, eh ? Well, if you help me in this, and put me on the track I want, it'll be a fine thing for you. You'll be a principal witness at the police-court; name in the papers ; regular advertisement for you ! "

This prospect, had he known it—but even inspectors cannot know everything—was the last which could appeal to Leander in his peculiar position. " I don't care for notoriety," he said loftily ; " I scorn it."

" Oho ! " said the inspector, shifting his ground. " Well, you don't want to impede the course of justice, do you ?—because that's what you seem to me to be after, and you won't find it pay in the long run. I'll get this out of you in a friendly way if I can ; if not, some other way. Come, give me your account, fair and full, of how you came to lose that ring ; there's no help for it—you must! "

Leander saw this and yielded. After all, it did not much matter, for of course he would not touch upon the strange sequel of his ill-omened act; so he told the story faithfully and circumstantially, while the inspector took it all down in his note-book, questioning him closely respecting the exact time of each occurrence.

At last he closed his note-book with a snap. "I'm not obliged to tell you anything in return for all this," he said, "but I will, and then you'll see the importance of holding your tongue till I give you leave to talk about it."

"I shan't talk about it," said Leander.

"I don't advise you to. I suppose you've heard of that affair at Wricklesmarsh Court? What! not that business where a gang broke into the sculpture gallery, one of the finest private collections in England? You surprise me!"

"And what did they steal?" asked Leander.

"They stole the figure whose finger you were ass enough (if you'll allow me the little familiarity) to put your ring on. What do you think of that?"

A wild rush of ideas coursed through the hairdresser's head. Was this policeman "after" the goddess upstairs? Did he know anything more? Would it be better to give up the statue at once and get rid of it? But then—his ring would be lost for ever!

"It's surprising," he said at last. "But what did they want to go and burgle a plaster figure for?"

"That's where it is, you see; she ain't plaster—she's marble, a genuine antic of Venus, and worth thousands. The beggars who broke in knew that, and took nothing else. They'd made all arrangements to get away with her abroad, and pass her off on some foreign collection before it got blown upon; and they'd have done it too if we hadn't been beforehand with them! So what do they do then? They drive up with her to these gardens, ask to see the manager, and say they're agents for some Fine Arts business, and have a sample with them, to be disposed of at a low price. The manager, so he tells me,

THE TINTED VENUS

had a look at it, thought it a neat article and suitable to the style of his gardens. He took it to be plain plaster, as they said, and they put it up for him their own selves, near the small gate up by the road ; then they took the money—a pound or two they asked for it—and drove away, and he saw no more of them."

" And was that all they got for their pains ? " said Leander.

The inspector smiled indulgently. " Don't you see your way yet ? " he asked. " Can't you give a guess where that statue's got to now, eh ? "

" No," said Leander, with what seemed to the inspector a quite uncalled-for excitement, " of course I can't! What do you ask me for? How should I know ? "

" Quite so," said the other ; " you want a mind trained to deal with these things. It may surprise you to hear it, but I know as well how that statue disappeared, and what was done with her, as if I'd been there ! "

" Do you, though ? " thought Leander, who was beginning to doubt whether his visitor's penetration was anything so abnormal. " What was done with her ? " he asked.

" Why, it was a plant from the first. They knew all their regular holes were stopped, and they wanted a place to dump her down in, where she wouldn't attract attention, till they could call for her again ; so they got her taken in at the gardens, where they could come in any time by the gate and fetch her off again—and very neatly it was done, too ! "

" But where do you make out they've taken her to now ? " asked Leander, who was naturally anxious to discover if the official had any suspicions of him.

" I've my own theory about that," was his answer. " I shall hunt that Venus down, sir ; I'll stake my reputation on it."

" Venus is her name, it seems," thought Leander.

" She told me it was Aphrodite. But perhaps the other's

her Christian name. It can't be the Venus I've seen pictures of—she's dressed too decent."

" Yes," repeated the inspector, " I shall hunt her down now. I don't envy the poor devil who's giving her house-room ; he'll have reason to repent it ! "

" How do you know anyone's giving her house-room ? " inquired Leander; " and why should he repent it ? "

" Ask your own common sense. They daren't take her back to any of their own places ; they know better. They haven't left the country with her. What remains ? They've bribed or got over some mug of an outsider to be their accomplice, and a bad speculation he'll find it, too."

" What would be done to him ? " asked the hair-dresser, with a quite unpleasant internal sensation.

" That is a question I wouldn't pretend to decide ; but I've no hesitation in saying that the party on whose premises that statue is discovered will wish he'd died before he ever set eyes on her."

" You're quite right there ! " said Leander. " Well, sir, I'm afraid I haven't been much assistance to you."

" Never mind that," said the inspector, encouragingly ; " you've answered my questions ; you've not hindered the law, and that's a game some burn their fingers at."

Leander let him out, and returned to his saloon with his head in a worse whirl than before. He did not think the detective suspected him. He was clearly barking up the wrong tree at present; but so acute a mind could not be long deceived, and if once Leander was implicated his guilt would appear beyond denial. Would the police believe that the statue had run after him ? No one would believe it ! To be found in possession of that fatal work of art would inevitably ruin him.

He might carry her away to some lonely spot and leave her, but where was the use ? She would only come back again ; or he might be taken in the act. He

THE TINTED VENUS

dared not destroy her ; his right arm had been painful all day after that last attempt.

If he gave her up to the authorities, he would have to explain how he came to be in a position to do so, which, as he now saw, would be a difficult undertaking ; and even then he would lose all chance of recovering his ring in time to satisfy his aunt and Matilda. There was no way out of it, unless he could induce Venus to give up the token and leave him alone.

" Cuss her ! " he said angrily ; " a pretty bog she's led me into, she and that minx, Ada Parkinson ! "

He felt so thoroughly miserable that hunger had vanished, and he dreaded the idea of an evening at home, though it was a blustering night, with occasional vicious spirts of rain, and by no means favourable to continued pacing of streets and squares.

" I 'm hanged if I don't think I'll go to church ! " he thought ; " and perhaps I shall feel more equal to supper afterwards."

He went upstairs to get his best hat and overcoat, and was engaged in brushing the former in his sitting-room, when from within the cupboard he heard a shower of loud raps.

His knees trembled. " She's wuss than any ghost ! " he thought ; but he took no notice, and went on brushing his hat, while he endeavoured to hum a hymn.

" Leander ! " cried the clear, hard voice he knew too well, " I have returned. Release me ! "

His first idea was to run out of the house and seek sanctuary in some pew in the opposite church. " But there," he thought disgustedly, " she'd only come in and sit next to me. No, I'll pluck up a spirit and have it out with her ! " and he threw open the door.

" How have you dared to imprison me in this narrow tomb ? " she demanded majestically, as she stepped forth.

Leander cringed. " It's a nice roomy cupboard," he said. " I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind putting

up with it, especially as you invited yourself," he could not help adding.

" When I found myself awake and in utter darkness," she said, " I thought you had buried me beneath the soil."

" Buried you ! " he exclaimed, with a sudden perception that he might do worse.

" And in that thought I was preparing to invoke the forces that lie below the soil to come to my aid, burst the masses that impeded me, and overwhelm you and all this ugly swarming city in one vast ruin ! "

" I won't bury her," Leander decided. " I'm sorry you hadn't a better opinion of me, mum," he said aloud. " You see, how you came to be in there was this way : when you went out, like the snuff of a candle, so to speak, you left your statue standing in the middle of the floor, and I had to put it somewhere where it wouldn't be seen."

" You did well," she said indulgently, " to screen my image from the vulgar sight; and if you had no statelier shrine wherein to install it, the fault lies not with you. You are pardoned."

" Thank you, mum," said Leander ; " and now let me ask you if you intend to animate that statue like this as a regular thing ? "

" So long as your obstinacy continues, or until it outlives my forbearance, I shall return at intervals," she said. " Why do you ask this ? "

" Well," said Leander, with a sinking heart, but hoping desperately to move her by the terrors of the law, " it's my duty to tell you that that image you're in is stolen property."

" Has it been stolen from one of my temples ? " she asked.

" I dare say—I don't know ; but there's the police moving heaven and earth to get you back again ! "

" He is good and pious—the police, and if I knew him I would reward him."

" There's a good many hims in the police—that's what we call our guards for the street, who take up

THE TINTED VENUS

thieves and bad characters ; and, being stolen, they're all of 'em after *you* ; and if they had a notion where you were, they'd be down on you, and back you'd go to wherever you've come from—some gallery, I believe, where you wouldn't get away again in a hurry ! Now, I tell you what it is, if you don't give me up that ring, and go away and leave me in quiet, I'll tell the police who you are and where you are. I mean what I say, by George I do ! "

" We know not George, nor will it profit you to invoke him now," said the goddess. " See, I will deign to reason with you as with some froward child. Think you that, should the guards seize my image, / should remain within, or that it is aught to me where this marble presentment finds a resting-place while I am absent therefrom ? But for you, should you surrender it into their hands, would there be no punishment for your impiety in thus concealing a divine effigy ? "

" She ain't no fool ! " thought Leander ; " she mayn't understand our ways, but she's a match for me notwithstanding. I must try another line."

" Lady Venus," he began, " if that's the proper way to call you, I didn't mean any threats—far from it. I'll be as humble as you please. You look a good-natured lady ; you wouldn't want to make a man uncomfortable, I'm sure. Do give me back that ring, for mercy's sake ! If I haven't got it to show in a day or two, I shall be ruined ! "

" Should any mortal require the ring of you, you have but to reply, * I have placed it upon the finger of Aphrodite, whose spouse I am ! ' Thus will you have honour amongst mortals, being held blameless ! "

" Blameless ! " cried Leander, in pardonable exasperation. " That's all you know about it ! And what am I to say to the lady it lawfully belongs to ? "

" You have lied to me, then, and you are already affianced ! Tell me the abode of this maiden of yours."

" What do you want it for ? " he inquired, hoping faintly she might intend to restore the ring.

FROM BAD TO WORSE

" To seek it out, to go to her abode, to crush her ! Is she not my rival ? "

" Crush my Matilda ? " he cried in agony. " You'll never do such a thing as that ? "

" You have revealed her name ! I have but to ask in your streets, ' Where abideth Matilda, the beloved of Leander, the dresser of hair ? Lead me to her dwelling.* And having arrived thereat, I shall crush her, and thus she shall deservedly perish ! "

He was horrified at the possible effects of his slip, which he hastened to repair. " You won't find it so easy to come at her, luckily," he said ; " there's hundreds of Matildas in London alone."

" Then," said the goddess, sweetly and calmly, " it is simple : I shall crush them all."

" Oh, lor ! " whimpered Leander, " here's a blood-thirsty person ! Where's the sense of doing that ? "

" Because, dissipated reveller that you are, you love them."

" Now, when did I ever say I loved them ? I don't even know more than two or three, and those I look on as sisters—in fact " (here he hit upon a lucky evasion) " they *are* sisters—it's only another name for them. I've a brother and three Matildas, and here are you talking of crushing my poor sisters as if they were so many beadies—all for nothing ! "

" Is this the truth ? Palter not with me ! You are pledged to no mortal bride ? "

" I'm a bachelor. And as for the ring, it belongs to my aunt, who's over fifty."

" Then no one stands between us, and you are mine ! "

" Don't talk so ridiculous ! I tell you I ain't yours—it's a free country, this is ! "

" If I—an immortal—can stoop thus, it becomes you not to reject the dazzling favour."

A last argument occurred to him. " But I reelly don't think, mum," he said persuasively, " that you can be quite aware of the extent of the stoop. The fact is,

THE TINTED VENUS

I am, as I've tried to make you understand, a hairdresser ; some might lower themselves so far as to call me a barber. Now, hairdressing, whatever may be said for it " (he could not readily bring himself to decry his profession)—" hairdressing is considribly below you in social rank. I wouldn't deceive you by saying otherwise. I assure you that, if you had any ideer what a barber was, you wouldn't be so pressing."

She seemed to be struck by this. " You say well ! " she observed, thoughtfully ; " your occupation may be base and degrading, and if so, it were well for me to know it."

" If you were once to see me in my daily avocations," he urged, " you'd see what a mistake you're making."

" Enough ! I will see you—and at once. Barb, that I may know the nature of your toil ! "

" I can't do that now," he objected ; " I haven't got a customer."

" Then fetch one, and barb with it immediately. You must have your tools by you ; so delay not ! "

" A customer ain't a tool ! " he groaned, "it's a fellow-man ; and no one will come in to-night, because it's Sunday. (Don't ask me what Sunday is, because you wouldn't understand if I tried to tell you !) And I don't carry on my business up here, but below in the saloon."

" I will go thither and behold you."

" No ! " he exclaimed. " Do you w^rant to ruin me ? "

" I will make no sign ; none shall recognise me for what I am. But come I will ! "

Leander pondered awhile. There was danger in introducing the goddess into his saloon ; he had no idea what she might do there. But at the same time, if she were bent upon coming, she would probably do so in any case ; and besides, he felt tolerably certain that what she would see would convince her of his utter unsuitability as a consort.

Yes, it was surely wisest to assist necessity, and obtain the most favourable conditions for the inevitable experiment.

" I might put you in a corner of the operating-room, to be sure," he said thoughtfully. " No one would think but what you was part of the fittings, unless you went moving about."

" Place me where I may behold you at your labour, and there I will remain," she said.

" Well," he conceded, " I'll risk it. The best way would be for you to walk down to the saloon, and leave yourself ready in a corner till you come to again. I can't carry a heavy marble image all that way ! "

" So be it," said she, and followed him to the saloon with a proud docility.

" It's nicely got up," he remarked, as they reached it ; " and you'll find it roomier than the cupboard."

She deigned no answer as she remained motionless in the corner he had indicated ; and presently, as he held up the candle he was carrying, he found its rays were shining upon a senseless stone.

He went upstairs again, half fearful, half sanguine. " I don't altogether like it," he was thinking. " But if I put a print wrapper over her all day, no one will notice. And goddesses must have their proper pride. If she once gets it into her marble head that I keep a shop, I think that she'll turn up her nose at me. And then she'll give back the ring and go away, and I shan't be afraid of the police ; and I needn't tell Tillie anything about it. It's worth risking."

5. *An Experiment*

" 'Tis time ; descend ; be stone no more ; approach :
Strike all that look upon with marvel."

The Winter's Tale.

THE next day brought Leander a letter which made his heart beat with mingled emotions—it was from his Matilda. It had evidently been written immediately before her return, and told him that

THE TINTED VENUS

she would be at their old meeting-place (the statue of Fox in Bloomsbury Square) at eight o'clock that evening.

The wave of tenderness which swept over him at the anticipation of this was hurled back by an uncomfortable thought. What if Matilda were to refer to the ring ? But no ; his Matilda would do nothing so indelicate.

All through the day he mechanically went through his hairdressing, singeing, and shampooing operations, divided between joy at the prospect of seeing his adored Matilda again, and anxiety respecting the cold marble swathed in the print wrapper, which stood in the corner of his hair-cutting saloon.

He glanced at it every time he went past to change a brush or heat a razor, but there was no sign of movement under the folds, and he gradually became reassured, especially as it excited no remark.

But as evening drew on he felt that, for the success of his experiment, it was necessary that the cover should be removed. It was dangerous, supposing the inspector were to come in unexpectedly and recognise the statue ; but he could only trust to fortune for that, and hoped, too, that even if the detective came he would be able to keep him in the outer shop.

It was only for one evening, and it was well worth the risk.

A foreign gentleman had come in, and the hairdresser found that a fresh wrapper was required, which gave him the excuse he wanted for unveiling the Aphrodite. He looked carefully at the face as he uncovered it, but could discover no speculation as yet in the calm, full gaze of the goddess.

The foreign gentleman was inclined to be talkative under treatment, and the conversation came round to public amusements.

" In my country," the customer said, without mentioning or betraying what his particular country was—" in my country we have what you have not, places to sit out in

the fresh air, and drink a glass of beer, along with the entertainments. You have not that in London ? "

" Bless your soul, yes," said Leander, who was a true patriot, " plenty of them ! "

" Oh, I did not aware that; but who ? "

" Well," said the hairdresser, " there's the Eagle in the City Road, for one ; and there's the Surrey Gardens ; and there's Rosherville," he added, after a pause. (The Fisheries Exhibition, it may be said, was as yet unknown.)

" And you go there, often ? "

" I've been to Rosherville."

" Was it goot there—you laiike it, eh ? "

" Well," said Leander, " they tell me it's very gay in the season. P'rhaps I went at the wrong time of the year for it."

" What you call wrong time for it ? "

" Slack—nothing going on," he explained ; " like it was when I went last Saturday."

" You went last Saturday ? And you stay a long time ? "

" I didn't stay no longer than I could help," Leander said. " All our party was glad to get away."

The foreigner had risen to go, when his eyes fell on the Venus in the corner.

" You did not stay long, and your party was glad to come away ? " he repeated absently. " I am not surprised at that." He gave the hairdresser a long stare as he spoke. " No, I am not surprised. . . . You have a good taste, my friend ; you laiike the antique, do you not ? " he broke off suddenly.

" Ah ! you are looking at the Venus, sir," said Leander. " Yes, I'm very partial to it."

" It is a taste that costs," his customer said.

He looked back over his shoulder as he left the shop, and once more repeated softly, " Yes, it is a taste that costs."

" I suppose," Leander reflected as he went back, " it

THE TINTED VENUS

does strike people as queer, my keeping that statue there ; but it's only for one evening."

The foreigner had scarcely left when an old gentleman, a regular customer, looked in, on his way from the City, and at once noticed the innovation. He was an old gentleman who had devoted much time and study to Art, in the intervals of business, and had developed critical powers of the highest order.

He walked straight up to the Venus, and stuck out his under lip. "Where did you get that thing?" he inquired. "Isn't this place of yours small enough, without lumbering it up with statuary out of the Euston Road?"

"I didn't get it there," said Leander. "I—I thought it would be 'andy to 'ang the 'ats on."

"Dear, dear," said the old gentleman, "why do you people dabble in matters you don't understand? Come here, Tweddle, and let me show you. Can't you see what a miserable sham the thing is—a cheap, tawdry imitation of the splendid classic type? Why, by merely exhibiting such a thing, you're vitiating public taste, sir—corrupting it."

Leander did not quite follow this rebuke, which he thought was probably based upon the goddess's antecedents.

"Was she reelly as bad as that, sir?" he said. "I wasn't aware so, or I shouldn't give any offence to customers by letting her stay here."

As he spoke he saw the indefinable indications in the statue's face which denoted that it was instinct once more with life and intelligence, and he was horrified at the thought that the latter part of the conversation might have been overheard.

"But I've always understood," he said, hastily, "that the party this represents was puffickly correct, however free some of the others might have been; and I suppose that's the costume of the period she's in, and very becoming it is, I'm sure, though gone out since."

AN EXPERIMENT

" Bah ! " said the old gentleman, "it's poor art. I'll show you *where* the thing is bad. I happen to understand something of these things. Just observe how the top of the head is out of drawing ; look at the lowness of the forehead, and the distance between the eyes ; all the canons of proportion ignored—absolutely ignored ! "

What further strictures this rash old gentleman was preparing to pass upon the statue will never be known now, for Tweddle already thought he could discern a growing resentment in her face, under so much candour. He could not stand by and allow so excellent a customer to be crushed on the floor of his saloon, and he knew the Venus quite capable of this : was she not perpetually threatening such a penalty, on much slighter provocation?

He rushed between the unconscious man and his fate. " I think you said your hair cut ? " he said, and laid violent hands upon the critic, forced him protesting into a chair, throttled him with a towel, and effectually diverted his attention by a series of personal remarks upon the top of his head.

The victim, while he was being shampooed, showed at first an alarming tendency to revert to the subject of the goddess's defects, but Leander was able to keep him in check by well-timed jets of scalding water and ice-cold sprays, which he directed against his customer's exposed crown, until every idea, except impotent rage, was washed out of it, while a hard machine brush completed the subjugation.

Finally, the unfortunate old man staggered out of the shop, preserved by Leander's unremitting watchfulness from the wrath of the goddess. Yet, such is the ingratitude of human nature, that he left the place vowing to return no more. " I thought I'd got a *clown* behind me, sir ! " he used to say afterwards, in describing it.

Before Leander could recover from the alarm he had been thrown into, another customer had entered ; a pale young man, with a glossy hat, a white satin necktie, and a rather decayed gardenia. He, too, was one of

THE TINTED VENUS

Tweddle's regular clients. What his occupation might be was a mystery, for he aimed at being considered a man of pleasure.

" I say, just shave me, will you ? " he said, and threw himself languidly into a chair. " Fact is, Tweddle, I've been so doosid chippy for the last two days, I daren't touch a razor."

" Indeed, sir ! " said Leander, with respectful sympathy.

" You see," explained the youth, " I've been playing the goat—the giddy goat. Know what that means ? "

" I used to," said Leander ; " I never touch alcoholic stimulants now, myself."

" Wish I didn't. I say, Tweddle, have you been to the Cosmopolitan lately ? "

" I don't go to music-'alls now," said Leander ; " I've given up all that now I'm keeping company."

" Well, you go and see the new ballet," the youth exhorted him earnestly ; not that he cared whether the hairdresser went or not, but because he wanted to talk about the ballet to somebody.

" Ah ! " observed Leander ; " is that a good one they've got there now, sir ? "

" Rather think so. Ballet called *Olympus*. There's a regular ripping little thing who comes on as one of Venus's doves." And the youth went on to intimate that the dove in question had shown signs of being struck by his powers of fascination. " I saw directly that I'd mashed her ; she was gone, dead gone, sir ; and—— I say, who's that in the corner over there—eh ? "

He was staring intently into the pier-glass in front of him. " That ? " said Leander, following his glance. " Oh ! that's a statue I've bought. She—she brightens up the place a bit, don't she ? "

" A statue, is it ? Yes, of course ; I knew it was a statue. Well, about that dove. I went round after it was all over, but couldn't see a sign of her ; so—— That's a queer sort of statue you've got there ! " he broke

off suddenly ; and Leander distinctly saw the goddess shake her arm in fierce menace. " He's said something that's put her out," he concluded. " I wish I knew what it was."

" It's a classical statue, sir," he said, with what composure he might; " they're all made like that."

" Are they, by Jove ? But, Tweddle, I say, it *moves* : it's shaking its fist like old Harry ! "

^c Oh, I think you're mistaken, sir, really ! I don't perceive it myself."

" Don't perceive it ? But, hang it, man, look—look in the glass ! There ! don't you see it does ? Dash it ! can't you say it does ? "

" Flaw in the mirror, sir ; when you move your 'ed, you do ketch that effect. I've observed it myself frequent. Chin cut, sir ? My fault—my fault entirely," he admitted handsomely.

The young man was shaved by this time, and had risen to receive his hat and cane, when he gave a violent start as he passed the Aphrodite. " There ! " he said, breathlessly, " look at that, Tweddle; she's going to punch my head ! I suppose you'll tell me *that's* the glass ? "

Leander trembled—this time for his own reputation ; for the report that he kept a mysterious and pugnacious statue on the premises would not increase his custom. He must silence it, if possible. " I 'm afraid it is, sir—in a way," he remarked, compassionately.

The young man turned paler still. " No ! " he exclaimed. " You don't think it is, though ? Don't you see anything yourself ? I don't either, Tweddle ; I was chaffing, that's all. I know I'm a wee bit off colour ; but it's not so bad as that. Keep off ! Tell her to drop it, Tweddle ! "

For, as he spoke, the goddess had made a stride towards him. " Miserable one ! " she cried, " you have mangled one of my birds. Hence, or I crush thee ! "

" Tweddle ! Tweddle ! " cried the youth, taking refuge in the other shop, " don't let her come after me ! What's

THE TINTED VENUS

she talking about, eh ? You shouldn't have these things about; they're not *right* ! "

Leander shut the glass door and placed himself before it, while he tried to assume a concerned interest. " You take my advice, sir," he said ; " you go home and keep steady."

" Is it that ? " murmured the customer. " Great Scott J I must be bad ! " and he went out into the street, shaking.

" I don't believe I shall ever see *him* again, either," thought Leander. " She'll drive 'em all away if she goes on like this." But here a sudden recollection struck him, and he slapped his thigh with glee. " Why, of course," he said, " that's it. I've downright disgusted her ; it was me she was most put out with, and after this she'll leave me alone. Hooray ! I'll shut up everything first and get rid of the boy, and then go in and see her, and get away to Matilda."

When the shop was secured for the night, he re-entered the saloon with a light step. " Well, mum," he began, " you've seen me at work, and you've thought better of what you were proposing, haven't you now ? "

" Where is the wretched stripling who dared to slay my dove ? " she cried. " Bring him to me ! "

" What *are* you a-talking about now ? " cried the bewildered Leander. " Who's been touching your birds. I wasn't aware you *kept* birds."

" Many birds are sacred to me—the silver swan, the fearless sparrow, and, chief of all, the coral-footed dove. And one of these has that monster slain—his own mouth hath spoken it."

" Oh ! is that all ? " said Leander. " Why, he wasn't talking about a real dove ; it was a ballet girl he meant. I can't explain the difference ; but they *are* different. And it's all talk, too. I know him ; *he's* harmless enough. And now, mum, to come to the point; you've now had the opportunity of forming some idee of my calling. You've thought better of it, haven't you ? "

AN EXPERIMENT

" Better ! ay, far better ! " she cried, in a voice that thrilled with pride. " Leander, too modestly you have rated yourself, for surely you are great amongst the sons of men."

" *Me !* " he gasped, utterly overcome. " How do you make that out ? "

" Do you not compel them to furnish sport for you ? Have I not seen them come in, talking boldly and loud, and yet seat themselves submissively at a sign from you ? And do you not swathe them in the garb of humiliation, and daub their countenances with whiteness, and threaten their bared throats with the gleaming knife, and grind their heads under the resistless wheel ? Then, having in disdain granted them their worthless lives, you set them free ; and they propitiate you with a gift, and depart trembling."

" Well, of all the topsy-turvy contrariness ! " he protested. " You've got it *all* wrong ; I declare you have ! But I'll put you right, if it's possible to do it." And he launched into a lengthy explanation of the wonders she had seen, at the end of which he inquired, " Now do you understand I'm nobody in particular ? "

" It may be so," she admitted ; " but what of that ? Ere this have I been wild with love for a herdsman on Phrygian hills. Aye, Adonis have I kissed in the oakwood, and bewailed his loss. And did not Selene descend to woo the neatherd Endymion ? Wherefore, then, should I scorn thee ? and what are the differences and degrees of mortals to such as I ! Be bold ; distrust your merits no longer, since I, who amongst the goddesses obtained the prize of beauty, have chosen you for my own."

" I don't care what prizes you won," he said, sulkily ; " I'm not yours, and I don't intend to be, either." He was watching the clock impatiently all the while, for it was growing very near nine.

" It is vain to struggle," she said, " since not the gods themselves can resist Fate. We must yield, and contend not."

THE TINTED VENUS

" You begin it, then," he said. " Give me my ring."

" The sole symbol of my power ! the charm which has called me from my long sleep ! Never ! "

" Then," said Leander, knowing full well that his threat was an impossible one, " I shall place the matter in the hands of a respectable lawyer."

" I understand you not; but it is no matter. In time I shall prevail."

" Well, mum, you must come again another evening, if you've no objection," said Leander, rudely, " because I've got to go out just now."

" I will accompany you," she said.

Leander nearly danced with frenzy. Take the statue with him to meet his dear Matilda ! He dared not. " You're very kind," he stammered, perspiring freely ; " but I couldn't think of taking you out such a foggy evening."

" Have no cares for me," she answered ; " we will go together. You shall explain to me the ways of this changed world."

" Catch *me* ! " was Leander's elliptical comment to himself; but he had to pretend a delighted acquiescence. " Well," he cried, " if I hadn't been thinking how lonely it would be going out alone ! and now I shall have the honour of your company, mum. You wait a bit here, while I run upstairs and fetch my 'at."

But the perfidious man only waited until he was on the other side of the door, which led from the saloon to his staircase, to lock it after him, and slip out by the private door into the street.

" Now, my lady," he thought triumphantly, " you're safe for awhile, at all events. I've put up the shutters, and so you won't get out that way. And now for Tillie ! "

6. *Two are Company*

" The shape
Which has made escape,
And before my countenance
Answers me glance for glance."

Mesmerism.

IEANDER hastened eagerly to his trysting-place. All these obstacles and difficulties had rendered **L**his Matilda tenfold dearer and more precious to him ; and besides, it was more than a fortnight since he had last seen her. But he was troubled and anxious still at the recollection of the Greek statue shut up in his haircutting saloon. What would Matilda say if she knew about it ; and still worse, what might it not do if it knew about her ? Matilda might decline to continue his acquaintance—for she was a very right-minded girl—unless Venus, like the jealous and vindictive heathen she had shown herself to be, were to crush her before she even had the opportunity.

" It's a mess," he thought disconsolately, " whatever way I look at it. But after to-night I won't meet Matilda any more while I've got that statue staying with me, or no one could tell the consequences." However, when he drew near the appointed spot, and saw the slender form which awaited him there by the railings, he forgot all but the present joy. Even the memory of the terrible divinity could not live in the wholesome presence of the girl he had the sense to love truly and honestly.

Matilda Collum was straight and slim, though not tall ; she had a neat little head of light brown hair, which curled round her temples in soft rings ; her complexion was healthily pale, with the slightest tinge delicate pink in it ; she had a round but decided chin, and her grey eyes were large and innocently severe, except on the rare occasions when she laughed, and then their expression was almost childlike in its gaiety.

Generally, and especially in business hours, her pretty

THE TINTED VENUS

face was calm and slightly haughty, and rash male customers, who attempted to make the choice of a " button-hole " an excuse for flirtation were not encouraged to persevere. She was seldom demonstrative to Leander—it was not her way—but she accepted his effusive affection very contentedly, and, indeed, returned it more heartily than her principles allowed her to admit; for she secretly admired his spirit and fluency, and, as is often the case in her class of life, had no idea that she was essentially her lover's superior.

After the first greetings, they walked slowly round the square together, his arm around her waist. Neither said very much for some minutes, but Leander was wildly, foolishly happy, and there was no severity in Matilda's eyes when they shone in the lamp-light.

" Well," he said, at last, " and so I've actually got you safe back again, my dear, darling Tillie ! It seems like a long eternity since last we met. I've been so beastly miserable, Matilda ! "

" You do seem to have got thinner in the face, Leander dear," said Matilda, compassionately. " What have you been doing while I've been away ? "

" Only wishing my dearest girl back, that's all I've been doing."

" What ! haven't you given yourself any enjoyment at all—not gone out anywhere all the time ? "

" Not once—leastwise, that is to say——" A guilty memory of Rosherville made him bungle here.

" Why, of course I didn't expect you to stop indoors all the time," said Matilda, noticing the amendment, " so long as you never went where you wouldn't take me."

Oh, conscience, conscience ! But Rosherville didn't count—it was outside the radius ; and besides, he *hadn't* enjoyed himself.

" Well," he said, " I did go out one evening, to hear a lecture on Astronomy at the Town Hall, in the Gray's Inn Road ; but then I had the ticket given me by a customer, and I reely was surprised to find how regular

the stars was in their habits, comets and all. But my 'Tilda is the only star of the evening for me, to-night. I don't want to talk about anything else."

The diversion was successful, and Matilda asked no more inconvenient questions. Presently she happened to cough slightly, and he touched accusingly the light summer cloak she was wearing.

" You're not dressed warm enough for a night like this," he said, with a lover's concern. " Haven't you got anything thicker to put on than that ? "

" I haven't bought my winter things yet," said Matilda ; " it was so mild, that I thought I'd wait till I could afford it better. But I've chosen the very thing I mean to buy. You know Mrs. Twilling's, at the top of the Row, the corner shop ? Well, in the window there's a perfectly lovely long cloak, all lined with squirrel's fur, and with those nice oxidised silver fastenings. A cloak like that lasts ever so long, and will always look neat and quiet; and anyone can wear it without being stared after ; so I mean to buy it as soon as it turns really cold."

" Ah ! " said he, " I can't have you ketching cold, you know ; it ain't summer any longer, and I—I've been thinking we must give up our evening strolls together for the present."

" When you've just been saying how miserable you've been without them. Oh, Leander ! "

" Without *you*" he amended lamely. " I shall see you at aunt's, of course ; only we'd better suspend the walks while the nights are so raw. And, oh, Tillie, ere long you will be mine, my little wife ! Only to think of you keeping the books for me with your own pretty little fingers, and sending out the bills ! (not that I give much credit). Ah, what a blissful dream it sounds ! Does it to you, Matilda ? "

" I'm not sure that you keep your books the same way as we do," she replied demurely ; " but I dare say " —(and this was a great concession for Matilda)—" I dare say we shall suit one another."

THE TINTED VENUS

" Suit one another ! " he cried. " Ah ! we shall be inseparable as a brush and comb, Tillie, if you'll excuse so puffessional a stimulus. And what a future lies before me ! If I can only succeed in introducing some of my inventions to public notice, we may rise, Tilly, ' like an exclamation,' as the poet says. I believe my new nasal splint has only to be known to become universally worn ; and I've been thinking out a little machine lately for imparting a patrician arch to the flattest foot, that ought to have an extensive run. I almost wish you weren't so pretty, Tillie. I've studied you careful, and I'm bound to say, as it is there really isn't room for any improvement I could suggest. Nature's beaten me there, and I'm not too proud to own it."

" Would you rather there was room ! " inquired Matilda.

" From a puffessional point of view, it would have inspired me," he said. " It would have suggested ideers, and I shouldn't have loved you less, not if you hadn't had a tooth in your mouth nor a hair on your head ; you would still be my beautiful Tillie."

" I would rather be as I am, thank you," said Matilda, to whom this fancy sketch did not appeal. " And now, let's talk about something else. Do you know that Mother is coming up to town at the end of the week on purpose to see you ? "

" No," said Leander, " I — I didn't."

" Yes, she's taken the whole of your aunt's first floor for a week. (You know, she knew Miss Tweddle when she was younger, and that was how I came to lodge there, and to meet you.) Do you remember that Sunday afternoon you came to tea, and your aunt invited me in, because she thought I must be feeling so dull, all alone ? "

" Ah, I should think I did ! Do you remember I helped to toast the crumpets ? What a halcyon evening that was, Matilda ! "

" Was it ? " she said. " I don't remember the weather exactly ; but it was nice indoors."

TWO ARE COMPANY

" But, I say, Tillie, my own," he said, somewhat anxiously, " how does your ma like your being engaged to me ? "

" Well, I don't think she does like it quite," said Matilda. " She says she will reserve her consent till she sees whether you are worthy ; but directly she sees you, Leander, her objections will vanish."

" She has got objections, then ? What to ? "

" Mother always wanted me to keep my affections out of trade," said Matilda. " You see, she never can forget what poor papa was."

" And what was your poor papa ? " asked Leander.

" Didn't you know ? He was a dentist, and that makes mamma so very particular, you see."

" But, hang it, Matilda ! you're employed in a flower-shop, you know."

" Yes, but Mother never really approved of it ; only she had to give way because she couldn't afford to keep me at home, and I scorned to go out as a governess. Never mind, Leander ; when she comes to know you and hear your conversation, she will relent ; her pride will melt."

" But suppose it keeps solid ; what will you do, Matilda ? "

" I am independent, Leander ; and though I would prefer to marry with Mother's approval, I shouldn't feel bound to wait for it. So long as you are all I think you are, I shouldn't allow anyone to dictate to me."

" Bless you for those words, my angelic girl ! " he said, and hugged her close to his breast. " Now I can beard your ma with a light 'art. Oh, Matilda ! you can form no ideer how I worship you. Nothing shall ever come betwixt us two, shall it ? "

" Nothing, as far as I am concerned, Leander," she replied. " What's the matter ? "

He had given a furtive glance behind him after the last remarks, and his embrace suddenly relaxed, until his arm was withdrawn altogether.

THE TINTED VENUS

" Nothing is the matter, Matilda/' he said. " Doesn't the moon look red through the fog ? "

" Is that why you took away your arm ? " she inquired.

" Yes—that is, no. It occurred to me I was rendering you too conspicuous ; we don't want to go about advertising ourselves, you know."

" But who is there here to notice ? "' asked Matilda.

" Nobody," he said ; " oh, nobody ! but we mustn't get into the way of it " ; and he cast another furtive rearward look. In the full flow of his raptures the miserable hairdresser had seen a sight which had frozen his very marrow—a tall form, in flowing drapery, gliding up behind with a tigress-like stealth. The statue had broken out, in spite of all his precautions ! Venus, jealous and exacting, was near enough to overhear every word, and he could scarcely hope she had escaped seeing the arm he had thrown round Matilda's waist.

" You were going to tell me how you worshipped me," said Matilda.

" I didn't say *worship*" he protested ; " it—it's only images and such that expect that. But I can tell you there's very few brothers feel to you as I feel."

" *Brothers*, Leander ! " exclaimed Matilda, and walked farther apart from him.

" Yes," he said. " After all, what tie's closer than a brother ? A uncle's all very well, and similarly a cousin ; but they can't feel like a brother does, for brothers they are not."

" I should have thought there were ties still closer," said Matilda ; " you seemed to think so too, once."

" Oh, ah ! *that!* " he said. (Every frigid word gave him a pang to utter ; but it was all for Matilda's sake.) " There's time enough to think of that, my girl ; we mustn't be in a hurry."

" I 'm *not* in a hurry," said Matilda.

" That's the proper way to look at it," said he ; " and meanwhile I haven't got a sister I'm fonder of than I am of you."

" If you've nothing more to say than that, we had better part," she remarked ; and he caught at the suggestion with obvious relief. He had been in an agony of terror, lest, even in the gathering fog, she should detect that they were watched ; and then, too, it was better to part with her under a temporary misconception than part with her altogether.

" Well," he said, " I mustn't keep you out any longer, with that cold."

" You are very ready to get rid of me," said poor Matilda.

" The real truth is," he answered, simulating a yawn with a heavy heart, " I am most uncommon sleepy to-night, and all this standing about is too much for me. So good-bye, and take care of yourself! "

" I needn't say that to you," she said ; " but I won't keep you up a minute longer. I wonder you troubled to come out at all."

" Oh," he said, carefully keeping as much in front of the statue as he could, " it's no trouble ; but you'll excuse me seeing you to the door this evening ? "

" Oh, certainly," said Matilda, biting her lip. She touched his hand with the ends of her fingers, and hurried away without turning her head.

When she was out of sight, Leander faced round to the irrepressible goddess. He was in a white rage ; but terror and caution made him suppress it to some extent.

" So here you are again ! " he said.

" Why did you not wait for me ? " she answered. " I remained long for you ; you came not, and I followed."

" I see you did," said the aggrieved Leander ; " I can't say I like being spied upon. If you're a goddess, act as such ! "

" What ! you dare to upbraid me ? " she cried. " Beware, or I——"

" I know," said Leander, flinching from her. " Don't do that ; I only made a remark."

" I have the right to follow you ; I choose to do so."

THE TINTED VENUS

" If you must, you must," he groaned ; " but it does seem hard that I mayn't slip out for a few minutes' talk with my only sister."

" You said you were going to run for business, and you told me you had three sisters."

" So I have ; but only one *youngest* one."

" And why did they not all come to talk with you ? "

" I suppose because the other two stayed at home," rejoined Leander, sulkily.

" I know not why, but I doubt you ; that one who came, she is not like you ! "

" No," said Leander, with a great show of candour, " that's what every one says ; all our family are like that ; we are like in a way, because we're all of us so different. You can tell us anywhere just by the difference. My father and mother were both very unlike : I suppose we take after them."

The goddess seemed satisfied with this explanation. " And now that I have regained you, let us return to your abode," she said ; and Leander walked back by her side, a prey to rage and humiliation.

" It is a miserable thing," he was thinking, " for a man in my rank of life to have a female statue trotting after him like a great dorg. I'm damned if I put up with it ! Suppose we happen on somebody as knows me ! "

Fortunately, at that time of night Bloomsbury Square is not much frequented ; the increasing fog prevented the apparition of a female in classical garments from attracting the notice to which it might otherwise have been exposed, and they reached the shop without any disagreeable encounter.

" She shan't stop in the saloon," he determined ; " I've had enough of that ! If you've no objections," he said, with a mixture of deference and dictation, " I shall be obliged if you'd settle yourself in the little shrine in the upstairs room before proceeding to evaporate out of your statue ; it would be more agreeable to my feelings."

" Ah ! " she said, smiling, " you would have me nearer

you ? Your stubborn heart is yielding ; a little while, and you will own the power of Aphrodite ! "

" Now, don't you go deceiving yourself with any such icleters," said the hairdresser, irritably. " I shan't do no sucji.thing, so you needn't think it. And, to come to the point, how long do you mean to carry on this little game ? "

" Game ? " repeated the goddess, absently.

" How long are you going to foiler me about in this ridiclous way ? "

" Till you submit, and profess your willingness to redeem your promise."

" Oh, and vou're coming every evening till then, are you ? "

" At nightfall of each day I have power to revisit you."

" Well, come then ! " he said, with a fling of impatient anger. " I tell you beforehand that you won't get anything by it. Not if you was to come and bring a whole stonemason's yard of sculptures along with you, you wouldn't ! You ought to know better than to come pestering a respectable tradesman in this bold-faced manner ! "

She smiled with a languid contemptuous tolerance, which maddened Leander.

" Rave on," she said. " Truly, you are a sorry prize for such as I to stoop to win ; yet I will it, nor shall you escape me. There will come a day when, forsaken by all you hold dear on earth, despised, ruined, distracted, you will pray eagerly for the haven of refuge to which I alone can guide you. Take heed, lest your conduct now be remembered then ! I have spoken."

They were indeed her last words that evening, and they impressed the hairdresser, in spite of himself. Custom habituates the mind to any marvel, and already he had overcome his first horror at the periodical awakenings of the statue, and surprise was swallowed up by exasperation ; now, however, he quailed under her

THE TINTED VENUS

dark threats. Could it ever really come to pass that he would sue to this stone to hide him in the realms of the supernatural ?

" I know this," he told himself, " if it once gets about that there's a hairdresser to be seen in Bloomsbury chivied about after dark by a classical statue, I shan't dare to show my face. Yet I don't know how I'm to prevent her coming out after me, at all events now and then. If she was only a little more like other people, I shouldn't mind so much ; but it's more than I can bear to have to go about with a *tablow vivant* or a *pose plastique* on my arm ! "

All at once he started to his feet. " I've got it ! " he cried, and went downstairs to his laboratory, to reappear with some camel-hair brushes, grease-paints, and a selection from his less important discoveries in the science of cosmetics ; namely, an " eyebrow accentuator," a vase of " Tweddle's Cream of Carnations " and " Blondinette Bloom," a china box of " Conserve of Coral " for the lips, and one of his most expensive *chevelures*.

He was trembling as he arranged them upon his table ; not that he was aware of the enormity of the act he contemplated, but he was afraid the goddess might revisit the marble while he was engaged upon it.

He furnished the blank eye-sockets with a pair of eyes which, if not exactly artistic, at least supplied a want ; he pencilled the eyebrows, laid on several coats of the " Bloom," which he suffused cunningly with a tinge of carnation, and stained the pouting lips with his " Conserve of Coral."

So far, perhaps, he had not violated the canons of art, and may even have restored to the image something of its pristine hues ; but his next addition was one the vandalism of which admits of no possible defence, and when he deftly fitted the coiffure of light closely-curved hair upon the noble classical head, even Leander felt dimly that something was wrong !

" I don't know how it is," he pondered ; " she looks

more natural, but not half so respectable. However, when she's got something on to cover the marble, there won't be anything much to notice about her. I'll buy a cloak for her the first thing to-morrow morning. Matilda was saying something about a shop near here where I could get that. And then, if this Venus must come following me about, she'll look less outlandish at any rate, and that's something ! "

7. *A Further Predicament*

" So long as the world contains us both,
Me the loving and you the loth,
While the one eludes, must the other pursue."

BROWNING.

IMMEDIATELY after breakfast the next day, Leander went out and paid a visit to Miss Twilling's bringing away with him a hooded cloak of the precise kind he remembered Matilda to have described as unlikely to render its owner conspicuous. With this garment he succeeded in disguising the statue to such a degree, that it was far less likely than before that the goddess's appearance in public would excite any particular curiosity—a result which somewhat relieved his anxiety as to her future proceedings.

But all that day his thoughts were busy with Matilda. He must, he feared, have deeply offended her by his abrupt change on the previous night; and now he could not expect to meet her again for days, and would not know how to explain his conduct if he did meet her.

If he could only dare to tell her everything ; but from such a course he shrank. Matilda would not only be extremely indignant (though, in very truth, he had done nothing positively wrong as yet), but, with her strict notions and well-regulated principles, she would assuredly recoil from a lover who had brought himself into a predicament so hideous. He would tell her all when, or if, he succeeded in extricating himself.

THE TINTED VENUS

But he was to learn the nature of Matilda's sentiments sooner than he expected. It was growing dusk, and he was unpacking a parcel of goods in his front shop—for his saloon happened to be empty just then—when the outer door swung back, and a slight girlish figure entered, after a pause of indecision on the threshold. It was Matilda.

Had she come to break it off—to reproach him ? He was prepared for no less ; she had never paid him a visit like this alone before ; and some doubts of the propriety of the thing seemed to be troubling her now, for she did not speak.

" Matilda," he faltered, " don't tell me you have come in a spirit of unpleasantness, for I can't bear it."

" Don't you deserve that I should ? " she said, but not angrily. " You know, you were very strange in behaving as you did last night. I couldn't tell what to make of it."

" I know," he said confusedly ; " it was something come over me, all of a sudden like. I can't understand what made me like that ; but, oh, Tillie, my dearest love, my 'art was busting with adoration all the time ! The circumstances was highly peculiar ; but I don't know that I could explain them."

" You needn't, Leander ; I have found you out." She said this with a strange significance.

" What ! " he almost shrieked. " You don't mean it, Matilda ! Tell me, quick ! has the discovery changed your feelings towards me ? Has it ? "

" Yes," she said softly. " I — I think it has ; but you ought not to have done it, Leander."

" I know," he groaned. " I was a fool, Tillie ; a fool ! But I may get out of it yet," he added. " I can get her to let me off. I must—I will! "

Matilda opened her eyes. " But, Leander dear, listen ; don't be so hasty. I never said I *wanted* her to let you off, did I ?

He looked at her in a dazed manner. " I rather

A FURTHER PREDICAMENT

thought," he said slowly, " that it might have put you out a little. I see I was mistook."

" You might have known that I should be more pleased than angry, I should think," said Matilda.

" More pleased than——I might have known ! " exclaimed the bewildered man. " Oh, you can't reely be taking it as cool as this ! Will you kindly inform me *what* it is you're alludin' to in this way ? "

" What is the use of pretending ? You know I know. And it *is* colder, much colder, this morning. I felt it directly I got up."

" Quite a change in the weather, Fm sure," he said mechanically ; " it feels like a frost coming on." (" Has Matilda looked in to tell me the weather's changed ? " he was wondering within himself. " Either I'm mad, or Matilda is.")

" You dear old goose ! " said Matilda, with an unusual effusiveness ; " you shan't tease me like this ! Do you think I've no eyes and no feelings ? Any girl, I don't care how proud or offended, would come round on such proof of devotedness as I've had this evening. When I saw it gone, I felt I must come straight in and thank you, and tell you I shouldn't think any more of last night. I couldn't stop myself."

" When you saw *what* gone ? " cried the hairdresser, rubbing up his hair.

" The cloak," said Matilda ; and then, as she saw his expression, her own changed. " Leander Tweddle," she asked, in a dry hard voice, " have I been making a wretched fool of myself ? *Didn't* you buy that cloak ? "

He understood at last. He had gone to Miss Twilling's chiefly because he was in a hurry and it was close by, and he knew nowhere else w'here he could be sure of getting what he required. Now, by some supreme stroke of the ill-luck which seemed to be pursuing him of late, he had unwittingly purchased the identical garment on which Matilda had fixed her affections ! How

THE TINTED VENUS

was he to notice that they took it out of the window for him?

All this flashed across him as he replied, " Yes, yes, Tillie, I did buy a cloak there ; but are you sure it was the same you told me about ? "

" Do you think a woman doesn't know the look of a thing like that, when it's taken her fancy ? " said Matilda. " Why, I could tell you every clasp and tassel on that cloak ; it wasn't one you'd see every day, and I knew it was gone the moment I passed the window. It quite upset me, for I'd set my heart on it so ; and I ran into Miss Twilling, and asked her what had become of it ; and when she said she'd sold it that morning, I thought I should have fainted. You see, it never struck me that it could be you ; for how could I dream that you'd be clever enough to go and choose the very one ? Leander, it was clever of you ! "

" Yes," he said, with a bitter rail against himself, " I'm a clever chap, I am ! But how did you find out ? "

" Oh, I made Miss Twilling (I often get little things there), I made her describe who she sold it to, and she said she thought it was to a gentleman in the haircutting persuasion who lived near ; and then, of course, I guessed who bought it."

" Tillie," gasped Leander, " I — I didn't *mean* you to guess ; the purpose for which I require that cloak is my secret."

" Oh, you silly man, when I've guessed it ! And I take it just as kind of you as if it was to be all a surprise. I was wishing as I came along I could afford to buy it at once, it struck so cold coming out of our place ; and you had actually bought it for me all the time ! Thank you ever so much, Leander dear ! "

He had only to accept the position ; and he did. " I'm glad you're pleased," he said ; " I intended it as a surprise."

" And I am surprised," said Matilda ; " because, do you know, last night, when I went home, I was feeling

very cross with you. I kept thinking that perhaps you didn't care for me any more, and were trying to break it off ; and, oh, all sorts of horrid things I kept thinking ! And aunt gave me a message for you this morning, and I was so out of temper I wouldn't leave it. And now to find you've been so kind ! "

She stretched out her hand to him across the counter, and he took and held it tight ; he had never seen her looking sweeter, nor felt that she was half so dear to him. After all, his blunder had brought them together again, and he was grateful to it.

At last Matilda said, " You were quite right about this wrapper, Leander ; it's not half warm enough for a night like this. I'm really afraid to go home in it."

He knew well enough what she intended him to do ; but just then he dared not appear to understand. " It isn't far, only to Millman Street," he said ; " and you must walk fast, Tillie. I wish I could leave the shop and come too."

" You want me to ask you downright," she said, pouting. " You men can't even be kind prettily. Don't you want to see how I look in your cloak, Leander ? "

What could he say after that ? He must run upstairs, deprive the goddess of her mantle, and hand it over to Matilda. She had evidently made up her mind to have that particular cloak, and he must buy the statue another. It would be expensive ; but there was no help for it.

" Certainly," he said, " you shall have it now, dearest, if you'd like to. I'll run up and fetch it down, if you'll wait."

He rushed upstairs, two steps at a time, and, flinging open the door of a cupboard, began desperately to uncloak his Aphrodite. She was lifeless still, which he considered fortunate.

But the goddess seemed to have a natural propensity to retain any form of portable property. One of her arms was so placed that, tug and stretch as he would,

THE TINTED VENUS

Leander could not get the cloak from her shoulders, and his efforts only broke one of the oxidised silver fastenings, and tore part of the squirrel's-fur lining.

It was useless, and with a damp forehead he came down again to his *expectant fiancée*.

" Why, you haven't got it, after all ! " she cried, her face falling.

" Tillie, my own dear girl," he said, " I'm uncommon sorry, upon my soul I am, but you can't have that cloak this evening."

" But why, Leander, why ? "

" Because one of the clasps is broke. It must be sent back to be repaired."

" I don't mind that. Let me have it just as it is."

" And the lining's torn. No, Matilda, I shan't make you a present of a damaged article. I shall send it back. They must change it for me." (" Then," he thought, " I can buy my Matilda another.")

" I don't care for any other but that," she said ; " and you can't match it."

" Oh, lor ! " he thought, " and she knows every inch of it. The goddess must give it up ; it'll be all the same to *her*. Very well then, dearest, you *shall* have that, but not till it's done up. I must have my way in this ; and as soon as ever I can, I'll bring it round."

" Leander, could you bring it me by Sunday," she said eagerly, " when you come ? "

" Why Sunday ? " he asked.

" Because—oh, that was the message your aunt asked me to bring you ; it was in a note, but I've lost it. She told me what was inside though, and it's this. Will you give her the pleasure of your company at her mid-day dinner at two o'clock, to be introduced to mother ? And she said you were to be sure and not forget her ring."

He tottered for a moment. The ring ! Yes, there was that to be got off, too, besides the cloak.

" Haven't you got the ring from Vidler's yet ? " she said. " He's had it such a time."

A FURTHER PREDICAMENT

He had told her where he had left it for alterations. " Yes," he said, " he has had it a time. It's disgraceful the way that old Vidler potters and potters. I shall go round and 'urry him up. I won't stand it any longer."

Here a customer came in, and Matilda slipped away with a hurried good-bye.

" I've got till Sunday to get straight," the hairdresser thought, as he attended on the new-comer, " the best part of a week; surely I can talk that Venus over by that time."

When he was alone he went up to see her, without losing a moment. He must have left the door unlocked in his haste, for she was standing before the low chimney-glass, regarding herself intently. As he came in she turned.

" Who has done all this ? " she demanded. " Tell me, was it you ? "

" I did take the liberty, mum," he faltered guiltily.

" You have done well," she said graciously. " With reverent and loving care have you imparted hues as of life to these cheeks, and decked my image in robes of costly skins."

" Don't name it, mum," he said.

" But what are these ? " she continued, raising a hand to the light ringlets on her brow. " I like them not—they are unseemly. The waving lines, parted by the bold chisel of a Grecian sculptor, resemble my ambrosial tresses more nearly than this abomination."

" You may go all over London," said Leander, " and you won't find a coiffure, though I say it, to set closer and defy detection more naturally than the one you've got on ; selected from the best imported foreign hair in the market, I do assure you."

" I accept the offering for the spirit in which it was presented, though I approve it not otherwise."

" You'll find it wear very comfortable," said Leander ; " but that cloak, now I cpm to see it on, it reely is most unworthy of you, a very inferior piece of goods, and, if

THE TINTED VENUS

you'll allow me, I'll change it," and he gently extended his hand to draw it off.

" Touch it not," said the goddess ; " for, having once been placed upon my effigy, it is consecrated to my service."

" For mercy's sake, let me get another one—one with more style about it," he entreated ; " my credit hangs on it ! "

" I am content," she said, " more than content. No more words—I retain it. And you have pleased me by this conduct, my hairdresser. Unknown it may be, even to yourself, your heart is warming in the sunshine of my favour ; you are coy and wayward, but you are yielding. Though pent in this form, carved by a mortal hand, I shall prevail in the end. I shall have you for my own."

He rumbled his hair wildly, " 'Orrid obstinate these goddesses are," he thought. " What am I to say to Matilda now ? If I could only find a way of getting this statue shut up somewhere where she couldn't come and bother me, I'd take my chance of the rest. I can't go on with this sort of thing every evening. I'm sick and tired of it."

Then something occurred to him. " Could I delude her into it ? " he asked himself. " She's soft enough in some things, and, for all she's a goddess, she don't seem up to our London ways yet. I'll have a try, anyway."

So he began : " Didn't I understand you to observe, mum, some time back,, that the pidgings and sparrers were your birds ? "

" They are mine," she said—" or they were mine in days that are past."

" Well," he said, " there's a place close by, with railings in front of it, and steps and pillars as you go in, and if you like to go and look in the yard there you'll find pidgings enough to set you up again. I shouldn't wonder if they've been keeping them for you all this time."

A FURTHER PREDICAMENT

" They shall not lose by it," she said. " Go thither, and bring me my birds."

" I think," he said, " it would be better if you'd go yourself; they don't know me at the British Museum. But if you was to go to the beadle at the lodge and demand them, I've no doubt you'd be attended to ; and you'll see some parties at the gates in long coats and black cloth 'elmets, which if you ask them to ketch you a few sparrers, they'll probably be most happy to oblige."

" My beloved birds ! " she said. " I have been absent from them so long. Yes, I will go. Tell me where."

He got his hat, and went with her to a corner of Bloomsbury Square, from which they could see the railings fronting the Museum in the steel-tinted haze of electric light.

" That's the place," he said. " Keeps its own moonshine, you see. Go straight in, and tell 'em you're come to fetch your doves."

" i will do so," she said, and strode off in imperious majesty.

He looked after her with an irrepressible chuckle.

" If she ain't locked up soon, I don't know myself," he said, and went back to his establishment.

He had only just dismissed his apprentice and secured the shop for the night, when he heard the well-known tread up the staircase. " Back again ! I don't have any luck," he muttered ; and with reason, for the statue, wearing an expression of cold displeasure, advanced into his room. He felt a certain sense of guilt as he saw her.

" Got the birds ? " he inquired, with a nervous familiarity, " or couldn't you bring yourself to ask for them ? "

" You have misled me," she said. " My birds are not there. I came to gates in front of a stately pile—doubtless erected to some god ; at the entrance stood a priest, burly and strong, with gold-embroidered garments——"

(" The beadle, I suppose," commented Leander.)

THE TINTED VENUS

" I passed him unseen, and roamed unhindered over the courtyard. It was bare, save for one or two worshippers who crossed it. Presently a winged thing fluttered down to my feet. But though a dove indeed, it was no bird of mine—it knew me not. And it was draggled, begrimed, uncleanly, as never were the doves of Aphrodite. And the sparrows (for these, too, did I see), they were worse. I motioned them from me with loathing. I renounced them all. Thus, Leander, have I fared in following your counsels ! "

" Well, it ain't my fault," he said ; " it's the London soot makes them like that. There's some at the Guild-hall : perhaps they're cleaner."

" No," she said, vehemently ; " I will seek no further. This is a city of darkness and mire. I am in a land, an age, which know me not : this much have I learnt already. The world was fairer and brighter of old ! "

" You see," said Leander, " if you only go about at night, you can't expect sunshine ! But I'm told there's cleaner and brighter places to be seen abroad—if you cared to go there ? " he insinuated.

" To one place only, to my Cyprian caves, will I go," she declared, " and with you ! "

" We'll talk about that some other time," he answered, soothingly. " Lady Venus, look here, don't you think you've kept that ring long enough ? I've asked you civilly enough, goodness knows, to 'and it over, times without number. I ask you once more to act fair. You know it came to you quite accidental, and yet you want to take advantage of it like this. It ain't right ! "

She met this with her usual scornful smile. " Listen, Leander," she said. " Once before—how long since I know not—a mortal, in sport or accident, placed his ring as you have done upon the finger of a statue erected to me. I claimed fulfilment of the pledge then, as now ; but a force I could not withstand was invoked against me, and I was made to give up the ring, and with it the power and rights I strove to exert. But I will not again

A FURTHER PREDICAMENT

be thwarted : no force, no being shall snatch you from me ; so be not deceived. Submit, ere you excite my fierce displeasure ; submit now, since in the end submit you must! "

There was a dreadful force in the sonorous tones which made him shiver ; a rigid inflexible will lurked in this form, with all its subtle curves and feminine grace. If goddesses really retained any power in these days, there could be no doubt that she would use hers to the full.

Yet he still struggled. " I can't make you give up the ring," he said ; " but no more you can't make me leave my—my establishment, and go away underground with you. I'm an Englishman, I am, and Englishmen are free, mum ; p'r'aps you wasn't aware of that ? I've got a will of my own, and so you'll find it ! "

" Poor worm ! " she said pityingly (and the hairdresser hated to be addressed as a poor worm), " why oppose thy weak will to mine ? Why enlist my pride against thyself ; for what hast thou of thine own to render thy conquest desirable ? Thou art bent upon defiance, it seems. I leave thee to reflect if such a combat can be equal. Farewell ; and at my next coming let me find a change ! "

And the spirit of the goddess fled, as before, to the mysterious realms from which she had been so incautiously evoked, leaving Leander almost frantic with rage, superstitious terror, and baffled purposes.

" I must get the ring off," he muttered, " *and* the cloak, somehow. Oh ! if I could only find out how— There was that other chap—he got off ; she said as much. If I could get out how he managed it, why couldn't I do the same ? But who's to tell me ? She won't—not if she knows it ! I wonder if it's in any history. Old Freemoult would know it if it was—he's such a scholar. Why, he gave me a name for that 'airwash without having to think twice over it ! I'll try and pump old Freemoult. I'll do it to-morrow, too. I'll see if I'm to be domineered

THE TINTED VENUS

over by a image out of a tea-garden. Eh ? I — I don't care if she *did* hear me ! "

So Leander went to his troubled pillow, full of this new resolution, which seemed to promise a way of escape.

8. *Between the Devil and the Deep Sea*

" Some, when they take *Revenge*, are Desirous the party should know whence it cometh : This is the more Generous."—BACON.

IN the Tottenham Court Road was a certain Commercial Dining-room, where Leander occasionally took his evening meal, after the conclusion of his day's work, and where Mr. Freemoult was accustomed to take his supper, on leaving the British Museum Library.

To this eating-house Leander repaired the very next evening, urged by a consuming desire to learn the full particulars of the adventure which his prototype in misfortune had met with.

It was an unpretending little place, with the bill of fare wafered to the door, and red curtains in the windows, setting off a display of joints, cauliflowers, and red herrings. He passed through into a long, low room, with dark-brown grained walls, partitioned off in the usual manner ; and taking a seat in a box facing the door, he ordered dinner from one of the shirtsleeved attendants.

The first glance had told him that the man he wished to see was not there, but he knew he must come in before long ; and, in fact, before Leander's food could be brought, the old scholar made his appearance.

He was hardly a man of attractive exterior, being of a yellow complexion, with a stubbly chin, and lank iron-grey locks. He wore a tall and superannuated hat with a staring nap, and the pockets of his baggy coat bulged with documents. Altogether he did not seem exactly the person to be an authority on the subject of Venus.

BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP SEA

But, as the hairdresser was aware, he had the reputation of being a mine of curious and out-of-the-way information, though few thought it worth their while to work him. He gained a living, however, by hackwork of various descriptions, and was in slightly better circumstances than he allowed to appear.

As he passed slowly along the central passage, in his usual state of abstraction, Leander touched him eagerly on the sleeve. "Come in 'ere, Mr. Freemoult, sir," he said ; "there's room in this box."

"It's the barber, is it ? " said the old man. "What do you want me to eat with you for, eh ? "

"Why, for the pleasure of your company, sir, of course," said Leander, politely.

"Well," said the old gentleman, sitting down, while documents bristled out of him in all directions, "there are not many who would say that—not many now."

"Don't you say so, Mr. Freemoult, sir. I'm sure it's a benefit, if only for your conversation. I often say, 'I never meet Mr. Freemoult without I learn somethink ;' I do indeed."

"Then we must have met less often than I had imagined."

"Now, you're too modest, sir ; you reelly are—a scholar like you, too ! Talking of scholarship, you'll be gratified to hear that that title you were good enough to suggest for the ' Regenerator ' is having a quite surprising success. I disposed of five bottles over the counter only yesterday." ("These old scholars," was his wily reflection, "like being flattered up.")

"Does that mean you've another beastly bottle you want me to stand godfather to ? " growled the ungrateful old gentleman.

"Oh no, indeed, sir ! It's only——But p'r'aps you'll allow me previously the honour of sending out for whatever beverage you was thinking of washing down your boiled beef with, sir."

THE TINTED VENUS

" Do you know who I am ? " Mr. Freemoult burst out.
" Fm a scholar, and gentleman enough still to drink at my own expense ! "

" I intended no offence, Fm sure, sir ; it was only meant in a friendly way."

" That is the offence, sir ; that *is* the offence ! But, there, we'll say no more about it ; you can't help your profession, and I can't help my prejudices. What was it you wanted to ask me ? "

" Well," said Leander, " I was desirous of getting some information respecting—ahem—a party by the name of (if I've caught the foreign pronounciation) Haphrodite, otherwise known as Venus. Do you happen to have heard tell of her ? "

" Have I had a classical education, sir, or haven't I ? Heard of her ? Of course I have. But why, in the name of Mythology, any hairdresser living should trouble his head about Aphrodite, passes my comprehension. Leave her alone, sir ! "

" It's her who won't leave *me* alone ! " thought Leander ; but he did not say so. " I've a very particular reason for wishing to know ; and I'm sure if you could tell me all you'd heard about her, I'd take it very kind of you."

" Want to pick my brains ; well, you wouldn't be the first. But I am here, sir, to rest my brain and refresh my body, not to deliver peripatetic lectures to hairdressers on Grecian mythology."

" Well," said Leander, " I never meant you to give your information peripatetic ; I'm willing to go as far as half a crown."

" Conf——But, there, what's the good of being angry with you ? Is this the sort of thing you want for your half-crown ?—Aphrodite, a later form of the Assyrian Astarte ; the daughter, according to some theogonies, of Zeus and Dione ; others have it that she was the offspring of the foam of the sea, which gathered round the fragments of the mutilated Uranos——"

BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP SEA

" That don't seem so likely, do it, sir ?" said Leander.

" If you are going to crop in with idiotic remarks, I shall confine myself to my supper."

" Don't stop, Mr. Freemoult, sir ; it's most instructive. I'm attending."

But the old gentleman, after a manner he had, was sunk in a dreamy abstraction for the moment, in which he apparently lost the thread, as he resumed, " Where-upon Zeus, to punish her, gave her in wedlock to his deformed son, Hephaestus."

" She never mentioned him to *me*," thought Leander ; " but I suppose she's a widow goddess by this time ; I'm sure I *hope* so."

" Whom," Mr. Freemoult was saying, " she deceived upon several occasions, notably in the case of——" And here he launched into a scandalous chronicle, which determined Leander more than ever that Matilda must never know he had entertained a personage with such a past.

" Angered by her indiscretions, Zeus inspired her with love for a mortal man."

" Poor devil! " said Leander, involuntarily. " And what became of *him*, sir ? "

" There were several thus distinguished ; amongst others, Anchises, Adonis, and Cinyras. Of these, the first was struck by lightning ; the second slain by a wild boar ; and the third is reputed to have perished in a contest with Apollo."

" They don't seem to have had no luck, any of them," was Leander's depressed conclusion.

" Aphrodite, or Venus, as you choose to call her, took a prominent part in the Trojan war, the origin of which ten years' struggle may be traced to a certain golden apple."

" What an old rag-bag it is ! " thought Leander. " I'm only wasting money on him. He's like a bran-pie at a fancy fair : what you get out of him is always the thing you didn't want."

THE TINTED VENUS

" No, no, Mr. Freemoult," he said, with some impatience ; " leave out about the war and the apple. It—it isn't either of them as I wanted to hear about."

" Then I have done," said the old man, curtly. " You've had considerably more than half a crown's worth, as it is."

" Look here, Mr. Freemoult," said the reckless hair-dresser, " if you can't give me no better value, I don't mind laying out another sixpence in questions."

" Put your questions, then, by all means; and I'll give you your fair sixpenn'orth of answers. Now, then> I'm ready for you. What's your difficulty ? Out with it."

" Why," said Leander, in no small confusion, " isn't there a story somewhere of a statue to Venus as some young man (a long time back it was, of course) was said to have put his ring on ? and do you know the rights of it ? I — I can't remember how it ended, myself."

" Wait a bit, sir ; I think I do remember something of the legend you refer to. You found it in the *Earthly Paradise* y I make no doubt ? "

" I found it in Rosherville Gardens," Leander very nearly blurted out; but he stopped himself, and said instead, " I don't think I've ever been there, sir ; not to remember it."

" Well, well ! you're no lover of poetry, that's very evident; but the story is there. Yes, yes ; and Burton has a version of it, too, in his *Anatomy*. How does it go ? Give my head a minute to clear, and I'll tell you. Ha ! I have it ! It was something like this : There was a certain young gentleman of Rome who, on his wedding-day, went out to play tennis ; and in the tennis-court was a brass statue of the goddess Venus——"

(" Mine *ought* to be brass, from her goings on," thought Leander.)

" And while he played he took off his finger-ring and put it upon the statue's hand ; a mighty foolish act, as you will agree."

BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP SEA

" Ah ! " said Leander, shaking his head ; " you may say that ! What next, sir ? " He became excited to find that he really was on the right track at last.

" Why, when the game was over, and he came to get his ring, he found he couldn't get it off again. Ha ! ha ! " and the old man chuckled softly, and then relapsed once more into silence.

" Yes, yes, Mr. Freemoult, sir ! I'm a-listening ; it's very funny ; only do go on ! "

" Go on ? Where was I ? Hadn't I finished ? Ah, to be sure ! Well, so Paris gave *her* the apple, you see."

" I didn't understand you to allude to no apple," said his puzzled hearer ; " and it was at Rome, I thought, not Paris. Bring your mind more to it, sir ; we'd got to the ring not coming off the statue."

" I know, sir ; I know. My mind's clear enough, let me tell you. That very night (as I was about to say, if you'd had patience to hear me) Venus stepped in and parted the unfortunate pair——"

" It was a apple just now, you aggravating old muddle 'ed ! " said Leander, internally.

" Venus informed the young man that he had be-brothed himself to her by that ring " (" Same game exactly," thought the pupil), " and—and, in short, she led him such a life for some nights, that he could bear it no longer. So at length he repaired to a certain mighty magician called——. Let me see, what was his name again ? It wasn't Agrippa—was it Albertus ? Odd ; has escaped me for the moment."

" Never mind, sir ; call him Jones."

" I will *not* call him Jones, sir ! I had it on my tongue—there, *Palumbus!* Palumbus it was. Well, Palumbus told him the goddess would never cease to trouble him, unless he could get back the ring—unless he could get back the ring."

Leander's heart began to beat high ; the solution of his difficulty was at hand. It was something to know for

THE TINTED VENUS

certain that upon recovery of the ring the goddess's power would be at an end. It only remained to find out how the other young man managed it. "Yes, Mr. Freemoult?" he said interrogatively; for the old gentleman had run down again.

"I was only thinking it out. To resume, then. No sooner had the magician (whose name as I said was Apollonius) come to the wedding, than he promptly conjectured the bride to be a serpent; whereupon she vanished incontinently, after the manner of serpents, with the house and furniture."

"Haven't you missed out a lot, sir?" inquired Leander, deferentially; "because it don't seem to me to hook on quite. What became of Venus and the ring?"

"How the dickens am I to tell you, if you will interrupt? Ring! *What* ring? Why, yes; the magician gave the young man a certain letter, and told him to go to a particular cross-road outside the city, at dead of night, and wait for Saturn to pass by in procession, with his fallen associates. This he did, and presented the magician's letter; which Saturn, after having read, called Venus to him, who was riding in front, and commanded her to deliver up the ring."

Here he stopped, as if he had nothing to add.

"And did she, sir?" asked Leander, breathlessly.

"Did she what? give up the ring? Of course she did. Haven't I been saying so? Why not?"

"Well," observed Leander, "so that's how *he* got out of it, was it? Hah! he was a lucky chap. Those were the days when magicians did a good trade, I suppose? Should you say there were any such parties now, on the quiet like, eh, sir?"

"Bah! Magic is a lost art, degraded to dark seances and juvenile parties—the last magician dead for more than two hundred years. Don't expose your ignorance, sir, by any more such questions."

"No," said Leander; "I thought as much. And so, if anyone was to get into such a fix nowadays—of course,

BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP SEA

that's only my talk, but if they did—there ain't a practising magician anywhere to help him out of it. That's your opinion, ain't it, sir ? "

" As the danger of such a contingency is not immediate," was the reply, " the want of a remedy need not, in my humble opinion, cause you any grave uneasiness."

" No," agreed Leander, dejectedly. " I don't care, of course. I was only thinking that, in case—but there, it's no odds ! Well, Mr. Freemoult, you've told me what I was curious to know, and here's your little honnyrarium, sir—two shillings and two sixpences, making three shillings in all, precisely."

" Keep your money, sir," said the old man, with contemptuous good humour. " My working hours are done for the day, and you're welcome enough to any instruction you're capable of receiving from my remarks. It's not saying much, I dare say."

" Oh, you told it very clear, considering, sir, I'm sure ! I don't grudge it."

" Keep it, I tell you, and say no more about it."

So, expressing his thanks, Leander left the place ; and, when he was outside, felt more keenly than ever the blow his hopes had sustained.

He knew the whole story of his predecessor in misfortune now, and, as a precedent, it was worse than useless.

True, for an instant a wild idea had crossed his mind, of seeking some lonely suburban cross-road at dead of night, just to see if anything came of it. " The last time was several hundred years ago, it seems," he told himself ; " but there's no saying that Satan mightn't come by, for all that. Here's Venus persecuting as lively as ever, and I never heard the devil was dead. I've a good mind to take the tram to the Archway, and walk out till I find a likely-looking place."

But, on reflection, he gave this up. " If he did come by, I couldn't bring him a line—not even from the

THE TINTED VENUS

conjuror in High 'Oborn—and Satan might make me put my hand to something binding, and I shouldn't be no better off. No ; I don't see no way of getting back my ring and poor Tillie's cloak, nor yet getting rid of that goddess, any more than before. There's one comfort, I can't be any worse off than I am."

Oppressed by these gloomy reflections, he returned to his home, expecting a renewal of his nightly persecution from the goddess ; but from some cause, into which he was too grateful to care to inquire, the statue that evening showed no sign of life in his presence, and after waiting with the cupboard open for some time in suspense, he ventured to make himself some coffee.

He had scarcely tasted it, however, before he heard, from the passage below, a low whistle, followed by the peculiar stave by which a modern low-life Blondel endeavours to attract attention. The hairdresser paid no attention, being used, as a Londoner, to hearing such signals, and not imagining they could be intended for his ear.

But presently a handful of gravel rattled against his window, and the whistle was repeated. He went to the window cautiously, and looked out. Below were two individuals, rather carefully muffled ; their faces, which were only indistinctly seen, were upturned to him.

He retreated, trembling. He had had so much to think of lately, that the legal danger he was running, by harbouring the detested statue, was almost forgotten ; but now he remembered the Inspector's words, and his legs bent beneath him. Could these people be *detectives* ?

" Is that Mr. Tweddle up there ? " said a voice below—" because if it is, he'd better come down, double quick, and let us in, that's all I "

" 'Ere, don't you skulk up there ! " added a coarser voice. " We know y'er there ; and if yer don't come down to us, why, we'll come up to you ! "

This brought Leander forward again. " Gentlemen,"

BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP SEA

he said, leaning out, and speaking in an agitated whisper, " for goodness' sake, what do you want with me ? "

" You let us in, and we'll tell you. "

" Will it do if I come down and speak to you outside ? " said Leander.

There was a consultation between the two at this, and at the end of it the first man said : " It's all the same to us, where we have our little confabulation. Come down, and look sharp about it ! "

Leander came down, taking care to shut the street door behind him. " You ain't the police ? " he said, apprehensively.

They each took an arm, and walked him roughly off between them towards Queen Square. " We'll show you who we are," they said.

" I — I demand your authority for this," gasped Leander. " What am I charged with ? "

They had brought him into the gloomiest part of the square, where the houses, used as offices in the daytime, were now dark and deserted. Here they jammed him up against the railings, and stood guard over him, while he was alarmed to perceive a suppressed ferocity in the faces of both.

" What are you charged with ? Grr——! For 'arf a pint I'd knock your bloomin 'ed in ! " said the coarser gentleman of the two—an evasive form of answer which did not seem to promise a pleasant interview.

Leander was not naturally courageous, and what he had gone through lately had shaken his nerves. He thought that, for policemen, they showed too strong a personal feeling ; but who else could they be ? He could not remember having seen either of them before. One was a tall, burly, heavy-jawed man ; the other smaller and slighter, and apparently the superior of the two in education and position.

" You don't remember me, I see," said the latter ; and then suddenly changing his tone to a foreign accent, he

THE TINTED VENUS

said : " Haf you been since to drink a glass of beer at your open-air gardens at Rosherville ? "

Leander knew him then. It was his foreign customer of Monday evening. His face was clean-shaven now, and his expression changed—not for the better.

" I think," he said, faintly, " I had the privilege of cutting your 'air the other evening."

" You did, my friend, and I admired your taste for the fine arts. This gentleman and I have, on talking it over, been so struck by what I saw that evening, that we ventured to call and inquire into it."

" Look 'ere, Count," said his companion, " there ain't time for all that perlitiness. You leave him to me ; I'LL talk to him ! Now then, you white-livered little airy-sneak, do you know who we are ? "

" No," said Leander ; " and, excuse me calling of your attention to it, but you're pinching my arm ! "

" I'll pinch it off before I've done," said the burly man. " Well, we're the men that have planned and strived, and run all the risk, that you and your gang might cut in and carry off our honest earnings. You infernal little hair-cutting shrimp, you ! To think of being beaten by the likes of you ! It's sickening, that's what it is, sickening ! "

" I don't understand you—as I live, gentlemen, I don't understand you ! " pleaded Leander.

" You understand us well enough," said the ex-foreigner, with an awful imprecation on all Leander's salient features ; " but you shall have it all in black and white. We're the party that invented and carried out that little job at Wrucklesmarsh Court."

" Burglars ! Do you mean you're burglars ? " cried the terrified Leander.

" We started as burglars, but we've finished by being made cat's-paws of—by you, curse you ! You didn't think we should find you out, did you ? But if you wanted to keep us in the dark, you made two awkward little slips: one was leaving your name and address at the

BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP SEA

gardens as the party who was supposed to have last seen the statue, and the other was keeping the said statue standing about in your hair-cutting room, to meet the eye of any gentleman calling out of curiosity, and never expecting such a find as that."

"What's the good of jawing at him, Count? That won't satisfy me, it won't. 'Ere, I can't 'old myself off him any longer. I *must* put a 'ed on him."

But the other interposed. "Patience, my good Braddle. No violence. Leave him to me; he's a devilish deep fellow, and deserves all respect." (Here he shook Leander like a rat.) "You've stolen a march on us, you condemned little hair-dressing ape, you! How did you do it? Out with it! How the devil did you do it?"

"For the love of heaven, gents," pleaded Leander, without reflecting that he might have found a stronger inducement, "don't use violence! How did I do *what*?"

"Count, I *can't* answer for myself," said the man addressed as Braddle. "I shall send a bullet into him if you don't let me work it off with fists; I know I shall!"

"Keep quiet," said his superior, sternly. "Don't you see *Fm* quiet?" and he twisted his knuckles viciously into Leander's throat. "If you call out you're a corpse!"

"I wasn't thinking of calling out, indeed I wasn't. I'm quite satisfied with being where I am," said Leander, "if you'd only leave me a little more room to choke in, and tell me what I've done to put you both in such tremenjous tempers."

"Done? You cur, when yer know well enough you've taken the bread out of our mouths—the bread we'd earned! D'ye suppose we left out that statue in the gardens for the like of you? Who put you up to it? How many were there in it? What do you mean to do now you've got it? Speak out, or I swear I'll cut your heart out, and throw it over the railings for the tom-cats; I will, you——!"

The man called Braddle, as he uttered this threat,

THE TINTED VENUS

looked so very anxious to execute it, that Leander gave himself up for lost.

" As true as I stand here, gentlemen, I didn't steal that statue."

" I doubt you're not the build for taking the lead in that sort of thing," said the Count; " but you were in it. You went down that Saturday as a blind. Deny it if you dare."

Leander did not dare. " I could not help myself, gentlemen," he faltered.

" Who said you could ? And you can't help yourself now, either ; so make a clean breast of it. Who are you standing in with ? Is it Potter's lot ? "

If Leander had declared himself to be alone, things might have gone harder with him, and they certainly would never have believed him ; so he said it was Potter's lot.

" I told you Potter was after that marble, and you wouldn't have it, Count," growled Braddle. " Now you're satisfied."

The Count comprised Potter and his lot in a new and original malediction by way of answer, and then said to Leander, " Did Potter tell you to let that Venus stand where all the world might see it ? "

" I had no discretion," said the hairdresser. " I'm not responsible, indeed, gents."

" No discretion ! I should think you hadn't. Nor Potter either, acting the dog in the manger like this. Where'll *he* find his market for it, eh ? What orders have you got ? When are you going to get it across ? "

" I've no notions. I haven't received no directions," said Leander.

" A nice sort o' mug you are to be trusted with a job like this," said Braddle. " I did think Potter was better up in his work, I did. A pretty bungle he'll make of it ! "

" It would serve him right, for interfering with fellow-professionals in this infernal unprincipled manner. But

BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP SEA

he shan't have the chance, Braddle, he shan't have the chance ; we'll steal a march on him this time."

" Is the coast clear yet ? " said Braddle.

" We must risk it. We shall find a route for it, never fear," was the reply. " Now, you cursed hairdresser, you listen to what I'm going to tell you. That Venus is our lawful property, and, by——, we meant to get her into our hands again. D'ye hear that ? "

Leander heard, and with delight. So long as he could once get free from the presence of the statue, and out of the cross-fire of burglars and police, he was willing by this time to abandon the cloak and ring.

" I can truly say, I hope you'll be successful, gents," he replied.

" We don't want your hopes, we want your help. You must round on Potter."

" Must I, gents ? " said Leander. " Well, to oblige you, whatever it costs me, I *will* round on Potter."

" Take care you stick to that," said Braddle. " The next p'int, Count, is 'ow we're to get her."

" Come in and take her away now," said Leander, eagerly. " She'll be quiet. I—I mean the *house'll* be quiet now. You'll be very welcome, I assure you. I won't interfere."

" You're a bright chap to go in for a purfession like ours," said Mr. Braddle, with intense disgust. " How do yer suppose we're to do it—take her to pieces, eh, and bring her along in our pockets ? Do you think we're flats enough to run the chance of being seen in the streets by a copper, lugging that 'ere statue along ? "

" We must have the van again, and a sack," said the Count. " It's too late to-night."

" And it ain't safe in the daytime," said Braddle. " We're wanted for that job at Camberwell, that puts it on to to-morrow evening. But suppose Potter has fixed the same time."

" Here, *you* know. Has Potter fixed the same time ? " the Count demanded from Leander.

THE TINTED VENUS

" No," said Leander ; " Potter ain't said nothing to me about moving her."

" Then are you man enough to undertake Potter, if he starts the idea ? Are you ? Come ! "

" Yes, gents, I'll manage Potter. You break in any time after midnight, and I engage you shall find the Venus on the premises."

" But we want more than that of you, you know. We mustn't lose any time over this job. You must be ready at the door to let us in, and bear a hand with her down to the van."

But this did not suit Leander's views at all. He was determined to avoid all personal risks ; and to be caught helping the burglars to carry off the Aphrodite would be fatal.

He was recovering his presence of mind. As his tormentors had sensibly relaxed, he was able to take steps for his own security.

" I beg pardon, gents," he said, " but I don't want to appear in this myself. There's Potter, you see ; he's a hawful man to go against. You know what Potter is, yourself." (Potter was really coming in quite usefully, he began to think.)

" Well, I don't suppose Potter would make more bones about slitting your throat than we should, if he knew you'd played him false," said the Count. " But we can't help that; in a place like this it's too risky to break in, when we can be let in."

" If you'll only excuse me taking an active part," said Leander, " it's all I ask. This is my plan, gentlemen. You see that little archway there, where my finger points ? Well, that leads by a small alley to a yard, back of my saloon. You can leave your cart here, and come round as safe as you please. I'll have the winder in my saloon unfastened, and put the statue where you can get her easy; but I don't want to be mixed up in it further than that."

" That seems fair enough," said the Count, " provided you keep to it."

BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP SEA

" But suppose it's a plant ? " growled Braddle. " Suppose he's planning to lay a trap for us ? Suppose we get in, to find Potter and his lot on the look-out for us, or break into a house that's full of bloomin' coppers ? "

" I did think of that; but I believe our friend knows that if he doesn't act square with me, his life isn't worth a bent pin; and besides, he can't warn the police without getting himself into more or less hot water. So I think he'll see the wisdom of doing what he's told."

" I do," said Leander, " I do, gentlemen. I'd sooner die than deceive you."

" Well," said the Count, " you'd find it come to the same thing."

" No," added Braddle. " If you blow the gaff on us, my bloomin', I'll saw that pudden head of yours right off your shoulders, and swing for it, cheerful ! "

Leander shuddered. Amongst what desperate ruffians had his unlucky stars led him ! How would it all end, he wondered feebly—how ?

" Well, gentlemen," he said, with his teeth chattering, " if you don't want me any more, I'll go in ; and I'm to expect you to-morrow evening, I believe ? "

" Expect us when you 'ear us," said Braddle ; " and if you make fools of us again——" And he described consequences which exceeded in unpleasantness the worst that Leander could have imagined.

The poor man tottered back to his room again, in a most unenviable frame of mind ; not even the prospect of being delivered from the goddess could reconcile him to the price he must pay for it. He was going to take a plunge into downright crime now ; and if his friend the inspector came to hear of it, ruin must follow. And, in any case, the cloak and the ring would be gone beyond recovery, while these cut-throat housebreakers would henceforth have a hold over him ; they might insist upon steeping him in blacker crime still, and he knew he would never have the courage to resist.

THE TINTED VENUS

As he thought of the new difficulties and dangers that compassed him round about, he was frequently on the verge of tears, and his couch that night was visited by dreadful dreams, in which he sought audience of the Evil One himself at cross-roads, was chased over half London by police, and dragged over the other half by burglars, to be finally flattened by the fall of Aphrodite.

9. *At Last!*

" Does not the stone rebuke me
For being more stone than *it*? "

Winter's Tale,

" Yet did he loath to see the image fair,
White and unchanged of face, unmoved of limb ! "
Earthly Paradise.

LEANDER'S hand was very tremulous all the next day, as several indignant clients discovered, and he closed as early as he could, feeling it impossible to attend to business under the circumstances.

About seven o'clock he went up to his sitting-room. A difficult and ungrateful task was before him. To facilitate her removal, he must persuade the goddess to take up a position in the saloon for the night; and, much as he had suffered from her, there was something traitorous in delivering her over to these coarse burglars.

He waited until the statue showed signs of returning animation, and then said, " Good evening, mum," more obsequiously than usual.

She never deigned to notice or return his salutations. " Hairdresser," she said abruptly, " I am weary of this sordid place."

He was pleased, for it furthered his views. " It isn't so sordid in the saloon, where you stood the other evening, you know," he replied. " Will you step down there?"

" Bah ! " she said, " it is *all* sordid. Leander, a restlessness has come upon me. I come back night after night out of the vagueness in which I have lain so long,

and for what ? To stand here in this mean chamber and proffer my favour, only to find it repulsed, disdained. I am tired of it—tired ! "

" You can't be more tired of it than I am ! " he said.

" I ask myself," she went on, " why, having, through your means, ascended once more to the earth, which I left so fair, I seek not those things which once delighted me. This city of yours—all that I have seen of it—revolts me ; but it is vast, vaster than those built by the mortals of old. Surely somewhere there must be brightness in it and beauty, and the colour and harmony by which men knew once to delight the gods themselves. It cannot be that the gods of old are all forgotten ; surely, somewhere there yet lingers a little band of faithful ones, who have not turned from Aphrodite."

" I can't say, I'm sure," said Leander ; " I could inquire for you."

" I myself will seek for them," she said proudly. " I will go forth this very night."

Leander choked. " To-night ! " he cried. " You *carit* go to-night."

" You forget yourself," she returned haughtily.

" If I let you go," he said hesitatingly, " will you promise faithfully to be back in half an hour ? "

" Do you not yet understand that you have to do with a goddess—with Aphrodite herself ? " she said. " Who are you, to presume to fetter me by your restrictions ? Truly, the indulgence I have shown has turned your weak brain."

He put his back against the door. He was afraid of the goddess, but he was still more afraid of the burglars' vengeance if they arrived to find the prize missing.

" I'm sorry to disoblige a lady," he said ; " but you don't go out of this house to-night."

In another minute he was lying in the fender amongst the fireirons—alone ! How it was done he was too stunned to remember ; but the goddess was gone. If she did not return by midnight, what would become of

THE TINTED VENUS

him ? If he had only been civil to her, she might have stayed ; but now she had abandoned him to certain destruction !

A kind of fatalistic stupor seized him. He would not run away—he would have to come home some time—nor would he call in the police, for he had a very vivid recollection of Mr. Braddle's threat in such a contingency.

He went, instead, into the dark saloon, and sat down in a chair to wait. He wondered how he could explain the statue's absence. If he told the burglars it had gone for a stroll, they would tear him limb from limb. " I was so confoundedly artful about Potter," he thought bitterly, " that they'll never believe now I haven't warned him ! "

At every sound outside he shook like a leaf; the quarters, as they sounded from the church clock, sank like cold weights upon his heart. " If only Venus would come back first! " he moaned ; but the statue never returned.

At last he heard steps—muffled ones—on the paved alley outside. He had forgotten to leave the window unfastened, after all, and he was too paralysed to do it now.

The steps were in the little yard, or rather a sort of back area, underneath the window. " It may be only a constable," he tried to say to himself; but there is no mistaking the constabulary tread, which is not fairy-like, or even gentle, like that he heard.

A low whistle destroyed his last hope. In a quite unpremeditated manner he put out the gas and rolled under a leather divan which stood at the end of the room. He wished now, with all his heart, that he had run away while he had the chance ; but it was too late.

" I hope they'll do it with a revolver, and not a knife," he thought. " Oh, my poor Matilda ! you little know what I'm going through just now, and what'll be going through *me* in another minute ! "

A hoarse voice under the window called out, " Tweddle ! "

He lay still. "None o' that, yer skulker ; I know yer there ! " said the voice again. "Do yer want to give me the job o' coming after yer ? "

After all, Leander reflected, there was the window and a thick half-shutter between them. It might be best not to provoke Mr. Braddle at the outset. He came half out of his hiding-place. "Is that you, Mr. Braddle ? " he quavered.

"Ah ! " said the voice, affirmatively. "Is this w^hat you call being ready for us ? Why, the bloomin' winder ain't even undone ! "

"That's what I'm here for," said poor Leander. "Is the—the other gentleman out there too ? "

"You mind your business ! You'll find something the Count give me to bring yer ; I've put it on the winder-sill out 'ere. And you obey horders next time, will yer ? "

The footsteps were heard retreating. Mr. Braddle was apparently going back to fetch his captain. Leander let down the shutter, and opened the window. He could not see, but he could feel a thick, rough bundle lying on the window-sill.

He drew this in, slammed down the window, and ran up the shutter in a second, before the two could have had time to discover him.

"Now," he thought, "I *will mn* for it " ; and he groped his way out of the dark saloon to the front shop, where he paused, and, taking a match from his pocket, struck a light. His parcel proved to be rough sackcloth, on the outside of which a paper was pinned.

Why did the Count write, when he was coming in directly ? Curiosity made him linger even then to ascertain this. The paper contained a hasty scrawl in blue chalk. "*Not to-night,*" he read ; "*arrangements still uncomplete. Expect us to-morrow night without fail, and see that everything is prepared. Cloth sent with this for packing goods. P———laid up with professional accident, and safe for a week or two. You must have known*

THE TINTED VENUS

this—why not say so last night ? No trifling, if you value life!"

It was a reprieve—at the last moment! He had a whole day before him for flight, and he fully intended to flee this time ; those hours of suspense in the saloon were too terrible to be gone through twice.

But as he was turning out his cashbox, and about to go upstairs and collect a few necessaries, he heard a well-known tread outside. He ran to the door, which he unfastened with trembling hands, and the statue, with the hood drawn closely round her strange painted face, passed in without seeming to heed his presence.

She had come back to him. Why should he run away now, when, if he waited one more night, he might be rescued from one of his terrors by means of the other ?

" Lady Venus ! " he cried hysterically. " Oh, Lady Venus, mum, I thought you was gone for ever ! "

" And you have grieved ? " she said almost tenderly. " You welcome my return with joy! Know then, Leander, that I myself feel pleasure in returning, even to such a roof as this ; for little gladness have I had from my wanderings. Upon no altar did I see my name shine, nor the perfumed flame flicker ; the Lydian measures were silent, and the praise of Cytherea. And everywhere I went I found the same senseless troubled haste, and pale mean faces of men, and squalor, and tumult. Grace and joyousness have fled—even from your revelry ! But I have seen your new gods, and understand : for, all grimy and mis-shapen and uncouth are they as they stand in your open places and at the corners of your streets. Zeus, what a place must Olympus now be ! And can any men worship such monsters, and be gladsome ? "

Leander did not perceive the very natural mistake into which the goddess had fallen ; but the fact was, that she had come upon some of our justly renowned public statues.

" I'm sorry you haven't enjoyed yourself, mum," was all he could find to say.

" Should I linger in such scenes were it not for you ? " she cried reproachfully. " How much longer will you repulse me ? "

" That depends on you, mum," he ventured to observe.

" Ah ! you are cold ! " she said reproachfully ; " yet surely I am worthy of the adoration of the proudest mortal. Judge me not by this marble exterior, cunningly wrought though it be. Charms are mine, more dazzling than any your imagination can picture ; and were you once to surrender your being into my hands, I should be able to show myself as I really am—supreme in loveliness and majesty ! "

Unfortunately, the hairdresser's imagination was not his strongest point. He could not dissociate the goddess from the marble shape she had assumed, and that shape he was not sufficiently educated to admire ; he merely coughed now in a deferential manner.

" I perceive that I cannot move you," she said. " Men have grown strangely stubborn and impervious. I leave you, then, to your obstinacy ; only take heed lest you provoke me at last to wrath, for my patience is well-nigh at an end ! "

And she was gone, and the bedizened statue stood there, staring hardly at him with the eyes his own hand had given her.

" This has been the most trying evening I've had yet," he thought. " Thank my stars, if all goes well, I shall get rid of her by this time to-morrow ! "

The next day passed uneventfully enough, though the unfortunate Leander's apprehensions increased with every hour. As before, he closed early, got his apprentice safely off the premises, and sat down to wait in his saloon. He knew that the statue (which he had concealed during the day behind a convenient curtain) would probably recover consciousness for some part of the evening, as it had rarely failed to do, and prudence urged him to keep an eye over the proceedings of his tormentress.

THE TINTED VENUS

To his horror, Aphrodite's first words, after awaking, expressed her intention of repeating the search for homage and beauty, which had been so unsuccessful the night before !

" Seek not to detain me, Leander," she said ; " for, goddess as I am, I am drooping under this persistent obduracy. Somewhere beyond this murky labyrinth, it may be that I shall find a shrine where I am yet honoured. I will go forth, and never rest till I have found it, and my troubled spirits are revived by the incense for which I have languished so long. I am weary of abasing myself to such a contemptuous mortal, nor will I longer endure such indignity. Stand back, and open the gates for me ! Why do you not obey ? "

He knew now that to attempt force would be useless ; and yet if she left him this time, he must either abandon all that life held for him, and fly to distant parts from the burglars' vengeance—or remain to meet a too probable doom !

He fell on his knees before her. " Oh, Lady Venus," he entreated, " don't leave me ! I beg and implore you not to ! If you do, you will kill me ! I give you my honest word you will ! "

The statue's face seemed irradiated by a sudden joy. She paused, and glanced down with an approving smile upon the kneeling figure at her feet.

" Why did you not kneel to me before ? " she said.

" Because I never thought of it," said the hairdresser, honestly ; " but I'll stay on my knees for hours, if only you won't go ! "

" But what has made you thus eager, thus humble ? " she said, half in wonder and half in suspicion. " Can it be, that the spark I have sought to kindle in your breast is growing to a flame at last ? Leander, can this thing be ? "

He saw that she was gratified, that she desired to be assured that this was indeed so.

AT LAST !

" I shouldn't be surprised if something like that was going on inside of me," he said encouragingly.

" Answer me more frankly," she said. " Do you wish me to remain with you because you have learnt to love my presence ? "

It was a very embarrassing position for him. All depended upon his convincing the goddess of his dawning love, and yet, for the life of him, he could not force out the requisite tenderness ; his imagination was unequal to the task.

Another and a more creditable feeling helped to tie his tongue—a sense of shame at employing such a subterfuge in order to betray the goddess into the lawless hands of these housebreakers. However, she must be induced to stay by some means.

" Well," he said sheepishly, " you don't give me a chance to love you, if you go wandering out every evening, do you ? "

She gave a low cry of triumph. " It has come ! " she exclaimed. " What are clouds of incense, flowers, and homage, to this ? Be of good heart; I will stay, Leander. Fear not, but speak the passion which consumes you ! "

He became alarmed. He was anxious not to commit himself, and yet employ the time until the burglars might be expected.

" The fact is," he confessed, " it hasn't gone so far as that yet—it's beginning ; all it wants is *time*, you know—time, and being let alone."

" All Time will be before us, when once your lips have pronounced the words of surrender, and our spirits are transported together to the enchanted isle."

" You talk about me going over to this isle—this Cyprus," he said ; " but it's a long journey, and I can't afford it. *How* you come and go, I don't know ; but I've not been brought up to it myself. I can't flash across like a telegram ! "

THE TINTED VENUS

" Trust all to me," she said. " Is not your love strong enough for that ? "

" Not quite yet," he answered ; " it's coming on. Only, you see, it's a serious step to take, and I naturally wish to feel my way. I declare, the more I gaze upon the—the elegant form and figger which I see before me, the stronger and the more irresistible comes over me a burning desire to think the whole thing carefully over. And if you only allowed me a little longer to gaze (I've no time to myself except in the evenings), I don't think it would be long before this affair reached a 'appy termination—I don't indeed ! "

" Gaze, then," she said, smiling—" gaze to your soul's content."

" I mean no offence," he represented, having felt his way to a stroke of superlative cunning, " but when I feel there's a goddess inside of this statue, I don't know how it is exactly, but it puts me off. I can't fix my thoughts ; the—the passion don't ferment as it ought. If, supposing now, you was to withdraw yourself and leave me the statue ? I could gaze on it, and think of thee, and Cyprus, and all the rest of it, more comfortable, so to speak, than what I can when you're animating of it, and making me that nervous, words can't describe it ! "

He hardly dared to hope that so lame and transparent a device would succeed with her ; but, as he had previously found, there was a certain spice of credulity and simplicity in her nature, which made it possible to impose upon her occasionally.

" It may be so," she said. " I overawe thee, perchance ? "

" Very much so," said he, promptly. " You don't intend it, I know ; but it's a fact."

" I will leave you to meditate upon the charms so faintly shadowed in this image, remembering that whatever of loveliness you find herein will be multiplied ten thousand-fold in the actual Aphrodite ! Remain, then ; ponder and gaze—and love ! "

He waited for a little while after the statue was silent, and then took up the sacking left for him by Braddle ; twice he attempted to throw it over the marble, and twice he recoiled. " It's no use," he said, " I can't do it ; they must do it themselves ! "

He carefully unfastened the window at the back of his saloon, and, placing the statue in the centre of the floor, turned out the gas, and with a beating heart stole upstairs to his bedroom, where (with his door bolted he waited anxiously for the arrival of his dreaded deliverers.

He scarcely knew how long he had been there, for a kind of waking dream had come upon him, in which he was providing the statue with light refreshment in the shape of fancy pebbles and liquid cement, when the long low whistle, faintly heard from the back of the house, brought him back to his full senses.

The burglars had come ! He unbolted the door and stole out to the top of the crazy staircase, intending to rush back and bolt himself in if he heard steps ascending ; and for some minutes he strained his ears, without being able to catch a sound.

At last he heard the muffled creak of the window, as it was thrown up. They were coming in ! Would they, or would they not, be inhuman enough to force him to assist them in the removal ?

They were still in the saloon ; he heard them tramping about, moving the furniture with unnecessary violence, and addressing one another in tones that were not caressing. Now they were carrying the statue to the window ; he heard their labouring breath and groans of exertion under the burden.

Another pause. He stole lower down the staircase, until he was outside his sitting-room, and could hear better. There ! that was the thud as they leapt out on the flagged yard. A second and heavier thud—the goddess ! How would they get her over the wall ? Had they brought steps, ropes, or what ? No matter ; they

THE TINTED VENUS

knew their own business, and were not likely to have forgotten anything. But how long they were about it ! Suppose a constable were to come by and see the van !

There were sounds at last; they were scaling the wall—floundering, apparently ; and no wonder, with such a weight to hoist after them ! More thuds ; and then the steps of men staggering slowly, painfully away. The steps echoed louder from under the archway, and then died away in silence.

Could they be really gone ? He dared not hope so, and remained shivering in his sitting-room for some minutes ; until, gaining courage, he determined to go down and shut the window, to avoid any suspicion. Although now that the burglars were safely off with their prize, even their capture could not implicate him. He rather hoped they *would* be caught !

He took a lighted candle, and descended. As he entered the saloon, a gust from the open window blew out the light. He stood there in the dark and an icy draught; and, beginning to grope about in the dark for the matches, he brushed against something which was soft and had a cloth-like texture. " It's Braddle ! " he thought, and his blood ran cold ; " or else the Count ! " And he called them both respectfully. There was no reply ; no sound of breathing, even.

Ha ! here was a box of matches at last ! He struck a light in feverish haste, and lit the nearest gas-bracket. For an instant he could see nothing, in the sudden glare ; but the next moment he fell back against the wall with a cry of horror and despair.

For there, in the centre of the disordered room, stood—not the Count, not Braddle—but the statue, the mantle thrown back from her arms, and those arms, and the folds of the marble drapery, spotted here and there with stains of dark crimson !

io. *Damocles Dines Out*

" To feed were best at home."—*Macbeth*.

AS soon as Leander had recovered from the first shock of horror and disappointment, he set himself to efface the stains with which the statue and the oilcloth were liberally bespattered ; he was burning to find out what had happened to make such desperadoes abandon their design at the point of completion.

They both seemed to have bled freely. Had they quarrelled, or what ? He went out into the yard with a hand-lamp, trembling lest he should come upon one or more corpses ; but the place was bare, and he then remembered having heard them stumble and flounder over the wall.

He came back in utter bewilderment; the statue, standing calm and lifeless as he had himself placed it, could tell him nothing, and he went back to his bedroom full of the vaguest fears.

The next day was a Saturday, and he passed it in the state of continual apprehension which was becoming his normal condition. He expected every moment to see or hear from the baffled ruffians, who would, no doubt, consider him responsible for their failure ; but no word nor sign came from them, and the uncertainty drove him very near distraction.

As the night approached, he almost welcomed it, as a time when the goddess herself would enlighten part of his ignorance ; and he waited more impatiently than ever for her return.

He was made to wait long that evening, until he almost began to think that the marble was deserted altogether ; but at length, as he watched, the statue gave a long, shuddering sigh, and seemed to gaze round the saloon with vacant eyes.

" Where am I ? " she murmured. " Ah ! I remember.

THE TINTED VENUS

Leander, while you slumbered, impious hands were laid upon this image ! "

" Dear me, mum ; you don't say so ! " exclaimed Leander.

" It is the truth ! From afar I felt the indignity that was purposed, and hastened to protect my image, to find it in the coarse grasp of godless outlaws. Leander, they were about to drag me away by force—away from thee ! "

" I'm very sorry you should have been disturbed," said Leander ; and he certainly was. " So you came back and caught them at it, did you ? And wh—what did you do to 'em, if I may inquire ? "

" I know not," she said simply. " I caused them to be filled with mad fury, and they fell upon one another blindly, and fought like wild beasts around my image until strength failed them, and they sank to the ground ; and when they were able, they fled from my presence, and I saw them no more."

" You—you didn't kill them outright, then ? " said Leander, not feeling quite sure whether he would be glad or not to hear that they had forfeited their lives.

" They were unworthy of such a death," she said ; " so I let them crawl away. Henceforth they will respect our images."

" I should say they would, most likely, madam," agreed Leander. " I do assure you, I'm almost glad of it myself—I am ; it served them both right."

" *Almost* glad ! And do you not rejoice from your heart that I yet remain to you ? "

" Why," said Leander, " it is, in course, a most satisfactory and agreeable termination, I'm sure."

" Who knows whether, if this my image had once been removed from you, I could have found it in my power to return ? " she said ; " for, I ween, the power that is left me has limits. I might never have appeared to you again. Think of it, Leander,"

" I was thinking of it," he replied. " It quite upsets me to think how near it was."

DAMOCLES DINES OUT

" You are moved. You love me well, do you not, Leander ? "

" Oh ! I suppose I do," he said—" well enough."

" Well enough to abandon this gross existence, and fly with me where none can separate us ? "

" I never said nothing about that," he answered.

" But yesternight and you confessed that you were yielding—that ere long I should prevail."

" So I am," he said ; " but it will take me some time to yield thoroughly. You wouldn't believe how slow I yield ; why, I haven't hardly begun yet! "

" And how long a time will pass before you are fully prepared ? "

" I'm afraid I can't say, not exactly; it may be a month, or it might only be a week, or again, it may be a year. I'm so dependent upon the weather. So, if you're in any kind of a hurry, I couldn't advise you, as a honest man, to wait for me."

" I will not wait a year ! " she said fiercely. " You mock me with such words. I tell you again that my forbearance will last but little longer. More of this laggard love, and I will shame you before your fellow-men as an ingrate and a dastard ! I will ; by my zone, I will! "

" Now, mum, you're allowing yourself to get excited," said Leander, soothingly. " I wouldn't talk about it no more this evening ; we shall do no good. I can't arrange to go with you just yet, and there's an end of it."

" You will find that that is not the end of it, clod-witted slave that you are ! "

" Now, don't call names ; it's beneath you."

" Ay, indeed ! for are not *you* beneath me ? But for very shame I will not abandon what is justly mine ; nor shall you, wily and persuasive hairdresser though you be, withstand my sovereign will with impunity ! "

" So you say, mum ! " said Leander, with a touch of his native impertinence.

THE TINTED VENUS

" As I say, I shall act; but no more of this, or you will anger me before the time. Let me depart."

" I'm not hindering you," he said; but she did not remain long enough to resent his words. He sat down with a groan. " Whatever will become of me ? " he soliloquised dismally. " She gets more pressing every evening, and she's been taking to threatening dreadful of late. . . . If the Count and that Braddle ever come back now, it won't be to take her off my hands ; it'll more likely be to have my life for letting them into such a trap. They'll think it was some trick of mine, I shouldn't wonder. . . . And to-morrow's Sunday, and I've got to dine with aunt, and meet Matilda and her ma. A pretty state of mind I'm in for going out to dinner, after the awful week I've had of it ! But there'll be some comfort in seeing my darling Tillie again; *she* ain't a statue, bless her ! "

" As for you, mum," he said to the unconscious statue, " I'm going to lock you up in your old quarters, where you can't get out and do mischief. I do think I'm entitled to have my Sunday quiet."

After which he contrived to toil upstairs with the image, not without considerable labour and frequent halts to recover his breath ; for although, as we have already noted, the marble, after being infused with life, seemed to lose something of its normal weight, it was no light burden, even then, to be undertaken single-handed.

He slept long and late that Sunday morning ; for he had been too preoccupied for the last few days to make any arrangements for attending chapel with his Matilda, and he was in sore need of repose besides. So he rose just in time to swallow his coffee and array himself carefully for his aunt's early dinner, leaving his two Sunday papers—the theatrical and the general organs—unread on his table.

It was a foggy, dull day, and Millman Street, never a cheerful thoroughfare, looked gloomier than ever as he turned into it. But one of those dingy fronts held

DAMOCLES DINES OUT

Matilda—a circumstance which irradiated the entire district for him.

He had scarcely time to knock before the door was opened by Matilda in person. She looked more charming than ever, in a neat dark dress, with a little white collar and cuffs. Her hair was arranged in a new fashion, being banded by a neat braided tress across the crown; and her grey eyes, usually serene and cold, were bright and eager.

The hairdresser felt his heart swell with love at the sight of her. What a lucky man he was, after all, to have such a girl as this to care for him! If he could keep her—ah, if he could only keep her!

"I told your aunt / was going to open the door to you," she said. "I wanted——Oh, Leander, you've not brought it, after all!"

"Meaning what, Tillie, my darling?" said Leander.

"Oh, you know—my cloak!"

He had had so much to think about that he had really forgotten the cloak of late.

"Well, no, I've not brought that—not the cloak, Tillie," he said slowly.

"What a time they are about it!" complained Matilda.

"You see," explained the poor man, "when a cloak like that is damaged, it has to be sent back to the manufacturers to be done, and they've so many things on their hands. I couldn't promise that you'll have that cloak—well, not this side of Christmas, at least."

"You must have been very rough with it, then, Leander," she remarked.

"I was," he said. "I don't know how I came to *be* so rough. You see, it was trying to tear it off——" But here he stopped.

"Trying to tear it off what?"

"Trying to tear it off nothink, but trying to tear the wrapper off *it*. It was so involved," he added, "with string and paper and that; and I'm a clumsy, unlucky

THE ^TINTED VENUS

sort of chap, sweet one ; and I'm uncommon sorry about it, that I am ! "

" Well, we won't say any more about it /' said Matilda, softened by his contrition. " And I'm keeping you out in the passage all this time. Come in, and be introduced to mamma ; she's in the front parlour, waiting to make your acquaintance."

Mrs. Collum was a stout lady, with a thin voice. She struck a nameless fear into Leander's soul as he was led up to where she sat. He thought that she contained all the promise of a very terrible mother-in-law.

" This is Leander, mamma dear," said Matilda, shyly and yet proudly.

Her mother inspected him for a moment, and then half closed her eyes. " My daughter tells me that you carry on the occupation of a hairdresser," she said.

" Quite correct, madam," said Leander ; " I do."

" Ah ! well," she said, with an unconcealed sigh, " I could have wished to look higher than hairdressing for my Matilda ; but there are opportunities of doing good even as a hairdresser. I trust you are sensible of that."

" I try to do as little 'arm as I can," he said feebly.

" If you do not do good, you must do harm," she said uncompromisingly. " You have it in your means to be an awakening influence. No one knows the power that a single serious hairdresser might effect with worldly customers. Have you never thought of that ? "

" Well, I can't say I have exactly," he said ; " and I don't see how."

" There are cheap and appropriate illuminated texts," she said, "to be had at so much a dozen ; you could hang them on your walls. There are tracts you procure by the hundred ; you could put them in the lining of hats as you hang them up ; you could wrap them round your—your bottles and pomatum-pots. You could drop a word in season in your customer's ear as you bent over him. And you tell me you don't see how ; you *will* not see, I fear, Mr. Tweddle."

DAMOCLES DINES OUT

" Fm afraid, mum," he replied, " my customers would consider I was taking liberties."

" And what of that, so long as you save them ?

" Well, you see, I shouldn't—I should *lose* 'em ! And it's not done in our profession ; and, to tell you the honest truth, Fm not given that way myself—not to the extent of tracks and suchlike, that is."

Matilda's mother groaned ; it was hard to find a son-in-law with whom she had nothing in common, and who was a hairdresser into the bargain.

" Well, well," she said, " we must expect crosses in this life ; though for my own daughter to lay this one upon me is—is——But I will not repine."

" I'm sorry you regard me in the light of a cross," said Leander ; " but, whether Fm a cross or a naught, Im a respectable man, and I love your daughter, mum, and I'm in a position to maintain her."

Leander hated to have to appear under false pretences, of which he had had more than enough of late. He was glad now to speak out plainly, particularly as he had no reason to fear this old woman.

" Hush, Leander ! Mamma didn't mean to be unkind ; did you, mamma ? " said Matilda.

" I said what I felt," she said. " We will not discuss it further. If, in time, I see reason for bestowing my blessing upon a choice which at present——But no matter. If I see reason in time, I will not withhold it. I can hardly be expected to approve at present!"

" You shall take your own time, mum ; J won't hurry you," said Leander. " Tillie is blessing enough for me—not but what I shall be glad to be on a pleasant footing with you, I'm sure, if you can bring yourself to it."

Before Mrs. Collum could reply, Miss Louisa Tweddle made an opportune appearance, to the relief of Matilda, in whom her mother's attitude was causing some uneasiness.

Miss Tweddle was a well-preserved little woman, with

THE TINTED VENUS

short curly iron-grey hair and sharp features. In manner she was brisk, not to say chirpy, but she secreted sentiment in large quantities. She was very far from the traditional landlady, and where she lost lodgers occasionally she retained friends. She regarded Mrs. Collum with something like reverence, as an acquaintance of her youth who had always occupied a superior social position, and she was proud, though somewhat guiltily so, that her favourite nephew should have succeeded in captivating the daughter of a dentist.

She kissed Leander on both cheeks. "He's done the best of all my nephews, Mrs. Collum, ma'am," she explained, "and he's never caused me a moment's anxiety since I first had the care of him, when he was first apprenticed to Catchpole's in Holborn, and paid me for his board."

"Well, well," said Mrs. Collum, "I hope he never may cause anxiety to you, or to anyone."

"I'll answer for it, he won't," said his aunt. "I wish you could see him dress a head of hair."

Mrs. Collum shut her eyes again. "If at his age he has not acquired the necessary skill for his line in life," she observed, "it would be a very melancholy thing to reflect upon."

"Yes, wouldn't it?" agreed Miss Tweddle; "you say very truly, Mrs. Collum. But he's got ideas and notions beyond what you'd expect in a hairdresser—haven't you, Leandy? Tell Miss Collum's dear ma about the new machines you've invented for altering people's hands and eyes and features."

"I don't care to be told," the lady struck in, "To my mind, it's nothing less than sheer impiety to go improving the features we've been endowed with. We ought to be content as we are, and be thankful we've been sent into the world with any features at all. Those are my opinions!"

"Ah," said the politic Leander, "but some people are saved having resort to Art for improvement, and we

oughtn't to blame them as are less favoured for trying to render themselves more agreeable as spectacles, ought we ? "

" And if everyone thought with you," added his aunt, with distinctly inferior tact, " where would your poor dear 'usband have been, Mrs. Collum, ma'am ? "

" My dear husband was not on the same level—he was a medical man ; and, besides, though he replaced Nature in one of her departments, he had too much principle to *imitate* her. Had he been (or had I allowed him to be) less conscientious, his practice would have been largely extended ; but I can truthfully declare that not a single one of his false teeth was capable of deceiving for an instant. I hope," she added to Leander, " you, in your own different way, are as scrupulous."

" Why, the fact is," said Leander, whose professional susceptibilities were now aroused, " I am essentially an artist. When I look around, I see that Nature out of its bounty has supplied me with a choice selection of patterns to follow, and I reproduce them as faithful as lies within my abilities. You may call it a fine thing to take a blank canvas, and represent the luxurious tresses and the blooming hue of 'ealth upon it, and so do I; but I call it a still higher and nobler act to produce a similar effect upon a human 'ed ! "

" Isn't that a pretty speech for a young man like him—only twenty-seven—Mrs. Collum ? " exclaimed his admiring aunt.

" You see, mamma dear," pleaded Matilda, who saw that her parent remained unaffected, " it isn't as if Leander was in poor papa's profession."

" I hope, Matilda," said the lady sharply, " you are not going to pain me again by mentioning this young man and your departed father in the same breath, because I cannot bear it."

" The old lady," reflected Leander here, " don't seem to take to me ! "

" I'm sure," said Miss Tweddle, " Leandy quite feels

THE TINTED VENUS

what an honour it is to him to look forward to such a connection as yours is. When I first heard of it, I said at once, 'Leandy, you can't never mean it; she won't look at you; it's no use your asking her,' I said. And I quite scolded myself for ever bringing them together!"

Mrs. Collum seemed inclined to follow suit, but she restrained herself. "Ah! well," she observed, "my daughter has chosen to take her own way, without consulting my prejudices. All I hope is, that she may never repent it!"

"Very handsomely said, ma'am," chimed in Miss Tweddle; "and, if I know my nephew, repent it she never will!"

Leander was looking rather miserable; but Matilda put out her hand to him behind his aunt's back, and their eyes and hands met, and he was happy again.

"You must be wanting your dinner, Mrs. Collum," his aunt proceeded; "and we are only waiting for another lady and gentleman to make up the party. I don't know what's made them so behindhand, I'm sure. He's a very pleasant young man, and punctual to the second when he lodged with me. I happened to run across him up by Chancery Lane the other evening, and he said to me, in his funny way, 'I've been and gone and done it, Miss Tweddle, since I saw you. I'm a happy man; and I'm thinking of bringing my young lady soon to introduce to you.' So I asked them to come and take a bit of dinner with me to-day, and I told him two o'clock sharp, I'm sure. Ah, there they are at last! That's Mr. Jauncy's knock, among a thousand."

Leander started. "Aunt!" he cried, "you haven't asked Jauncy here to-day?"

"Yes, I did, Leandy. I knew you used to be friends when you were together here, and I thought how nice it would be for both your young ladies to make each other's acquaintance; but I didn't tell *him* anything. I meant it for a surprise."

And she bustled out to receive her guests, leaving

Leander speechless. What if the new-comers were to make some incautious reference to that pleasure-party on Saturday week ? Could he drop them a warning hint ?

" Don't you like this Mr. Jauncy, Leander ? " whispered Matilda, who had observed his ghastly expression.

" I like him well enough," he returned, with an effort; " but I'd rather we had no third parties, I must say."

Here Mr. Jauncy came in alone, Miss Tweddle having retired to assist the lady to take off her bonnet.

Leander went to meet him. " James," he said in an agitated whisper, " have you brought Bella ? "

Jauncy nodded. " We were talking of you as we came along," he said in the same tone, " and I advise you to look out—she's got her quills up, old chap ! "

" What about ? " murmured Leander.

Mr. Jauncy's grin was wider and more appreciative than ever as he replied, mysteriously, " Rosherville ! "

Leander would have liked to ask in what respect Miss Parkinson considered herself injured by the expedition to Rosherville; but, before he could do so, his aunt returned with the young lady in question.

Bella was gorgeously dressed, and made her entrance with the stiff est possible dignity. " Miss Parkinson, my dear, " said her hostess, " you mustn't be made a stranger of. That lady sitting there on the sofa is Mrs. Collum, and this gentleman is a friend of *your* gentleman's, and my nephew, Leandy."

" Oh, thank you," said Bella, " but I've no occasion to be told Mr. Tweddle's name ; we have met before—haven't we, Mr. Tweddle ? "

He looked at her, and saw her brows clouded, and her nose and mouth with a pinched look about them. She was annoyed with him evidently—but why ?

" We have," was all he could reply.

" Why, how nice that is, to be sure ! " exclaimed his aunt. " I might have thought of it, too, Mr. Jauncy, and you being such friends and all. And p'r'aps you

THE TINTED VENUS

know this lady, too—Miss Collum—as Leandy is keeping company along with ? ”

Bella's expression changed to something blacker still. “ No,” she said, fixing her eyes on the still unconscious Leander ; “ I made sure that Mr. Tweddle was courting a young lady, but—but—well, this is a surprise, Mr. Tweddle ! You never told us of this when last we met. I shall have news for somebody ! ”

“ Oh, but it's only been arranged within the last month or two ! ” said Miss Tweddle.

“ Considering we met so lately, he might have done us the compliment of mentioning it, I must say ! ” said Bella.

“ I — I thought you knew,” stammered the hairdresser ; “ I told——”

“ No, you didn't, excuse me ; oh no, you didn't, or some things would have happened differently. It was the place and all that made you forget it, very likely.”

“ When did you meet one another, and where was it, Miss Parkinson ? ” inquired Matilda, rather to include herself in the conversation than from any devouring curiosity.

Leander struck in hoarsely. “ We met,” he explained, “ some time since, quite casual.”

Bella's eyes lit up with triumphant malice. “ What ! ” she said, “ do you call yesterday week such a long while ? What a compliment that is, though ! And so he's not even mentioned it to you, Miss Collum ? Dear me, I wonder what reasons he had for that, now ! ”

“ There's nothing to wonder at,” said Leander ; “ my memory does play me tricks of that sort.”

“ Ah, if it was only you it played tricks on ! There's Miss Collum dying to know what it's all about, I can see.”

“ Indeed, Miss Parkinson, I'm nothing of the sort,” retorted Matilda, proudly. Privately her reflection was : “ She's got a lovely gown on, but she's a common girl, for all that ; and she's trying to set me against Leander for some reason, and she shan't do it . ”

DAMOCLES DINES OUT

" Well," said Bella, " you're a fortunate man, Mr. Tweddle, that you are, in every way. I'm afraid I shouldn't be so easy with my James."

" There's no need for being afraid about it," her James put in ; " you aren't! "

" I hope you haven't as much cause, though," she retorted.

Leander listened to her malicious innuendo with a bewildered agony. Why on earth was she making this dead set at him ? She was amiable enough on Saturday week. It never occurred to him that his conduct to her sister could account for it, for had he not told Ada straightforwardly how he was situated ?

Fortunately dinner was announced to be ready just then, and Bella was silenced for the moment in the general movement to the next room.

Leander took in Matilda's mamma, who had been studiously abstracting herself from all surrounding objects for the last few minutes. " That Bella is a downright basilisk," he thought dismally, as he led the way. " Lord, how I do wish dinner was done ! "

II. *Denounced*

" There's a new foot on the floor, my friend ;
And a new face at the door, my friend ;
A new face at the door."

1 LEANDER sat at the head of the table as carver, having Mrs. CoUum and Bella on his left, and James and Matilda opposite to them.

James was the first to open conversation, by the remark to Mrs. Collum, across the table, that they were " having another dull Sunday."

" That," rejoined the uncompromising lady, " seems to me a highly improper remark, sir."

" My friend Jauncy," explained Leander, in defence of his abashed companion, " was not alluding to present

THE TINTED VENUS

company, I'm sure. He meant the dullness *outside*—the fog, and so on."

"I knew it," she said; "and I repeat that it is improper and irreverent to speak of a dull Sunday in that tone of complaint. Haven't we all the week to be lively in?"

"And I'm sure, ma'am," said Jauncy, recovering himself, "you make the most of your time. Talking of fog, Tweddle, did you see those lines on it in to-day's *Referee*? Very smart, I call them; regular witty."

"And do you both read a paper on Sunday mornings with 'smart' and 'witty' lines in it?" demanded Mrs. Collum.

"I — I hadn't time this morning," said the unregenerate Leander; "but I do occasionally cast a eye over it before I get up."

Mrs. Collum groaned, and looked at her daughter reproachfully.

"I see by the *Weekly News*," said Jauncy, "you've had a burglary in your neighbourhood."

Leander let the carving-knife slip. "A burglary! What! in my neighbourhood? When?"

"Well, perhaps not a burglary; but a capture of two that were * wanted ' for it. It's all in to-day's *News*."

"I — I haven't seen a paper for the last two days," said Leander, his heart beating with hope. "Tell us about it!"

"Why, it isn't much to tell; but it seems that last Friday night, or early on Saturday morning, the constable on duty came upon two suspicious-looking chaps, propped up insensible against the railings in Queen Square, covered with blood, and unable to account for themselves. Whether they'd been trying to break in somewhere and been beaten off, or had quarrelled, or met with some accident, doesn't seem to be known for certain. But, anyway, they were arrested for loitering at night with housebreaking things about them; and, when they were got to the station, recognised as the men ' wanted *

for shooting a policeman down at Camberwell some time back, and if it is proved against them they'll be hung, for certain."

"What were they called? Did it say?" asked Leander, eagerly.

"I forget one—something like Bradawl, I believe; the other had a lot of aliases, but he was best known as the 'Count,' from having lived a good deal abroad, and speaking broken English like a native."

Leander's spirits rose, in spite of his present anxieties. He had been going in fear and dread of the revenge of these ruffians, and they were safely locked up; they could trouble him no more. Small wonder, then, that his security in this respect made him better able to cope with minor dangers; and Bella's animosity seemed lulled too—at least, she had not opened her mouth, except for food, since she sat down.

In his expansion, he gave himself the airs of a host. "I hope," he said, "I've served you all to your likings? Miss Parkinson, you're not getting on; allow me to offer you a little more pork."

"Thank you, Mr. Tweddle," said the implacable Bella, "but I won't trouble you. I haven't an appetite to-day—like I had at those gardens."

There was a challenge in this answer—not only to him, but to general curiosity—which, to her evident disappointment, was not taken up.

Leander turned to Jauncy. "I—I suppose you had no trouble in finding your way here?" he said.

"No," said Jauncy, "not more than usual; the streets were pretty full, and that makes it harder to get along."

"We met such quantities of soldiers," put in Bella. "Do you remember those two soldiers at Rosherville, Mr. Tweddle? How funny they did look, dancing; didn't they? But I suppose I mustn't say anything about the dancing here, must I?"

"Since," said the poor badgered man, "you put it to

THE TINTED JVENUS

me, Miss Parkinson, I must say that, considering the *day*, you know——"

" Yes," continued Mrs. Collum, severely ; " surely there are better topics for the Sabbath than—than a dancing soldier ! "

" Mr. Tweddle knows why I stopped myself," said Bella. " But there, I won't tell of you—not now, at all events ; so don't look like that at me ! "

" There, Bella, that'll do," said her *fiance*, suddenly awakening to the fact that she was trying to make herself disagreeable, and perhaps feeling slightly ashamed of her.

" James ! I know what to say and what to leave unsaid, without tellings from you ; thanks all the same. You needn't fear my saying a word about Mr. Tweddle and Ada—la, now, if I haven't gone and said it ! What a stupid I am to run on so ! "

" *Drop* it, Bella ! Do you hear ? That's enough," growled Jauncy.

Leander sat silent; he did not attempt again to turn the conversation : he knew better. Matilda seemed perfectly calm, and certainly showed no surface curiosity ; but he feared that her mother intended to require explanations.

Miss Tweddle came in here with the original remark that winter had begun now in good earnest.

" Yes," said Bella. " Why, as we came along, there wasn't hardly a leaf on the trees in the squares ; and yet only yesterday week, at the gardens, the trees hadn't begun to shed. Had they, Mr. Tweddle ? Oh, but I forgot; you were so taken up with paying attention to Ada——(Well, James ! I suppose I can make a remark !) "

" I'll never take you out again, if you don't hold that tongue," he whispered savagely.

Mrs. Collum fixed her eyes on Leander, as he sat cowering on her right. " Leander Tweddle," she said, in a hissing whisper, " what is that young person talking

about ? Who—who is this * Ada ' ? I insist upon being told."

" If you want to know, ask her," he retorted desperately.

All this by-play passed unnoticed by Miss Tweddle, who was probably too full of the cares of a hostess to pay attention to it; and, accordingly, she judged the pause that followed the fitting opportunity for a little speech.

" Mrs. Collum, ma'am," she began ; " and my dearest Miss Matilda, the flower of all my lady lodgers ; and you Leandy ; and Mr. Jauncy ; and, though last mentioned, not intentionally so, I assure you, Miss Parkinson, my dear—I couldn't tell you how honoured I feel to see you all sitting, so friendly and cheerful, round my humble table. I hope this will be only the beginning of many more so ; and I wish you all your very good healths ! "

" Which, if I may answer for self and present company," said Mr. Jauncy, nobody else being able to utter a word, " we drink and reciprocate."

Leander was saved for the moment, and the dinner passed without further incident. But his aunt's vein of sentiment had been opened, and could not be staunched all at once ; for when the cloth was removed, and the decanters and dishes of oranges placed upon the table, she gave a little preparatory cough and began again.

" I'm sure it isn't my wish to be ceremonial," she said ; " but we're all among friends—for I should like to look upon you as a friend, if you'll let me," she added rather dubiously, to Bella. " And I don't really think there could be a better occasion for a sort of little ceremony that I've quite set my heart on. Leandy, you know what I mean ; and you've got it with you, I know, because you were told to bring it with you."

" Miss Tweddle," interrupted Matilda, hurriedly, " not now. I — I don't think Vidler has sent it back yet. I told you, you know——"

" That's all you know about it, young lady," she said, archly ; " for I stepped in there yesterday and asked him

THE TINTED VENUS

about it, to make sure, and he told me it was delivered over the very Saturday afternoon before. So, Leandy, oblige me for once, and put it on the dear girl's finger before us all; you needn't be bashful with us, I'm sure, either of you."

"What is all this?" asked Mrs. Collum.

"Why, it's a ring, Mrs. Collum, ma'am, that belonged to my own dear aunt, though she never wore it; and her grandfather had the posy engraved on the inside of it. And I remember her telling me, before she was taken, that she'd left it to me in her will, but I wasn't to let it go out of the family. So I gave it to Leandy, to be his engagement ring; but it's had to be altered, because it was ever so much too large as it was."

"I always thought," said Mrs. Collum, "that it was the gentleman's duty to provide the ring."

"So Leandy wanted to; but I said, 'You can pay for the altering; but I'm fanciful about this, and I want to see dearest Miss Collum with my aunt's ring on.'"

"Oh, but, Miss Tweddle, can't you see?" said Matilda. "He's forgotten it; don't—don't tease him about it. . . . It must be for some other time, that's all!"

"Matilda, I'm surprised at you," said her mother. "To forget such a thing as that would be unpardonable in *any* young man. Leander Tweddle, you *cannot* have forgotten it."

"No," he said, "I've not forgotten it; but—but I haven't it about me, and I don't know as I could lay my hand on it, just at present, and that's the truth."

"*Part* of the truth," said Bella. "Oh, what deceitful things you men are! Leave me alone, James; I will speak. I won't sit by and hear poor dear Miss Collum deceived in this way. Miss Collum, ask him if that is all he knows about it. Ask him, and see what he says."

"I'm quite satisfied with what he has chosen to say already, Miss Parkinson; thank you," said Matilda.

" Then permit me to say, Miss Collum, that I'm truly sorry for you," said Bella.

" If you think so, Miss Parkinson, I suppose you must say so."

" I do say it," said Bella ; " for it's a sorrowful sight to see meekness all run to poorness of spirit. You have a right to an explanation from Mr. Tweddle there ; and you would insist on it, if you wasn't afraid (and with good reason) of the answer you'd get ! "

At the beginning of this short colloquy Miss Tweddle, after growing very red and restless for some moments, had slipped out of the room, and came in now, trembling and out of breath, with a bonnet in her hand and a cloak over her arm.

" Miss Parkinson," she said, speaking very rapidly, " when I asked you to come here with my good friend and former lodger, I little thought that anything but friendship would come of it ; and sorry I am that it has turned out otherwise. And my feelings to Mr. Jauncy are the same as ever ; but—this is your bonnet, Miss Parkinson, and your cloak. And this is my house ; and I shall be obliged if you'll kindly put on the ones, and walk out of the other at once ! "

Bella burst into tears, and demanded from Mr. Jauncy why he had brought her there to be insulted.

" You brought it all on yourself," he said, gloomily ; " you should have behaved ! "

" What have I done," cried Bella, " to be told to go, as if I wasn't fit to stay ? "

" I'll tell you what you've done," said Miss Tweddle. " You were asked here with Mr. Jauncy to meet my dear Leandy and his young lady, and get all four of you to know one another, and lay foundations for Friendship's flowery bonds. And from the moment you came in, though I paid no attention to it at first, you've done nothing but insinuate and hint, and try all you could to set my dear Miss Collum and her ma against my poor unoffending nephew ; and I won't sit by any longer and

THE TINTED VENUS

hear it. Put on your bonnet and cloak, Miss Parkinson, and Mr. Jauncy (who knows I don't bear him any ill-feeling, whatever happens) will go home with you."

"I've said nothing," repeated Bella, "but what I'd a right to say, and what I'll stand to."

"If you don't put on those things," said Jauncy, "I shall go away myself, and leave you to follow as best you can."

"I'm putting them on," said Bella; and her hands were unsteady with passion as she tied her bonnet-strings. "Don't bully *me*, James, because I won't bear it! Mr. Tweddle, if you're a man, will you sit there and tell me you don't know that that ring is on a certain person's finger? Will you do that?"

The miserable man concluded that Ada had disregarded his entreaties, and told her sister all about the ring and the accursed statue. He could not see why the story should have so inflamed Bella; but her temper was always uncertain.

Everybody was looking at him, and he was expected to say something. His main idea was, that he would see how much Bella knew before committing himself.

"What have I ever done to offend you," he asked, "that you turn on me in this downright vixenish manner? I scorn to reply to your insinuations!"

"Do you want me to speak out plain? James, stand away, *if you please*. You may all think what you choose of me. / don't care! Perhaps if *you* were to come in and find a man who, only a week ago, had offered marriage to your youngest sister, figuring away as engaged to quite another lady, *you* wouldn't be all milk and honey, either. I'm doing right to expose him. The man who'd deceive one would deceive many, and so you'll find, Miss Collum, little as you think it."

"That's enough," said Miss Tweddle. "It's all a mistake, I'm sure, and you'll be sorry some day for having made it. Now go, Miss Parkinson, and make no More mischief!"

A light had burst in upon Leander's perturbed mind. Ada had not broken faith with him, after all. He remembered Bella's conduct during the return from Rosherville, and understood at last to what a mistake her present wrath was due.

Here, at all events, was an accusation he could repel with dignity, with truth. Foolish and unlucky he had been—and how unlucky he still hoped Matilda might never learn—but false he was not; and she should not be allowed to believe it.

"Miss Parkinson," he said, "I've been badgered long enough. What is it you're trying to bring up against me about your sister Ada? Speak it out, and I'm ready to answer you."

"Leander," said Matilda, "I don't want to hear it from her. Only you tell me that you've been true to me, and that is quite enough."

"Matilda, you're a foolish girl, and don't know what you're talking about," said her mother. "It is not enough for *me*; so I beg, young woman, if you've anything to accuse the man who's to be my son-in-law of, you'll say it now, in my presence, and let him contradict it afterwards if he can."

"Will he contradict his knowing my sister Ada, who's one of the ladies at Madame Chenille's, in the Edgware Road, more than a twelvemonth since, and paying her attentions?" asked Bella.

"I don't deny," said Leander, "meeting her several times, and being considerably struck, in a quiet way. But that was before I met Matilda."

"You had met Matilda before last Saturday, I suppose?" sneered Bella, spitefully—"when you laid your plans to join our party to Rosherville, and trouble my poor sister, who'd given up thinking of you."

"There you go, Bella!" said her *fiance*. "What do you know about his plans? He'd no idea as Ada and you was to be there; and when I told him, as we were

THE TINTED VENUS

driving down, it was all I could do to prevent him jumping out of the cab."

"I'm highly flattered to hear it," said Bella. "But he didn't seem to be so afraid of Ada when they did meet; and you best know, Mr. Tweddle, the things you said to that poor trusting girl all the time you were walking and dancing and talking foolishness to her."

"I never said a word that couldn't have been spoke from the top of St. Paul's," protested Leander. "I did dance with her I own, not to seem uncivil; but we only waltzed round twice."

"Then why did you give her a ring—an engagement ring too?" insisted Bella.

"Who saw me give her a ring?" he demanded hotly. "Do you dare to say you did? Did she ever tell you I gave her any ring? You *know* she didn't!"

"If I can't trust my own ears," said Bella, "I should like to know what I can trust. I heard you myself, in that railway carriage, ask my sister Ada not to tell anyone about some ring, and I tried to get out of Ada afterwards what the secret was; but she wouldn't treat me as a sister, and be open with me. But anyone with eyes in their head could guess what was between you, and all the time you an engaged man!"

"See there, now!" cried the injured hairdresser; "there's a thing to go and make all this mischief about! Matilda, Mrs. Collum, aunt, I declare to you I told the—the other young lady everything about my having formed new ties and that. I was very particular not to give rise to hopes which were only doomed to be disappointed. As to what Miss Parkinson says she overheard, why, it's very likely I may have asked her sister to say nothing about a ring, and I won't deny it was the very same ring that I was to have brought here to-day; for the fact was, I had the misfortune to lose it in those very gardens, and naturally did not wish it talked about: and that's the truth, as I stand here. As for giving it away I swear I never parted with it to no mortal woman!"

" After that, Bella," observed Mr. Jaimcy, " you'd better say you're sorry you spoke, and come home with me—that's what you'd better do."

" I shall say nothing of the sort," she asserted. " I'm too much of a lady to stay where my company is not desired, and I'm ready to go as soon as you please. But if he was to talk his head off, he would never persuade me (whatever he may do other parties) that he's not been playing double ; and if Ada were here you would soon see whether he would have the face to deny it. So good-night, Miss Tweddle, and sooner or later you'll find yourself undeceived in your precious nephew, take my word for it. Good-night, Miss Collum, and I'm only sorry you haven't more spirit than to put up with such treatment. James, are you going to keep me waiting any longer ? "

Mr. Jauncy, with confused apologies to the company generally, hurried his betrothed off, in no very amiable mood, and showed his sense of her indiscretions by indulging in some very plain speaking on their homeward way.

As the street door shut behind them, Leander gave a deep sigh of relief.

" Matilda, my own dearest girl," he said, " now that that cockatrice has departed, tell me, you don't doubt your Leander, do you ? "

" No," said Matilda, judicially, " I don't doubt you, Leander, only I do wish you'd been a little more open with me ; you might have told me you had gone to those gardens and lost the ring, instead of leaving me to hear it from that girl."

" So I might, darling," he owned ; " but I thought you'd disapprove."

" And if she's *my* daughter," observed Mrs. Collum, " she *will* disapprove."

But it was evident from Matilda's manner that the inference was incorrect; the relief of finding Leander guiltless on the main count had blinded her to all minor

THE TINTED VENUS

shortcomings, and he had the happiness of knowing himself fully and freely forgiven.

If this could only have been the end ! But, while he was still throbbing with bliss, he heard a sound, at which his " bedded hair " started up and stood on end—the ill-omened sound of a slow and heavy footfall.

" Leandy," cried his aunt, " how strange you're looking ! "

" There's some one in the passage," he said, hoarsely. " I'll go and see her. Don't any of you come out."

" Why, it's only our Jane," said his aunt; " she always treads heavy."

The steps were heard going up the stairs ; then they seemed to pause half-way, and descend again. " I'll be bound she's forgot something," said Miss Tweddle. " I never knew such a head as that girl's " ; and Leander began to be almost reassured.

The steps were heard in the adjoining room, which was shut off by folding doors from the one they were occupying.

" Leander," cried Matilda, " what *can* there be to look so frightened of ? " and as she spoke there came a sounding solemn blow upon the folding-doors.

" I never saw the lady before in all my life ! " moaned the guilty man, before the doors had time to swing back ; for he knew too well who stood behind them.

And his foreboding was justified to the full. The doors yielded to the blow, and, opening wide, revealed the tall and commanding figure of the goddess ; her face, thanks to Leander's pigments, glowing lifelike under her hood, and the gold ring gleaming on her outstretched hand.

" Leander," said the goddess, in her low musical accents, " come away."

" Upon my word ! " cried Mrs. Collum. " Who is this person ? "

He could not speak. There seemed to be a hammer beating on his brain, reducing it to a pulp.

"Perhaps," said Miss Tweddle—"perhaps, young lady, you'll explain what you've come for?"

The statue slowly pointed to Leander. "I come for him," she said calmly. "He has vowed himself to me; he is mine!"

Matilda, after staring, incredulous, for some moments at the intruder, sank with a wild scream upon the sofa, and hid her face.

Leander flew to her side. "Matilda, my own," he implored, "don't be alarmed. She won't touch *you*; it's *me* she's come after."

Matilda rose and repulsed him with a sudden energy. "How dare you!" she cried, hysterically. "I see it all now: the ring, the—the cloak; *she* has had them all the time! . . . Fool that I was—silly, trusting fool!" And she broke out into violent hysterics.

"Go away at once, hypocrite!" enjoined her mother, addressing the distracted hairdresser, as he stood, dumb and impotent, before her. "Do you want to kill my poor child? Take yourself off!"

"For goodness' sake, go, Leandy," added his aunt. "I can't bear the sight of you!"

"Leander, I wait," said the statue. "Come!"

He stood there a moment longer, looking blankly at the two elder women as they bustled about the prostrate girl, and then he gave a bitter, defiant laugh.

His fate was too strong for him. No one was in the mood to listen to any explanation; it was all over! "I'm coming," he said to the goddess. "I may as well; I'm not wanted here."

And, with a smothered curse, he dashed blindly from the room, and out into the foggy street.

12. *An Appeal*

" If you did know to whom I gave the ring,
If you did know for whom I gave the ring,
And how unwillingly I left the ring,
You would abate the strength of your displeasure."
Merchant of Venice.

LEANDER strode down the street in a whirl of conflicting emotions. At the very moment when he seemed to have prevailed over Miss Parkinson's machinations, his evil fate had stepped in and undone him for ever ! What would become of him without Matilda ? As he was thinking of his gloomy prospects, he noticed, for the first time, that the statue was keeping step by his side, and he turned on her with smothered rage. " Well," he began, " I hope you're satisfied ? "

" Quite, Leander, quite satisfied ; for have I not found you ? "

" Oh, you've found me right enough/' he replied, with a groan—" trust you for that ! What I should like to know is, how the dickens you did it ? "

" Thus," she replied : "I awoke, and it was dark, and you were not there, and I needed you ; and I went forth, and called you by your name. And you, now that you have hearkened to my call, you are happy, are you not ? "

" Me ? " said Leander, grimly. " Oh, I'm regular jolly, I am ! Haven't I reason ? "

" Your sisters seemed alarmed at my coming," she said. " Why ? "

" Well," said Leander, " they aren't used to having marble goddesses dropping in on them promiscuously."

" The youngest wept: was it because I took you from her side ? "

" I shouldn't wonder," he returned gruffly. " Don't bother me ! "

When they were both safely within the little upper room again, he opened the cupboard door wide. " Now,

marm," he said, in a voice which trembled with repressed rage, " you must be tired with the exercise you've took this evening, and I'll trouble you to walk in here."

" There are many things on which I would speak with you," she said.

" You must keep them for next time," he answered roughly. " If you can see anything, you can see that just now I'm not in a temper for to stand it, whatever I may be another evening."

" Why do I suffer this language from you ? " she demanded indignantly—" why ? "

" If you don't go in, you'll hear language you'll like still less, goddess or no goddess ! " he said, foaming. " I mean it. I've been worked up past all bearing, and I advise you to let me alone just now, or you'll repent it ! "

" Enough ! " she said haughtily, and stalked proudly into the lonely niche, which he closed instantly. As he did so, he noticed his Sunday papers lying still folded on his table, and seized one eagerly.

" It may have something in it about what Jauncy was telling me of," he said ; and his search was rewarded by the following paragraph :—

" DARING CAPTURE OF BURGLARS IN BLOOMSBURY.—On the night of Friday, the —th, Police-constable Yorke, B 954, while on duty, in the course of one of his rounds, discovered two men, in a fainting condition and covered with blood, which was apparently flowing from sundry wounds upon their persons, lying against the railings of Queen Square. Being unable to give any coherent account of themselves, and housebreaking implements being found in their possession, they were at once removed to the Bow Street Station, where, the charge having been entered against them, they were recognised by a member of the force as two notorious housebreakers who have long been ' wanted ' in connection with the Camberwell burglary, in which, as will be remembered, an officer lost his life."

The paragraph went on to give their names and

THE TINTED VENUS

sundry other details, and concluded with a sentence which plunged Leander into fresh torments :—

" In spite of the usual caution, both prisoners insisted upon volunteering a statement, the exact nature of which has not yet transpired, but which is believed to have reference to another equally mysterious outrage—the theft of the famous Venus from the Wrucklesmarsh Collection—and is understood to divert suspicion into a hitherto unsuspected channel."

What could this mean, if not that those villains, smarting under their second failure, had denounced him in revenge ? He tried to persuade himself that the passage would bear any other construction, but not very successfully. " If they have brought *me* in," he thought, and it was his only gleam of consolation, " I should have heard of it before this."

And even this gleam vanished as a sharp knocking was heard below ; and, descending to open the door, he found his visitor to be Inspector Bilbow.

" Evening, Tweddle," said the Inspector, quietly. " I've come to have another little talk with you."

Leander thought he would play his part till it became quite hopeless. " Proud to see you, Mr. Inspector," he said. " Will you walk into my saloon ? and I'll light the gas for you."

" No, don't you trouble yourself," said the terrible man. " **111** walk upstairs where you're sitting yourself, if you've no objections."

Leander dared not make any, and he ushered the detective upstairs accordingly.

" Ha ! " said the latter, throwing a quick eye round the little room. " Nice little crib you've got here. Keep everything you want on the premises, eh ? Find those cupboards very convenient, I dare say ? "

" Very," said Leander (like the innocent Joseph Surface that he was) ; " oh, very convenient, sir." He tried to keep his eye from resting too consciously upon the fatal door that held his secret.

AN APPEAL

" Keep your coal and your wine and spirits there ? " said the detective. (Was he watching his countenance, or not ?)

" Y—yes," said Leander ; " leastways, in one of them. Will you take anything, sir ? "

" Thank 'ee, Tweddle ; I don't mind if I do. And what do you keep in the other one, now ? "

" The other ? " said the poor man. " Oh, odd things ! " (He certainly had *one* odd thing in it.)

After the officer had chosen and mixed his spirits and water, he began : " Now, you know what's brought me here, don't you ? "

(" If he was sure, he wouldn't try to pump me," argued Leander. " I won't throw up just yet.")

" I suppose it's the ring," he replied innocently. " You don't mean to say you've got it back for me, Mr. Inspector ? Well, I *am* glad."

" I thought you set no particular value on the ring when I met you last ? " said the other.

" Why," said Leander, " I may have said so out of politeness, not wanting to trouble you ; but, as you said it was the statue you were after chiefly, why, I don't mind admitting that I shall be thankful indeed to get that ring back. And so you've brought it, have you, sir ? "

He said this so naturally, having called in all his powers of dissimulation to help him in his extremity, that the detective was favourably impressed. He had already felt a suspicion that he had been sent here on a fool's errand, and no one could have looked less like a daring criminal, and the trusted confederate of still more daring ruffians, than did Leander at that moment.

" Heard anything of Potter lately ? " he asked, wishing to try the effect of a sudden *coup*,

" I don't know the gentleman," said Leander, firmly ; for, after all, he did not.

" Now, take care. He's been seen to frequent this house. We know more than you think, young man."

" Oh ! if he bluffs, I can bluff too," passed through

THE TINTED VENUS

Leander's mind. " Inspector Bilbow," he said, " I give you my sacred honour, I've never set eyes on him. He can't have been here, not with my knowledge. It's my belief you're trying to make out something against me. If you're a friend, Inspector, you'll tell me straight out."

" That's not our way of doing business ; and yet, hang it, I ought to know an honest man by this time ! Tweddle, I'll drop the investigator, and speak as man to man. You've been reported to me (never mind by whom) as the receiver of the stolen Venus—a pal of this very Potter—that's what I've against you, my man ? "

" I know who told you that," said Leander ; " it was that Count and his precious friend Braddle ! "

" Oh, you know them, do you ? That's an odd guess for an innocent man, Tweddle ! "

" They found me out from inquiries at the gardens," said Leander ; " and as for guessing, it's in this very paper. So it's me they've gone and implicated, have they ? All right. I suppose they're men whose word you'd go by, wouldn't you, sir—truthful, reliable kind of parties, eh ? "

" None of that, Tweddle," said the Inspector, rather uneasily. " Our Department is bound to follow up any clue, no matter where it comes from. I was informed that that Venus is concealed somewhere about these premises. It may be, or it may not be ; but it's my duty to make the proper investigations. If you were a prince of the blood, it would be all the same."

" Well, all I can say is, that I'm as innocent as my own toilet preparations. Ask yourself if it is likely. What could I do with a stolen statue—not to mention that I'm a respectable tradesman, with a reputation to maintain ? Excuse me, but I'm afraid those burglars have been 'aving a lark with you, sir."

He went just a little too far here, for the detective was visibly irritated.

" Don't chatter to me," he said. " If you're innocent, so much the better for you ; if that statue is found

here after this, it will ruin you. If you know anything, be it ever so little, about it, the best thing you can do is to speak out while there's time."

" I can only say, once more, I'm as innocent as the drivelling snow," repeated Leander. " Why can't you believe my word against those blackguards ? "

" Perhaps I do," said the other; " but I must make a formal look round, to ease my conscience."

Leander's composure nearly failed him. " By all means," he said at length. " Come and ease your conscience all over the house, sir, do ; I can show you over."

" Softly," said the detective. " I'll begin here, and work gradually up, and then down again."

" Here ? " said Leander, aghast. " Why, you've seen all there is here ! "

" Now, Tweddle, I shall conduct this my own way, if *you* please. I've been following your eyes, Tweddle, and they've told me tales. I'll trouble you to open that cupboard you keep looking at so."

" This cupboard ? " cried Leander. " Why, you don't suppose I've got the Venus in there, sir ! "

" If it's anywhere, it's there ! There's no taking me in, I tell you. Open it ! "

" Oh ! " said Leander, " it is hard to be the object of these cruel suspicions. Mr. Inspector, listen to me. I can't open that cupboard, and I'll tell you why. . . . You—you've been young yourself. . . . Think how you'd feel in my situation . . . and consider *her* ! As a gentleman, you won't press it, I'm sure ! "

" If I'm making any mistake, I shall know how to apologise," said the Inspector. " If you don't open that cupboard, / shall."

" Never ! " exclaimed Leander. " I'll die first ! " and he threw himself upon the handle.

The other caught him by the shoulders, and sent him twirling into the opposite corner ; and then, taking a key from his own pocket, he opened the door himself.

THE TINTED VENUS

" I — I never encouraged her ! " whimpered Leander, as he saw that all was lost.

The officer had stepped back in silence from the cupboard ; then he faced Leander, with a changed expression. " I suppose you think yourself devilish funny ? " he said savagely ; and Leander discovered that the cupboard was as bare as Mother Hubbard's !

He was not precisely surprised, except at first. " She's keeping out of the way ; she wouldn't be the goddess she is if she couldn't do a trifling thing like that ! " was all he thought of the phenomenon. He forced himself to laugh a little.

" Excuse me," he said, " but you did seem so set on detecting something wrong, that I couldn't help humouring you ! "

Inspector Bilbow was considerably out of humour, and gave Leander to understand that he would laugh in a certain obscure region, known as " the other side of his face," by-and-by. " You take care, that's my advice to you, young man. I've a deuced good mind to arrest you on suspicion as it is ! " he said hotly.

" Lor, sir ! " said Leander, " what for—for not having anything in that cupboard ? "

" It's my belief you know more than you choose to tell. Be that as it may, I shall not take you into custody for the present; but you pay attention to what I'm going to tell you next. Don't you attempt to leave this house, or to remove anything from it, till you see me again, and that'll be some time to-morrow evening. If you do attempt it, you'll be apprehended at once, for you're being watched. I tell you that for your own sake, Tweddle ; for I've no wish to get you into trouble if you act fairly by me. But mind you stay where you are for the next twenty-four hours."

" And what's to happen then ? " said Leander.

" I mean to have the whole house thoroughly searched and you must be ready to give us every assistance—that's what's to happen. I might make a secret of it; **but**

where's the use ? If you're not a fool, you'll see that it won't do to play any tricks. You'd far better stand by me than Potter."

" I tell you I don't know Potter. *Blow Potter !* " said Leander, warmly.

" We shall see," was all the detective deigned to reply ; " and just be ready for my men to-morrow evening, or take the consequences. Those are my last words to you ! "

And with this he took his leave. He was by no means the most brilliant officer in the Department, and he felt uncomfortably aware that he did not see his way—clear as yet. He could not even make up his mind on so elementary a point as Leander's guilt or innocence.

But he meant to take the course he had announced, and his frankness in giving previous notice was not without calculation. He argued thus : If Tweddle was free from all complicity, nothing was lost by delaying the search for a day ; if he were guilty, he would be more than mortal if he did not attempt, after such a warning, either to hide his booty more securely, and probably leave traces which would betray him, or else to escape when his guilt would be manifest.

Unfortunately, there were circumstances in the case which he could not be expected to know, and which made his logic inapplicable.

After he had gone, Leander thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and began to whistle forlornly. " A little while ago it was burglars—now it's police ! " he reflected aloud. " I'm going it, I am ! And then there's Matilda and that there Venus—one predickymment on top of another ! " (But here a sudden hope lightened his burden.) " Suppose she's took herself off for good ? " He was prevented from indulging this any further by a long, low laugh, which came from the closed cupboard.

" No such luck—she's back again ! " he groaned. " Oh, *come* out if you want to. Don't stay larfin' at me in there ! "

THE TINTED VENUS

The goddess stepped out, with a smile of subdued mirth upon her lips. "Lcander," she said, "did it surprise you just now that I had vanished?"

"Oh," he said wearily, "I don't know—yes, I suppose so. You found some way of getting through at the back, I dare say?"

"Do you think that even now I cannot break through the petty restraints of matter?"

"Well, however it was managed, it was cleverly done. I must say that. I didn't hardly expect it of you. But you must do the same to-morrow night, mind you!"

"Must I, indeed?" she said.

"Yes, unless you want to ruin me altogether, you must. They're going to search the premises for you!"

"I have heard all," she said. "But give yourself no anxiety: by that time you and I will be beyond human reach."

"Not me," he corrected. "If you think I'm going to let myself be wafted over to Cyprus (which is British soil now, let me tell you), you're under a entire delusion. I've never been w^rafted anywhere yet, and I don't mean to try it!"

All her pent-up wrath broke forth and descended upon him with crushing force.

"Meanest and most contemptible of mortal men, you shall recognise me as the goddess I am! I have borne with you too long; it shall end this night. Shallow fool that you have been, to match your puny intellect against a goddess famed for her wiles as for her beauty! You have thought me simple and guileless; you have never feared to treat me with disrespect; you have even dared to suppose that you could keep me—an immortal—pent within these wretched walls! I humoured you, I let you fool yourself with the notion that your will was free—your soul your own. Now that is over! Consider the perils which encircle you. Everything has been aiding to drive you into these arms. My hour of triumph is at hand—yield, then! Cast yourself at my feet, and

grovel for pardon—for mercy—or assuredly I will spare you not! "

Leander went down on all-fours on the hearthrug. " Mercy ! " he cried, feebly. " I Ve meant no offence. Only tell me what you want of me."

" Why should I tell you again ? I demand the words from you which place you within my power : speak them at once! "

(" Ah," thought Leander, " I am not in her power as it is, then.") " If I was to tell you once more that I couldn't undertake to say any such words ? " he asked aloud.

" Then," she said, " my patience would be at an end, and I would scatter your vile frame to the four winds of heaven ! "

" Lady Venus," said Leander, getting up with a white and desperate face, " don't drive me into a corner. I can't go off, not at a moment's notice—in either way ! I — I must have a day—only a day—to make my arrangements in. Give me a day, Lady Venus ; I ask it as a partickler favour ! "

" Be it so," she said. " One day I give you in which to take leave of such as may be dear to you ; but, after that, I will listen to no further pleadings. You are mine, and, all unworthy as you are, I shall hold you to your pledge ! "

Leander was left with this terrible warning ringing in his ears : the goddess would hold him to his involuntary pledge. Even he could see that it was pride, and not affection, which rendered her so determined ; and he trembled at the thought of placing himself irrevocably in her power.

But what was he to do ? The alternative was too awful ; and then, in either case, he must lose Matilda. Here the recollection of how he had left her came over him with a vivid force. What must she be thinking of him at that moment ? And who would ever tell her the truth, when he had been spirited away for ever ?

THE TINTED VENUS

" Oh, Matilda ! " he cried, " if you only knew the hideous position I'm in—if you could only advise me what to do—I could bear it better ! "

And then he resolved that he would ask that advice without delay, and decide nothing until she replied. There was no reason for any further concealment: she had seen the statue herself, and must know the worst. What she could not know was his perfect innocence of any real unfaithfulness to her, and that he must explain.

He sat up all night composing a letter that should touch her to the heart, with the following result:—

" MY OWN DEAREST GIRL,

" If such you will still allow me to qualify you, I write to you in a state of mind that I really arldy know what I am about, but I cannot indure making no effort to clear up the gaping abiss which the events of the past fatal afternoon has raised betwixt us.

" In spite of all I could do, you have now seen, and been justly alarmed at, the Person with whom I allowed myself to become involved in such a unhappy and unprecedented manner, and having done so, you can think for yourself whether that Art of Stone was able for to supplant yours for a single moment, though the way in which such a hideous Event transpired I can not trust my pen to describe except in the remark that it was purely axidental. It all appened on that ill-ominous Saturday when we went down to those Gardens where my Doom was saving up to lay in wait for me, and I scorn to deny that Bella's sister Ada was one of the party. But as to anything serous in that quarter, oh Tilly the ole time I was contrasting you with her and thinking how trully superior, and never did I swerve not what could be termed a swerve for a instant. I did dance arf a walz with her—but why ? Because she asked me to it and as a Gentleman I was bound to oblige ! And that was afterwards too, when I had put that ring on which is the sauce of all my recent aggony.

All the while I was dancing my thoughts were elsewhere—on how I could get the ring back again, for so I still hoped I could, though when I came to have a try, oh my dear girl no one couldn't persuade her she's that obstinate, and yet unless I do it is all over with me, and soon too !

" And now if it's the last time I shall ever write words with a mortal pen, I must request your support in this dilemma which is sounding its dread orns at my very door !

" You know what she is and who she is, and you cannot doubt but what she's a *godess* loath as you must feel to admit such a thing, and I ask you if it would be downright wicked in me to do what she tells me I must do. Indeed I wont do it, being no less than flying with her immediate to a distant climb, and you know how repugnant I am to such a action—not if you advise me against it or even if you was but to assure me your affections were unchanged in spite of all! But you know we parted under pigulier circs, and I cannot disguise from myself that you may be thinking wuss of me than what Matilda I can honestly say I deserve !

" Now I tell you solimly that if this is the fact, and you've been thinking of your proper pride and your womanly dignity and things like that—there's *no time for to do it in* Matilda, if you don't want to break with me for all Eternity !

" For she's pressing me to carry out the pledge, as she calls it, and I must decide before this time to-morrow, and I want to feel you are not lost to me before I can support my trial, and what with countless perplexities and burglars threatening, and giving false informations, and police searching, there's no saying what I may do nor what I mayn't do if I'm left to myself, for indeed I am very unappy Matilda, and if ever a man was made a Victim through acting without intentions, or if with, of the best—I am that Party ! Oh Matilda don't, don't desert me, unless you have seased to care for me, and

THE TINTED VENUS

in that contingency I can look upon my Fate whatever it be with a apathy that will supply the courage which will not even winch at its approach, but if I am still of value, come, and come precious soon, or it will be too late to the Assistance of

" Your truly penitent and unfortunate

" LEANDER TWEDDLE.

" P.S.—You will see the condition of my feelings from my spelling—I haven't the hart to spell."

Dawn was breaking as he put the final touches to this appeal, and read it over with a gloomy approbation. He had always cherished the conviction that he could " write a good letter when he was put to it," and felt now that he had more than risen to the occasion.

" William shall take it down to Bayswater the first thing to-morrow—no, to-day, I mean," he said, rubbing his hot eyes. " I fancy it will do my business ! "

And it did.

13. *The Last Straw*

" Thou in justice,
If from the height of majesty we can
Look down upon thy lowness and embrace it,
Art bound with fervour to look up to me."

MASSINGER, *Roman Actor*,

HAGGARD and distraught was Leander as he went about his business that morning, so mechanically that one customer, who had requested to have his luxuriant locks " trimmed," found himself reduced to a state of penal bullet-headedness before he could protest, and another sacrificed his whiskers and part of one ear to the hairdresser's uninspired scissors. For Leander's eyes were constantly turning to the front part of his shop, where his apprentice might come in at any moment with the answer to his appeal.

At last the moment came when the bell fixed at the

door sounded sharply, and he saw the sleek head and chubby red face he had been so anxiously expecting. He was busy with a customer ; but that could not detain him then, and he rushed quickly into the outer shop. " Well, William," he said, breathlessly, " a nice time you've been over that message ! I gave you the money for your 'bus."

" Yusser, but it was this way : you said a green 'bus, and I took a green 'bus with 'Bayswater ' on it, and I didn't know nothing was wrong, and when it stopped I sez to the conductor, ' This ain't Kensington Gardings ; ' and he sez, ' No, it's Archer Street ; ' and I sez——"

" Never mind that now ; you got to the shop, didn't you ? "

" Yes, I got to the shop, sir, and I see the lady ; but I sez to that conductor, ' You should ha' told me,' I

" Did she give you anything for me ? " interrupted Leander, impatiently.

" Yessur," said the boy.

" Then where the dooce is it ? "

" 'Ere ! " said William, and brought out an envelope, which his master tore open with joy. It contained his own letter !

" William," he said unsteadily, " is this all ? "

" Ain't it enough, sir ? " said the young scoundrel, who had guessed the state of affairs, and felt an impish satisfaction at his employer's rejection.

" None of that, William; d'ye hear me ? " said Leander. " William, I ain't been a bad master to you. Tell me, how did she take it ? "

" Well, she didn't seem to want to take it nohow at first," said the boy. " I went up to the desk where she was a-sittin' and gave it her, and by-and-by she opened it with the tips of her fingers, as if it would bite, and read it all through very careful, and I could see her nose going up gradual, and her colour coming, and then she sez to me, ' You may go now, boy ; there's no answer.'

THE TINTED VENUS

And I sez to her, ' If you please, miss, master said as I was not to go away without a answer.' So she sez, uncommon short and stiff, " In that case he shall have it ! '—like that, she says, as proud as a queen, and she scribbles a line or two on it, and throws it to me, and goes on casting up figgers."

" A line or two ! where ? " cried Leander, and caught up the letter again. Yes, there on the last page was Matilda's delicate commercial handwriting, and the poor man read the cruel words, " / *have nothing to advise ; I give you up to your ' goddess ! ' "*

" Very well, William," he said, with a deadly calm ; " that's all. You young devil ! what are you a-sniggering at ? " he added, with a sudden outburst.

" On'y something I 'eard a boy say in the street, sir, going along, sir ; nothing to do with you, sir."

" Oh, youth, youth ! " muttered the poor broken man ; " boys don't grow feelings, any more than they grow whiskers ! "

And he went back to his saloon, where he was instantly hailed with reproaches from the abandoned customer.

" Look here, sir ! what do you mean by this ? I told you I wanted to be shaved, and you've soaped the top of my head and left it to cool ! What "—and he made use of expletives here—" what are you about ? "

Leander apologised on the ground of business of a pressing nature, but the customer was not pacified.

" Business, sir ! your business is *here*: *Tm* your business ! And I come to be shaved, and you soap the top of my head, and leave me all alone to dry ! It's scandalous ! it's——"

" Look here, sir," interrupted Leander, gloomily ; " I've a good deal of private trouble to put up with just now, without having *you* going on at me ; so I must ask you not to 'arris me like this, or I don't know what I might do, with a razor so 'andy ! "

" That'll do ! " said the customer, hastily. " I — I

don't care about being shaved this morning. Wipe my head, and let me go ; no, I'll wipe it myself,—don't you trouble ! " and he made for the door. " It's my belief," he said, pausing on the threshold for an instant, " that you're a dangerous lunatic, sir ; you ought to be shut up ! "

" I dessay I shall have a mad doctor down on me after this," thought Leander ; " but I shan't wait for *him*. No, it is all over now ; the die is fixed ! Cruel Tillie ! you have spoke the mandrake ; you have thrust me into the stony harms of that 'eathen goddess—always supposing the police don't nip in fust, and get the start of her."

No more customers came that day, which was fortunate, perhaps, for them. The afternoon passed, and dusk approached, but the hairdresser sat on, motionless, in his darkening saloon, without the energy to light a single gas-jet.

At last he roused himself sufficiently to go to the head of the stairs leading to his " labatry," and call for William, who, it appeared, was composing an egg-wash, after one of his employer's formulas, and came up, wondering to find the place in darkness.

" Come here, William," said Leander, solemnly. " I just want a few words with you, and then you can go. I can do the shutting-up myself. William, we can none of us foretell the future ; and it may so 'appen that you are looking on my face for the last time. If it should so be, William, remember the words I am now about to speak, and lay them to 'art! . . . This world is full of pitfalls ; and some of us walk circumspect and keep out of 'em, and some of us, William—some of us don't. If there's any places more abounding in pitfalls than what others are, it is the noxious localities known under the deceitful appellation of * pleasure ' gardens. And you may take that as the voice of one calling to you from the bottom of about as deep a 'ole as a mortal man ever plumped into. And if ever you find a taste for statuary growing on you, William, keep it down, wrestle with it,

THE TINTED VENUS

and don't encourage it. Farewell, William ! Be here at the usual time to-morrow, though whether you will find me here is more than I can say."

The boy went av/ay, much impressed by so elaborate and formal a parting, which seemed to him a sign that, "in his parlance, " the guv'nor was going to make a bolt of it."

Leander busied himself in some melancholy preparations for his impending departure, dissolution, or incarceration ; he was not very clear which it might be.

He went down and put his "labatry" in order. There he had worked with all the fiery zeal of an inventor at the discoveries which w'ere to confer perpetual youth, in various-sized bottles, upon a grateful world. He must leave them all, with his work scarcely begun ! Another would step in and perfect what he had left incomplete !

He came up again, with a heavy heart, and examined his till. There was not much ; enough, however, for William's wages and any small debts. He made a list of these, and left it there with the coin. " They must settle it among themselves," he thought, wearily ; " I can't be bothered with business now."

He was thinking whether it was worth while to shut the shop up or not; when a clear voice sounded from above—

" Leander, where art thou ? Come hither ! "

And he started as if he had been shot. " I'm coming, madam," he called up, obsequiously. " I'll be with you in one minute ! "

" Now for it," he thought, as he went up to his sitting-room. " I wish I wasn't all of a twitter. I wish I knew what was coming next! "

The room was dark, but when he got a light he saw the statue standing in the centre of the room, her hood thrown back, and the fur-lined mantle hanging loosely about her; the face looked stern and terrible under its brilliant tint.

" Have you made your choice ? " she demanded.

" Choice ! " he said. " I haven't any choice left me ! "

" It is true," she said triumphantly, " Your friends have deserted you ; mortals are banded together to seize and disgrace you : you have no refuge but with me. But time is short. Come, then, place yourself within the shelter of these arms, and, while they enfold you tight in their marble embrace, repeat after me the words which complete my power."

" There's no partickler hurry," he objected. " I will directly. I — I only want to know what will happen when I've done it. You can't have any objection to a natural curiosity like that."

" You will lose consciousness, to recover it in balmy Cyprus, with Aphrodite (no longer cold marble, but the actual goddess, warm and living), by your side ! Ah ! impervious one, can you linger still ? Do you not tremble with haste to feel my breath fanning your cheek, my soft arm around your neck ? Are not your eyes already dazzled by the gleam of my golden tresses ? "

" Well, I can't say they are ; not at present," said Leander. " And, you see, it's all very well ; but, as I asked you once before, how are you going to *get* me there ? It's a long way, and I'm ten stone, if I'm an ounce ! "

" Heavy-witted youth, it is not your body that will taste perennial bliss."

" And what's to become of that, then ? " he asked, anxiously.

" That will be left here, clasped to this stone, itself as cold and lifeless."

" Oh ! " said Leander, " I didn't bargain for that, and I don't like it."

" You will know nothing of it ; you will be with me, in dreamy grottoes strewn with fragrant rushes and the new-stript leaves of the vine, where the warm air woos to repose with its languorous softness, and the water as it

THE TINTED VENUS

wells murmurs in liquid laughter. Ah ! no Greek would have hesitated thus."

" Well, I ain't a Greek ; and, as a business man, you can't be surprised if I want to make sure it's a genuine thing, and worth the risk, before I commit myself. I think I understand that it's the gold ring which is to bind us two together ? "

" It is," she said ; " by that pure and noble metal are we united."

" Well," said Leander, " that being so, I should wish to have it tested, else there might be a hitch somewhere or other."

" Tested ! " she cried ; " what is that ? "

" Trying it, to see if it's real gold or not," he said. " We can easily have it done."

" It is needless," she replied, haughtily. " I will not suffer my power to be thus doubted, nor that of the pure and precious metal through which I have obtained it ! "

Leander might have objected to this as an example of that obscure feat, " begging the question " ; for, whether the metal was pure and precious, was precisely the point he desired to ascertain. And this desire was quite genuine ; for, though he saw no other course before him but that upon which the goddess insisted, he did wish to take every reasonable precaution.

" For all I know," he reasoned in his own mind, " if there's anything wrong with that ring, I may be left 'igh and dry, halfway to Cyprus ; or she may get tired of me, and turn me out of those grottoes of hers ! If I must go with her, I should like to make things as safe as I could."

" It won't take long," he pleaded ; " and if I find the ring's real gold, I promise I won't hold out any longer."

" There is no time," she said, " to indulge this whim. Would you mock me, Leander ? Ha ! did I not say so ? Listen ! "

The private bell was ringing loudly. Leander rushed to the window, but saw no one. Then he heard the clang

of the shop bell, as if the person or persons had discovered that an entrance was possible there.

" The guards ! " said the statue. " Will you wait for them, Leander ? "

" No ! " he cried. " Never mind what I said about the ring ; I'll risk that. Only—only, don't go away without me. . . . Tell me what to say, and I'll say it, and chance the consequences ! "

" Say, ' Aphrodite, daughter of Olympian Zeus, I yield ; I fulfil the pledge ; I am thine ! "

" Well," he thought, " here goes. Oh, Matilda, you're responsible for this ! " And he advanced towards the white extended arms of the goddess. There were hasty steps outside; another moment and the door would be burst open.

" Aphrodite, daughter of——" he began, and recoiled suddenly ; for he heard his name called from without in a voice familiar and once dear to him.

" Leander, where are you ? It's all dark ! Speak to me ; tell me you've done nothing rash ! Oh, Leander, it's Matilda ! "

That voice, which a short while back he would have given the world to hear once more, appalled him now. For if she came in, the goddess would discover who she was, and then—he shuddered to think what might happen then !

Matilda's hand was actually on the door. " Stop where you are ! " he shouted, in despair; " for mercy's sake, don't come in ! "

" A h ! you are there, and alive ! " she cried. " I am not too late ; and I *will* come in ! "

And in another instant she burst into the room, and stood there, her tear-stained face convulsed with the horror of finding him in such company.

14. *The Thirteenth Trump*

"Your adversary having thus secured the lead with the last trump, you will be powerless to prevent the bringing-in of the long suit."

ROUGH'S Guide to Whist.

"What ! thinkest thou that utterly in vain
Jove is my sire, and in despite my will
That thou canst mock me with thy beauty still ? "

Story of Cupid and Psyche.

LEANDER, when he wrote his distracted appeal to Matilda, took it for granted that she had recognised the statue for something of a supernatural order, and this, combined with his perplexed state of mind, caused him to be less explicit than he might have been in referring to the goddess's ill-timed appearance.

But, unfortunately, as will probably have been already anticipated, the only result of this reticence was, that Matilda saw in his letter an abject entreaty for her consent to his marriage with Ada Parkinson, to avoid legal proceedings, and, under this misapprehension, she wrote the line that abandoned all claims upon him, and then went on with her accounts, which were not so neatly kept that day as usual.

What she felt most keenly in Leander's conduct was, that he should have placed the ring, which to all intent was her own, upon the finger of another. She could not bear to think of so unfeeling an act, and yet she thought of it all through the long day, as she sat, outwardly serene, at her high desk, while her attendants at her side made up sprays for dances and wreaths for funerals from the same flowers.

And at last she felt herself urged to a course which, in her ordinary mind, she would have shrunk from as a lowering of her personal dignity : she would go and see her rival, and insist that this particular humiliation should be spared her. The ring was not Leander's to dispose of—at least, to dispose of thus ; it was not right that any

THE THIRTEENTH TRUMP

but herself should wear it ; and, though the token could never now be devoted to its rightful use, she wanted to save it from what, in her eyes, was a kind of profanation.

She would not own it to herself, but there was a motive stronger than all this—the desire to relieve her breast of some of the indignation which was choking her, and of which her pride forbade any betrayal to Leander himself.

This other woman had supplanted her ; but she should be made to feel the wrong she had done, and her triumphs should be tempered with shame, if she were capable of such a sensation. Matilda knew very well that the ring was not hers, and she wanted it no longer ; but, then, it was Miss Tweddle's, and she would claim it in her name.

She easily obtained permission to leave somewhat earlier that evening, as she did not often ask such favours, and soon found herself at Madame Chenille's establishment, where she remembered to have heard from Bella that her sister was employed.

She asked for the forewoman, and begged to be allowed to speak to Miss Parkinson in private for a very few minutes ; but the forewoman referred her to the proprietress, who made objections : such a thing was never permitted during business hours, the shop would close in an hour, till then Miss Parkinson was engaged in the show-room, and so on.

But Matilda carried her point at last, and was shown to a room in the basement, where the assistants took their meals, there to wait until Miss Parkinson could be spared from her duties.

Matilda waited in the low, dingy room, where the tea-things were still littering the table, and as she paced restlessly about, trying to feel an interest in the long-discarded fashion-plates which adorned the walls, her anger began to cool, and give place to something very like nervousness.

She wished she had not come. What, after all, was

THE TINTED VENUS

she to say to this girl when they met ? And what was Leander—base and unworthy as he had shown himself—to her any longer ? Why should she care what he chose to do with the ring ? And he would be told of her visit, and think——No ! that was intolerable : she would not gratify his vanity and humble herself in this way. She would slip quietly out, and leave her rival to enjoy her victory !

But, just as she was going to carry out this intention, the door opened, and a short, dark young woman appeared. " I'm told there was a young person asking to speak to me," she said ; " I'm Ada Parkinson."

At the name, Matilda's heart swelled again with the sense of her injuries ; and yet she was unprepared for the face that met her eyes. Surely her rival had both looked and spoken differently the night before ? And yet, she had been so agitated that very likely her recollections were not to be depended upon.

" I — I did want to see you," she said, and her voice shook, as much from timidity as righteous indignation. " When I tell you who I am, perhaps you will guess why. I am Matilda Collum."

Miss Parkinson showed no symptoms of remorse. " What ! " she cried, " the young lady that Mr. Tweddle is courting ? Fancy ! "

" After what happened last night," said Matilda, trembling exceedingly, " you know that that is all over. I didn't come to talk about that. If you knew—and I think you must have known—all that Mr. Tweddle was to me, you have—you have not behaved very well ; but he is nothing to me any more, and it is not worth while to be angry. Only, I don't think you ought to keep the ring—not *that* ring ! "

" Goodness gracious me ! " cried Ada. " What in the world is all this about ? What ring oughtn't I to keep ? "

" You know ! " retorted Matilda. " How can you pretend like that ? The ring he gave you that night at Rosherville ! "

THE THIRTEENTH TRUMP

" The girl's mad ! " exclaimed the other. " He never gave me a ring in all his life ! I wouldn't have taken it, if he'd asked me ever so. Mr. Tweddle indeed ! "

" Why do you say that ? " said Matilda. " He has not got it himself, and your sister said he gave it to you, and—and I saw it with my own eyes on your hand ! "

" Oh, *dear* me ! " said Ada, petulantly, holding out her hand, " look there—is that it ?—is this ? Well, these are all that I have, whether you believe me or not ; one belonged to my poor mother, and the other was a present, only last Friday, from the gentleman that's their head traveller, next door, and is going to be my husband. Is it likely that I should be wearing any other now ?—ask yourself ! "

" You wouldn't wish to deceive me, I hope," said Matilda ; " and oh, Miss Parkinson, you might be open with me, for I'm so very miserable ! I don't know what to think. Tell me just this : did you—wasn't it you who came last night to Miss Tweddle's ? "

" No ! " returned Ada, impatiently—" no, as many times as you please ! And if Bella likes to say I did, she may ; and she always was a mischief-making thing ! How could I, when I didn't know there was any Miss Tweddle to come to ? And what do you suppose I should go running about after Mr. Tweddle for ? I wonder you're not ashamed to say such things ! "

" But," faltered Matilda, " you did go to those gardens with him, didn't you ? And—and I know he gave the ring to somebody ! "

Ada began to laugh. " You're quite correct, Miss Collum," she said ; " so he did. Don't you want to know who he gave it to ? "

" Yes," said Matilda, " and you will tell me. I have a right to be told. I was engaged to him, and the ring was given to him for me—not for anyone else. You *will* tell me, Miss Parkinson, I am sure you will ? "

" Well," said Ada, still laughing, " I'll tell you this

THE TINTED VENUS

much—she's a foreign lady, very stiff and stuck-up and cold. She's got it, if anyone has. I saw him put it on myself! "

" Tell me her name, if you know it. "

" I see you won't be easy till you know all about it. Her name's Afriddity, or Froddity, or something outlandish like that. She lives at Rosherville, a good deal in the open air, and—there, don't be ridiculous—it's only a *statue* ! There's a pretty thing to be jealous of ! "

" Only a statue ! " echoed Matilda. " Oh ! Heaven be with us both, if—if that was It ! "

Certain sentences in the letter she had returned came to her mind with a new and dreadful significance. The appearance of the visitor last night—Leander's terror—all seemed to point to some unsuspected mystery.

" It can't be—no, it can't! Miss Parkinson, you were there : tell me all that happened, quick ! You don't know what may depend on it ! "

" What ! not satisfied even now ? " cried Ada. " Well, Miss Collum, talk about jealousy ! But, there, I'll tell you all I know myself. "

And she gave the whole account of the episode with the statue, so far as she knew it, even to the conversation which led to the production of the ring.

" You see," she concluded, " that it was all on your account that he tried it on at all, and I'm sure he talked enough about you all the evening. I really was a little surprised when I found *you* were his Miss Collum. (You won't mind my saying so ?) If I was you, I should go and tell him I forgave him, now. I do think he deserves it, poor little man ! "

" Yes, yes ! " cried Matilda ; " I'll go—I'll go at once ! Thank you, Miss Parkinson, for telling me what you have ! " And then, as she remembered some dark hints in Leander's letter : " Oh, I must make haste ! He may be going to do something desperate—he may have done it already ! "

And, leaving Miss Parkinson to speculate as she

pleased concerning her eccentricity, she went out into the broad street again ; and, unaccustomed as she was to such expenditure, hailed a hansom ; for there was no time to be lost.

She had told the man to drive to the Southampton Row Passage at first, but, as she drew nearer, she changed her purpose ; she did not like to go alone, for who knew what she might see there ? It was out of the question to expect her mother to accompany her, but her friend and landlady would not refuse to do so ; and she drove to Millman Street, and prevailed on Miss Tweddle to come with her without a moment's delay.

The two women found the shop dark, but unshuttered ; there was a light in the upper room. " You stay down here, please," said Matilda ; " if—if anything is wrong, I will call you." And Miss Tweddle, without very well understanding what it was all about, and feeling fluttered and out of breath, was willing enough to sit down in the saloon and recover herself.

And so it came to pass that Matilda burst into the room just as the hairdresser was preparing to pronounce the inevitable words that would complete the goddess's power. He stood there, pale and dishevelled, with eyes that were wild and bordered with red. Opposite to him was the being she had once mistaken for a fellow-creature.

Too well she saw now that the tall and queenly form, with the fixed eyes and cold tinted mask, was inspired by nothing human ; and her heart died within her as she gazed, spellbound, upon her formidable rival.

" Leander," she murmured, supporting herself against the frame of the door, " what are you going to do ? "

" Keep back, Matilda ! " he cried desperately ; " go away—it's too late now ! "

A moment before, and, deserted as he believed himself to be by love and fortune alike, he had been almost resigned to the strange and shadowy future which lay before him ; but now—now that he saw Matilda there in his room, no longer scornful or indifferent, but pale and

THE TINTED VENUS

concerned, her pretty grey eyes dark and wide with anguish and fear for him—he felt all he was giving up ; he had a sudden revulsion, a violent repugnance to his doom.

She loved him still! She had repented for some reason. Oh ! why had she not done so before ? What could he do now ? For her own sake he must steel himself to tell her to leave him to his fate ; for he knew well that if the goddess were to discover Matilda's real relations to him, it might cost his innocent darling her life !

For the moment he rose above his ordinary level. He lost all thought of self. Let Aphrodite take him if she would, but Matilda must be saved. " Go away ! " he repeated ; and his voice was cracked and harsh, under the strain of doing such violence to his feelings. " Can't you see you're—you're not wanted ? Oh, do go away—while you can ! "

Matilda closed the door behind her. " Do you think," she said, catching her breath painfully, " that I shall go away and leave you with That! "

" Leander," said the statue, " command your sister to depart! "

" I'm *not* his "—Matilda was beginning impetuously, till the hairdresser stopped her.

" You *are* ! " he cried. " You know you're my sister—you've forgotten it, that's all. . . . Don't say a syllable now, do you hear me ? She's going, Lady Venus, going directly ! "

" Indeed Fm not," said Matilda, bravely.

" Leave us, maiden ! " said the statue. " Your brother is yours no longer, he is mine. Know you who it is that commands ? Tremble then, nor oppose the will of Aphrodite of the radiant eyes ! "

" I never heard of you before," said Matilda, " but Fm not afraid of you. And, whoever or whatever you are, you shall not take my Leander away against his will. Do you hear ? You could never be allowed to do that! "

The statue smiled with pitying scorn. " His own

THE THIRTEENTH TRUMP

act has given me the power I hold," she said, " and assuredly he shall not escape me ! "

" Listen," pleaded Matilda ; " perhaps you are not really wicked, it is only that you don't know ! The ring he put—without ever thinking what he was doing—on your finger was meant for mine. It was, really ! He is my lover ; give him back to me ! "

" Matilda ! " shrieked the wretched man, " you don't know what you're doing. Run away, quick ! Do as I tell you ! "

" So," said the goddess, turning upon him, " in this, too, you have tried to deceive me ! You have loved—you still love this maiden ! "

" Oh, not in that way ! " he shouted, overcome by his terror for Matilda. " There's some mistake. You mustn't pay any attention to what she says : she's excited. All my sisters get like that when they're excited—they'd say *anything* ! "

" Silence ! " commanded the statue. " Should not I have skill to read the signs of love ? This girl loves you with no sister's love. Deny it not ! "

Leander felt that his position was becoming untenable ; he could only save Matilda by a partial abandonment. " Well, suppose she does," he said, " I'm not obliged to return it, am I ? "

Matilda shrank back. " Oh, Leander ! " she cried, with a piteous little moan.

" You've brought it on yourself ! " he said ; " you will come here interfering ! "

" Interfering ! " she repeated wildly, " you call it that ! How can I help myself ? Am I to stand by and see you giving yourself up to—nobody can tell what ? As long as I have strength to move and breath to speak I shall stay here, and beg and pray of you not to be so foolish and wicked as to go away with her ! How do you know where she will take you to ? "

" Cease this railing ! " said the statue. " Leander loves you not ! Away, then, before I lay you dead at my feet ! "

THE TINTED VENUS

" Leander," cried the poor girl, " tell me : it isn't true what she says ? You didn't mean it ! you *do* love me ! You don't really want me to go away ? "

For her own sake he must be cruel; but he could scarcely speak the words that were to drive her from his side for ever. " This—this lady," he said, " speaks quite correct. I—I'd very much rather you went! "

She drew a deep sobbing breath. " I don't care for anything any more ! " she said, and faced the statue defiantly. " You say you can strike me dead," she said : " I'm sure I hope you can ! And the sooner the better—for I will not leave this room ! "

The dreamy smile still curved the statue's lips, in terrible contrast to the inflexible purpose of her next words.

" You have called down your own destruction," she said, " and death shall be yours ! "

" Stop a bit," cried Leander, " mind what you're doing ! Do you think I'll go with you if you touch a single hair of my poor Tillie's head ? Why, I'd sooner stay in prison all my life ? See here," and he put his arm round Matilda's slight form ; " i f you crush her, you crush me—so now ! "

" And if so," said the goddess, with cruel contempt, " are you of such value in my sight that I should stay my hand ? You, whom I have sought but to manifest my power, for no softer feelings have you ever inspired ! And now, having withstood me for so long, you turn, even at the moment of yielding, to yonder creature ! And it is enough. I will contend no longer for so mean a prize ! Slave and fool that you have shown yourself, Aphrodite rejects you in disdain ! "

Leander made no secret of his satisfaction at this. " Now you talk sense ! " he cried. " I always told you we weren't suited. Tillie, do you hear ? She gives me up ! She gives me up ! "

" Aye," she continued, " I need you not. Upon you and the maiden by your side I invoke a speedy and

THE THIRTEENTH TRUMP

terrible destruction, which, ere you can attempt to flee, shall surely overtake you ! "

Leander was so overcome by this highly unexpected sentence that he lost all control over his limbs ; he could only stand where he was, supporting Matilda, and stare at the goddess in fascinated dismay.

The goddess was raising both hands, palm upwards, to the ceiling, and presently she began to chant in a thrilling monotone : " Hear, O Zeus, that sittest on high, delighting in thunder, hear the prayer of thy daughter, Aphrodite the peerless, as she calleth upon thee, nor suffer her to be set at nought with impunity ! Rise now, I beseech thee, and hurl with thine unerring hand a blazing bolt that shall consume these presumptuous insects to a smoking cinder ! Blast them, Sire, with the fire-wreaths of thy lightning 1 blast, and spare not !

" Kiss me, Tillie, and shut your eyes," said Leander ; " it's coming ! "

She was nestling close against him, and could not repress a faint shivering moan. " I don't mind, now we're together," she whispered, " if only it won't hurt much ! "

The prayer uttered with such deadly intensity had almost ceased to vibrate in their ears, but still the answer tarried ; it tarried so long that Leander lost patience, and ventured to open his eyes a little way. He saw the goddess standing there, with a strained expectation on her upturned face.

" I don't wish to hurry you, mum," he said tremulously ; " but you ought to be above torturing us. Might I ask you to request your—your relation to look sharp with that thunderbolt ? "

" Zeus ! " cried the goddess, and her accent was more acute, " thou hast heard—thou wilt not shame me thus ! Must I go unavenged ? "

Still nothing whatever happened, until at last even Matilda unclosed her eyes. " Leander ! " she cried, with a hysterical little laugh, " / *don't believe she can do it !* "

THE TINTED VENUS

" No more don't I ! " said the hairdresser, withdrawing his arm, and coming forward boldly. " Now look here, Lady Venus," he remarked, " it's time there was an end of this, one way or the other ; we can't be kept up here all night, waiting till it suits your Mr. Zooce to make cockshies of us. Either let him do it now, or let it alone ! "

The statue's face seemed to be illumined by a stronger light. " Zeus, I thank thee ! " she exclaimed, clasping her pale hands above her head ; " I am answered ! I am answered ! "

And, as she spoke, a dull ominous rumble was heard in the distance.

" Matilda, here ! " cried the terrified hairdresser, running back to his betrothed ; " keep close to me. It's all over this time ! "

The rumble increased to a roll, which became a clanking rattle, and then lessened again to a roll, died away to the original rumble, and was heard no more.

Leander breathed again. " To think of my being taken in like that ! " he cried. " Why, it's only a van out in the street ! It's no good, mum ; you can't work it : you'd better give it up ! "

The goddess seemed to feel this herself, for she was wringing her hands with a low wail of despair. " Is there none to hear ? " she lamented. " Are they all gone—all ? Then is Aphrodite fallen indeed ; deserted of the gods, her kinsmen ; forgotten of mortals ; braved and mocked by such as these ! Woe ! woe ! for Olympus in ruins, and Time the dethroner of deities ! "

Leander would hardly have been himself if he had forborne to take advantage of her discomfiture. " You see, mum," he said, " you're not everybody. You mustn't expect to have everything your own way down here. We're in the nineteenth century nowadays, mum, and there's another religion come in since you were the fashion ! "

THE THIRTEENTH TRUMP

" *Don't*, Leander ! " said Matilda, in an undertone ;
" let her alone, the poor thing ! "

She seemed to have quite forgotten that her fallen enemy had been dooming her to destruction the moment before ; but there was something so tragic and moving in the sight of such despair that no true woman could be indifferent to it.

Either the taunt or the compassion, however, roused the goddess to a frenzy of passion. " Hold your peace ! " she said fiercely, and strode down upon Leander until he beat an instinctive retreat. " Fallen as I am, I will not brook your mean vauntings or insolent pity ! Shorn I may be of my ancient power, but something of my divinity clings to me still. Vengeance is not wholly denied to me ! Why should I not deal with you even as with those profane wretches who laid impious hands upon this my effigy ? Why ? why ? "

Leander began to feel uncomfortable again. " If I've said anything you object to," he said hastily, " I'll apologise. I will—and so will Matilda—freely and full ; in writing, if that will satisfy you ! "

" Tremble not for your worthless bodies," she said ; " had you been slain, as I purposed, you would but have escaped me, after all ! Now a vengeance keener and more enduring shall be mine ! In your gross blindness, you have dared to turn from divine Aphrodite to such a thing as this, and for your impiety you shall suffer ! This is your doom, and so much at least I can still accomplish : Long as you both may live, strong as your love may endure, never again shall you see her alone, ne[^]ver more shall she be folded to your breast ! For ever, I will stand a barrier between you : so shall your days consume away in the torturing desire for a felicity you may never attain I "

" It seems to me, Tillie," said Leander, looking round at her with hollow eyes, " that we may as well give up keeping company together, after that ! "

Matilda had been weeping quietly. " Oh no, Leander,

THE TINTED VENUS

not that! Don't let us give each other up : we may—we may get used to it! "

" That is not all," said the revengeful goddess. " I understand but little of the ways of this degenerate age. But one thing I know : this very night, guards are on their way to search this abode for the image in which I have chosen to reveal myself; and, should they find that they are in search of, you will be dragged to some dungeon, and suffer deserved ignominy. It pleased me yesternight to shield you : to-night, be very sure that this marble form shall not escape their vigilance."

He felt at once that this, at least, was no idle threat. The police might arrive at any instant; she had only to vacate the marble at the moment of their entry—and what could he do ? How could he explain its presence ? The gates of Portland or Dartmoor were already yawning to receive him ! Was it too late, even then, to retrieve the situation ? " If it wasn't for Tillie, I could see my way to something, even now," he thought. " I can but try! "

" Lady Venus," he began, clearing his throat, " it's not my desire to be the architect of any mutual unpleasantness—anything but! I don't see any use in denying that you've got the best of it. I'm done—reg'lar bowled over ; and if ever there was a poor devil of a toad under a harrer, I've no hesitation in admitting that toad's me ! So the only point I should like to submit for your consideration is this : Have things gone too far ? Are you quite sure you won't be spiting yourself as well as me over this business ? Can't we come to an amicable arrangement ? Think it over ! "

" Leander, you can't mean it! " cried Matilda.

" Leave me alone," he said hoarsely; " I know what I'm saying ! "

Whether the goddess had overstated her indifference, or whether she may have seen a prospect of some still subtler revenge, she certainly did not receive this proposition of Leander's with the contumely that might

THE THIRTEENTH TRUMP

have been expected ; on the contrary, she smiled with a triumphant satisfaction that betrayed a disposition to treat.

" Have my words been fulfilled, then ? " she asked. " Is your insolent pride humbled at last ? and do you sue to me for the very favours you so long have spurned ? "

" You can put it that way if you like," he said doggedly. " If you want me, you'd better say so while there's time, that's all ! "

" Little have you merited such leniency," she said ; " and yet, it is to you I owe my return to life and consciousness. Shall I abandon what I have taken such pains to win ? No ! I accept your submission. Speak, then, the words of surrender, and let us depart together ! "

" Before I do that," he said firmly, " there's one point I must have settled to my satisfaction."

" You can bargain still I " she exclaimed haughtily. " Are all barbers like you ? If your point concerns the safety of this maiden, be at ease ; she shall go unharmed, for she is my rival no longer ! "

" Well, it wasn't that exactly," he explained ; " but I'm doubtful about that ring being the genuine article, and I want to make sure."

" But a short time since, and you were willing to trust all to me ! "

" I was ; but, if I may take the liberty of observing so, things were different then. You were wrong about that thunderbolt—you may be wrong about the ring ! "

" Fool ! " she said, " how know you that the quality of the token concerns my power ? Were it even of unworthy metal, has it not brought me hither ? "

" Yes," he said, " but it mightn't be strong enough to pass *me* the whole distance, and where should I be then ? It don't look more to me than 15 carat, and I daren't run any extra risk."

" How, then, can your doubts be set at rest ? " she demanded.

THE TINTED VENUS

" Easy," he replied : " there are men who understand these things. All I ask of you is to step over with me, and see one of them, and take his opinion ; and if he says it's gold—why, then I shall know where I am ! "

" Aphrodite submit her claims to the judgment of a mortal! " she cried. " Never will I thus debase myself! "

" Very well," he said, " then we must stay where we are. All I can say is, I've made you a fair offer."

She paused. " Why not ? " she said dreamily, as if thinking aloud. " Have not I sued ere this for the decision of a shepherd judge—even of Paris ! 'Tis but one last indignity, and then—he is mine indeed! Leander," she added graciously, " it shall be as you will. Lead the way ; I follow ! "

But Matilda, who had been listening to this compromise with incredulous horror, clung in desperation to her lover's arm, and sought to impede his flight. " Leander ! " she cried, " oh, Leander ! surely you won't be mad enough to go away with her ! You won't be so wicked and sinful as that ! Remember who she is : one of the false gods of the poor benighted heathens—she owned it herself! She's nothing less than a live idol! Think of all the times we've been to chapel together ; think of your dear aunt, and how she'll feel your being in such awful company ! Let the police come, and think what they like : we'll tell them the truth, and make them believe it. Only be brave, and stay here with me ; don't let her ensnare you ! Have some pity for me ; for, if you leave me, I shall die ! "

" Already the guards are at your gates," said the statue ; " choose quickly—while you may ! "

He put Matilda gently from him : " Tillie," he said, with a convulsive effort to remain calm, " you gave me up of your own free will—you know that—and now you've come round too late. The other lady spoke first! "

As she still clung to him, he tried to whisper some last words of a consoling or reassuring nature, and she suddenly relaxed her grasp, and allowed him to make his

escape without further dissuasion—not that his arguments had reconciled her to his departure, but because she was mercifully unaware of it.

15. *The Odd Trick*

" O heart of stone, are you flesh, and caught
By that you swore to withstand ? "

Maud.

OUTSIDE on the stairs Leander suddenly remembered that his purpose might be as far as ever from being accomplished. The house was being watched : to be seen leaving it would procure his instant arrest.

Hastily excusing himself to the goddess, he rushed down to his laboratory, where he knew there was a magnificent beard and moustache which he had been constructing for some amateur theatricals. With these, and a soft felt hat, he completed a disguise in which he flattered himself he was unrecognisable.

The goddess, however, penetrated it as soon as he rejoined her. " Why have you thus transformed yourself ? " she inquired coldly.

" Because," explained Leander, " seeing the police are all on the look-out for me, I thought it couldn't do any harm."

" It is useless ! " she returned.

" To be sure," he agreed blankly, " they'll expect me to go out disguised. If only they aren't up to the way out by the back ! That's our only chance now."

" Leave all to me," she replied calmly; " with Aphrodite you are safe."

And he never did quite understand how that strange elopement was effected, or even remember whether they left the house from the front or rear. The statue glided swiftly on, and, grasping a corner of her robe, he followed, with only the vaguest sense of obstacles overcome and passed as in a dream.

THE TINTED VENUS

By the time he had completely regained his senses he was in a crowded thoroughfare, which he recognised as the Gray's Inn Road.

A certain scheme from which, desperate as it was, he hoped much, might be executed as well here as elsewhere, and he looked about him for the aid on which he counted.

"Where, then, lives the wise man whom you would consult?" said Aphrodite.

Leander went on until he could see the coloured lights of a chemist's window, and then he said, "There—right opposite!"

He felt strangely nervous himself, but the goddess seemed even more so. She hung back all at once, and clutched his arm in her marble grasp.

"Leander," she said, "I will not go! See those liquid fires glowing in lurid hues, like the eyes of some dread monster! This test of yours is needless, and I fear it."

"Lady Venus," he said earnestly, "I do assure you they're only big bottles, and quite harmless too, having water in them, not physic. You've no call to be alarmed."

She yielded, and they crossed the road. The shop was small and unpretending. In the window the chief ornaments were speckled plaster limbs clad in elastic socks, and photographs of hideous complaints before and after treatment with a celebrated ointment; and there were certain trophies which indicated that the chemist numbered dentistry among his accomplishments.

Inside, the odour of drugs prevailed, in the absence of the subtle perfume that is part of the fittings of a fashionable apothecary, and on the very threshold the goddess paused irresolute.

"There is magic in the air," she exclaimed, "and fearful poisons. This man is some enchanter!"

"Now I put it to you," said Leander, with some impatience, "does he *look* it?"

The chemist was a mild little man, with a high fore-

head, round spectacles, a little red beak of a nose, and a weak grey beard. As they entered, he was addressing a small and draggled child from behind his counter. "Go back and tell your mother," he said, "that she must come herself. I never sell paregoric to children."

There was so little of the wizard in his manner that the goddess, who possibly had some reason to mistrust a mortal magician, was reassured.

As the child retired, the chemist turned to them with a look of bland and dignified inquiry (something, perhaps the consciousness of having once passed an examination, sustains the meekest chemist in an inward superiority). He did not speak.

Leander took it upon himself to explain. "This lady would be glad to be told whether a ring she's got on is the real article or only imitation," he said, "so she thought you could decide it for her."

"Not so," corrected the goddess, austere. "For myself I care not!"

"Have it your own way!" said Leander. "I should like to be told, then. I suppose, mister, you've some way of testing these things?"

"Oh yes," said the chemist; "I can treat it for you with what we call *aqua fortis*, a combination of nitric and hydrochloric acid, which would tell us at once. I ought to mention, perhaps, that so extremely powerful an agent may injure the appearance of the metal if it is of inferior quality. Will the lady oblige me with the ring?"

Aphrodite extended her hand with haughty indifference. The chemist examined the ring as it circled her finger, and Leander held his breath in tortures of anxiety. A horrible fear came over him that his deep-laid scheme was about to end in failure.

But the chemist remarked at last: "Exactly; thank you, madam. The gold is antique, certainly; but I should be inclined to pronounce it, at first sight, genuine. I will ascertain how this is, if you will take the trouble to remove **the ring and** pass it over!"

THE TINTED VENUS

" Why ? " demanded Aphrodite, obstinately.

" I could not undertake to treat it while it remains upon your hand," he protested. " The acid might do some injury ! "

" It matters not ! " she said calmly ; and Leander recollected with horror that, as any injury to her statue would have no physical effect upon the goddess herself, she could not be much influenced by the chemist's reason.

" Do what the gentleman tells you," he said, in an eager whisper, as he drew her aside.

" I know your wiles, O perfidious one," she said. " Having induced me to remove this token, you would seize it yourself, and take to flight ! I will not remove this ring ! "

" There's a thing to say ! " said Leander ; " there's a suspicion to throw against a man ! If you think I'm likely to do that, I'll go right over here, where I can't even see it, and I won't stir out till it's all over. Will that satisfy you ? You know why I'm so anxious about that ring ; and now, when the gentleman tells you he's almost sure it's gold——"

" It is gold ! " said the goddess.

" If you're so sure about it," he retaliated, " why are you afraid to have it proved ? "

" I am not afraid," she said ; " but I require no proof ! "

" I do," he retorted, " and what I told you before I stand to. If that ring is proved—in the only way it can be proved, I mean, by this gentleman testing it as he tells you he can—then there's no more to be said, and I'll go away with you like a lamb. But without that proof I won't stir a step, and so I tell you. It won't take a moment. You can see for yourself that I couldn't possibly catch up the ring from here ! "

" Swear to me," she said, " that you will remain where you now stand ; and remember," she added, with an accent of triumph, " our compact is that, should yonder

man pronounce that the ring has passed through the test with honour, you will follow me whithersoever I bid you ! "

" You have only to lead the way," he said, " and I promise you faithfully I'll follow."

Goddesses may be credited with some knowledge of the precious metals, and Aphrodite had no doubt of the result of the chemist's investigations. So it was with an air of serene anticipation that she left Leander upon this, and advanced to the chemist's counter.

" Prove it now," she said, " quickly, that I may go ! "

The chemist, who had been waiting in considerable bewilderment, prepared himself to receive the ring, and Leander, keeping his distance, felt his heart beating fast as Aphrodite slowly drew the token from her finger, and placed it in the chemist's outstretched hand.

Scarcely had she done so, as the chemist was retiring with the ring to one of his lamps, before the goddess seemed suddenly aware that she had committed a fatal error.

She made a stride forward to follow and recover it; but, as if some unseen force was restraining her, she stopped short, and a rush of whirling words, in some tongue unknown both to Leander and the chemist, forced its way through lips that smiled still, though they were freezing fast.

Then, with a strange hoarse cry of baffled desire and revenge, she succeeded, by a violent effort, in turning, and bore down with tremendous force upon the cowering hairdresser, who gave himself up at once for lost.

But the marble was already incapable of obeying her will. Within a few paces from him the statue stopped for the last time, with an abruptness that left it quivering and rocking. A greyish hue came over the face, causing the borrowed tints to stand forth, crude and glaring ; the arms waved wildly and impotently once or twice, and then grew still for ever, in the attitude conceived long since by the Grecian sculptor !

THE TINTED VENUS

Leander was free ! His hazardous experiment had succeeded. As it was the ring which had brought the passionate, imperious goddess into her marble counterfeit, so—the ring once withdrawn—her power was instantly at an end, and the spell which had enabled her to assume a form of stone was broken.

He had hoped for this, and counted upon it, but even yet hardly dared to believe in his deliverance.

He had not done with it yet, however ; for he would have to get the statue out of that shop, and abandon it in some manner which would not compromise himself, and it is by no means an easy matter to mislay a life-size and invaluable antique without attracting an inconvenient amount of attention.

The chemist, who had been staring meanwhile in blank astonishment, now looked inquiringly at Leander, who looked helplessly at him.

At last the latter, unable to be silent any longer, said, " The lady seems unwell, sir."

" Why," Leander admitted, " she does appear a little out of sorts."

" Has she had these attacks before, do you happen to know ? "

" She's more often like this than not," said Leander.

" Dear me, sir; but that's very serious. Is there nothing that gives relief?—a little sal volatile, now ? Does the lady carry smelling salts ? If not, I could——" And the chemist made an offer to come from behind his counter to examine the strange patient.

" No," said Leander, hastily. " Don't you trouble—you leave her to me. I know how to manage her. When she's rigid like this, she can't bear to be taken notice of."

He was wondering all the time how he was to get away with her, until the chemist, who seemed at least as anxious for her departure, suggested the answer: " I should imagine the poor lady would be best at home. Shall I send out for a cab ? " he asked.

" Yes," said Leander, gratefully ; " bring a hansom. She'll come round better in the open air " ; for he had his doubts whether the statue could be stowed inside a four-wheeler.

" I'll go myself," said the obliging man ; " my assistant's out. Perhaps the lady will sit down till the cab comes ? "

" Thanks," said Leander ; " but when she's like this, she's been recommended to stand."

The chemist ran out bare-headed, to return presently with a cab and a small train of interested observers. He offered the statue his arm to the cab-door, an attention which was naturally ignored.

" We shall have to carry her there," said Leander.

" Why, bless me, sir," said the chemist, as he helped to lift her, " she—she's surprisingly heavy ! "

" Yes," gasped Leander, over her unconscious shoulder ; " when she goes off in one of these sleeps, she does sleep very heavy"—an explanation which, if obscure, was accepted by the other as part of the general strangeness of the case.

On the threshold the chemist stopped again. " I'd almost forgotten the ring," he said.

" Til take that! " said Leander.

" Excuse me," was the objection, " but I was to give it back to the lady herself. Had I not better put it on her finger, don't you think ? "

" Are you a married man ? " asked Leander, grimly.

" Yes," said the chemist.

" Then, if you'll take my advice, I wouldn't if I was you—if you're at all anxious to keep out of trouble. You'd better give the ring to me, and I give you my word of honour as a gentleman that I'll give it back to her as soon as ever she's well enough to ask for it."

The other adopted the advice, and, amidst the sympathy of the bystanders, they got the statue into the cab.

" Where to ? " asked the man through the trap.

THE TINTED VENUS

" Charing Cross," said Leander, at random ; he thought the drive would give him time for reflection.

" The 'orspital, eh ? " said the cabman, and drove off, leaving the mild chemist to stare open-mouthed on the pavement for a moment, and go back to his shop with a growing sense that he had had a very unusual experience.

Now that Leander was alone in the cab with the statue, whose attitude required space, and cramped him uncomfortably, he wondered more and more what he was to do with it. He could not afford to drive about London for ever with her ; he dared not take her home ; and he was afraid of being seen with her !

All at once he seemed to see a way out of his difficulty. His first step was to do what he could, in the constantly varying light, to reduce the statue to its normal state. He removed the curls which had disfigured her classical brow, and, with his pocket-handkerchief, rubbed most of the colour from her face ; then the cloak, had only to be torn off, and all that could betray him was gone.

Near Charing Cross, Leander told the driver to take him down Parliament Street, and stop at the entrance to Scotland Yard ; there the cabman, at Leander's request, descended, and stared to find him huddled up under the gleaming pale arms of a statue.

" Guv'nor," he remarked, " that warn't the fare I took up, I'll take my dying oath ! "

" It's all right," said Leander. " Now, I tell you what I want you to do : go straight in through the archway, find a policeman, and say there's a gentleman in your cab that's found a valuable article that's been missing, and wants assistance in bringing it in. I'll take care of the cab, and here's double fare for your trouble."

" And wuth it, too," was the cabman's comment, as he departed on his mission. " I thought it was the devil I was a drivin', we was that down on the orfside ! "

It was no part of Leander's programme to wait for his return ; he threw the cloak over his arm, pocketed his beard, and slipped out of the cab and across the road to a spot whence he could watch unseen. And when he had seen the cabman come with two constables, he felt assured that his burden was in safe hands at last, and returned to Southampton Row as quickly as the next hansom he hailed could take him.

He entered his house by the back entrance : it was unguarded ; and although he listened long at the foot of the stairs, he heard nothing. Had the Inspector not come yet, or was there a trap ? As he went on, he fancied there were sounds in his sitting-room, and went up to the door and listened nervously before entering in.

" Oh, Miss Collum, my poor dear ! " a tremulous voice, which he recognised as his aunt's, was saying, " for Mercy's sake, don't lie there like that ! She's dying !—and it's my fault for letting her come here !—and what am I to say to her ma ? "

Leander had heard enough ; he burst in, with a white, horror-stricken face. Yes, it was too true ! Matilda way lying back in his crazy armchair, her eyes fast closed, her lips parted.

" Aunt," he said with difficulty, " she's not—not dead ? "

" If she is not," returned his aunt, " it's no thanks to you, Leander Tweddle ! Go away ; you can do no good to her now I "

" Not till I've heard her speak," cried Tweddle. " Tillie, don't you hear ? —it's me ! "

To his immense relief, she opened her eyes at the sound of his voice, and turned away with a feeble gesture of fear and avoidance. " You have come back ! " she moaned, " and with her I Oh, keep her away I . . . I can't bear it all over again ! . . . I can't ! "

He threw himself down by her chair, and drew down the hands in which she had hidden her face, " Matilda,

THE TINTED VENUS

my poor, hardly-used darling ! " he said, " I've come back *alone* ! I've got rid of her, Tillie ! Fm free ; and there's no one to stand between us any more ! "

She pushed back her disordered fair hair, and looked at him with sweet, troubled eyes. " But you went away with her—for ever ? " she said. " You said you didn't love me any longer. I heard you . . . it was just before——" and she shuddered at the recollection.

" I know," said Leander, soothingly. " I was obligated to speak harsh, to deceive the—the other party, Tillie. I tried to tell you, quiet-like, that you wasn't to mind ; but you wouldn't take no notice. But there, we won't talk about it any more, so long as you forgive me ; and you do, don't you ? "

She hid her face against his shoulder, in answer, from which he drew a favourable conclusion ; but Miss Tweddle was not so easily pacified.

" And is this all the explanation you're going to give," she demanded, " for treating this poor child the way you've done, and neglecting her shameful like this ? If she's satisfied, Leander, I'm not."

" I can't help it, aunt," he said. " I've been true to Tillie all the way through, in spite of all appearances to the contrary—as she knows now. And the more I explained, the less you'd understand about it ; so we'll leave things where they are. But I've got back the ring, and now you shall see me put it on her finger."

* * * *

It seemed that Leander had driven to Scotland Yard just in time to save himself, for the Inspector did not make his threatened search that evening.

Two or three days later, however, to Leander's secret alarm, he entered the shop. After all, he felt, it was hopeless to think of deceiving these sleuth-hounds of the Law : this detective had been making inquiries, and identified him as the man who had shared the hansom with that statue !

His knees trembled as he stood behind his glass-

topped counter. " Come to make the search, sir ? " he said, as cheerfully as he could. " You'll find us ready for you."

" Well," said Inspector Bilbow, with a queer mixture of awkwardness and complacency, " no, not exactly. Tweddle, my good fellow, circumstances have recently assumed a shape that renders a search unnecessary, as perhaps you are aware ? "

He looked very hard at Tweddle as he spoke, and the hairdresser felt that this was a crucial moment—the detective was still uncertain whether he had been mixed up with the affair or not. Leander's faculty of ready wit served him better here than on past occasions.

" Aware ? No, sir ! " he said, with admirable simplicity. " Then that's why you didn't come the other evening ! I sat up for you, sir ; all night I sat up."

" The fact of the matter is, Tweddle," said Bilbow, who had become suddenly affable and condescending, " I found myself reduced, so to speak, to make use of you as a false clue, if you catch my meaning ? "

" I can't say I do quite understand, sir."

" I mean—of course, I saw with half an eye, bless your soul, that you'd had nothing to do with it—it wasn't likely that a poor chap like you had any knowledge of a big plant of that description. No, no ; don't you go away with that idea. I never associated you with it for a single instant."

" I'm truly glad to hear it, Mr. Inspector," said Leander.

" It was owing to the line I took up. There were the real parties to put off their guard, and to do that, Tweddle—to do that, it was necessary to appear to suspect you. D'ye see ? "

" I think it was a little hard on me, sir," he said ; " for being suspected like that hurts a man's feelings, sir. I did feel wounded to have that cast up against me !"

" Well, well," said the Inspector, " we'll go into that

THE TINTED VENUS

later. But, to go on with what I was saying. My tactics, Tweddle, have been crowned with success—the famous Venus is now safe in my hands ! What do you say to that ? "

" Say ? Why, what clever gentlemen you detective officers are, to be sure ! " cried Leander.

" Well, to be candid, there's not many in the Department that would have managed the job as neatly ; but, then it was a case I'd gone into, and thoroughly got up."

" That I'm sure you must have done, sir," agreed Leander. " How ever did you come on it ? " He felt a kind of curiosity to hear the answer.

" Tweddle," was the solemn reply, " that is a thing you must be content to leave in its native mystery " (which Leander undoubtedly was). " We in the Criminal Investigation Department have our secret channels and our underground sources for obtaining information, but to lay those channels and sources bare to the public would serve no useful end, nor would it be an expedient act on my part. All you have any claim to be told is, that, however costly and complicated, however dangerous even, the means employed may have been (that I say nothing about), the ultimate end has been obtained. The Venus, sir, will be restored to her place in the Gallery at Wricksmarsh Court, without a scratch on her ! "

" You don't say so ! Lor ! " cried Leander, hoping that his countenance would keep his secret, " well, there now ! And my ring, sir, if you remember—*isn't that* on her ? "

" You mustn't expect us to do everything. Your ring was, as I had every reason to expect it would be, missing. But I shall be talking the matter over with Sir Peter Purbecke, who's just come back to Wricksmarsh from the Continent, and, provided—ahem !—you don't go talking about this affair, I should feel justified in recommending him to make you some substantial acknowledgment for any—well, little inconvenience you may have been put to on account of your slight connection with

THE ODD TRICK

the business, and the steps I may have thought proper to take in consequence. And, from all I hear of Sir Peter, I think he would be inclined to come down uncommonly handsome."

" Well, Mr. Inspector," said Leander, " all I can say is this : if Sir Peter was to know the life his statue has led me for the past few days, I think he'd say I deserved it—I do, indeed ! "

* * *

CONCLUSION

The narrow passage off Southampton Row is at present without a hairdresser's establishment, Leander having resigned his shop, long since, in favour of either a fruiterer or a stationer.

But, in one of the leading West End thoroughfares there is a large and prosperous haircutting saloon, over which the name of " Tweddle " glitters resplendent, and the books of which would prove too much for Matilda, even if more domestic duties had not begun to claim her attention.

Leander's troubles are at end. Thanks to Sir Peter Purbecke's munificence, he has made a fresh start; and, so far, Fortune has prospered him. The devices he has invented for correcting Nature's more palpable errors in taste are becoming widely known, while he is famous, too, as the gifted author of a series of brilliant and popular hairwashes. He is accustoming his clients to address him as " Professor "—a title which he has actually had conferred upon him from a quarter in which he is, perhaps, the most highly appreciated—for prosperity has not exactly lessened his self-esteem.

Mr. Jauncy, too, is a married man, although he does not respond so heartily to congratulations. There is no intimacy between the two households, the heads of which recognise that, as Leander puts it, " their wives harmonise better apart."

To the new collection of Casts from the Antique, at

THE TINTED VENUS

South Kensington, there has been recently added one which appears in the official catalogue under the following description :

" *The Cytherean Venus*.—Marble statue. Found in a grotto in the Island of Cerigo. Now in the collection of Sir Peter Purbecke, at Wricksmarsh Court, Blackheath.

" This noble work has been indifferently assigned to various periods ; the most general opinion, however, pronounces it to be a copy of an earlier work of Alkamenes, or possibly Kephisodotos.

" The unusual smallness of the extremities seems to betray the hand of a restorer, and there are traces of colour in the original marble, which are supposed to have been added at a somewhat later period."

Should Professor Tweddle ever find himself in the Museum on a Bank Holiday, and enter the new gallery, he could hardly avoid seeing the magnificent cast numbered 333 in the catalogue, and reviving thereby recollections he has almost succeeded in suppressing.

But this is an experience he will probably spare himself ; for he is known to entertain, on principle, very strong prejudices against sculpture, and more particularly the Antique.

A FALLEN IDOL

TO
MRS. PANTON
THIS BOOK
WHICH OWES ITS EXISTENCE TO HER SUGGESTION
IS
GRATEFULLY AND CORDIALLY INSCRIBED
BY HER VERY SINCERE FRIEND
THE AUTHOR

The Prologue

SCENE, *India.* TIME, *Eighteenth Century*

IN the cool of an early morning, more than a hundred years ago, an elderly priest was sitting under the pilastered portico of a little temple, just outside the village of Chandra-gurry, in Southern Mysore.

It was the ordinary village of the place and period, fortified by a low mud wall, and consisting of lines of two-storied houses, gay with broad vertical stripes of red and white, and roofed with tile or ragged Palmyra leaves. On three sides it was surrounded by peepul and tamarind groves, and level plantations of rice, cotton, and millet, intersected by gleaming water-channels ; on the other, the ground rose, by gradual slopes and plateaux, with stretches of velvety grass and stately trees, towards the rugged heights beyond.

The temple stood on a knoll at the head of the first of these slopes—a graceful building, with its cluster of snow-white domes arranged in pyramid form, crowned by an elaborately carved pinnacle, upon which rose a pole, ending in a gilded ball.

It was not an orthodox Hindu temple—that was down below, a great staring structure of red granite dominating the humble roofs of the village—it was the place of worship for such portion of the population as belonged to the sect of Jains. The Jains profess a perverted form of Buddhism, under which reverence is claimed for no less than seventy-two earthly Buddhas—namely, twenty-four of a past era, twenty-four of the present, and twenty-four who are still to come. These Buddhas they call " Jinas," " Arhats," or " Tirthankars " ; they are saints who have

A FALLEN IDOL

lived on earth as mere mortals, but who have vanquished vice and virtue, and obtained *nirvana*, or emancipation from further existence on earth.

The last saint of the present era was Mahavira, who was translated more than two thousand years ago. To him this particular temple had been dedicated, and his image consequently was the largest and the most luxuriously installed in the idol chamber, where each of the twenty-four was represented in effigy.

The temple was the private property of the old priest, Acharya Chick, who, though subject to the supervision and control of the head guru of the Jains, was free in most respects to conduct his ministrations as he pleased.

Chick, however, being a good and earnest old man, with the simplicity of a child, was strictly conscientious in the performance of his duties, took an honest pride in the appointments of his temple, and derived no more than a modest livelihood from his priestly calling.

As he sat outside on the stone bench, where he was accustomed to collect his thoughts for the service which began the working day, he was troubled by doubts and perplexities which had only of late begun to assail his tranquil faith.

Quite recently he had been called upon to include a new saint in his Pantheon, and to one of his conservative instincts, this was disturbing.

It came about in this wise. Some twenty years or so before, a lad had run wild about the village bazaar ; he was of unknown parentage, and adopted by one of the workers in brass who formed a section of the inhabitants and were Jains to a man.

There was nothing, to an uninitiated eye, to distinguish him from other naked children, unless it was the superior force of will and ingenuity which procured him the leadership in all mischievous enterprises, until one day, when the guru from the Jain headquarters at Belligola came over on his periodical visit of inspection and made a startling discovery.

THE PROLOGUE

It was two thousand years, as has been said, since the last tirthankar of the present era had passed away, and the first of the succeeding one was already considerably overdue.

Now the guru had perceived that this expected tirthankar had actually taken up his mortal habitation in the body of this lad ! There could be no possible mistake on this point, for the body bore every one of the mystic signs and marks which denoted his high mission.

This revelation, as might be expected, made all the difference in the world to the youth's prospects. For he could not be left to develop unaided—since he might conceivably fail, and then all the business of incarnating a tirthankar would have to be gone through over again ; he must be trained, and trained carefully.

So they put him under fit teachers, and the mystic name of Chalanka was conferred upon him, and he studied natural magic, in which he soon became a proficient, at the feet of an eminent *yogi* of great sanctity and uncleanliness.

It was said, indeed, that Chalanka did not invariably make the highest use of his occult knowledge, and that his miracles, to the end of his days, rather resembled the more ill-natured kind of practical joke ; but these miracles will have that tendency when the saint is enthusiastic and young.

Chalanka grew up strong, bold, by no means uncomely, and in time he passed his novitiate, becoming a *yati* or ascetic of the first class ; he cut off his hair, wore robes of a tawny hue—which became much tawnier—and confined his personal luggage to a bundle of peacock's feathers and an earthen pot.

He devoted his energies to contemplating the abstract, which he did with perseverance and entire success ; he overcame all human passions and infirmities—for that was expected from him—and he trained himself to regard his body as a bubble, though it need hardly be said it was a bubble which had no connection whatever with soap.

A FALLEN IDOL

And from time to time he stalked through the Jain quarter of the village, blowing a chank shell to attract attention, and soliciting the alms of the charitable, and occasionally his wanderings led him unconsciously around the compound of the big Brahman temple, much to the annoyance of the priests and the amusement of the dancing girls.

Years went on, and his wisdom was pronounced ripe for gathering ; he had his remaining hairs plucked out by the roots ; he unrobed at his simple meals, and disciples were told off to attend upon him, to hearken to his discourses and store them up for future transmission.

Unfortunately no records have been preserved of his doctrines, which seem to have been found too complicated or too advanced to be divulged at present. All that is known of him at this stage is that he inspired his disciples with a salutary fear.

Another period elapsed, and Chalanka dismissed his grateful disciples, and established himself in a sort of hermitage up amongst the rocks, where he was to remain for years, silent, in self-centred contemplation.

He was not often to be seen there by the curious, for he possessed the power of making himself invisible. Sometimes at night in the thicket near the Brahman temple a shadowy form was seen gliding and prowling, the projection from the holy hermit who sat like stone in the cell far above among the heights ; sometimes, a fierce wild laugh rang out over the crags and cliffs, and those who heard knew then that Chalanka was in one of his holy frenzies, and would not have disturbed him for their lives.

And then, in the most unforeseen way—he died. They found his corpse lying stiff and swollen at the foot of a precipice, which, had he been an ordinary person, it would have been said he had fallen over.

Now nobody had expected him to die for years to come, still less to cease from existence with such an entire absence of parade ; but he was the first of the new era,

and consequently entitled to make his own precedents. He was obviously dead, and the only thing to be done was to burn his body and cast the ashes into water.

Chalanka's untimely end brought to the surface a question which many had secretly entertained in his lifetime. Was he, in sober truth, a tirthankar at all? Compared with his predecessors, he did not show to great advantage; his fame was limited, his supernatural feats were of a low and even pettifogging order, and he had enriched the faith with no fresh precepts of any value.

And those, too, who had had opportunities of observing him (amongst whom was Acharya Chick himself) could not but see certain shortcomings—a disposition to arrogance, for instance, a hankering after admiration, traces of greed, unscrupulousness, cruelty, which, without being serious in themselves, were slightly inconsistent with a complete conquest of the flesh.

Upon the whole, a dead man has perhaps a better chance of being canonised if the matter is postponed for a hundred years, as in the Roman Catholic faith, than when, as here, his claims must be settled at his decease; but none of Chalanka's co-religionists chose to play the *advocatus diaboli* in this case, feeling that his admission amongst the Jain divinities would reflect distinction upon the village and temple, and not improbably have a stimulating effect upon the brass-founding trade, in which they were all largely interested.

And the head guru, to whom the point was referred, not unnaturally backed his original opinion; Chalanka was a genuine arhat, the first of a new order, and, as such, he was entitled to the reverence of all devout Jains, and an image must consequently be set up in his honour, and assigned a niche in the temple of his native village.

The guru's decision was of course final, the idol-carver was set to work, and soon produced a small seated image, which was as faithful a representation of the real Chalanka as could be expected or desired.

The new idol had only spent one night under the

A FALLEN IDOL

temple roof on the morning which witnessed Acharya Chick's perplexity beneath the portico—a perplexity of which it was the unconscious cause.

For the worthy Jain, though too humble-minded to think of questioning, even to himself, the wisdom of his superior, could not consider his latest deity an acquisition. His little Pantheon had been quite large enough before ; he was too old to relish having a new object of veneration thrust upon him in this way.

And so, in apportioning the day's offerings on the previous evening, he had, without perhaps any conscious intention, reserved the least tempting fruits and the more faded flowers as the share of the new-comer ; and now he was not quite certain whether he felt more self-reproach or repugnance as the time drew near when he must again enter the inner shrine.

However, these unpleasant meditations of his were to receive as unpleasant an interruption. From his seat he could command a view of the winding path which led up the knoll from the village gates, and now he saw advancing a tall and stately figure, in which his eyes were keen enough to recognise his bitterest enemy, Ram Chunga, the Brahman who presided over the massive temple where Brahma, and Siva and Parvati, and Geneswara, their son, were worshipped.

He was evidently coming to the Jain's temple ; he was almost at the palisade already, and Chick felt a certain flutter at the prospect of such a visitor, much as might a Dissenting minister of the old school on seeing a shovel hat and a pair of gaiters coming down his garden path.

The minister feels he has as good a right to the title of " reverend " as the bishop ; but then, he is only too well aware that the bishop is of a different opinion. So Acharya Chick claimed to be of the Brahman caste, and had an uncomfortable suspicion all the time that Ram Chunga would probably deny his right to any caste worth belonging to.

THE PROLOGUE

He thought he could guess the other's errand. It had come to Ram Chunga's ears that the Jain temple contained, as such buildings frequently did, an exceedingly handsome image of Siva, and on one or two occasions when the rival priests had met in the bazaar the Brahman had made offers to purchase an idol which, as he urged, could be but out of place in an alien sanctuary.

That Ram Chunga had any real wish to acquire the Siva was more than the Jain could believe ; he was probably acting out of pure aggravation, or with a tyrannical desire to dictate and domineer, which Chick was determined to withstand, even while his mild and gentle nature shrank from the impending wrangle.

As the Brahman came in with a general and highly offensive air of precaution against moral and physical contamination, the Jain rose and saluted him as courteously as he could bring himself to do.

Ram Chunga declined the seat which the other indicated on the stone bench, and, remaining at some distance, began by saying that the errand which alone could bring him to such a place would probably be guessed.

If, said the Jain, his visitor had come to renew his offer to purchase the Siva, he must, with every respect, make the same answer as before.

The Brahman replied that he no longer proposed to purchase the image ; he now demanded that it should be surrendered to him without a price.

That, said Acharya Chick, was obviously unjust. The Siva was his own, he had brought it at his own expense from one of the Jain temples at Padan-guddy, how then could the Brahman claim it from him ?

As the ministrant of Siva, the azure-throated, Ram Chunga replied, it was intolerable to him to know that the image of that mighty one was forced to share the offerings and suffer the companionship of such a herd of insignificant little demigods as he understood were venerated in the temple of the Jain.

To which Acharya Chick answered peaceably that his

A FALLEN IDOL

brother was mistaken. It was true indeed that many of the Vedantic emblems were to be found in Jain temples, and he instanced Brahma, Indra, Indrani, and the bull Nandi, as well as Siva; but they were not at any time considered as more than *devatas* or attendants upon the various tirthankars, and this particular image of Siva was a mere ornament, and never received offerings or adoration.

His reply did not improve matters, for the Brahman retorted that this only increased the impiety. Why should Siva go unhonoured while these tawdry little tirthankars were loaded with gifts? Which were more powerful, a handful of deified men or a god who was before all things began?

"You mistake, Ram Chunga, you do not grasp the spirit of our creed" (the Brahman's thin lips curled contemptuously); "we lay our humble tributes of fruit and flowers before the emblems of these our arhats, the pure existences, the sages, the teachers, but with no purpose to please or propitiate. They themselves are infinitely beyond our poor homage; but to honour what is pure and good is beneficial in itself, and acts of devotion purify the heart, though there is no other reward."

"And this newest god of yours," said the Brahman, "who and what was he?"

The Jain gave an embarrassed cough. "You speak of Chalanka, who was but yesterday among us and now has passed away? He, too, is worthy of our worship; he had overcome the eight great crimes, fasting in silence (even as did the blessed Mahavir, who for months kept his eye fixed upon the tip of his nose); he had vanquished all human passion and infirmity, and now therefore that he has crossed the ocean of existence, his life remains to us for an example."

The Brahman made a guttural sound of intense contempt. "An example truly!" he exclaimed; and then coming nearer and lowering his voice as he bent his cold keen eyes upon the other's face, he asked, "Know you how he died—and why? Hear then!"

THE PROLOGUE

It was a wild story that was poured into the Jain's unwilling ears, a story of stolen joys, of detection, hideous punishment and fierce despair ; it was small wonder that Acharya Chick utterly refused to believe it.

" Where is this perjured dancing girl of yours ? " he said. " I would fain question her."

" The girl ? " said the Brahman drily. " Where not you, Acharya Chick, nor any man will see her more. And this man, forsooth, is to take his place amongst your divinities—his shrine is to be decked whilst the idol of sacred Siva craves garlands in vain ! Nay, this shall not be. I, his unworthy priest, protest against this last outrage. Let this image depart, which you know not how to honour—let it depart, I say ! "

Mild as the Jain was, he was not going to be bullied in his own temple ; the attack on Chalanka had roused his flagging enthusiasm ; besides, the Brahman's demand was too unconscionable to be treated seriously.

" I have spoken, O Ram Chunga," he said ; " leave me to administer my own temple and go in peace."

" You refuse ? " said Ram Chunga, and his brows grew black.

" I refuse ! " said Acharya Chick.

" Then hear my warning. Not long can such obstinacy go unpunished. Our gods at least have not dreamed themselves to eternal apathy. They can reward, and, what is more, they can punish. Quick are they to feel a slight—yea, and to revenge it. Have you never heard of the bag of insufficient peas, and the insulted idol of Mahadeva, which is Iswara, which is Siva ? "

And, as the Jain made no reply, Ram Chunga told him the story : how a pious but parsimonious worshipper repaired to the village of Tady Malingy, where are many temples to Mahadeva ; how, being desirous to pay each shrine the compliment of an offering if he could do so with prudence, he solved the problem by procuring a bag of peas, a single one of which he laid before each idol. How, unhappily for him, there were not enough peas

A FALLEN IDOL

to go round, and one idol was left out in the cold, at which he was highly offended, and mortified into the bargain by the insolent boasting of the other gods, who seem, by the way, to have been somewhat easily elated. How, in his anger, the incensed idol transported itself miraculously across the river in chase of the unsuspecting worshipper, who was trudging home in calm satisfaction with his own economical genius. And how something too dreadful to describe befell the pilgrim, and how the idol evermore refused to return, and all its former companions and their temples lie fathoms deep under the sand to this day.

This marvellous tale Ram Chunga repeated with impressive solemnity. "Such is Siva, the glorious, the conqueror of death, in whose sacred name I now speak." He concluded, "Think once, aye and twice, ere you thwart him ! "

Acharya Chick rose with a mild dignity. "I must leave you, O Ram Chunga," he said ; "it is the hour at which I begin my ministrations."

The Brahman shrugged his shoulders. "Upon your own head be the consequences," he said. "You are warned, and I say to you, Acharya Chick, that this image will yet be mine ! "

He turned and strode down the path with his aquiline nose high in the air, while the Jain stood in the portico for a few moments, watching the Brahman's scarlet cap as it burned in the sun every time he passed out of the shade, before he went into his temple with a new reason for disquietude.

He could not, he would not, believe so terrible a slander, and yet he wished more than ever that the head guru had not been so positive about the new idol. He was more determined than before to observe a marked moderation in the offerings he laid before it.

Thus resolved, he shook off his slippers on the marble pavement of the vestibule under the central dome, and unfastened the heavy and richly inlaid doors which com-

THE PROLOGUE

municated with the idol-chamber, a large, cool, and dimly lighted place, where the air was charged with the accumulated fragrance of constantly renewed blossoms of the champak and a kind of oleander.

The whole of one wall was elaborately carved and divided into two tiers of highly ornamented niches. In the centre of the upper tier, supported by two other arhats, sat Mahavira, the presiding deity of the temple, whose image was painted yellow and bathed in a flood of mysterious glory from an unseen opening above, through which came the only light that was admitted.

In the lower tier were the other tirthankars, each idol painted its characteristic colour, and in a separate compartment ; its sacred cognisance carved below, and the mystic triple umbrella forming a kind of finial over its head. The attitude was the same in every case : all the idols squatted cross-legged, their hands being laid, one on the other, over the feet, whose soles turned upwards ; most of the images had been hung with earrings and necklaces of more or less value, and before each niche was a kind of slab or altar for the reception of offerings.

In the corner, by the doors, stood the image of Siva which the Brahman coveted for his own temple ; a large and imposing figure, pot-bellied, painted a sickly blue, with a superfluous eye in the middle of its forehead, and more arms than even a deity could manage with either comfort or dexterity.

It had not been found possible to accommodate **Chalanka** in the tier of niches, but they had contrived a **very** comfortable little recess and a temporary altar for him in the opposite wall. His image, it may be said, was in its general character of the same pattern as the rest, though—owing to a hint which Acharya had given the idol-carver—considerably smaller; his cognisance was the hunting-leopard, or cheetah.

The gloom when the priest entered made it difficult to distinguish objects very clearly for a time, but, as his eyes became more accustomed to it, he made a startling

A FALLEN IDOL

discovery. Some impious person had entered during the night and stripped the idols of their jewellery ! The robber had even dared to carry off the freshly dedicated flowers and fruit, for the altars which Acharya himself had seen heaped the night before were bared.

But the next moment brought a certain relief. It was not sacrilege after all; neither jewellery, fruit, nor flowers had been actually removed ; The earrings and necklaces loaded the idol of the new tirthankar, before which the whole of the previous day's offerings were heaped in profusion.

The sight made Acharya extremely angry notwithstanding ; the temple ministrant (for Acharya himself merely superintended the ceremonies) was youthful and fervid, but still it was ill-judged of him to give this invidious welcome to the idol of a local celebrity.

He sent for his too zealous subordinate and censured him severely ; but unfortunately a vow of silence for that day prevented the offender from making any attempt at self-defence beyond shaking his head with much vehemence.

That evening, as Acharya presided over the distribution of the day's offerings, he was even more careful than before to restrict Chalanka's portion both in quantity and quality. It was vain to tell himself that the Brahman's story had had no influence upon him—a slandered saint is like a damaged plum, something is gone from him that can never be restored—and then, too, the Jain had had his doubts from the beginning.

But the very next morning revealed an outrage of the grossest irreverence. Every one of the tirthankars had been turned upside-down in his niche, except Chalanka, who was almost hidden under a mass of flowers !

Acharya well knew that no Jain would be guilty of such impiety ; he saw in it the hand of his unscrupulous adversary, Ram Chunga, and was struck with mingled consternation and wrath.

He got the idols replaced in a normal position before

the worshippers arrived, and as soon as the morning's rites were ended he went down to the village and had an interview with the headman, Fattekhan Gul, to whom he disclosed what had happened.

The headman sent him a Mussulman guard, who, having a splendid contempt for Jains and Brahmans alike, might be trusted to remain impartial, and who were posted around the temple in such a manner that none could approach unchallenged.

And then the idols were all carefully oiled and bathed with sandal water, and left for the night with a strong conviction on Acharya's part that their tranquillity was not likely to be again invaded.

But when he entered the idol-chamber at dawn next day it was to find it in a condition at the sight of which he staggered back confounded and appalled. All that had gone before was child's play to this. Every niche on the lower tier was bare, and in the centre of the pavement was a pile of images, each one of which proved to have been mutilated—its nose, its ears (which were disproportionately large, and stuck out like the African elephant's), and the triple umbrella above its head had all been chipped off, and upon each altar a nose, an umbrella, and a pair of ears were laid out with derisive neatness !

Acharya almost lost his senses at the sight, for he had spent the whole night in watching, in going from post to post, and he knew that for this second outrage the Brahman could not by any possibility be responsible.

Yet a complete and valuable set of images had been ruthlessly defaced by some one, and the pious Jains would soon be at the gates to perform their morning's devotions. What would they think—what explanation could he give them ?

To his more enlightened mind the images were but emblems ; but this was a doctrine wholly beyond his flock, and he trembled to think of the view they might take of such a wholesale destruction.

The reader, who was quick of resources, proposed to

A FALLEN IDOL

restore the idols to their niches, and trust to the semi-darkness to conceal their imperfect condition, but Acharya was too dejected, and, be it added, too conscientious, to resort to any such evasion.

And so, when the earliest braziers and coppersmiths, after depositing their offerings in the porch, came into the idol-chamber, to walk round three times and make obeisances to the images as usual, they found their priest standing with bent head and his white robes torn, behind a heap of mutilated divinities, and they stood aghast.

Gradually the chamber filled, and a buzz of dismayed curiosity rose from the various groups. If their gods were cast from their shrines, what was left for them to worship ? and while some of the less devotionally-minded were rather relieved to have a legitimate excuse for non-attendance in future, the majority felt a pious regret for their gods—their bland, sleepy, smiling gods, who never gave any trouble, and whose faces had become as the faces of old friends.

" My children," faltered the priest, perceiving they were waiting for some explanation, " the destroyer has been at work in the darkness. I know no more than ye why this has come upon us, to humble me and perplex your hearts."

" It is the evil spirits ! " whispered Murli Dass, the coppersmith, and the congregation took it up and cried, " Yes, it is the evil spirits—it is the *saktis* ! " And they fell on their knees, and struck the floor with their foreheads ; and Acharya, whatever his private opinions might be, did not contradict them now.

But there was a sudden stir in the crowd ; several rose to their feet, and made way, as if for some personage of distinction, and Acharya, with an agony of mortification, saw his rival Ram Chunga approach—the very last person he wished to witness his embarrassment.

A village in any part of the world is not the place for a secret. The Jain's suspicions and request for a guard had not been long in reaching the Brahman's ears ; he had

THE PROLOGUE

come up to repudiate the charge indignantly, when he gathered from the stir outside the temple that something extraordinary was going on within, and, with his habitual contempt for all prejudices but his own, strode in to discover what the matter might be for himself.

Ram Chunga, avoiding contact with the rest as much as possible, stood taking in the situation with no small bewilderment. "What is this, O Acharya Chick ? " he inquired at last.

"Behold," said the Jain, "the effigies of our blessed arhats have been found mutilated and dishonoured, as you see, and by whose hand we cannot tell ! "

"Why," the Brahman asked himself, "had this wretched old creature destroyed the gods by which he lived ? for of course this was his work." Ram Chunga was not above conducting a manifestation or arranging miracles himself, but he did not understand a portent on such a scale as this ; it seemed wanting in common judgment.

And then suddenly he saw through the design : this Jain priest in his mulish obstinacy had actually destroyed his Siva rather than deliver it to his rival, and then, to divert suspicion, had been forced to deface his own images.

"Where is the image of Siva the undying ? " he demanded with a black frown. "Bring it forth that I may look upon it."

"It is there, behind you," said the Jain dejectedly, and Ram Chunga, turning, beheld for the first time the idol on which he had grounded so pretty a quarrel. Till then he had had no particular desire to possess it for its own sake ; now the sight of it strengthened his determination to get it out of alien hands.

It really was a handsome idol, rather antiquated perhaps in design, but still of excellent workmanship and, notwithstanding its somewhat questionable origin, orthodox in all its details ; it would do credit to the best-appointed temple.

And, to his intense surprise, he found it absolutely

A FALLEN IDOL

uninjured. Evidently this old fool had not had the nerve, when it came to the point, to deface it, and render it useless (a mutilated Hindu idol being, of course, about as formidable as a spiked gun).

What could have made him attempt such a piece of reckless folly ? Was it—and the Brahman's brows grew darker at the idea—was it intended to throw suspicion on *him* ? If that were so, he should find he had made a slight miscalculation.

He turned upon the Jains with a magnificent gesture. "Hear me, O Acharya Chick," he said, "and answer truly. Did not I but two days since make demand of you for the restoration of this image of the god from which you and your followers have turned away ? Did I not warn you of the indignity you did him in introducing a miserable *yogi*, who but yesterday was in our streets, to be his fellow-god and companion in your idol-chamber ? "

"Even so, Ram Chunga," said the Jain, "nor will I now deny it."

"Behold the warning fulfilled ! " the Brahman cried. "Siva, the beautiful, the blue-necked, has spoken ; he has shattered the gods whom he has suffered so long ! "

The Jains were deeply impressed by this ; less enlightened than their teacher, their idols were for them concrete divinities who could hear their humble prayers and satisfy their moderate wants. They had always felt a secret conviction that it was not quite respectful to ignore Siva so pointedly, and now this neglected Siva had suddenly developed into a tremendous deity, who could manifest his displeasure in a very practical manner.

But Acharya's suspicions of the Brahman rose again at this attempt to turn the situation to his own advantage ; he was resolved to dispose of these outrageous pretensions if he could. "What sign have you, O Ram Chunga, that it is as you have said ? " he inquired.

"A sign ? " said the Brahman. "Is not the image of Siva unharmed ? Are not yours defaced and discredited ? **And** you ask for a sign I "

THE PROLOGUE

Acharya, in glancing round the idol-chamber, had already observed a fact which he did not at first mention, for it only perplexed him more, but now he turned it to account with desperate readiness.

" Siva has wrought it, because his image has gone unharmed ! " he exclaimed. " How then has he spared the very image which you assert to be the main cause of his wrath ? If Siva is untouched, much more then is the image of Chalanka, for look you to what honour has he been exalted ! "

He pointed as he spoke to the centre niche in the topmost tier, the niche lately occupied by the portly idol of Mah&vira. There, looking ludicrously disproportioned to its cell, squatted the newest and smallest tirthankar, basking with a smile of subdued and private enjoyment in the flood of mysterious glory which had so lately belonged to the deposed Mah&vira !

The congregation, who had not noticed this before, saw it now with a cry of rapture—surely Chalanka, who had weathered a storm in which so many deities of, so to speak, far higher tonnage had foundered, surely he must be a god of sound and solid qualities, a god who could hold his own with the whole Hindu mythology !

The Brahman sneered. So *this*, after all, was what the Jain had been scheming for ! He had sacrificed the greater part of his sacred stock to increase the value of the remainder—well, he would checkmate him there at all events ! " Does a tiger lie in wait for a rat ? " he said, " or shall an elephant charge a tortoise ? Fools, all of ye, and blind, not to see that this Chalanka of yours owes his immunity to his insignificance ! These others are in a measure divinities, but he is less than all, and therefore the mighty magnanimous Siva scorns to lift up so much as the little finger of his sixth hand in wrath against him. He hath set him thus on high in his derision, as the god before whom it is indeed fit that such as ye should bow ! "

The Jains veered round again. Ram Chunga was wise and spoke with assurance ; he must know best.

A FALLEN IDOL

" Set up your maimed idols," the Brahman continued, with biting scorn, " worship them as before, for what concern is it of mine or Siva's ? But detain his image no longer, yield it to me, his servant. For the last time I demand it I "

" Ram Chunga," said the Jain, mildly but with determination, " since first it was removed hither, yonder idol has refrained from all disturbance, nor has it given the least sign of displeasure. I will not believe that these dread signs proceed from it now, nor will I ever consent to dishonour the chamber which is consecrated to the arhats by robbing it of such an embellishment. Never will I——" But here, with a groan of horror, he covered his eye with his hand, and rushed into the vestibule followed by his anxious flock.

" A fly in it, my children ! " he gasped ; " in the name of the blessed arhats and the pure existences, take it out ere it die ! "

A European's chief solicitude under the circumstances would scarcely be lavished on the fly ; but the stricter Jains are most averse to the destruction of any form of life, and take every imaginable precaution—even to wearing cloth respirators—against the involuntary swallowing of the minuter insects.

So for some moments of intense excitement the priest's eye was surrounded by an eager group, all anxious to save the fly if possible ; Murli Dass, the oilman, got it out with a strip of linen from his loin-cloth, but unhappily the fly had ceased to live—in fact, it was hardly to be recognised as a fly at all, for the priest, in the first agony of smarting, had so far forgotten himself as to rub his eye with fatal violence.

When Acharya Chick realised this, he sank down heavily, quite overcome by the blow, upon the nearest stone bench, amidst cries of fresh consternation from his people. He never sat down anywhere as a general rule without having first carefully dusted his proposed seat with a small feather brush, not because he was afraid of

THE PROLOGUE

sully his robe, but from the aforesaid unwillingness of all Jains to destroy even the lowest forms of life.

In his agitation he omitted to use his brush on this occasion ; a large red spider had dropped upon the bench but one instant before, and the most humane person cannot sit upon a spider without putting it to the gravest inconvenience.

The Jain prostrated himself in unavailing penitence before its flattened form, cast dust upon his shaven head, and vowed to accomplish various uncomfortable penances—but the spider would never spin a web again !

His congregation edged away from him with horror-stricken haste ; of course similar mishaps had occurred to them all now and then, but for a priest to transgress twice in such close succession seemed to show that he was pursued by some evil destiny.

Ram Chunga, whose tenets did not go to quite such lengths, had been a spectator of the scene, which, as usual, he sought to adapt to his own ends.

" Are you still obdurate ? " he said, " or do you recognise in this the hand of Siva ? "

The Jains might have resisted the evidence of the fly, but, corroborated by the spider, it was irresistible ; they fell on their faces : " Siva, Lord Siva, have pity upon us ! " they cried. Had Ram Chunga cared to proselytise, he could have carried them all over to his own sect there and then ; but their belief was a matter of total indifference to him : these brass-workers were too poor to be profitable.

" And you, Acharya Chick/' he said, " you will yield the image ? "

The Jain was about to refuse once more, but his followers would not hear of it. " Yield it," they cried, " oh, yield it, lest harm overtake us also ! "

And Acharya Chick knew that his hold over them was rudely shaken, if not lost for ever. Sullenly he turned to the Brahman and said, " Take it, and trouble us no more ? "

A FALLEN IDOL

Thus had Ram Chunga triumphed, winning a twofold victory ; he had acquired a most desirable addition to his temple, an idol which would have all the interest of a trophy, and probably tell favourably for months upon the temple receipts, and, which pleased him better still, he had thoroughly crushed the rival whose temple had always been an eyesore to him—the Jain was worsted, humbled, struck by his own cobra.

The Brahman was not precisely the man to spare a defeated adversary a single pang. It was good policy to make as much of his advantage as possible, and, besides, it was clearly impossible to walk out with the surrendered idol under his arm.

" This submission is tardy, but prudent," he said, " and I accept it in the mighty name of Siva, conqueror of death. With glory and rejoicing shall the sacred image of Iswara be conducted to a more seemly abode. At the hour of sunset the idol of ever-living Brahma shall come himself to escort him. See that your gates are open to us when we arrive, and should any unseemly encounter take place between our respective followers, I shall hold you responsible."

Acharya Chick bent his head in silent resignation ; he felt a sullen impatience to have the measure of his humiliation filled to the brim ; the mainspring of his simple inoffensive life was snapped, the good he had tried to do all undone, and he felt a bitter protest against the apathy which could allow such things to be.

He stood in the vestibule for some time after the Brahman had gone, gazing blankly on the marble flags ; the reader and the officiating priest were afraid to ask if the morning services were to take place as usual, and stood apart. Acharya had not courage to order the idols to be replaced, and the usual invocations and lustral ceremonies to be gone through as if nothing had happened ; the Jains had all gone back to their daily labours, and it was doubtful whether they would ever consent to do homage again to the noseless idols whom they had seen

THE PROLOGUE

piled up in an ignominious heap on the floor of the sanctuary.

At last he came out of his reverie with a groan, and fled like a hunted man from his dishonoured temple, and up the rocky heights, till the noonday blaze forced him to fall panting in the shade of a projecting crag ; and the temple attendants went their own ways, and the temple itself was deserted. ^

The Brahman meanwhile had gone down to the village, bent upon organising as magnificent a display as could be procured on such short notice. He was excessively pleased at having so completely outwitted the hypocritical and cowardly old Jain, and he arranged in his mind where the new idol should be set up ; it only needed a little purification, a few *mantrams*, to be as good as ever.

And before the day declined the whole Hindu portion of the villagers, thanks to the Brahman's endeavours, was in a ferment of religious excitement. Acharya had spent the greater part of the day crouched in such shade as he could find, his mind possessed by a kind of stupor, his main impulse the childish determination to mortify himself to the utmost. But as the sun began to set, and the plain below steamed with the mists from the paddy fields, he grew more collected ; some powerful attraction seemed to be drawing him down the slope to where his temple stood ; he was impelled to be present at his own humiliation.

So, feeling faint and weak, he clambered painfully down until he reached a banyan grove, from which he could command his own compound, and see all that took place without attracting observation.

Very soon the air thickened with sudden dusk, and part of the village became outlined in flickering lines of fire, while a confused buzzing began to be heard in the direction of the bazaar.

The buzzing grew louder, swelling **into** a low roar, above which rose the clash of cymbals and the screaming of chank shells ; with a little stretching the Jain could

A FALLEN IDOL

make out a dim confused mass swarming up the slope, and knew that the procession had already started to conduct Siva to his new home.

Up they came, with clouds of dust, and waving banners and sacred insignia, with leaping fanatics, and slow serpentine movements of the nautch girls at the head, and in the midst, drawn by bullocks, came the huge clumsy idol-chariot, with its barbaric splendour of carving and gilding, its dome-shaped canopy, which caught the last red ray of the sun.

And now the crowd had surged through the temple gates, and there was Ram Chunga with other white-robed Brahmans, keeping what order was possible in the wild throng.

And then, the road being clear for it, the idol-car rolled, creaking and jolting over the threshold, whilst the idol it bore wobbled, with some loss of dignity, upon the lofty seat to which it had very prudently been strapped.

It was a representation of Brahma in one of his numerous *avatars*, the god being fashioned as a man-lion, with the usual superabundance of arms, one pair of which seemed busy plucking a small figure which lay across his knees and was supposed to be a personal enemy.

This was a very exclusive idol, and a visit from it was esteemed as an overwhelming distinction throughout Mysore ; in fact, it only went out once a year to confer with an extremely well-connected idol of Vishnu at a *mandapam*, or sacred rest-house, half-way from their respective temples, but on this occasion Ram Chunga's influence had enabled the rule to be relaxed in Siva's favour.

Here it was accordingly, and a rich pavilion was put up at one end of the compound, within which the distinguished visitor was installed, and, this done, the Brahmans entered the temple and came out bearing the wonder-working image of Siva, which was hailed with acclamations, while it was being reverently deposited in the pavilion by the side of Brahma.

THE PROLOGUE

And then, as the gods would necessarily have many things to say to one another, the hangings were drawn, and the priests made a ring round the pavilion, and stood guarding it from vulgar curiosity.

While the conference was supposed to be taking place within, Ram Chunga mounted the footboard of the chariot and addressed the crowd. He rapidly sketched the history of this image of Siva, that had been preserved originally for the lingering homage of heretic Jains, then gradually ignored and degraded to the level of an ornament, till the last indignity was attained in the introduction of Chalanka. The Brahman gave a highly-coloured description of the various marvels by which the offended god had vindicated his majesty, and finally worked up his hearers to a frenzy of wrath against the Jains, which he calmed down to the best of his ability by telling them that their misguided fellow-villagers had acted thus under pure ignorance, having merely followed the leading of their spiritual guide, his worthy, if somewhat self-sufficient brother, Acharya Chick.

There were shouts and yells for Chick, demands that he should be dragged from his shrine, hurled over the rock, and so on, which made the Jain priest grateful to his sheltering banyans, and those of his congregation whom curiosity had driven to follow the procession sorry that they had not stayed at home.

But now the gods had had sufficient time to exchange views, and it was time to gratify them with the ministrations of the dancing girls, before the united idols were placed upon the chariot and carried home together in pomp.

So the tom-toms were rattled and thumped with fervour and the torches made the compound light as day, as the dancing girls, in robes of purple and orange and green, edged with glittering silver tissue, prepared to go through their dreamy and deliberate evolutions, accompanied by chants like the cry of the midnight cat, and Ram Chunga gave the signal for the hangings to be drawn back.

A universal shriek marked their withdrawal, as the

A FALLEN IDOL

torchlight shed its fierce glare upon the interior. Ram Chunga grew green, and his teeth chattered, as well they might, and even Acharya Chick, as he gazed from afar, could hardly trust his eyesight. For the sacred idol of Brahma was broken into a dozen pieces, his arms were planted, with considerable taste and fancy, in various corners of the floor ; and, worse still, the hardly-won idol of Siva was in the same plight, its fragments arranged in a pyramid upon the principal throne, upon the very summit of which squatted, with a bland smile on its smug features, the despised image of Chalanka, the least and lowest of the Jain tirthankars !

For once Ram Chunga's presence of mind deserted him. He could not lay the blame upon the Jains because of the Brahman *cordon* around the pavilion ; it did occur to him to explain so disastrous an occurrence by the legend of some ancient feud between Brahma and Siva, which had prompted their images to fly at one another like fighting cocks, but that would be an admission of want of tact on his own part in throwing them together, and, even then, the interference of this despicable little Jain idol remained unaccounted for !

So the haughty Ram Chunga, savagely accepting his defeat, wrapped his shawl about him, and made his way, through the shivering dancing girls and awestruck villagers, out of the precincts of the temple where he had been so signally discomfited.

There was no desire on the part of the others to remain in that accursed place any longer ; their idols were useless, and they left the gaudy wreckage where it was, and filed out of the compound thoroughly cowed and abashed. And as they descended a sudden squall swept from the heights behind them, and the rain came down in gleaming lances, and, drenched and miserable, the procession fled back to the temple they had quitted so triumphantly, as if pursued to its gates by the anger of Chalanka.

The Jains, realising that their " ugly duckling " of an idol had proved more than a match for the two chief

THE PROLOGUE

personages of the Hindu mythology, now ventured boldly forth, and carried Chalanka's image with rejoicing into the idol-chamber, where they were joined by Acharya Chick.

"Henceforth," cried Murli Dass triumphantly, "our reverence is due to Chalanka alone ; he has delivered us—he has shown himself mightier than the gods of old, mightier than the blessed tirthankars ! Tell us, O Father, is it not so ? "

Acharya Chick looked at the idol with an uncontrollable feeling of repulsion. "It is even so," he said, "and may he prove himself as benevolent as he is mighty ! "

From that hour the fame of Chalanka was established, and spreading further with every day. The other tirthankars were entirely discarded by the Jains of the locality, who transferred their entire homage to the last translated saint.

A splendid shrine was erected to him, which pilgrims came from Girnar, from Patna, and even from Mount Abu, to worship.

At this shrine Acharya officiated for a time, but after a very brief period retired from the priesthood altogether, and no one ever made out exactly why, though there were rumours that the idol had manifested a pointed dislike to his services ; he was succeeded by a Jain *yati* who gave perfect satisfaction, and marvels and signs, of a somewhat *ad captandum* order, were of almost daily occurrence at the altar of Chalanka.

It soon became clear that the idol was of an exceptionally jealous disposition, keeping his devotees well up to the mark in the matter of offerings, and altogether religious enthusiasm was maintained at a wonderfully high level, compared with the attendances and ceremonies which had satisfied the easy-going original tirthankars, which, perhaps, shows that your upstart idol is not different from other mushrooms.

Thus, for some years, shrine and idol flourished, and the village found spiritual **and** commercial benefit from

A FALLEN IDOL

the circumstance, until the bad times came when Tippoo Sahib took it into his ill-regulated head to force the Mussulman faith indiscriminately upon all his subjects.

Temples of various denominations were wantonly destroyed, and the idols buried by their custodians until brighter days should dawn ; and possibly some such fate as this befell the shrine of Chalanka, for no record of it is to be found later than the fall of Seringapatam and the annexation of Mysore by Great Britain.

But the legend survives to this day, and, as will be seen hereafter, an attempt has even been made on the part of a highly cultivated Babu to connect it with certain events which form the European part of this story.

How far this attempt may be justified, this historian presumes not to decide, but he submits the tradition here for what it may be worth, on the bare chance that it may be accepted as shedding some faint light upon much that is otherwise inexplicable.

THE STORY

SCENE, *London.* TIME, *Nineteenth Century*

I Self-restraint

" I love not less though less the show appear,
That love is merchandised whose rich esteeming
The owner's tongue doth publish everywhere."

THERE are parts of London which never seem to have been thoroughly assimilated. Anyone who is at all familiar with the metropolis will be able to recall at least one neighbourhood of this kind. The houses are small and neat, in the doll's-house style of architecture, with a tendency to over-indulgence in green blinds and burnished brass, and street-numbering is almost abandoned in favour of names charged with rural or sentimental associations. Its thoroughfares are free from bustle and noise, its shops maintain a calm and

serious front, while its principal wheel traffic consists of the tricycle, the milk cart, and the piano organ. Entering such a region as this, one cannot but be struck by the contrast between the turmoil that has only just ceased to be audible and this peacefulness which, if not precisely arcadian, is distinctly provincial, producing, as it does, a general impression of a Sunday afternoon at a second-rate inland watering-place, between the seasons.

It may possibly excite the smile of superiority when it is added that these characteristics may all be found in a district which, in fiction and drama, is reserved exclusively for scenes of Bohemianism and guilty splendour—the much maligned district of St. John's Wood, but it is the fact nevertheless, and as many of the scenes of this story have to be laid in that suburb, it seems not wholly impertinent to insist upon it at starting.

In one of the quietest and most unimpeachable roads in the neighbourhood in question, there is a little two-storied house, or rather cottage, with an acacia in front and at the back a long out-building whose big north-light proclaims its use.

It was in fact, at the time of which I am writing, the studio of a young painter who was already beginning to be known in Art circles, and who was at work there on the particular afternoon in early spring with which this narrative opens.

It was not one of the picturesque studios ; it would have made a poor show in an illustrated article, for it boasted no carved gallery, no stained glass, nor rich tapestry, none of the splendours, in short, of the man to whom success has brought luxury, or who expects his luxury to bring him success. Ronald Campion was too fond of somewhat daring experiments to have quite gained the confidence of the British art-patron, and, so far, such praise as had been accorded him was greatly in excess of the solid pudding.

He was too engrossed in his work to care, even if he **could** afford it, to surround himself with disturbing in-

A FALLEN IDOL

fluences ; the rooms in which he lived were as harmonious and artistic as his means could make them, but in his studio reigned a severity which many of his sitters felt as a personal affront.

It was big and bare, and a cold dry light pervaded it, piled canvases, dusty casts, and dingy studies leaned or hung against the walls ; on the tables lay heaps of colour-tubes and brushes in stained newspaper ; here and there was a glowing piece of embroidery, or a quaintly carved chair, but these were strictly for use, not show ; it was easy to infer from the surroundings that their owner was a painter in grim earnest.

The conviction would only have been confirmed by Campion's appearance as he stood at the large and ambitious-looking canvas before him : a tall well-built man with fair hair which came in a crisp wave over his forehead, light blue eyes, with a trained keenness in their gaze, a blunt nose and a short golden beard and moustache which did not wholly conceal the rather sceptical and ironical mouth.

He was not strictly a handsome man, though his face had a power and attractiveness of its own, and his figure would have appeared to advantage in one of the becoming painting-suits in which many less well favoured men indulge, but while he was not of the order of squalid geniuses, there were no more traces of an eye to effect in his dress than in his studio.

Such was Ronald Campion, as he stood painting with a rapid bold action, and an air of entire absorption in his work, from which he only paused to give some slightly impatient direction to the model who stood and shivered in classical costume on his right, for it was cold work keeping the pose when the stove had been allowed to go out for lack of attention.

So much engrossed was he, that he did not look round when the door which communicated with the house opened, and an elderly man with a cross-grained walnut-coloured face made his appearance. " Mister Babcock to

see you, sir," he announced with a certain grim relish, as he stood at the top of the short flight of steps.

Campion muttered something which did not sound like delight. " Hang it, Bales, couldn't you tell him I was busy," he said.

" Just precisely what I did tell him," said Bales, with an injured air ; " but it wasn't no use ; he's a-comin' in, he is—wants to see you on important business, 'cordin' to him."

Bales was an old soldier who had been a professional model for some years, and now acted as Campion's factotum. His chief characteristic was a systematic disbelief in everything and everybody, which he seldom lost a chance of expressing.

As he spoke he stood aside to make way for the visitor, who seemed to have no misgivings as to his welcome. " Well, my dear fellow, how are you ? Hard at it, as usual, I see. Never saw such a fellow," he began, in the tone of one who rallies another upon a rather ridiculous foible. " I thought I'd drop in and look you up—can't stop long. I wanted to see you about a little matter of mine."

And he glanced at the model with a meaning which Campion affected not to understand, for he continued to paint. " Well," he said, " you won't mind my going on ? I can listen and work too."

" Oh, I'll wait till we're alone. I'm not in such a hurry as all that. I can take a look round till you're ready," said Babcock cheerfully. " What have you been doing for the shows this year, eh ? I shan't send anything in this season, after the way they've treated me ; but you always manage to get the right side of 'em somehow."

Babcock was a painter himself, so far as he could be said to have a profession at all. He had always had a taste for sketching, and an eye for colour ; and, as he had a handsome private income, he was well able to devote some of it to supporting himself by the exercise of his art.

He had drifted from one art school to another until

A FALLEN IDOL

he conceived his education complete, and then he set up an elaborately appointed studio, where he soon became celebrated for his afternoon tea, and was reported to have begun several important pictures.

Babcock was inclined to be severe upon contemporary art, and had a reputation for extreme fastidiousness, which he seldom perilled by unstinted praise. So he strolled from canvas to canvas in Champion's studio with an air of calm superiority which was intensely trying.

"What's this—young woman taking a header? Ha! I see, very good—'Burning Sappho'—putting herself out. And that's for the Academy? Um. Think you've got that forearm in drawing? doesn't look quite right to me. And you might have caught more of the Greek feeling, perhaps."

Champion, after some fruitless attempts to go on with his work, had sent his model away, and sat down chafing, as Babcock came round and inspected his latest and largest canvas through his *pince-nez*.

"More classics, eh? What are you going to call this—Scene from the Trojan War?"

"You're only a few centuries out," said Champion. "It's Xerxes on Mount Ægaleus watching the battle of Salamis."

"Ah, to be sure; good subject—capital *subject*. Not new though, is it? And, to be frank, it's not quite what I should call happy."

"No more was Xerxes at that particular moment," said Champion.

"You don't see what I mean: it's all too modern—a trifle *voulu*; wants what you may call the repose, the— the remoteness of really great Art." And Babcock made that little wave of the hand which is so useful as a definition. "It's the same everywhere, nowadays. A man paints two or three models in fancy dress, and thinks he has re-created the Past—it's a mistake, sir. There are very few men whose art is capable of going back beyond a couple of centuries."

" I've seen some things of yours that had gone back a good part of the way, Babcock."

" Mine ! why, I don't attempt historical subject myself. I'm not a figure-painter, unfortunately."

" I don't see anything unfortunate about it—it might be worse."

" Yes, that's true ; there's a good deal to be done in landscape. Still, now and then, I confess I rather wish—which brings me to what I came about. The fact is, I've just finished a landscape study—a glade in Epping Forest. I rather pleased myself over it."

" Congratulate you, I'm sure," growled Campion.

" Thanks ; but, with all that, it wants something."

" Purchaser ? "

" That, my dear fellow, depends upon you," was the answer.

" Very sorry, but I have to deny myself luxuries," said Campion.

" Oh, ah ; I didn't expect you to buy it. It's this way, don't you see. I got Sieditoff of Bond Street to come round and look at it, and he said he'd take it for that gallery of his, and do his best to find a purchaser, only I must put a figure in the foreground first. Now, I don't pretend to be a figure-painter."

" But why not ? "

" Well, 'pon my word, I can't say ; I never took it up, somehow. But you, now. Well, that's certainly your strong point—I always admit that. And so it struck me that you wouldn't mind putting me in some kind of a figure—I don't care what. You will, won't you ? "

" I don't know, Babcock," said Campion. " Suppose I can't catch the Epping Forest feeling ? "

" Nonsense, you can do it if you like ; and of course, I'll take care your name comes in."

" Thanks, but I couldn't think of that," said Campion, in some alarm. " I'll paint your figure for you, though, whenever you like. I suppose there's no particular hurry."

" Well, I should like it soon. I'll bring the thing

A FALLEN IDOL

round to-morrow. And now that's settled. I didn't come in to interrupt you, so I'll be off. What, another picture?—portrait this time. I must have a look at this before I go."

He had come upon a large easel and canvas which had been rolled into a corner, and which he now wheeled out to the light. "I thought I recognised her," he cried. "Miss Elsworth, by Jove—little Sybil!"

"It is Miss Elsworth," said Campion rather coldly. "What of it?"

It was the portrait of a girl who had thrown herself lazily back in a deep chair, her hands lying lightly folded in her lap. She had a charming audacious face, the eyes, wide apart and of a limpid grey, were set at an inclination just Oriental enough to be piquant, and gleamed with a certain playful malice, as the full red lips curved into a little smile of disdainful submission.

She was painted in pure white with a knot of blue at her shoulder, and behind her were heavily embroidered Japanese hangings, overlaid with strangely coloured birds and beasts and coils of glittering gold, all woven together in one rich harmony, and, dangerous as such a background was, it was both faithfully rendered and skilfully subordinated, whilst the portrait, as a whole, was a successful piece of daring which impressed even Lionel Babcock.

"I should screw up that white another tone or two if it was mine," was the only comment he made, however, as he inspected it through his finger and thumb in the orthodox manner.

"And so she's actually been sitting to you all this time?" he added, and his somewhat prominent eyes protruded rather more.

"She actually has. It does seem an eccentric thing to do, but she did it."

"What astonishes me is that Sybil should never have breathed a word about it to me—we've always been such particular chums that it is odd—she always carries all her little troubles to me."

" Perhaps this was too big to carry," said Campion.

" Ah ! "—and Babcock turned this suggestion over without appearing to make much of it—" I dare say. Well, I expect it didn't occur to her to mention it. I must say, my boy, you've succeeded admirably in catching the mere likeness—but I miss her expression, sort of eager interested look she has, if you ever noticed it."

" She would reserve that for a chum."

" Well, she's a queer girl, but she can be delightful when she chooses, I do assure you. Now, how did you find her ? "

" Perfectly civil, thank you, Babcock."

" Oh, my dear fellow, she'd be civil, of course, civil. But you've no idea how different she can be with a man who understands how to treat her—why, when she's been talking to me——"

" How do you manage to be so sympathetic ? "

" I — I don't manage, my dear fellow. Somehow, I don't know why, I'm a kind of father confessor to lots of girls, give 'em good advice, don't you know, and form their taste for 'em. Women are like other domestic animals—always know the fellows who are used to 'em and understand 'em. Now I've made rather a study of them myself, you know ; I flatter myself I read 'em like books."

" Thought you only read the reviews ? " said Campion.

" Read the book too, if it's worth reading ; it generally isn't. But about this portrait, of course I've often seen you at her aunt's, I suppose she gave you the commission ; queer old lady, isn't she ? Goes in for amateur benevolence, hat always going round for some genius who'll astonish the world for a few more coppers ; that house of hers in Sussex Place is a sort of patent incubator for hatching swans, only she will fill her ovens with duck's eggs—funny, isn't it ? "

" Well," said Campion, " you see I was one of the ducklings myself."

" Oh, ah, so you were," said Babcock, perfectly unabashed, " but we'll hope you'll turn out more in the ugly

A FALLEN IDOL

duckling line. I remember, you were tied down in some Bank or other, and she got you out of it—that was how we came to meet, where was it ? At the Slade, first, I think. And then you got into the Academy—and I didn't—but went that sporting and sketching tour to India instead. That reminds me, I pleased our dear Mrs. Staniland immensely the other day, brought a chela to see her I had met out at Bombay when I was over there. You know what a chela is ? sort of budding Buddhist, sucking Mahatma. Calls himself Axel Nebelsen, Norwegian or Swede or something, I fancy. Went out to India on some scientific expedition, and turned Theosophist. Now he's over here, dining out and advertising the religion. It hasn't been started long but it's pushing its way, don't you know. And the women run after him a good deal, queer-looking chap, talks till all's blue—ever meet him ? "

" Never," said Campion, " what does he do ? "

" Mild miracles—sort of parlour prophet, don't you know. Goes out to dinner and pecks a little rice all the time, and then has a trance upstairs over his coffee-cup. Says he sees everybody with an *aura* about him ; so have I—after dinner. And he's learning to manage his astral body, but he daren't let it outside the door yet. I think he's a bit of a humbug myself, but he amuses me. He's always holding forth to me on the advantages of being a Buddhist. But, as I tell him, I don't see the good of it—even supposing you pass as a Mahatma, and poor old Nebelsen says its devilish stiff, and thinks he's a safe plough, you only learn a lot of secrets you mayn't turn to any account. And what's the end of it all ? Being ' absorbed into Buddha '—which, as far as I can make out, won't make any difference to old Buddha, and would be the end of *me*. I call it foolishness. Not that Nebelsen hasn't powers of some kind. I've seen that fellow do things with cigarettes that were quite astounding in their way, and he produced a succession of raps out of old Lady Timberlake's head the other evening, that I wouldn't have believed unless I'd heard 'em. As for bell sounds, when

he's in form hell tinkle all with 'em, and they say he actually materialised a strawberry the other day when they were about half a crown apiece. Only where's the sense of materialising *one* strawberry ? These chaps ain't practical."

So Babcock rattled on, not much caring whether he was listened to or not, until he ran down, and Campion hoped he was going in earnest.

But he was standing before the portrait again. " I say, Campion," he began once more, " did Miss Els worth while she was sitting for this know you knew me ? "

" Not that I am aware of—why ? "

" Well, you just try mentioning my name, and see if you don't catch a different expression. She looks to me, in the picture you know, just the least bit bored, eh ? as if you hadn't tried to interest her."

" Think so ? " said Campion, " it's very possible ! "

" Well, you can't expect to do justice to a girl like that if you paint her in cold blood."

" My dear fellow, I didn't—I prefer the ordinary medium."

" You know what I mean. Here you are sitting down to interpret all the sentiment, the poetry, the—the fresh indescribable charm and grace of a delightful girl, for, take my word for it, she *is* that if you only knew her—you sit down and paint all that with as little emotion, as little care to catch the highest power of your subject as if you were painting a pump ! "

" How do you know what I feel when I paint a pump, Babcock ? As to the portrait here, that's a matter of opinion of course ; if I've failed—I've failed ! "

" Oh, I don't say that. It's a clever thing. But the fact is, only a lover could seize the soul in her face, don't you know."

" I dare say, which would account for my not taking that liberty ! "

" I wish / was a portrait painter. Gad, I've a good mind to ask her for sittings as it is ! " cried Babcock. " I

A FALLEN IDOL

don't mind telling you, old fellow, but for the last twelve months I've been gradually getting deeper in love with that little girl. I'm over head and ears now."

" That is deep," said Campion, drily.

" I'm no stoic to go on seeing her week after week without a heartbeat. I'd propose to-morrow, only there's no particular hurry—she's young, and I'm not quite tired of bachelor life yet. I shall give myself another year of it."

Campion looked at him ; he was not distinguished or impressive looking. He was short, with dark hair parted in the middle, a pale, rather flabby face, a loose mouth ; he had done nothing so far except talk, and was never likely to do more ; but for all that, Lionel Babcock was a personage in his way ; if he bored most men, women found him both instructive and amusing ; he was fluent and self-assured ; he was particularly well off.

Would anyone say he had not a good chance of winning a young girl's heart ? and yet, to hear him calmly assume that this was so, grated on Campion's nerves.

" Yes," continued Babcock, " I've got the old lady on my side. She's naturally anxious to protect the poor child from any imprudent engagement, and so I may very well wait. And she's so young, scarcely developed as yet, a little crude—even *bornee* still; she wants more atmosphere, more perspective, don't you know ! "

" Yes, and the violet wants sprinkling with a little sachet-powder, and the Lodore Falls want lighting up with red fire, and you're the man to do it all, my dear Babcock ! "

" But she does want manner, you know ; you mayn't notice it, but it's a fact. Why, this very morning, I came across them in a bric-a-brac shop in Hanway Street, and when she saw me she——"

" Haven't we discussed Miss Elsworth about enough ? " asked Campion.

" I can see you've taken a strong prejudice against the poor girl, Campion. Well, I won't talk about her, then, and I really must bolt now, I've got an appointment at

home. I'll bring the landscape round some time to-morrow, then ! "

When he had really gone Campion broke into a laugh, which was rather savage than amused. Then he went to the portrait and studied it : " Was that ass right ? " he was thinking ; " does that look on her face mean—boredom ? Isn't there a touch of something like sufferance on her lips ? It didn't strike me so while I was painting her, and yet—and yet—confound Babcock ! "

He wheeled the big easel back into the corner again, and, returning to his classical picture, touched in some details from the studies he had made for them, but, after a while, he stopped with an impatient sigh. " No good," he muttered, " I may as well stop work for to-day—the light's getting bad, too. I'll go and get some calling over ; no, I'm hanged if I do, I'll turn into the park."

And presently he was crossing one of the canal bridges in the direction of the park. It was one of those spring afternoons when Nature seems to be collecting herself for the decisive movement. At first sight everything looked as bare and bleak as it had done for five dreary months past ; only on closer view could it be discovered that the scumbled green of the steep banks was fresher and more vivid, that the branches against the sky were closely studded with tiny knobs, and the trunks touched with a light softer and more tender than that of a mere mid-winter afternoon.

Still the cheerfulness was mainly prophetic as yet ; the roads were moist and gleaming, and, in the park, the paths which cut the slopes in various directions looked cold and chalky against the dead green turf, and were soon lost in a misty veil ; the sunset was represented by a salmon-coloured gash in the grey sky, the wind was in the north-east.

Campion had in the last year developed a strong affection for the Regent's Park, and in the absence of any distinct route, would turn in there instinctively, and his steps always led him in the same direction—towards the ornamental water by Sussex Place.

A FALLEN IDOL

It is curious, the glamour which one perhaps all unconscious maiden can throw over an entire neighbourhood for him whom her charms have subdued. It can transform and beautify the least poetic surroundings, and has been known to outlast the original cause by many a year, so that a man may conceivably have to pause and ask his memory—it may be in vain—for whose sake it is that some very ordinary street or commonplace neighbourhood can thrill him yet with a vague romance as he passes through.

The divinity for whose sake a particular corner of the park possessed an irresistible attraction for Ronald Campion was, it may be needless to state, Miss Sybil Elsworth. He did not go there with any expectation, scarcely even the wish, of meeting her, and often as he took that direction he had only seen her on very rare occasions, either driving or walking, and always in the company of her aunt.

But he liked to walk there notwithstanding, and all the objects and even the people on that side had an interest and picturesqueness which were entirely wanting in any spot which did not happen to command a view of Sussex Place.

On this occasion, however, Campion longed for a more material solace ; he was harassed by doubts and depression which nothing would chase away but the actual presence of the adored one.

And, as it happened, Fate was kind to him for this once ; for while he was inside the radius of enchantment, he saw a dainty figure coming towards him from one of the bridges, and the figure was that of the enchantress.

As she came nearer there was the least little dimple in her cheek ; she recognised him evidently ; she stopped and held out her hand, and even called him by his Christian name. Even that dull and unpleasant type of person, the " most ordinary observer," would have instantly suspected, from the manner of both, that they were on terms of some intimacy ; and so they were, for they were engaged.

2. *A Remonstrance*

" There's a present for you, sir ! Yes, thanks to her thrift, My pet has been able to buy me a gift."—*London Lyrics*.

RONALD CAMPION had indeed succeeded in winning Mrs. Staniland's niece Sybil, but the elder lady had not as yet been consulted, and it was by no means likely that the engagement would meet with her approval. It is true that Ronald was a *protege* of hers : she had rescued him from his uncongenial duties as a bank clerk, and enabled him to follow the art he loved ; and now that he was beginning to be known as a painter of decided promise she could reflect with some complacency that she had discovered him. But the discoverer of a new country does not invariably feel called upon to live in it, and Mrs. Staniland had always maintained a certain social distance in her relations with the various objects of her benevolence.

Campion received occasional invitations of an informal kind, but he had never been admitted to any real intimacy ; and when Sybil Elsworth left school to live with her aunt at Sussex Place, no idea of any danger to either side from the young painter's visits presented itself to Mrs. Staniland's view.

Ronald himself, unfortunately, had not met Miss Elsworth many times before his peace of mind was seriously disturbed. To do him justice, he struggled hard to banish her face from his thoughts ; he refused even the rare opportunities of seeing her that were afforded him ; he tried to forget her in his work.

But the very ardour with which he set himself to paint only brought him into such further notice that Mrs. Staniland determined that he and no other should paint her niece's portrait, and he could not, or at all events did not, decline the commission.

The unhappy young man suffered a combination of torture and ecstasy during the first few sittings. Every

A FALLEN IDOL

day left him deeper in love and despair, for Sybil's manner gave him no reason for hope ; and if it had done so, was he not bound to silence by the most elementary principles of honour ? What right had he, who was only just beginning to make a living, to ask this or any other delicately-reared girl to step down to him into the struggle ?

So he hid his passion under indifference—with the usual success in such cases ; he had interested her from the first, so she was merely piqued by his apparent antipathy into the resolve to overcome it ; he was not long in betraying himself, though quite unconsciously, or at least involuntarily, and she was strangely thrilled by the discovery of his secret.

Still he did not speak—he would have kept silent to the end, but for a change in his prospects which released him from all further restraint ; a distant and eccentric relative died and left him an unexpected legacy, enough to make it possible for him to marry without imprudence or selfishness.

He hesitated a little even then, for Sybil's moods had varied so capriciously of late that he was afraid to put his fate to the touch just then ; but at last the opportunity came, and he took it, and she heard him to the end quite meekly, and he found himself accepted.

But upon one point she had insisted with the sweetest obstinacy : no one at home, not even her aunt, must be told of their engagement until she gave him leave to announce it. She had to consent to his writing to her father, who was out in India ; but if he told anybody else, why—then, this wilful young person declared, there should be no engagement to be disclosed.

He was too desperately in love to run any risk by putting this resolution of hers to the test—he yielded, and had never been free from self-reproach since.

It had gone on for more than a month now, this most unsatisfactory of engagements. They saw one another but seldom—indeed for part of the time she had been away at Eastbourne. She wrote, and her letters were gay and

affectionate ; but when he met her again, she gave no sign by her manner of greeting him that he was more to her than others were.

It is true there were others present at the time, and true that she contrived to reassure him before he left by some apparently careless speech, to which her eyes and voice gave a sweet and special meaning ; but, for all that, the strain was telling on his self-respect, and he chafed under his false position more and more.

What he suffered under Babcock's references to Sybil will after this explanation be readily imagined ; and now that by a happy accident he had met her, he felt the time had come to speak plainly.

She was the first who spoke. " I thought this was one of the things we agreed we wouldn't do ? " she observed, though with no very great show of displeasure.

" I didn't know I should have the luck to meet you just now," he said, " and you must let me speak to you, Sybil—there is something I want to say."

She arched her pretty eyebrows. " Something serious?" she inquired.

" Yes, rather."

" Then suppose we find a seat somewhere ? I can be so much more serious sitting down."

They found a sheltered bench near the water's edge, where the wavelets were lapping half-heartedly. " Now tell me all about it," she said, looking distractingly lovely as she settled herself comfortably to listen.

" It's simply this, Sybil—I can't stand this secrecy any longer ? "

" Oh, Ronald ! but why ? where would be the fun if everybody knew ? "

" After all, Sybil, one doesn't—at least / didn't—get engaged for the fun of the thing ; and if I had, I've had very little of it."

" You might be serious without being disagreeable."

" Is it disagreeable to object to have to play an under-hand part ? "

A FALLEN IDOL

" Very, because, don't you see, Father knows all about it—he must have had your letter a fortnight ago."

" But your aunt doesn't—you know how much she has done for me ; I never ought to have kept this from her."

" Ah, but you couldn't help yourself, you see ! " cried Sybil gaily ; " it was my secret as well as yours, and you were bound to keep it as long as I wished it kept."

" And why were you so anxious to have it kept ? "

She was looking at him with meditative eyes. " Will you have a lot of little reasons, or one big one ? " she asked.

" I should very much prefer the real one," he said, rather grimly.

" Well," said Sybil, " the real one was : I'd set my heart on having my portrait at the Grosvenor this year."

" I don't see the connection ; if all goes well, it must be there now. Sir Coutts has seen it, and I only want one more sitting to finish it."

" And we're coming for that to-morrow. Yes, but, you foolish Ronald, if you had told Aunt Hilary when you wanted to, do you suppose you would ever have had the chance of finishing it in time ? Why, I should never have been allowed to come near the studio, till we knew what Father thought of you—and perhaps not then—all these weeks quite wasted ! So that by that little stratagem of mine (for you might have known, if you hadn't been a goose, I never meant all I said !) just by that stratagem I've saved you a whole year of fame—because I have quite made up my mind that that portrait is going to make you famous. And naturally," she added, with a little laugh at her own vanity, " I should like to be a little famous too."

" If that is all," said Campion, " now the portrait is safe, you can't object to my speaking out."

" But I do ! " she said ; " don't tell Aunt Hilary yet, Ronald."

" **But** why ? you must have some reason ? "

" Surely we are very happy as we are ! "

" Hardly, as far as I am concerned. Just think, Sybil,

how often do I ever see you ? Why, this is the first time since that evening at the Pontifexes' that I've had a chance of being alone with you. I have to be content with catching sight of you through some confounded crush, and think myself lucky if I get a look or a word in the course of the evening."

" Isn't that what you ought to think ? And really, you might bear it a little longer when I ask you—it isn't as if there was the least harm in it."

" There wouldn't be if I was under no obligations to Mrs. Staniland—but for that I shouldn't complain ; I dare say I should enjoy keeping this to ourselves. As it is, nothing can get rid of the fact that I'm behaving shabbily."

" If you told her, do you know what would happen ? At first she would try to treat me like a naughty little girl " (and she looked very like one indeed as she spoke), " and then she would tell somebody about it—and everybody would know ! "

" And what then ? "

" Why, you know how people will come and fuss about and ask questions, and congratulate. I do hate all that so ! It's all very well for you—you won't have to go through it."

" As far as congratulations go, I fancy I'm in more danger than you. But what is there so very objectionable about it, after all ? "

" Oh, I don't know," and she gave a petulant little shrug. " Every girl I particularly detest will make a point of rushing up directly she sees me, to give me little pecking kisses and gush. And I shall have to listen to : ' So glad, dear love, so sweet of you to be romantic in these days—it's really quite idyllic—do tell me all about it ! ' and so on. And then all the old ladies, and the silly old gentlemen who try to be funny about it—Ronald, it will be horrid, and it's no use pretending it won't! "

" **But it must** come some time—your father will

A FALLEN IDOL

probably write to Mrs. Staniland soon, and he must mention it then."

" Father isn't very regular about letters, and at all events we can wait till he does write ; it isn't at all nice of you to be so obstinate."

Campion made a poor pretence at a laugh. " Why don't you say in so many words that you are beginning to think you might have done a wiser thing than accept me ? I suppose I oughtn't to wonder that you are not in any very great hurry to own me."

If her face was any index to her feelings, Sybil Elsworth was honestly startled and wounded by such doubts ; her petulance (which was not more than half real) vanished ; instantly all her childish wilfulness left her. " If you mean what you say," she said, and her voice trembled, " it is very cruel ; you know, or you ought to know, that I never had such a thought for one moment. I have always been so proud of you, Ronald ! "

" Yet you can't acknowledge me ! Sybil, if you are beginning to repent, if you have the slightest misgivings, don't, don't hide them under denials, tell me now—I can bear it better now than later."

" You seem to be quite certain you will have to bear it some time ! " she said with averted head.

" You may be asked to throw me over some day—soon, for what I know—to listen to some fellow who is rich, well-connected, able to give you the position you ought to fill, in whose cause your aunt would put all the pressure she could upon you—some fellow like—well, like Lionel Babcock, for instance."

Her colour deepened. " At least you might wait till you *are* thrown over. Poor Lionel Babcock—isn't it rather absurd to be jealous of him ? "

" Whether it is or not," said Campion, " I want to feel sure of you, Sybil ; and you must see that this concealment is putting me more hopelessly in the wrong every day, making it easier to separate us."

" If I had only known you felt like that about it ! " said

Sybil,—“ it frightens me, Ronald, when you let such fancies get hold of you. But you shall have no excuse for them any longer. I did hate a fuss, but I won't mind it now. Aunt Hilary shall be told if you think it right. There, will that satisfy you ? ”

“ It is everything I asked. Don't think me a brute for insisting on my own way in this, darling, even now when I know there was no ground for doubting you.”

“ I think you might have seen that from the first,” she said, “ but I suppose it is your nature and you can't help it, so I must forgive you. And I will tell Aunt Hilary everything this very evening ! ”

“ I can't think of letting you do that,” he said ; “ it ought to come from me.”

She gave a little sigh of very obvious relief. “ If you think it best,” she said. “ And when will you tell her ? ”

“ To-morrow, as soon as the sitting is over.”

“ We shall be scolded dreadfully, I know,” said Sybil ruefully. “ Still, so long as it relieves your mind—— And now,” she added brightly, with a complete return to her original gaiety, “ don't let us think of disagreeables any more. I've a surprise for you. While you were persuading yourself, I dare say, that I had completely forgotten all about you, what do you suppose I was doing for you this morning ?—guess.”

“ I can't tell, I'm sure,” he said, “ if it wasn't slippers.”

“ Of course it wasn't slippers ! ” said Sybil indignantly ; “ to think you've no more imagination than that ! It was nothing of that kind—I don't go in for it. Well, I had better tell you. I bought you a little present—you know I never gave you anything in return for that lovely ring, which I've never worn yet.”

“ You gave me this,” he said, taking the hand which was nearer to him.

“ That didn't cost me anything to give ; this is a real present—are you grateful, or will you tell me how foolish it is of me to waste my money on presents ?—which is what Aunt Hilary used to say when I gave her anything. To

A FALLEN IDOL

be sure," she added reflectively, " I always had to borrow the money from her first. But you will try to like this ? "

" I think I can promise that," he said ; " I haven't any words to thank you with."

" You must wait till you see it—perhaps you won't care about it. I don't know what made me think you would, but I'll tell you how I came to get it. I was driving with Aunt Hilary this morning, and we went into a little bric-a-brac shop near Oxford Street, where aunt had heard of some Sheraton she wanted to look at. Well, the shop was kept by the dearest old man, who wore a velvet cap, and seemed so low-spirited ; and while Aunt Hilary was upstairs looking at Buhl cabinets, the old man poured out all his sorrow to me. It seems he has had nothing but misfortune for months, losses and breakages and burglaries and fires—all kinds of trouble, poor thing. Well, I felt so sorry for him, particularly as I knew quite well that Aunt Hilary wouldn't buy anything—she never does ; so, as I had made up my mind to get something for you, I thought I would get it there to cheer him up a little. But all the things were so dear except one. I'm not going to tell you what it is, because you'll know very soon ; but it has quite a little story connected with it. It was dug up a short time ago by some Captain Somebody, who had to leave the army shortly after for some disgrace he got into—so the old man told me. And the ship which brought it over from India was wrecked and all the cargo lost except just that one thing, which floated safely to land wedged inside a lifebelt. So it's rather a curiosity in its way."

" Evidently," said Campion.

" But I had such a fright while I was buying it, for in the very middle who should come in but Lionel Babcock ! He came smiling up in that patronising way of his, swelling his chest out, and said, ' Well, little one, and what are we throwing our pocket-money away on now, eh ? ' So of course I had to show him, and then he wanted to know what possible use could I find for that. And I told him

I had bought it because his last photographs didn't do him justice, and then he went upstairs to find Aunt Hilary, and I had just time to give your address and swear my old gentleman to silence. It ought to be at your house by this time. I do wonder what you'll think when you see it ! "

" I shall think it my chief treasure, whatever it is. I shall keep it all my life."

" But will you really, Ronald ? Somehow, I don't like to think of your ever parting with it. Will you promise to keep it—whatever happens ? "

⁴⁴ " Whatever happens," he agreed, smiling at her earnest charming face.

" Well," said Sybil, " we've had a nice long talk and only one quarrel, and now I must go, Ronald."

" Not yet," he pleaded.

" Yes," she rejoined, " now. I coaxed Aunt to drive home and leave me at the Mastermans', because I wanted to talk with that odious Alice ; and I assured her I could find my way across the Park alone. She said one never knows what kind of people one may meet, which is quite true, for I hadn't the least idea I should meet you. I ought to go back at once, or she will be feeling nervous about me. No, you mustn't walk a step further with me—I forbid it. You will have your own way to-morrow."

They parted, and he watched her graceful figure till it disappeared in the dusk, and then he too made his way out of the Park, with a heart lighter than it had been when he entered. Sybil had shown a deeper affection, more real feeling, than she had ever betrayed before ; his worst doubts he could put behind him—he could afford to disregard Babcock now. And so, relieved and hopeful, with a pleasant anticipation of finding Sybil's present awaiting his return, he turned up into the broad silent street which would lead him to Romanoff Road.

He reached the corner, and was a few yards from his studio, when he noticed a youth, an errand-boy apparently, preparing to cross the road with a most superfluous degree

A FALLEN IDOL

of caution for that unfrequented quarter ; again and again when half-way across he would retreat to the curbstone he had left, looking this way and that as if completely demoralised by nervousness.

At last he seemed to pluck up courage and made a run for it, with an uncalled-for determination which mightily amused Campion ; he was laughing still when an empty hansom dashed round the corner and bowled the poor boy over a few inches from the footpath.

The cabman, without waiting to see what injury he had done, whipped his horse to a gallop and was gone before Campion, horrified and shocked as he was, could stop him or ascertain his number.

He could only run to the boy and pick him up and wait there while he leaned, white and gasping, against the railings of Campion's garden. When the boy could speak, he said. " You'll bear me out, Mister, as it wasn't none of my doing ; the guv'nor, he told me to be keerful, and I've been keerful enough—if it's broke it ain't my fault noway."

" Never mind that," said Campion, " the chief thing is are you broken anywhere ? "

" I don't think as how I'm broke anywhere, though I feel all nohow ; the shaft of that there 'ansom ketched me on the shoulder and sent me a-spinning. But feel o' that there parcel, sir—do it seem all right to you, through the paper ? Well, that's a good thing anyhow. If you knew the job I've 'ad a-bringin' of it 'ere, you'd feel for me, you would indeed ! I took a 'bus at Tot-nim Court Road, and blimy if both the 'orses didn't go down ! then I took another at the Cirkis, and we got a-racing down the Edgware Road, and run into a butcher's cart and very near turned over that time. / never see anything like it ! Then siz I , ' Not any more ridin' for me,' I sez, ' I'll walk the rest.' And, would you believe it, sir—if all the kebs and 'buses and carts there was didn't seem bent on runnin' over me ! Never run sech a erran* in all my born days ! Why, I was like a old woman by the time I got 'ere,

A REMONSTRANCE

and just as I sez, ' D——the himage ! ' sez I, ' I'm quit of it now ! ' round come that there gallopadin' 'ansom, and over I goes like a skittle ! "

" I saw," said Ronald, " you weren't to blame in the least; and now you had better come in with me and have some brandy, and we'll see if youVe broken any bones."

" I must deliver this 'ere parcel and get that off of my mind first," said the boy staunchly, and then Campion discovered that it was addressed to himself.

" Why, it must be Sybil's present! " he said as he saw the label. It was curious to think of the perils it had run of miscarrying and even perishing ; its escape struck him as a sort of special providence.

He had the boy attended to and examined at once. Fortunately he had escaped with a bruise or two and a slight shaking. " I never heard no cab," said Bales," the boy's been fightin' on the way—they young raskils will get fighting—he never got them bruises in no accident! " and no argument would move him from his opinion.

Meanwhile Campion had unpacked the precious parcel in full confidence of finding something with a pretty fanciful association about it, some graceful and well-chosen addition to his household gods.

His spirits fell suddenly at the reality : it was a household god literally enough, being nothing more nor less than an extremely ugly oriental idol, such as a Buddhist shrine in China or Burmah might contain.

It was made of a dingy mottled kind of alabaster with a sparkle here and there under the smooth surface, the robes were faintly indicated by a dull red lacquer, and it was represented squatting cross-legged with great fan-like hands on its knees.

The eyes in the broad flat moon-face were closed, and the general expression was one of smug and sleepy self-satisfaction—as if it were being reverently tickled by an unseen attendant.

This, then, was Sybil's first present! and at the sight of the inscrutable smile on its calm countenance, Campion's

A FALLEN IDOL

demon of doubt again stirred ; the smile seemed to be saying, " Now *do* I look the sort of thing a girl would give a lover she seriously and honestly cared for ? " and the answer he gave was, " No, she has sent me this in some fantastic spirit of mockery—not love ; she has been playing with me after all ! "

3. *From a Pedestal*

CAMPION was still gloomily staring at his ill-favoured gift when Bales returned from seeing the errand-boy safely off the premises. " I suppose/" remarked the attendant, with a dubious and inquiring inflexion, " I suppose as that there himage struck you favourable from a ornamental p'int of view, or you wouldn't have spent your money on it, sir ? "

" It was a present, Bales," said Campion, unconsciously vindicating his own judgment at the expense of Sybil's.

" A present was it, sir ? Well, if the 14th of Febry hadn't been gone so long I should have thought some one had sent you a walentine, and picked you out a parti ckler ugly one. It must have been meant comical-like, I should say."

" Heavy sort of joke, Bales—but it's a curious thing in its way, as you can see."

" If I wanted to give a present, I should choose something more tasty, I should ; if you must send a bust, there's plenty on them Italian men's trays as have a more Christian look to 'em."

" That's likely enough. This is an idol, an old Indian idol."

" Don't you believe it, Mr. Campion ; it's a deal more likely to be a sham—one of them Brummagem imitations, as we keep the heathen going with ; why—phew, ah ! " and he sat down suddenly upon the nearest chair—" excuse the liberty I'm taking, but one of my old spasims ketched me rather severe in the side ! "

" You've no faith in antiquities, eh, Bales ? "

" Why, no, sir, I can't say as I consider them altogether credulous ; I judge from my own observation. Now, there's that place you took a likeness of when you was down in Wiltshire last spring, Stone-Enge. Well, you'll never persuade *me* those big stones are genuine. What did them hancient Britons that lived up trees know about building ? and d'ye think any stone could stand our climate for all these 'undreds of years ? Look at our public buildings, erected quite recent and mouldering already ! Why, I dessay you, bein' young, believe in that there Cleopatry's Needle they've set up on the Embankment. /don't. The moment I set eyes on it I said, * It's a do ; all them marks and picturs on it have been cribbed right off from our Crystal Pallis, which I myself can well remember when it wasn't built. That's what I go upon, d'ye see ? No, no, don't you be took in, sir. It's the same with them old marsters ; why, you know what they are as well as I do. I know a party myself as turns 'em out by the gross—he's only got to draw and colour as bad as he knows how, and hang it in the chimbley to meller. There's some in the National Gal'ry it's true that are clean enough, but your own common sense '11 tell you they're too well coloured ever to have been done in them old muddy-evil times as they call it. They hadn't the education for it."

" You're a wise man, Bales ; the nineteenth's the only genuine century, eh ? all others are spurious, and their works prove it. And now suppose you suggest some place for this idol—how would it look on the low bookcase ? "

" It wouldn't look no handsomer than what it would elsewhere," said Bales.

" Try it on the bracket where the Hermes is now—you had better fetch the steps perhaps."

Bales fetched a pair of steps, and, bringing them to the mantelpiece, mounted laboriously, and, after deposing the reduced but faithful plaster copy of the antique, prepared to establish the oriental in the room of the classic divinity.

A FALLEN IDOL

He turned on the steps, holding the image out at arm's length, as he remarked with strong disgust, " Just think now that there's niggers so ignirent as to fall down and worship this here old figgerhead—why, I shouldn't have believed——"

But what Bales would not have believed was not destined to appear on that occasion, for at that instant he lost his balance and fell, accompanied or preceded by his burden. A wild clutch at the small overmantel brought the entire piece down, with its valuable load of old Bohemian glass, Venetian pottery, and Roman terracotta, the hard-won spoils of Campion's continental wanderings, and Bales lay on his back in the midst of the ruin.

" Well," said Campion, rather grimly, as he relieved him of the overmantel, and picked him out of the fragments, " you've contrived to come down on a rather extensive scale, Bales."

Bales sat up and rolled his eyes : " I've come down on the edge of the fender," he said. " It'll take me a hour to clear up this mess," he added, in an injured tone.

" I didn't make it, confound you ! " said Campion, laughing in spite of his anger ; " here, get up and collect the fragments. My Hermes smashed to atoms, I see, and I suppose the idol has come off no better."

" The idol, sir, being made uncommon strong, has remained 'ole and entire, which is more than I can say the same of my 'ed ; my skull's all in fractions, and my brain's in that state of concussion, I'ardly know what I'm a sayin' of, or whether I'm settin' down or standing up. All I can say is, the next time your friend takes a fancy for sending you a present, I hope he'll choose one that's easier to 'andle, that's all."

But at least Sybil's gift had escaped the slightest scratch, and Ronald, in the midst of his annoyance at the wholesale destruction, was glad that he would not have to* tell her that her idol was in fragments.

Where should he place it now ? Perhaps, after all, the studio and not the sitting-room was the best place for it,,

and there Sybil would see it when she came the next day ; he had a little Chinese pedestal round which a gaudy dragon curled itself, and upon this pedestal he established the idol for the present.

The next morning, when he came in to his breakfast, it was to find a letter on his plate, the stamp and marking of which made his hands shake as he opened the envelope ; he knew it contained the long-expected answer from Sybil's father, Colonel Elsworth.

It was a cautious and rather hesitating letter. The Colonel began by saying that, if Campion's position and projects were all he had stated them to be, there could be no reasonable objection to the match, particularly as his sister, who was a better judge of these things than he could be, had allowed them to become engaged ; for he presumed that her consent would naturally have been obtained in the first place. Still, he added, as a father, he was bound to take nothing for granted ; he had been some years away from England, which would probably account for Campion's name and works being unfamiliar to him, but he preferred to make all necessary and proper inquiries before he could allow any distinct engagement, especially as he had not heard as yet what his sister's views in the matter might be. He hoped to be home on leave very shortly, and then it would be time enough to decide, and he left it to Mrs. Staniland (as he should write and tell her himself in the course of the week) to say on what terms Campion and his daughter should be permitted to meet in the interval before his return, or whether they should meet at all. Campion might save time by showing her that letter if he thought fit.

It was perhaps as favourable as he could reasonably expect ; he had no cause to dread the result of the Colonel's " inquiries " ; after all, thanks to the legacy, which would doubtless be paid in soon now, he was able to marry without positive imprudence, and he was beginning to be recognised in his art as a man who might make his mark some day. Yes, if Sybil only remained

A FALLEN IDOL

true to him—for already the "if" had thrust itself once more into his hopes—he had no fear of overcoming all opposition.

Then came a disturbing thought—what if Mrs. Staniland, too, had heard from the Colonel that morning? then Champion's own confession would be forestalled, and she might be hopelessly prejudiced against him. The probability made his work fitful and unsteady until the time fixed for the appointment, and when the studio bell announced that Sybil, and Sybil's aunt, had arrived, he felt extremely ill at ease.

But Mrs. Staniland's manner, which was the same as usual, showed him at once that she suspected nothing as yet; the Colonel must have put off writing or missed the mail, and Champion was still in time.

She was a stately, handsome old lady, with iron-grey hair veined with silver, large and luminous eyes, and a complexion still unwrinkled, and tinted like a delicate apple; she spoke with a certain incisiveness, and even when she meant to be most gracious her tone was the tone of one having authority.

"Now, Mr. Champion," she began as she shook hands, "this really must be the last sitting; I was going to send for you to come and tell me about the picture on the day we came home from Eastbourne, but it really was such a frightful evening I didn't like to send my man out."

"It only wants one more sitting," he said, "and then I shall not have to trouble you like this again."

"Oh, I don't mind any *necessary* inconvenience. Now tell me, do you want quite such a glare of light as you have here? I should have thought it so unbecoming to any complexion—but you are the best judge, no doubt. I'm going to settle myself down as comfortably as I can, and you get to work, and let us have it over. You surely haven't left Willoughby in the carriage, Sybil; ah, no, there he is. Willoughby, come here, sir, and keep mistress company!"

Willoughby was the pug, who reluctantly abandoned

the tour of inspection he had begun, to lie by her side in a little Oriental divan, the one oasis of luxury in that artistic desert, in which Mrs. Staniland was now established with a work-basket, books, and papers as specifics for *ennui*.

Sybil had thrown off her heavy furred cloak, and was standing before her portrait in the pretty white dress in which she was being painted, and he came and stood at her side.

"Are you satisfied?" he asked.

"I—I think it is very clever." He thought he detected a certain embarrassment in her tone.

"But not all you could wish? Please be quite candid."

"Well—don't you think, if you were to give me a little more colour. Am I quite as pale as you make me?"

"A painter sees things with different eyes—that particular tone is a very great charm."

"But I can't believe I look my best when I'm not well."

"You must understand that the picture is still very far from finished; you will find many changes no doubt when you next see it. I hope you will own then that I have not quite failed."

He spoke rather distantly, partly owing to Mrs. Staniland's presence, but he was also a little offended; that warm creamy pallor of hers had no suggestion in it of ill-health, and was done full justice to upon his canvas. She might have perceived as much, he thought.

"You seem rather long in getting posed to-day, Sybil," said her aunt from her distant corner.

"We have begun now," said Campion. "Now, Miss Elsworth, if you can only keep like that for a few minutes."

Sybil indulged herself in a little mock-petulant grimace, after which she subsided, and he threw all his energies into the task of transferring to his canvas something of her provoking fascination and adorable capaciousness.

In her secret soul Mrs. Staniland did not consider art a sufficiently serious occupation to be carried on in silence,

A FALLEN IDOL

and she began a conversation by asking whether Campion had heard of her latest trial. " Yarker, my butler, has left me—oh, a month ago now," she explained ; " so inconsiderate and troublesome of the man, just when he had got into my ways. But nothing would do for him but he must go and be a policeman. So I told him, ' Of course, if you're bent upon going, you must, but I hope your conscience will reproach you sometimes under your new policeman's helmet.' That is always the way with every person I am interested in and try to assist. You remember that under kitchen-maid I told you of—the girl I rescued from singing at low music-halls ? "

" The girl who was beaten by a brutal father because she declined (with perfect propriety) to sing some of her songs ? " inquired Campion.

" Yes, *that* girl. Well, her scruples allowed her to sing all over my house—and I cannot imagine how any songs could be worse ! Then she was so violent, threw saucepans at the gentlest reproof, and her language was simply horrible. So she had to go, and now—would you believe it ?—she comes to the door every other afternoon with a piano-organ. Ah, it's an ungrateful, deceitful world, or so I have found it. Why, even that young piano-tuner who asked my opinion so modestly of some really charming little verses—*he's* a bitter disappointment! "

" Why, what has he done ? "

" Well, he hadn't done the verses. Copied them, if you please, almost word for word, from an old American magazine where Sybil found them—the only alteration he made was to spoil the metre. And when I taxed him with it he had the impudence to tell me there was no international copyright, and that he had only ' adapted ' the poems. Really it does seem as if I was doomed to be deceived sooner or later by everybody I try to help ! "

" Not everyone, I hope," said Campion, with a passing pang of conscience.

" I was not thinking of you when I said that. I am sure you will prove yourself an exception. By the way,

I expect my brother, Sybil's father, home on leave shortly, I ought to have heard from him before this, but he never did write home regularly. When he does come I must bring him here to see you ; it's so good for a young man to have a few influential friends ! "

" As I have found ! " said Campion.

" Oh, well, when I discover genius in any form I like to encourage it. I wish I could say the result was more generally satisfactory. What is the matter with Willoughby ? he has stolen away where I can't see him, but I can tell from his bark that he's excited. Do kindly go and see, Mr. Campion, for I can't leave my embroidery."

" I assure you," said Campion, " he is not likely to do any harm here."

" But I'm sure some rat must be worrying him, poor dear ; please go and drive it away."

" Not a rat in the place, I give you my word," protested Campion.

" Let me get down and see," said Sybil.

" You—not for worlds ! " cried Campion ; " it's too absorbing just now for me to think of allowing you to move. I'll attend to Master Willoughby as soon as I can."

" Mayn't I turn my head ? " she asked.

" Yes, if you will keep your hands still."

They were beautiful hands, and, as they lay lightly folded in all their charming indolence, he was rendering their pliant curves and satin surface with the eager ardour, the breathless excited care of a painter who was also a lover.

There was a mischievous sparkle in Sybil's eyes when she turned her head towards him. " Would you like to know what it really is that is frightening my aunt's pug ? " she asked with her audacious smile.

" Not one of my productions, I hope," he said.

" No ; he seems to have taken one of his sudden dislikes to that very hideous little image over there on the pedestal. Is that a new acquisition ? I don't remember seeing it here last time ! " She said this with the utmost unconsciousness, only her eyes danced.

A FALLEN IDOL

Campion met those eyes with rather stern and serious ones. " It was given to me only yesterday," he replied, " by a friend."

" Singular thing for a friend to give, don't you think ? " remarked Sybil.

" Depends rather on the spirit it was given in," Campion replied.

" What a horrid phrase—as if it came in a bottle like a pickled snake ! But you must have thought just when you first saw it that your friend was laughing at you ? "

He frowned slightly. " I have thought so ever since—never more than now. And yet I have tried to believe too that my—my friend would not have deliberately stooped to trifle with me."

Sybil's eyes were soft and repentant at once : " I think you are right," she said softly, and she forgot that she had no right to clasp her hands just then. " Very likely your friend bought it because at the time he really thought it was a curiosity and interesting in its way. Perhaps he fancied, too, that whatever it was—coming from—from him, you know—you would value it ? "

" Now you have put it in that way, I feel sure of it. And the friend was not mistaken. I do value it."

" If I was giving some one I—liked a present, I should be careful to choose a rather hideous one, because then if he cared about it I should know it was not for its own sake, but for mine. Certainly your friend's gift is hideous enough, with that remarkably unpleasant smile, isn't it ? "

" Gifts are not to be criticised—are they ?—at least about the mouth. And I'm not sure that I am not learning to love this one for its own sake ; there's something in its face that distinctly grows upon one."

" I should be very sorry if it were to distinctly grow upon *me*. But do you really like it ? "

" I really do. To me there's an irresistible fascination about a really genuine ex-idol. Think of the power it has enjoyed in its day, the enthusiasm it has aroused, the faith it has inspired. This reduced idol has once kept a

temple of its own, with a staff of priests, all engaged in ministering to its requirements and celebrating its virtues. Nothing expected of it either, except an occasional miracle whenever it felt equal to it, and even that was probably performed by deputy. There it sat in an atmosphere of incense and flowers, hearing its own praises from an endless string of grovelling votaries."

"It must have grown very conceited," said Sybil, "or fearfully bored."

"Conceited, perhaps—but I doubt whether there is any real boredom about idolatry as far as the object is concerned; none of our popular idols have ever been heard to complain of the monotony of the thing—perhaps because it did not last long enough. As for this fellow, he enjoyed it all thoroughly—you can see that in his face. I dare say a sense of humour is left out of most idols, otherwise it must have amused him to have his interference in so much request, and find himself propitiated with presents to keep him good-tempered, when all the time he knew he hadn't influence enough to stop a shower or cure a cold."

"We are talking as if it was something real," said Sybil.

"A good many real people have been much more artificial, I dare say; it has been a reality to generations, which must have encouraged it to believe in itself as implicitly as anybody. And now, what a change for it! No one even knows whom it is intended to represent—unless it is an image of Buddha, which for Buddha's sake I hope it isn't. Nobody consults it even on the weather, nobody gratifies or even understands its tastes in the matter of flowers or genuflections. It's a mere chattel, a curiosity, 'a fellow that hath had losses 'without the consolation of 'everything handsome about him.'"

"How pathetic you are!" exclaimed Sybil; "I shall have to send you some Lent lilies for it. But it seems happy and contented enough; just see how it sits, smiling down on that poor frantic pug, like a cat on a wall."

Willoughby, who had evidently taken a violent pre-

A FALLEN IDOL

judice against the inoffensive stranger, had been growling and sniffing round its pedestal for some time, and now, unable to refrain from more open manifestations of dislike, he was barking furiously.

" Mr. Champion," said Mrs. Staniland, " may I ask you once more to bring Willoughby to me ; it's not good for him—all this excitement. He's so sensitive about any ugliness, poor pet, and that image of yours seems to affect his nerves ; do put it where it won't irritate him."

Champion had just fallen back to catch the effect of his latest touches, and, as he dispersed some of the colour with his thumb, and looked about for a rag, he said, " I should have said the irritation was all on Willoughby's side," but in another moment, " by Jove, he's brought the whole thing over ! "

" Oh, Ronald ! " cried Sybil, forgetting where they were for a moment, " see—the poor dog ! Oh ! it's horrible—move it, quick ! "

" Has Willoughby done any mischief ? " inquired Mrs. Staniland, preparing to put down her work and leave the divan with a stately deliberation.

" To himself, I fear," replied Champion, as he went to the aid of the animal, whose last furious leap had upset the pedestal, and brought the image down upon his own devoted head.

The idol lay face upwards, wearing what the immortal biographer of " Hon. Chief Justice Mookerjee " would describe as the " soft and fascinating beams of a simper," and underneath it lay the ill-starred pug, past all insults.

Mrs. Staniland was bending over him. " Willoughby—oh, my poor pug, speak to me !—oh, I don't know *what* I'm saying ! Sybil, fetch my salts."

She might have applied the gold-headed bottle quite as usefully to the idol's flat nostrils. To quote the biographer once more, " it proved after all as if to milk the ram," for the pug had already departed " to reside with the morning stars."

Sybil stood by, looking rather pale, and distressed for

her aunt's sake, for she had never been very warmly attached to the deceased Willoughby. " Oh, Aunt Hilary," she said, " I am so very, very sorry—such an unfortunate accident ! "

Mrs. Staniland rose, grey and grim, and turned towards Campion. " It was no *accident*" she said harshly, " it was wilful, culpable carelessness, if no worse. To leave a heavy stone on a rickety pedestal, where a breath might upset it. No; it could not have been left there without some motive."

Campion could hardly believe his own ears : " Do you really suggest that I planned this ? " he asked.

" Oh, I charge nothing! You were never really pleased to have my poor pet in your studio, and no trap could have acted better than this one. And I begged you over and over again to interfere and take Willoughby away. But, no, I was only a silly old woman, not worth any attention from such a clever young gentleman. I dare say you hoped to see him hurt himself. Well, you have had your wish ! "

The ruffled old lady's eyes were very bright, and her cheeks were now stained a clear crimson ; she was in a towering passion. It would have been unfair to take any serious notice of her wild accusations, which she would probably forget by the following day, and Campion restrained his own impatience.

But the chief thought in his mind was, " I cannot tell her about Sybil just now." " I think you are very unjust, Mrs. Staniland," was all he said.

" Not the least unjust, sir. I had a right, which you compel me to remind you of, to expect something very different. I think you owe something to me, and how have you repaid me ? "

" You are repaying yourself, Mrs. Staniland, when you speak to me in this way."

Ronald, more to cover his own rising anger than for anything else, was carefully placing the idol exactly upon the centre of an old cabinet—unluckily the action seemed only to further inflame his patroness.

A FALLEN IDOL

" Is this a deliberate insult, or mere callousness/' she demanded, " this that you are doing now ? "

" It seems only too easy for me to offend this morning," he said, " but I have no notion how I am offending now."

" And you actually intend to keep that dangerous blood-stained object amongst your ornaments—in spite of all!"

" Really, Mrs. Staniland, do you expect me to have it hung ? " he said, with an irritation he could control no longer.

" It pleases you to be sarcastic, sir," she replied. " But no one with a spark of decent feeling, to say nothing of taste, would care to keep such a thing about him after this, supposing it had been a mere accident. No, he would throw it out of window, give it away, break it to atoms—anything rather than that ! "

Sybil had been standing a little apart, listening with downcast eyes, slightly ashamed, perhaps, of the whole thing, and yet, as the corners of her lips betrayed, quite alive to the ludicrous side of the situation. Now, at this latest display of unreasonableness on her aunt's part, she raised her eyes, and looked at her lover with sudden curiosity to know what he would say.

" I can't do that," he replied, " for the fact is, this idol was given to me by a very dear friend——"

" Who made him promise, Aunt Hilary—promise solemnly—never to part with it! " Sybil added, eagerly.

" How do you know that, Sybil, if you please ? " said her aunt, sharply, and Miss Sybil remained discreetly silent.

" It is the fact, however ! " said Campion, " I could not part with it even if I wished to ! "

" Well ! " said Mrs. Staniland, bitterly, " I have my reward, I suppose. I might have expected it ! "

And then there was an awkward pause, for the studio door had opened, and Lionel Babcock came, self-satisfied and serene as usual, into the highly electrical atmosphere.

Babcock noticed things and persons in sections. His mind being a good deal concentrated upon himself, he

had shaken hands with Campion without having observed that he was not alone. " I've brought the picture I want you to help me with," he began, " got it outside in a cab——" here he stopped, and became vaguely aware of the others, " Oh—apologise, I'm sure, why, it's Mrs. Staniland—so it is, and my little Sybil—what luck, this is jolly now. I am glad, by Jove I am ! "

He was all geniality and boyish heartiness just then (a manner which he considered became him rather well); he shook hands warmly, as if he had not seen them for months.

" Well! " he said, " and how do you think this young lady's portrait is getting on, Mrs. Staniland ? "

" I have been given other things to think about," said Mrs. Staniland, stiffly.

" Have you, though ? " said Babcock. " Hallo ! why, Sybil, what's our cross-legged friend, the idol, doing here ? You don't mean to say you've brought him here to get Mr. Campion's opinion ; *he* doesn't know anything about Indian idols. Now, I've *been* in India. I could have told you in a second whether it was worth anything, when you were buying it yesterday, if you had asked me ! "

" Stop," said Mrs. Staniland, " what are you talking about, Lionel ? "

" Eh ? " exclaimed Babcock. " Why, surely you remember yesterday in Hanway Street; I came in while you were buying it; we had a little joke about it, you and I, didn't we, my child ? "

" Did we ? " said Sybil, " I have forgotten ! "

" Now I begin to understand," said Mrs. Staniland. " Lionel, will you be so good as to go outside and see if you can find the carriage, and wait there till we come out. I shall not be long—but I have some business to arrange with Mr. Campion first."

" By all means," said Babcock ; " wouldn't disturb you for worlds."

When he had gone, Mrs. Staniland turned upon Sybil: " Now, Sybil, no fibs, if you please—it seems *you* are the friend who gave this highly desirable gift."

A FALLEN IDOL

Campion was about to speak—but he was checked.
" Not you, please, yet, I want my niece to answer."

" Yes, Aunt Hilary, I gave it! " said Sybil.

" And may I ask if you are in the habit of sending presents to young men with whom you are slightly acquainted ? " her aunt demanded.

" Not as a general rule/' explained Sybil, " but—but it makes some difference, doesn't it, when you are engaged to the person ? I thought it did."

" When you are *what* ? " cried Mrs. Staniland ; " are you insane, Sybil ? "

" The truth is, Mrs. Staniland, that Sybil has promised to be my wife," said Campion.

" And how long may this have been going on ? "

" About six weeks," he answered.

" Indeed—six weeks ! I congratulate you both on your talent for intrigue and concealment."

" We wrote to Father, directly we knew it ourselves," said Sybil, " and we were going to tell you this very day."

" Most considerate of you, really ; for of course I had no claim, being only your guardian and his best friend, to be told at all."

" It was not Ronald's fault; he wanted to tell you at first, but I — I wouldn't let him."

" I don't know whom to admire most. And has my brother written to approve of this very prudent arrangement ? "

" I got his answer this morning," said Ronald, as he handed her the Colonel's letter. He felt extremely small. Thanks to Babcock, their secret had been disclosed in the most disastrous manner, and at the worst possible time.

Mrs. Staniland read the letter with pursed lips, and then returned it to Campion. " My brother," she observed, " seems to have taken it for granted that you would not have concealed this from me ; but Horace is too ready to give other people credit for possessing a sense of honour."

" Aunt Hilary ! " cried Sybil, " Ronald always wanted to tell you."

" Hold your tongue, Sybil ; Mr. Champion ought to be very well able to defend himself."

" Oh ! " exclaimed Champion, " I make no excuse."

" I can find none. Well, sir, my brother has left me full discretion, it appears, until his return. I shall exercise it. What I have heard gives me very little cause to trust either of you. I forbid you, Mr. Ronald Champion, to call at my house or attempt to see my niece without my permission. The least you can do is to engage now not to make your conduct any worse."

Champion looked at Sybil ; her eyes said, " promise anything." " I will engage," he stipulated, " not to attempt to see her for the present, provided you allow us to write to one another."

Mrs. Staniland gave a short harsh laugh. " Oh, I shall not attempt the impossible," she said. " Sybil understands, or she ought to do so, that she must abide by her father's decision. If you choose to correspond in the meantime, I don't suppose I could prevent it if I would. But no meetings, you understand."

" I will wait patiently," said Champion.

" And so will I, Ronald," said Sybil softly.

" Then I think that is all. As for the portrait, that must do as best it can. If you have a conscience, Mr. Champion, it should be troubling you now."

" It is," said Ronald, as he made a movement to open the door.

" Thank you, we do not require any help from you," said Mrs. Staniland. " Mr. Babcock is outside—good day."

She took up the body of the departed Willoughby, which she had laid upon the divan, and swept haughtily out of the painting room, followed by Sybil, who threw Champion a parting glance of half-comic despair and resignation.

Shortly after, Babcock came in with a large canvas.

A FALLEN IDOL

" Here you are, my boy," he said, " throw in an appropriate figure, and earn my undying gratitude. I say, has there been anything in the shape of a row ? "

" Well, yes," said Campion, " I think I may say there has."

" Ha ! you've had the ill-luck to offend our charming Sybil, eh ? She's touchy ! oh, yes, deucedly touchy ! But don't you mind, old chap, you know what I told you yesterday. I've some little influence in that quarter, and if I can make it all right for you, why, command me."

" Thanks," Campion said, " but Miss Elsworth and I have had no quarrel."

" Then it's the old lady ! Well, I know you must have had a good deal to put up with. Anything to do with Willoughby ? I see he's gone aloft ; always knew that beast would go off suddenly one day. What was the row about, eh ? "

" My dear fellow, that's my affair."

" Excuse me," said Babcock, puffing his cheeks importantly, " but, as one who may be rather closely connected with the family, don't you know, I think it's my affair as well."

" Then I will tell you, and you will see what right you had to be told. Mrs. Staniland has just discovered, thanks to you, what I was about to disclose myself—that Miss Elsworth and I were engaged."

" The devil you are ! " cried Babcock sharply.

" I should have told you yesterday," said Campion, " if I had not been pledged to secrecy."

Babcock had turned extremely red. " If that's so," he said, after a moment's delay, " you have made a pretty considerable fool of me between you."

" What do you mean ? " said Campion, sternly.

" Nothing ; only if I know anything of women—and I used to imagine I did—well there ! What was it Brabantio said to Othello after the council scene ? ' She has deceived her father, and may thee ! ' The quotation isn't quite on all-fours, but it's near enough. I'll reserve my •congratulations—and it's just possible they may be a

trifle fly-blown before I have an opportunity of offering them. By-by ! "

" Ta-ta ! " growled Campion.

When Babcock had gone, Campion paced the studio restlessly ; he was ill at ease, discontented with the part he had been made to play ; distrustful, he knew not why, of the future. Everything had gone wrong on this most unlucky morning ; and, though he knew Babcock too well to pay much attention to his windy insinuations, he felt that Sybil and himself had been forced that day to take paths that would lead them ever farther asunder.

4. *Last Touches*

BY the next morning Campion's spirits had somewhat risen. After all, this untoward rupture with Mrs. Staniland was not likely to be final. Before many weeks he would, in all probability, find himself in a position which could not be fairly considered detrimental.

The payment of the legacy which had been so opportunely left him could not be long delayed. And then he had high expectations with respect to his two Academy pictures, and he knew that his portrait of Sybil Elsworth would attract some attention at the Grosvenor. So that if only Sybil remained staunch and true to him, he had no reason, even with Mrs. Staniland against him, to expect dismissal from the Colonel.

He found on his breakfast-table a letter in a blue envelope, on which he read the name of the solicitors who had first informed him of his legacy. The executors were ready to pay it in already, he concluded, with satisfaction ; but he had scarcely opened the envelope before his satisfaction vanished with his appetite.

For the letter was in the following terms :

Slipcup deceased.

DEAR SIR,—We are instructed by the exors. to lose no time in informing you that on sending down to Somerset

A FALLEN IDOL

House this day for grant of probate of the will of above deceased we discovered that a *caveat* had been entered, the object of which, as we have subsequently ascertained, is to have such will declared void, on the ground that at the time of its execution testator was of unsound mind. You will not need to be reminded that, should the proceedings which will probably now be necessary in the Probate Division have the result of upsetting the will in question, all legacies thereunder will fail in consequence ; and without, of course, expressing any opinion here as to our opponents' case, we would venture to impress upon you the step that they have taken is one which may very seriously prejudice your interests as one of the legatees.

We are, etc.,

MOORE, BRADSHAW, AND MOORE.

New Square, Lincoln's Inn.

Uneasy recollections of his relative's reputed " oddness " came back to Campion as he read this letter. He had scarcely known him by sight, but till now he had flattered himself that he owed his unexpected legacy to the testator's pride in a kinsman's rising fame, and it was the more unpleasant to see in it only additional proof of eccentricity.

He thought he would go to Lincoln's Inn and hear if there was any real danger that the will would not be upheld, and the partner who saw him was not unsympathetic, and as communicative as his profession allowed.

But he did not pretend to take a very encouraging view of the case, for, as he remarked with much weight, if the case went into the court, and it was proved that the deceased had, as it was currently reported, devoted much of his later days to fruitless attempts to drill ducks in his back-garden, the fact might not increase the jury's confidence in his testamentary capacity—a view with which poor Campion agreed with a sinking heart.

He could not learn with any certainty when he might expect to know the worst; it appeared that the executors had entered something known as a " warning to the *caveat*,

and the next move must come from the other side, while some time must pass before the case could be set down for trial. Upon the whole, the cautious solicitor succeeded in impressing Campion with the proper degree of gloom.

If, he reflected on his way back, this legacy were really about to prove a legal mirage, he might find himself in a somewhat embarrassed position, for, under the impression that his former strict economy was now no longer necessary, he had run up some considerable bills of late, at his colourman's and framemaker's.

Then there was Sybil. How would this affect his prospects of success with her father, perhaps even with herself? At all events, it must have the result of postponing the marriage if his own income were no longer assured; for Colonel Elsworth was by no means a rich man.

But Campion resolved to shake off all forebodings. Why should he despair when, at that very time, possibly, his studio contained canvases that would bring both fame and wealth?

On inspection, however, they satisfied him less now that he had become so much more dependent upon them. How was it that he had never noticed before how low they were in tone, how deficient in colour and breadth of treatment. Was it too late even then to bring them nearer to his conception of what they might be?

He decided to make the attempt, and had a wonderful sense of mastery and increased vision as he went over the old ground with rapid, nervous touches. In three hours he had entirely transformed the "Xerxes" canvas; now the several groups stood out in telling contrast against a flaming sunset sky, the faces and armour had been more boldly dealt with; the whole picture was suffused with a sombre glow.

He was satisfied at last, and now had courage to write to tell Sybil of the change in his fortunes, and ask her to give him some assurance that her constancy was unshaken. The letter was written in hot haste in his studio, and as he wrote the direction, he happened to look up and

A FALLEN IDOL

caught what seemed a look of bland encouragement and approval on the face of the oriental image on the cabinet opposite.

It was too precious a letter to trust to another hand, and he put it in the letter-box himself, confident of receiving the answer by return of post; he waited the next day, and two days more—but no reply came, though he knew that Sybil and her aunt were still at Sussex Place.

Then he went to the post-office and made inquiries, which he felt at the time were a farce, for he had no real doubt that his letter had been delivered in the usual way; they gave him a form to be filled up and sent to the Postmaster-General, but it occurred to him that Sybil might be troubled by official inquiries which would only vex her whether the letter had been received or not.

So he took the more sensible course of writing again, and his letter was one which no girl with any vestige of a heart could leave unanswered. Bales happened to come into the room shortly afterwards.

"Will you be wanting this yere image for a few minutes/' he inquired, "because I thought if you had no objections I'd get my missis to give it a wash down. What with the blacks and dust about, it's got so that a little soap and water wouldn't do it no 'arm."

"Just as you like," said Campion.

"This for the post, sir?" said Bales, as he was leaving the room with the idol tucked under his arm like a terrier, and saw Campion's letter on the table.

"No—let me see, I was going to the post with it myself; but, very well, Bales, only it must be posted in time for the last collection, mind!"

Bales went out with a kind of resentful grunt at being supposed in need of such a reminder. In about ten minutes the idol reappeared, not a whit cleaner, in the charge of Mrs. Bales.

"Could you oblige Bales with a little brandy, sir?" she asked.

" Certainly, you know where to find it. Isn't he well ? "

" He's had a slight fall, sir, and came down rather severe-like on the back of his head. I don't know what's come to Bales lately, he's took so to falling about and 'urting himself." And later in the day Bales's grim countenance was not improved by a bandage, but he made no reference to his accident.

Had Sybil a heart or had she not ? He waited again for some airily tender lines from her, but they never came.

He sent for Bales and questioned him ; but Bales was indignant at the mere suggestion of any default on his part. " Any letters, Mr. Campion, sir, as you give me to post, I post. You gave me that there letter—and posted it was, you may depend upon it."

After this he decided not to write again ; Sybil's silence was evidently intentional. Still, he did not blame or doubt her; she might be prevented, or have promised not to write until she had seen her father.

Campion declined to believe the worst in her case, and tried to concentrate his whole energies upon the " Sappho " in which he had now produced a wonderful alteration ; he was still eagerly at work when the men came with packing cases to carry the two largest canvases to the Academy.

But when they were off his hands he found himself more and more troubled by Sybil's silence.

There were little phrases of hers which he had thought at the time charming in their affectation of impertinence and indifference. Were they no affectation after all ? She never concealed the girlish pleasure she took in making dainty little experiments on his feelings. Was this only heartlessness ?

He used to ask himself these questions as he stood before her portrait, and even asked the pictured face as if those lips, smiling so disdainfully, were able to answer him " Tell me, you are not cruel, not indifferent—you do love me a little ? "

The picture was finished, but now he began to feel

A FALLEN IDOL

dissatisfied with it—he had meant to do so much more, and he felt that he had come very far short of rendering the exact shade of expression he thought to have surprised.

And there seemed now a want of balance in the composition, which he could have wished to set right before it was too late ; some accessory was needed at the right of the picture to keep the gorgeous hangings from becoming too prominent, and to relieve their somewhat bizarre effect.

It happened that at the instant this occurred to him his eye was resting upon the figure of the idol, and he uttered an exclamation of sudden enlightenment. There was his accessory ! Yes, it was the very thing, in sufficient character to harmonise with the surroundings, so quaintly ugly as to accentuate the charm of his subject. It seemed as if some instinct had led Sybil to give it to him for this particular purpose.

And then if she really were drifting apart from him, would she not, when she recognised the addition he had made to her portrait, see in it a mute appeal—a witness of the link between them ? It could not displease, and it might even succeed in touching her.

After this fancy had taken thorough possession of him, not all the best judges in London could have dissuaded him, on the most unanswerable artistic grounds from carrying it out.

He placed the idol upon the dragon pedestal, and began to paint it experimentally, but he had scarcely done more than indicate its position on the canvas before he became enchanted with his success. He painted on for two days, denying himself to everyone, scarcely allowing himself time for meals, so strongly did his subject appeal to his imagination ; and as he went on, he was astonished himself at the brilliancy and accuracy with which he had imitated its dingy tone and grotesque features.

He found himself able too to catch the exact expression in Sybil's eyes and mouth which had haunted and eluded him till then ; it was rendered in so marvellous

and lifelike a manner that he caught his breath, only half able to believe that his hand had really attained to such added skill.

Picture-Sunday passed, but did not affect him, for, wisely or unwisely, he had never encouraged the society stream to flow through his studio, and it now passed him by in ignorance.

Still he worked on, retouching and improving, with ever-growing delight, until past the regular Grosvenor sending-in day, for, on giving the measurements of the space his picture required, he had been granted a few days' grace, but at last, one afternoon, he had to allow it to be taken away, and saw it depart with a sense of desertion.

Even then he was not disposed to be idle. He had forgotten Babcock and his landscape all this time, but now, with a feeling that he owed it as a kind of atonement to his departed rival, he painted in a figure from an old sketch-book with all the care he could bestow.

And, a fortnight later, a letter bearing the royal arms was brought to him, containing an official notice which he read with a sick bewilderment.

Two-thirds of his year's labour wasted, a crushing and double failure ! Xerxes and Sappho, in which he had been so proudly confident, rejected !

His self-confidence staggered under the shock—where was all the increase of power he had been so conscious of ? How could he have deceived himself so blindly, so grossly ? If Sybil's portrait had not already left the studio, he would have destroyed it then and there in the first mad rush of despair and disappointment. It was safe at least from rejection, having been sent by express invitation, but for all he knew now it might prove as hideous a failure.

He was still chafing under the bitterness of this rejection, when an Academician called Perceval, who was on the Hanging Committee that year, looked in to see him. Perceval had always been a kind and appreciative friend, who had shown a warm interest in Campion from his student days.

A FALLEN IDOL

" You've had your medicine, I see, eh ? " he said, as he saw the young painter's face.

" Yes ! " said Campion with a forced laugh, " and gulped it down."

" Well," Perceval said, " I did all I could for you, but it was no use—they wouldn't have you at any price."

" Thanks," said poor Campion, drearily, " and—and did you think them so infernally bad ? "

" Do you want my candid opinion—don't say ' yes ' if you mean 'no.' Very well, then, if you must have it, I couldn't believe my eyes when I read your name on 'em. My dear boy, what could you have been about to send in such screamers, like the picture outside a shooting saloon, or a peep-show, by Gad they are ! I assure you, I consider it a good thing for you they are rejected ; you'd have been guyyed, sir, if they'd hung you."

Campion groaned. " You saw them a couple of months ago, and spoke rather well of them."

" Well, you've played the very deuce with them since. I scarcely knew 'em again at first. Come, my boy, you must set to and turn over a new leaf unless you want to join the noble army of rocket-sticks. You've got on a wrong track ; you're playing to the gallery, and a confounded transpontine kind of gallery at that."

" I suppose you're right, Perceval. I've been a fool. I've perpetrated a portrait, too, which can't escape the pillory, for it's at the Grosvenor. If the others are bad, I suppose this is even worse, for I thought it was the best thing I'd done."

" Go round to the Gallery and see if you can't get them to let you have it back. You mustn't play any tricks with your reputation just yet, my dear fellow ; leave that to *us*."

Campion shrank from this extreme step. " I can't do that, so much depends on it, I can't trust my own judgment any longer. Perceval, you know them there, you're exhibiting something yourself, aren't you ? I'm leaving town to-night—I can't stay here now—will you

see the picture if you can, and use your own discretion ? If it's bad, use all your influence to get it taken down. I'll give you the fullest authority."

" Well, I don't suppose they're often asked to do such a thing, and it may be a ticklish business to manage," said Perceval, " but I'll try my best. If the portrait (I haven't seen it, so I don't know), but if it's poor work and unworthy of you, I'll worry them till they give it up."

" They may be glad enough to be let off hanging it," said Champion gloomily.

" If it's at all like the other two," Perceval replied, " I can't say I should be surprised if they were. Can't imagine what's come to you this year ! "

" I expect I belong to the order of Jonah's gourds," said Champion bitterly, " and produce a gold medal pump-kin, and some biggish leaves—and then wither."

" Don't talk that nonsense to me. Come, come ! cheer up, my boy, you'll pull round all right, never fear. And I'll do what I can about the portrait, and let you know the result, eh ? "

Champion thanked him warmly, and gave the address of the little country village where he was going to hide his shamed head for the present, and they parted.

It was with a sore heart that he signed the receipt which was to authorise Bales to take back his unlucky canvases, and then left town, to spare himself the sight of them just then.

Here it may be said that when, some days after his return, he found courage to look at Xerxes and Sappho once more, he was forced to admit the justice of their condemnation. He could hardly believe he had painted them, they were so crude, so barbarically garish in colour, so far below in everything but the conception all that he had ever done, that it seemed as if only some lying spirit could have inspired him with any confidence at all in them.

However, before another week had passed, this telegram came to him at the homely inn where he was staying : " Have seen pic. Daring very, but far from bad.

A FALLEN IDOL

Think it will do. Hung on line end of East Gallery. Under circs. I let it stay there."

What relief this pregnant message brought him ! he was not such a complete failure, then, after all. Sybil would not have to think him a wretched impostor, and the fate of his Academy failures troubled him no more.

He had intended to remain away from town until after the private view, but now he found courage to return.

5. *Explanations*

" If thou wilt leave me, *do* not leave me last,
When other petty griefs have done their spite,
But in the onset come ; so shall I taste
At first the very worst of fortune's might."—*Sonnets*.

IN spite of the fact that his mind was at ease respecting the portrait, Campion was by no means cheerful during his journey to town. In all probability he would meet Sybil at the private view next day, but he could not calculate with any certainty upon the treatment she might see fit to accord him, and he could not help feeling himself in a very anomalous position. She had not written a line to him since he saw her last; he could not even be sure whether he might still consider himself engaged or not. To-morrow her first look would end his doubts—but he rather shrank from thinking how they might be determined.

Consequently it was with a thrill rather of anxiety than pleasure that, after he had stepped out on the Paddington platform, he found himself suddenly almost face to face with Sybil Elsworth.

She was coming towards him without the slightest appearance of recognition. Her eyes were scanning the line of doors and windows with an air of absorbed inquiry that looked only too like an attempt at evasion. He hesitated, pride urged him to pass on, common sense suggested that he would be a fool if he concluded the worst without

more unmistakable proof, and at that instant she saw him, and his suspense was over.

The sudden light in her deep eyes and the frank welcome in her smile and voice were enough to chase away all his brooding misgivings. No, she had not given him up yet.

" You didn't expect to meet me here ? " she said, almost in the same breath with her first greeting.

" No," he replied, " I have just come up from Diggle-swede, in Worcestershire, and had no reason to hope for this."

She shot a reproachful glance at him. " But you were going to pass on at first—you know you were."

" I wasn't sure what you would wish," he replied.

" Dear me," laughed Sybil, perhaps not without a spice of vexation, " that was very punctilious of you. It would never have occurred to me that duty expected us to cut one another ! "

" Not duty exactly," he explained.

" Then what was it, please ? "

" You took no notice of my letters," he said, " I couldn't tell how they might have changed you."

" But I never got them ! And so you have been doubting again ? Ah, Ronald, I had more faith *in you* ! "

" Did you write ? "

" No, but only because Aunt Hilary got a promise from me that I would not be the first to begin. I shouldn't have promised, but I thought you were so certain to write. But you did after all, so it's all right—isn't it strange, though, that I should never get your letters ? "

" Sybil," he said passionately, " I begin to see—your aunt has taken care that my letters should not reach you. This is her work ! "

She was startled. " Aunt Hilary ! " she exclaimed. " Oh, if I thought that, but it can't be—it isn't like her."

" I wouldn't think so if I could avoid it. No doubt in keeping back my letters she considered she was doing her duty to you. There, we won't trouble about it, will

A FALLEN IDOL

we ? for, after all, her plans have broken down. How did you come to be here alone ? "

" I — I forget," she said, with a happy little laugh. " Oh, I know, I was sent to meet a Miss Moon, who is coming to stay a few days with Aunt Hilary. I'm not alone. Griffiths is here with the carriage, and if you look you will see our youthful James staring with all his eyes at you and me. But evidently Miss Moon has missed the train, or got into one going the wrong way ; she generally makes a few circles, I believe, before she gets on the right track—like a carrier-pigeon. And the question is now—what is to be done next ? "

" Wait till the next train," suggested Campion.

" It doesn't come in till nearly seven," she said. " I don't know what Griffiths would do if he was asked to wait for three hours."

" Couldn't you send the carriage away and wait here—with me ? " he suggested desperately.

She shook her head gently. " Not for three hours, Ronald. And besides, I don't suppose Miss Moon will come to-day now."

" But she may," pleaded Campion, " and she'll expect some one to meet her, poor thing."

" How kind of you to think of that ! " said Sybil mischievously, " and wouldn't you really mind waiting here all by yourself ? Because I could give you her description, and you could meet her and explain things and put her comfortably into a cab, and all that, you know."

" I could do it, of course," he said uncomfortably, " if you insisted on it. But, Sybil, I have so much to talk to you about. If you could only stay a little while and listen."

" You forget that you were not to attempt to see me at all," she said.

" Our meeting like this was an accident," he said, " and in any case, your aunt has not kept faith with me, Sybil. I consider I am released. Those letters contained very important news, and if I am not allowed to tell it to you in any other way, I must speak. Don't send me away."

EXPLANATIONS

" I never said I meant to do that," she replied, " but what do you propose ? "

" Send back the carriage, and let me see you back to Sussex Place," he said boldly.

" It would be great fun," she agreed, " but what would Aunt Hilary say ? "

" She has chosen to suppress my letters after pretending to allow us to correspond ; she can't fairly complain of the consequences."

" No," said Sybil, " and after all, we have a perfect right to be together, you and I. Yes, you shall take me home."

The page was told that Miss Moon had not arrived, and that the carriage would go back empty. On the box, driving home, he drew down upon himself a severe snubbing from the coachman for certain comments he had ventured respecting the strangeness of Miss Sybil's last caprice.

" You are a boy, James," said Griffiths, " and as such, it is not your place to pass remarks on your betters. And what's more, if I hear you repeating it in the kitchen, James, I shall feel obligated for to fetch you a crump over the head as you won't forget—not partickler soon, James."

That Griffiths himself preserved an inviolable reticence on the subject is in the highest degree improbable, for the servants of a household find their chief drama and fiction in the sayings and doings of the family, and it would be too much to expect that the entertainment thus provided should escape all criticism.

In the meantime Campion, after disposing of such luggage as he had, was driving with Sybil towards York Gate, from which they intended to walk slowly across the Park.

How delightful that drive with Sybil was ! For a time he was content to sit almost silent by her side, and watch her charming animated face and listen to her voice once more.

He had that to tell her which might raise a barrier

A FALLEN IDOL

between them. He would leave himself, he thought, this one perfect recollection before he spoke ; and all too soon they were at Regent's Park and it was over.

It was a lovely spring afternoon, with a balmy warmth in the air. The foliage generally was still sparse, and only the smaller trees had burst into leaf ; but here and there the curving chestnut branches ended in a pale knob, and the bare outline of an elm was softened by a delicate mist of green.

They were outside the ring of the Botanic Gardens before Campion told his story of defeat, and having begun, he told it manfully, beginning with his threatened legacy and ended with his Academy reverses.

When he had finished, she laid her hand upon his sleeve with a pretty sympathetic caress. " And have you been making yourself wretched all this time by thinking I had given you up ? I suppose you thought it was only your money I cared about, and that I should reject you because the Academy did. I didn't consult the Academy when I accepted you, Ronald ! "

" Ah ! but, my darling, it leaves me in a very different position from what I was. I may lose the only thing which justified me in asking you to have me ; in any case, I have lost ground as a painter by these two failures. I may never be anything but a poor beggar all my life now."

" I shan't mind," said Sybil lightly. " I'll be a poor beggar too."

" I'm afraid your father won't hear of that," he said, " even if I was selfish enough to ask for it."

" Then I will wait, Ronald. Oh ! I know you think me frivolous and unfeeling, because I do enjoy tormenting you a little, but I do really care for you very much all the time, and you might—you *might* believe in me a little more than you do ! "

A great revulsion came over him of intense joy and relief and gratitude, and a little shame, too, that he should again have misjudged her. It found a vent in broken expressions of self-reproach and devotion. " If

you could only know," he concluded, " how wretched I have been making myself! "

" All about nothing too," she observed. " But you won't be so foolish again, will you ? "

His heart swelled with happiness and love, as he saw clearly that, all unworthy as he was, he might henceforth rest secure of her affection. She would never change, unless, which was absurd, he changed first.

And so they walked on by the edge of the lake, where they had met once before, and all around them seemed in harmony with their own happiness. From the little suspension bridge came the lively clatter of feet over its planks, and the merry shouts of the ragged urchins sliding face downwards on its broad supports. Pleasure boats, propelled by various experimental methods, were splashing over the dark olive water, laced by amethyst ripples, and the waterfowl quacked and screamed with the delight of outwitting one another in the hunt for bread.

Under the trees, on the benches a few tired wanderers were sitting, their worn faces less haggard as they felt the influence of the scene, with the birds twittering gaily above, and the children at play around, while outside the traffic rolled with the soothing rise and fall of a distant sea.

Perhaps the well-to-do and middle-aged are not as appreciative of our parks as they might be. If they were, we should surely find less apathy in providing for the needs of the London of the future in this respect. But the poor and the weary, the children and the lovers know the value of such magic enclosures, where the outside world is left behind at the keeper's lodge.

For lovers especially, not the Forest of Arden could offer greater facilities—except in the trifling detail of cutting names, and on the other hand, your park-keeper is a less fearful wildfowl than your lion.

For Campion, at least, Regent's Park was a paradise on that unforgettable afternoon, and everything in it was eloquent of the long happy summer that was at hand.

" I wonder what Aunt Hilary will say to me when she

A FALLEN IDOL

hears where I have been and with whom ! " said Sybil. " I can manage her now, though ; I have found out her plot. I shall be fearfully stern and angry, if I can only keep it up long enough. She really has behaved very badly, and I ought to be in a greater rage than I am. But even yet I can't quite imagine her doing such a thing ; it is so unlike her, with all her little peculiarities."

" I would rather believe, myself, that she had no hand in it, " he agreed. " But then her getting that promise from you is very suspicious, Sybil. I'm afraid there is only one explanation."

" I shall soon know," said Sybil. " It's disappointing, because I was beginning to think she was rather ashamed of making such a fuss about our poor dear idol. What is the matter, Ronald ? "

For he had uttered a half-suppressed exclamation at the word. All at once he saw the use to which he had lately put the idol in a new and startling light. In his enthusiasm as a lover and a painter he had, strangely enough, perhaps, entirely overlooked the probability that Mrs. Staniland would resent his introduction into Sybil's portrait of the image which had been the instrument of her favourite's decease.

Now he felt that he had been guilty of the rashest folly in thus deliberately reopening the wound. He could little enough afford to give fresh cause of complaint, and yet in his blindness that was precisely what he had done !

" Nothing," he replied, to Sybil's last question ; " that is, I was thinking of the portrait at the moment."

" Oh, Ronald ! " she cried, " is there something worse to be told yet ? Is that rejected too ? "

He smiled at her naive anxiety. " Oh, no," he said, " that's all right—in fact, I believe it has one of the best places."

" How you frightened me ; but something is worrying you, I'm sure."

" I was thinking," he said slowly, " that it might be

better if you could persuade your aunt not to go to the Grosvenor to-morrow."

" *Not*, Ronald ! " she exclaimed ; " but of course we shall go, when we've tickets and everything ! We are going to lunch early and be there about two. I thought you would be there, and we should meet. Surely you're not afraid she will make a scene ; don't you know Aunt Hilary better than that ? "

" Well," he said, with a sigh of resignation, " it can't be helped, I suppose ; you couldn't go alone, of course, and she will see it some time."

" See what ? " asked Sybil ; but he continued as if to himself, " And after all, she may not think anything of it—why should she ? "

" I don't know, dear," said Sybil, " because, you see, I haven't any idea what you're talking about."

" It's a trifle," he said, " an alteration I made at the last moment. I wish now—but it's no use wishing."

" Aunt Hilary won't mind, if she even notices," said Sybil. " She is not very critical in art matters."

" It's hardly a question of art. I intended it to touch you, and you only. I begin to think I was a fool to run such a risk."

" Why do you excite my curiosity in this unfeeling way ? " said Sybil. " Tell me at once."

" No," said Campion ; " we will see it together, dearest, to-morrow, and you shall tell me that you at least are not offended by what I have done."

" I don't like mysteries," she said, putting up her chin a little resentfully.

" Other people's mysteries ? Perhaps not," he said, laughing, " but I can't give up my little effect. I want it to burst upon you suddenly."

" But it doesn't amuse me to have effects bursting suddenly. I like to feel prepared for them. I didn't know you were so obstinate. If you really won't tell me I shall go away. Yes, I mean it, it's getting late, and I dare not stay here any longer. I must go and have it out

A FALLEN IDOL

with my wicked aunt. And, Ronald, things will be so different after to-morrow."

In a few minutes Sybil was at Sussex Place, and went straight to the drawing-room, where she found her aunt seated by one of the satin-shaded lamps, with her embroidery in her hands. She looked sharply up as her niece entered. "What does this mean, Sybil?" she demanded.

Sybil was stripping off her gloves, and as she spoke she was removing her hat and smoothing her pretty brown hair before a small mirror. "It means," she said, "oh, it means that Miss Moon never came after all."

"I know that—she will not come now till next week. I have just had a telegram. What I want you to tell me is why did you send the carriage home empty?"

"It was such a lovely afternoon I thought I would walk."

"You know very well I don't like you to walk about London alone, Sybil."

"Ah, but I wasn't alone—Ronald was there."

"Ronald Campion!" and Mrs. Staniland's tone and look were awful in their horror. "What, when you both promised?"

Sybil came and looked down at her with a smile of conscious power.

"You're a very wicked and cruel old lady," she observed, "and I'm extremely angry with you. You might have spoilt my life, if I hadn't found you out in time!"

Mrs. Staniland put down her work. "If you expect to carry off your disobedience by being impertinent," she said imposingly, "it will not succeed with me. You had no business to meet Mr. Campion without my knowledge—it was disgraceful of both of you."

"It was quite an accident. Still, you broke *your* word; you said we might write, you know you did."

"I don't see how that affects the case," said Mrs. Staniland stiffly.

"It's no use, Aunt Hilary. I know all—about those two letters Ronald wrote to me!"

" What about them ? "

" Ah, you know," cried Sybil, reproachfully. " I dare say you meant it all for the best, but it was not fair, indeed it wasn't. And so useless, because, whether you and Father like it or not, I shall never marry anybody else, you know. Now, be a good old lady and say you won't come between us again in that way."

" I think you have lost your senses," said Mrs. Staniland. " You are talking very strangely to me."

" Then I will speak plainly. Ronald sent me two letters ; I never got either. Aunt Hilary, I believe you best know why."

Mrs. Staniland rose stiffly. " That will do, Sybil. I never thought a niece of mine would insult me like this. I keep back letters after giving him leave to write ! If that is your opinion of me, the less we see of one another in future the better."

Instinct told Sybil that this indignation was no feint; she clung to her aunt, and detained her by gentle force from leaving the room. " Forgive me," she entreated ; " I'm ever so sorry I could think such a thing—I was a wicked wretch to suspect you."

" I presume," said the elder lady, as she sat down with a non-committal expression, " that Mr. Campion was good enough to suggest this ? "

" We didn't know what to think—you see, there were two letters ; they couldn't both miscarry, could they ? "

" Easily—if they were neither of them written," said Mrs. Staniland.

Sybil started. " Don't talk like that," she said ; " he *said* he wrote—why should he deceive me ? "

" That I can't tell. I only know that I have neither seen nor heard of his letters. If you want any further assurances——"

" You know I don't," cried Sybil, and sank down impulsively at her aunt's knees. " Won't you forgive me now—not when you see how penitent and humble I am ? "

Mrs. Staniland was disposed to make the most of her

A FALLEN IDOL

grievance. She turned away her head, and made some inarticulate sounds to convey that she was irreconcilably offended, but she could not resist the vivid upturned face very long, and presently kissed her on the mouth with a tolerably good grace. "You're a naughty wilful child," she said, "and I shall be heartily glad when your father comes home and my responsibility is over."

Sybil was playing with the lace on her aunt's dress. "You won't be angry with Ronald for this, will you?" she said.

"I have already told you that, as soon as your father arrives, I shall leave him to deal with this alone. Till then, it's my clear duty to see that it goes no farther."

"I mean, you won't prejudice Father against Ronald?" pursued Sybil. "You discovered him, you know, you dear old darling."

"As a painter, my dear, hardly as a *parti*. However, if your father is satisfied, I shall not interfere."

"Ronald told me to-day," said Sybil, "that it might be years before we could be married. He has been very unfortunate lately."

"Ah," thought Mrs. Staniland, whose experience had rendered her extremely shrewd in going behind appearances. "So he's trying to get out of it now that he finds I shall do nothing for him! And I suppose, my dear," she said aloud, "he offered to release you?"

"He was going to, if he did not in so many words," said Sybil, "but of course I wouldn't listen."

"Are you quite sure you were not intended to listen—and to consent? He knows by this time that your father cannot afford to do much for you."

"How can you say such things?" cried Sybil, drawing back indignantly, "you who can be so kind and good when you choose! I won't listen; you can't make me doubt him; only he himself could do that, and he never will. Why are you so bitter against my poor Ronald?"

"When you have lived as long in the world as I have, my dear, you may be as suspicious of everything men say

that sounds disinterested and noble, as I am. But I won't say another word. Mr. Ronald Campion may be everything that is high-minded ; I'm sure I hope so for your sake. I suppose he will be at the Grosvenor to-morrow, by the by ? "

" Yes," said Sybil, " and I forgot to tell you before, but I am hung very well indeed, he says ; isn't that a good thing ? And—and if we see him there, don't be stiff and proud to him ; be nice, and let him see that at least you don't mean to side against him. I shall keep you here till you promise."

" I wish you would learn to treat me with more respect, Sybil," Mrs. Staniland protested, but she could not withdraw her hands from Sybil's warm firm grasp, and she had to give the required assent at last. " There then, if Mr. Campion behaves himself he shall have no cause to complain of ill-treatment from me ; and now go and dress for dinner, you self-willed child, and let me have a little peace."

And while this conversation was being carried on, Campion was fondly retracing his steps across the park, for the mere pleasure of recalling the happy hour that had just fled ; of associating each step with some charming word or look of his lady's, like the lover in *Garden Fancies*. How lovely she had looked, how sweet and consoling she had been, how he loved her ! And the afternoon was gone and the tender spring twilight was far advanced before he had cooled sufficiently to remember that he ought to be returning to Romanoff Road. He let himself in, not without a passing shiver at the sight of some packing-cases by the door—his rejected pictures were inside them—and found himself unintentionally assisting at an apparently animated dispute in the painting-room, between Bales and his wife, which was audible from the entrance.

" If you don't tell him, Marire, I shall, that's all ! "

" You will, will you, carry tales against your own wife ? Do then ! "

A FALLEN IDOL

" Fve got my dooty to do, and, seem' as I ain't mixed up in it noway, I feel no 'esitation in doin' of it."

" Let me leave it on master's table, Bales, and say nothink—he won't notice anythink."

" Won't he, Mrs. Bales ? " said Campion, showing himself at the door of the painting-room. " Why ? "

Mrs. Bales put her hand to her side. " Oh, sir," she faltered, " I didn't go for to do it."

" There's a woman all over," remarked her devoted husband, " goes and drops a letter down behind a cabinet, where it might ha' been lost altogether if I hadn't come across it cleaning up."

" I didn't drop it down neither, so that's how much you know," retorted Mrs. Bales. " I went out of my way to be careful, as it so happens, for it came while you was out, and I put it so it would ketch your eye, sir, and to keep the draught from blowing it away I kep' it down with the corner of that Hingian bust there, and that's the truth if I was to die ! "

" Say what you like, Marire," persisted the inexorable Bales, " you can't get over the fact that I found the letter down behind the cabinet. You can't trust women with no documents, Mr. Campion, sir ; their brains ain't constructed for it."

" When you've both finished talking," said Campion, " I should like to have my letter."

Mrs. Bales brought it out from underneath her apron. " I do hope it ain't of any importance, sir."

Campion took the letter, which was directed to him in a hand that strangely resembled his own ; the postmark showed that it had been delivered about a month ago.

It contained the first letter he had written to Sybil after his change of fortune, and for some time he could not understand how this could be, till it occurred to him that, in his haste and excitement, he must have inadvertently written his own name and address on the envelope in mistake for Sybil's. It was foolish, but then a certain percentage of people every year post a letter with no address

at all. If he told himself he was incapable of a similar folly, why, there was the envelope to convict him.

So there was the failure of one letter accounted for ; was the non-delivery of the other capable of an equally simple explanation ? He resolved to question Bales more closely.

" You remember the letter I gave you to post some days ago," he said ; " did you notice the direction ? "

" You give me a many letters to post/" said Bales gruffly ; " was this any partickler one ? "

" It was one I gave you when you were taking this thing here downstairs to be washed."

" Oh," said Bales, " the day I fell down the kitching steps, and cut my head open. I remember."

" Well, you told me afterwards you had posted it, you know."

" In course I posted it—if I said so."

" No, Bales," put in his wife, " not the day you broke your head against that himage—not *that* day you didn't."

" What are you cackling about, Marire—how do you know what I did ? "

" Because you never stirred out of the house all that day ; you mostly laid on a chair and groaned, and swore, you did, till I thought Something would come for you." And Mrs. Bales concluded by declaring her conviction that he had the letter somewhere about him still.

" Oh, you think so, do you ? " snarled the insulted man. " I'm not one of your sort though ; there's nothing onreliable about me—you'd like to make out I was no better than yourself, I dare say. Well, you won't do it."

" You might examine your pockets though, Bales," suggested Campion.

" Oh, I'll do that cheerful. I ain't afraid—there, you see, nothing in that, is there, sir ? Nor in that, Marire ? Nor in—well, I needn't go on, / should think ? "

" No," said Campion, " for unless I'm mistaken, there's the letter."

" What did I tell you ? " cried Mrs. Bales.

" I can't account for it, sir," said the chapfallen Bales,

A FALLEN IDOL

" except that a trifle of that kind will slip out through a split head, do what you will—there's no call for you to snigger, Marire. If you'd had my excuse, I shouldn't have blamed you."

Campion dismissed the couple to continue their bickerings below, without expressing, or indeed feeling, any great annoyance. Now that he and Sybil had met, the fate of his letters had become unimportant.

The second letter was correctly addressed, he found, but had not passed through the post at all. The one thing that troubled him now was the injustice he had done to his benefactress in believing that she had tampered with the correspondence ; and although the discovery that he had been mistaken was a relief, as it proved her to be a less bitter and unscrupulous enemy than he had imagined, his conscience reproached him bitterly for his ingratitude—he especially wished that he had not communicated his suspicions to Sybil.

Still, this explanation certainly left him with better grounds for hope than before, and he was too happy just then to give more than a passing thought to his own readiness to judge uncharitably.

He had intended to dine at his club that evening, but after his meeting with Sybil, he did not care to carry that bright memory where it might be dulled or tarnished ; he must be alone to enjoy the anticipation of happiness.

And a little later, after an almost untouched dinner, he was wandering under the evening sky, luminous just then with a deep transparent blue in which the first stars were quivering.

Naturally, though he walked far and fast, in his aimless content, the " spirit in his feet " brought him at last to Sussex Place, where was the casket which contained his jewel. The curtains of all the windows were close drawn, and he could catch no glimpse of any form which he might persuade himself was Sybil's, but he found a certain satisfaction in looking up at the roof, with its prosaic parapet and chimney-stacks vaguely massed

against the star-sown sky ; no roof could be quite commonplace which sheltered her, and so, with his heart throbbing with exquisite exaltation, he went home to dream, if he might, of the morrow.

6. *The Private View*

" Let not my love be called idolatry,
Nor my beloved as an idol show."

THE hour was at hand to which Campion had been looking forward so impatiently ; it was about two in the afternoon when he turned into Old Bond Street from Piccadilly.

Bond Street was looking its best on that Saturday. A sharp brief April shower had given a freshness and brilliancy to the various tints of the house fronts ; the varnished roofs of the carriages that congested the thoroughfare glanced and glittered with past rain and present sunlight, and here and there, above the crowded pavements, a striped awning or projecting placard gave touches of vivid colour which were softened into harmony by the pearly haze that melted into the tender azure above.

The West End of London, sombre and gloomy in winter and autumn, hot and glaring in summer, has in spring a picturesqueness, a play of light and colour, an animation of pleasure rather than business, which give its streets an individual and irresistible charm.

The dullest " Season," capricious and unaccountable as that curious social institution is, has not as yet had time to find itself out, and flag untimely. Trade and its patrons are inspired with the lively but vague hopefulness which is as vernal as the almond-blossom itself.

Campion was just in the mood to be peculiarly susceptible to it ; all was going well with him. He was on his way to receive a double reward, smiles from his love, congratulations from his friends ; no wonder that his heart was light and his step elastic as he entered the Grosvenor portals, and passed up the crimson stairs, where the turn-

A FALLEN IDOL

stiles had vanished, and attendants received his ticket in a waste-paper basket.

A searching glance into the two chief rooms told him that those he came to see were not arrived as yet ; the place was in possession for the present of a few enthusiasts, who were apparently unaware that they were making an eccentric use of their tickets in looking at the pictures.

But even these did their inspection with the temporary air of people studying a railway advertisement, and kept a furtive watch for acquaintances whom it might be desirable to recognise or be recognised by.

Campion, from the entrance where he stood, could make out the frame of his portrait, which hung, as Perceval had told him, in the best position at the opposite end of the room ; how it adapted itself to its surroundings he could not tell, as the glass which protected the canvas caught the light in a way that left the painting invisible.

But it was attracting an attention that, at such a place and time, was flattering to a degree ; a small group was always in front of it, and none passed it by with indifference.

Should he go and assure himself that it did not suffer from its neighbours ? for, as has been said, he had not chosen to attend on varnishing day. He still shrank from the inevitable shock of seeing again in cold blood the work of those last impassioned days ; he told himself he did not want to hear unenlightened comments, whether in praise or blame. He would see it first at Sybil's side, and from her lips alone he would accept a verdict.

So he turned down into the little room, where he carefully examined a variety of water-colours which he never saw, till his growing restlessness allowed him to stay no longer, but even then it was the West Gallery, where his portrait was not, that he chose by a kind of half-conscious preference.

It was beginning to fill now, though chiefly with professors of art and criticism. Some one touched him on

the arm and he saw Perceval, whom he had not seen since the visit after his rejection by the Academy, and whom he thanked now for what he had done about the portrait.

" Nothing to do, as it happened/' said the Academician.
" Been to see it ? "

" Not yet," said Campion.

" Well, you should go," and Perceval chuckled, " 'pon my w^rord, to hear some of the remarks made about it, they'd amuse you ! By the way, who's your model ? Don't know her."

" It's a portrait," said Campion. " She's a young lady, a Miss Elsworth."

" And do you mean to say she's like that ? "

" I'm hardly a judge," said Campion, laughing ; " but I think it's not bad."

" Bad—it's devilish clever ; but how does the lady like it, eh ? "

" She hasn't seen it very lately, but she'll be here presently, and I hope she'll approve."

" Exactly," said Perceval, " and—well, I'm glad you're satisfied with what I did, or rather didn't do. Ah, Mrs. Pontifex, how d'ye do ? Soon be a crush now, won't there ? I don't know if you've met my young friend, Mr. Campion, before, if not——"

Mrs. Pontifex was a personage in her own set, with the power of conferring social degrees within a certain area. Campion had met her several times at Sussex Place, and she had always treated him with marked graciousness, and asked him more than once to her parties at Bryanston Square. So that he was rather surprised when, with the slightest bow, she said, " Thank you, I have had that advantage," and added without looking at him again, " Mr. Perceval, you're the very man I wanted ; do come and unriddle this very bilious and complicated allegory out here ; it's quite too much for my unassisted intelligence."

And she left Campion planted there, wondering a little whether there could be an intention in this capricious coolness. Before he could settle the point to his satisfac-

A FALLEN IDOL

tion, consolation came in the form of unexpected cordiality from another and equally influential quarter. A little lady, in a sensation costume, wriggled up with an effusion of delighted recognition. " It is Mr. Campion, I think. So very glad to see you ; had the pleasure of meeting you on several occasions at our dear Mrs. Staniland's."

Campion was not used to this kind of thing, and, coming as it did from Mrs. Venham Honiton, it was still more surprising, for though he had been introduced to her some time ago, she had dropped him systematically ever since, and he had imagined that this was due in some measure to his failure to respond to some sugared little sarcasms of hers, at the expense of his benefactress.

" I've been telling everybody to go and see it," she said. " You know what I mean : it really is wonderful, quite wonderful—the portrait of the year. Poor little Miss Elsworth will wake up to find herself famous."

" You are too kind," said Campion, unable to resist a pleasure in this unaccustomed flattery.

" What I liked so very much in your picture was its perfect truth ; it was quite refreshing, yes, really, to see some one one knows painted as she actually is in real life. And then that charming idol ; I could worship that idol. Only *you* would ever have thought of putting it there."

" I wanted as strong a contrast as I could find," he said. " I'm very glad you approve of the result."

" How *wicked* you are ! " she said, " you're too clever, Mr. Campion, you'll frighten people away. It's the Black Art you are most familiar with, I believe, or you could never have painted like that. But do come and see me ; Cornwall Gardens, you know, and always at home on Sundays. Now don't forget, and come soon."

And she writhed and fluttered away into the gathering throng, leaving Campion in a not unpleasant bewilderment. " By Jove," he was thinking, " I must have made a real hit this time, for that woman to be as civil as all that."

A fresh voice pronounced his name, and looking round he recognised two lady-artists with whom he had worked

at the Slade three or four years ago. He learned on inquiry that both were represented in the gallery, but he was implored not to attempt to find their productions. " For after seeing your portrait," said the elder, " we're quite out of conceit with our poor little daubs."

" And oh, Mr. Campion," the second struck in, " we want you to tell us about your mysterious girl. Is she *really* like that ? "

" I may not have done her full justice," he said, " still I think it is like her ? "

" Fancy anyone really being like that," they cried ; " do you think she knows it ? "

" I should say as little as is possible for anyone of her personal appearance."

" And that's why she sat to you, I suppose ? I shouldn't wonder if she was secretly very conceited."

" I'm not in a position to say," he answered coldly, " but the sittings were given at her aunt's request, not from any wish of her own."

" She might have refused. / should," remarked the elder, " but it's an ill-wind——That portrait is going to make your name, Mr. Campion, I prophesy it."

He found himself unable to follow the sequence of this last remark, and marvelled internally why girls, especially nice girls like these, could not afford to be more generous to their own sex.

They had turned to speak to some one else, and as Sybil and her aunt might come in at any moment, he was making for the East Gallery, when he ran against Lionel Babcock.

Babcock looked at him with a very curious expression. A mixture of surprise, resentment, disgust, and satisfaction was represented on his usually inexpressive countenance.

" Well, Campion," he said, " you've done it this time. And now I suppose you've come here to gloat over your performance ? "

" Kind of thing you *would* suppose, Babcock," said Campion shortly.

" Well, you've made Sybil Elsworth the talk of London

A FALLEN IDOL

—the poor girl won't be able to show her face this season. I should like to know what put such an infernal idea into your head ! "

" Look here," said Campion, " what do you mean ? "

" What did *you* mean ? Confound it, Campion, a portrait painter is in a position of trust; it's a low ungentlemanly thing to deliberately betray it, as you've done ! "

" You are talking of what you know nothing about," said Campion, flushing angrily ; " have the goodness to leave that to those concerned ; if *they* are satisfied——" He thought Babcock was taking upon himself to condemn his clandestine engagement, but he was soon undeceived.

" You've taken a fine way to satisfy them," Babcock interrupted with a sneer, " but perhaps you'll tell me you expect poor little Sybil will like the way in which you've thought proper to send her down to posterity."

Cold misgivings were stealing like serpents over Campion. " Babcock," he said, " what is wrong about the portrait ? "

" You won't make that sham innocence go down with anybody, you know," was all the answer he gained.

" By heaven," said Campion under his breath, " you *shall* give me an answer ! "

" You'll find the answer in the next room," said Babcock ; " beg to refer you to No. 999 in the Catalogue."

" Babcock, I will have this out of you, and know how to deal with it. Come with me now and show me fairly what you object to in the portrait."

Babcock shrugged his shoulders. " Of course if you persist in keeping this farce up," he said, " I don't mind ; only don't imagine I'm taken in by it—that's all " ; and he began to move towards the adjoining room followed by Campion.

Slowly, for the rooms were now filling fast, they made their way to the spot where the portrait was hanging, Campion consumed with a dread of he knew not what, as he began to recall the sinister form which the compliments so recently paid him had taken.

The portrait had not ceased to attract remark even yet; there was still a group before it and, strive as he would, Campion could not get near enough to see his work. The crowd blocked his way with a nightmare-like persistency, and all he could see between and over their heads was the sheet of glass reflecting the universal complacent smile, as at the appreciation of humour which would be thrown away upon ordinary intelligences.

How he longed, in the mad impatience of that moment, to plunge into the midst, and fight his way to the front, as if he were in a football scrimmage or at the pit doors of a popular theatre. But this was clearly not to be thought of, and he had to fret outside in a smouldering rage; listen to the comments around him, and wonder how long this slow torture would endure.

The comments only inflamed his anxiety. " Brilliant piece of painting, isn't it ? " one would say, and a female voice would reply, " But so exceedingly *peculiar* ; you're not going to tell me you positively like it ? I call it quite hideous ! " " That's not the fault of the artist; you can see he has been absolutely truthful and sincere ; and then, what masterly drawing ! " " Yes, look at those hands/' " And the colour, the *brio*, the consummate verve and audacity of the treatment; splendid, really splendid . . . work of undoubted genius." " Now, *did* you ever see anything so odd in all your life ? " " Isn't it wonderful ?—but one expects this sort of thing here ! "

But at last he gradually succeeded to a foremost place > and the first glance at his work was distinctly reassuring, though even then the tantalising reflections prevented him from seeing it as a whole. What he saw seemed richer in colour and finer in its surmounted difficulty than he had dared to expect. Where was the flaw Babcock pretended to see ? Let him point it out if he could ; let amateur critics cant and cavil as they chose, his work was strong enough to outlast all that—yes, he had been alarming himself unnecessarily.

He was stepping back until he had reached the proper

A FALLEN IDOL

point of view, and then all at once his soaring confidence dropped headlong like a shot bird, as he saw the face of the portrait for the first time since it had left his studio.

Was he mad or dreaming, or *what* was this horrible thing that had happened to it ? The bewitching face on which he had bestowed such loving labour, he now saw distorted as by the mirror of some malicious demon, yet without losing a dreadful resemblance to the original. Gradually he realised how subtle and insidious those alterations were, how the creamy warm hue of the cheeks with the faint carmine tinge had faded into a uniform dull white, and the delicately accented eyebrows which, combined with the slightly Oriental setting of the eyes, had given such piquancy to Sybil's expression, were inclined at an ultra-Chinese angle, while the wide, innocent-guileful eyes were narrowed now and glittering with a shallow shrewdness. Worst of all, the smile with its sweet pretence of mutinous mockery, had spread into a terrible simper, self-occupied, artificial, and fatuous.

No longer did the idol on his canvas serve to mark a contrast—it challenged a comparison, and alas ! not unsuccessfully, for in appearance it was distinctly the more pleasing of the two. Its former ugliness had been skilfully toned down, its flat features rendered less uncouth, its complexion transparently pure, and its expression one of calm dignity, and profound, but unostentatious, benevolence.

They made a grotesque pair, and the resemblance of this strange-looking girl to the quaint carved thing at her elbow seemed to have been worked out in a spirit of brutal cynicism, which found a repulsive pleasure in insisting upon so ludicrous and degrading an analogy.

Who could have worked this devilish transformation ? Not he. He would resist the very thought—yet who else ?

Babcock had been watching his face curiously, and saw it twitch and look grey and old in a moment. " Didn't know you'd gone quite so far, eh ? " he said. " Are you going to ask my reasons for considering that portrait a cowardly insult ? "

" No," said Campion. " It is, but it's not my work, Babcock ; it's been tampered with by some scoundrel."

" No doubt," said Babcock drily. " Very probable indeed ! "

" He shall answer for it when I find him."

" Oh, you'll find him all right," said Babcock ; " and he'll say anything you like to make him."

" You think I'm lying," groaned poor Campion.

" I think you've trusted too much to your nerve. You see it isn't quite such a funny notion as you thought it would turn out. I suppose it was meant to be a little surprise for the fair Sybil——Well, now's your time ! There's Mrs. Staniland over there in the next room, and Sybil with her ! "

" What am I to do ? " cried Campion to himself.

" If you ask me—I say, ' Bolt ! ' You'll only have a scene if you stay. I'll explain things for you."

" Run away ? " said Campion. " Leave her to see that thing alone ? No, I'll stay here. She will never believe I could be such an infernal villain."

" No," said Babcock ; " but you'll admit the other fellow has caught your style very cleverly. Whoever he is, he knows how to paint."

The same thing had struck Campion, who found it impossible to detect any clear traces of his enemy's handiwork, or to repudiate a single touch on technical grounds, and, much as he tried to reassure himself, he advanced to meet Mrs. Staniland and Sybil with a leaden despondency.

Mrs. Staniland failed to notice him for some time—engaged as she was in a leisurely survey of people who looked so like celebrities that they were probably nothing of the kind, but at the first sight of his agitated face, she laughed, not by any means displeased.

" Why, bless me ! " she said. " What are you looking like that for ? I'd no idea I was so alarming. Come ! if I was a little bit ruffled when we last met, you ought to know better than to take all I said literally. There, we'll bear

A FALLEN IDOL

one another no malice, and now you can go and talk to Sybil. Well, Lionel, and how are you ? "

Sybil was standing near, looking radiantly lovely in the pretty spring costume which set off her slender, supple figure to such advantage. " Now, you know where you must take me first," she said joyously, and then the sparkle in her eyes made a last expiring leap.

" I can guess," he said thickly. How was he to prepare her ?

He stood before her downcast and troubled. Something seemed to have removed them immeasurably apart, and Sybil felt that her lover had never appeared to such disadvantage.

There was a scarcely perceptible change in her manner as she said, " If my portrait isn't here after all, why not tell me, Ronald ? "

" I t is hung," he said, his lips catching against one another as he spoke ; " only——" and he paused hopelessly.

Babcock intervened here with an air of graceful consideration. " The truth is," he explained, " I've been telling Campion that he really ought not to allow you to see the portrait in its present state. Believe me, my dear child, it is better not."

" I should prefer to have a reason, please," said Sybil.

" What is this all about—not see the portrait!" exclaimed Mrs. Staniland, " and pray, why are we to be the only exceptions ? "

" There have been alterations," said Campion.

" So you told me yesterday," said Sybil, " But you said they would be a surprise for me."

" Which," Babcock observed softly, " I should hardly call an over-statement."

" Stuff and nonsense ! " said the old lady. " If the portrait is good enough to be exhibited at all, I can't see why we shouldn't be allowed to look at it. And Mrs. Honiton said it was admirable. So if you won't come with us, Sybil and I must go alone, that's all."

" Let us go, Sybil," said Campion desperately ; and he led the way with her to the fatal spot.

" If I were not perfectly certain I shall have nothing to do but admire," said Sybil, " I should not come, but indeed it's too absurd of you, Ronald, to lose confidence in yourself and in me like this."

" Do you think so ? " he said. " Wait."

Her pride was wounded by this strange response. What had altered him from the buoyant and ardent Ronald of only yesterday ? Could this be the moment she had looked forward to so confidently ?

The assembly, conscious of superior attractions in themselves, had turned their backs by common consent upon the pictures, and now, as Sybil and Campion passed into the East Gallery, there was a look on several faces of startled, incredulous recognition.

Many knew Campion by sight, and there were whispers that he was accompanied by the original of his strange portrait. There was a likeness, indeed, but this girl was natural and sweet, and altogether charming. No man with eyes could have misrepresented her by that piece of smirking affectation.

However, she was coming straight to the portrait. This was really interesting—dramatic, even—and the rules of ordinary good-breeding being suspended at these gatherings, Sybil and Campion found themselves surrounded by persons who took an eager interest in their proceedings.

She either was or seemed unaware of this. She stood for some moments before the cruelly elaborate caricature of herself, and Campion at her side could almost hear the blood surging up into his brain.

At last he turned. Her eyes were misted over as if with pain, and her face was a shade paler, but she smiled, and he alone read the proud contempt in the curve of her lips.

" It is not—not quite what I expected to see," she said ; " but it is very clever, and a complete surprise. It

A FALLEN IDOL

would not have been at all right to prevent me from seeing it."

Then she turned from him to Babcock, who had come up with Mrs. Staniland in the meantime. " And now," she said, " suppose we go and see something else ; perhaps you can find me a seat in the next room, and tell me who everybody is."

They moved away, Babcock nothing loth, and were followed a little way by some whose curiosity was still unslaked, and who would have followed farther but for the entrance of a renowned beauty, with superior claims to their attention.

Campion was left behind with Mrs. Staniland, who was sternly taking in every unfortunate detail of her niece's portrait, with pursed lips, and an occasional " Humph ! " of indignant disgust. " Well, sir," she said at last, " have you anything to say for yourself ? "

" Only," he said, " that I have no idea how it comes to look like that! "

" And this horrible image—what made you put that in. Was it to gratify me ? "

" It was a mistake," he said. " I never thought till too late."

" No gentleman makes such a mistake as that. To insult me by the very skill, which, without my help, you would never have attained. Even I have never met with quite such black ingratitude before. Well, this is not the place to tell you my opinion of you ; the only charitable excuse for your conduct is insanity. And now I'll leave you to enjoy your victory. No, be good enough to stay where you are, I am quite able to find my way back alone."

She turned away. He saw her pause and put up her glasses in search of Sybil, and then the crowd closed on her, and he was alone.

He stood staring blankly at his picture, straining his eyes for some evidence of an alien hand, with a dreadful haunting fear that if he looked long he would be com-

pelled to recognise it all as his, yet unable to tear himself away.

Behind him the " Private View " was at its height; the gallery was completely blocked by people whose eagerness to have the earliest sight of the year's Art seemed to have defeated itself : for they were reduced, though they bore it with resignation, to inspecting and criticising one another, and the hum and chatter of talk had the feverish hurried rhythm of machinery.

All the elements of this singular privacy were assembled now : celebrities of all ranks and professions dispensing their graduated greetings ; fashionable beauties, consciously unconscious of neighbouring round eyes ; the *poseurs*, and the seekers after paradoxes, and the background of nonentities—the " Adelphi guests "—so to speak, at this stage banquet of Art, who looked on with a sense of reflected distinction in direct proportion to the number of faces they recognised from photographs.

Those whose social footing was less secure than they could wish might be known by their restless endeavours to catch or avoid a distant eye, and the preoccupied character of their conversation, which suggested a " dog and shadow " conviction that there was an acquaintance somewhere in the room with whom it might be even more desirable to be seen. Campion stood apart from it all, unregarding and unregarded ; he scarcely knew why he remained at all—except that he shrank as yet from going home, and had no reason for going anywhere else in particular.

, But at last he came to himself at the recollection that if he let Sybil leave the place now without an explanation it might be long before an opportunity came again ; he was desperate at the mere idea, and determined to delay no longer. He would go into the adjoining room, watch his chance, and assure her of his innocence.

Before he could put this into action, he saw Babcock coming towards him : " You can tell me," he said. " I—I suppose they are still here."

A FALLEN IDOL

"Just put them into their carriage," said Babcock cheerfully : and as Campion groaned, he added : "You see, you didn't exactly encourage them to stay. But I mustn't forget—I have a message for you from the fair Sybil. She wishes to see you at the house as soon as you can make it convenient to call—at once if you like, for they've driven straight home."

"She *will* set me, then ! " cried Campion involuntarily. "God bless her—there's a chance for me yet! "

"If you can hit upon an explanation that can hold water, I dare say there is."

"All I know is, that since that portrait left me some scoundrel has managed to ruin it."

"Through the glass, eh ? Look here, Campion, that won't do. I've just been talking to Copal about it—he's one of the hangers here, you know—and he says he particularly noticed it when it was brought in, and it certainly hasn't altered since. Besides, it couldn't be done. Take my advice, find a more probable lie than that, or keep away from Sussex Place."

"I'm not trying to convince *you*, Babcock," said Campion.

"You'll only waste your time in trying to convince anyone of that, especially Miss Sybil, who, let me tell you, can come down precious heavily on a fellow when she chooses. I know her pretty well."

"And I am engaged to her, Babcock."

"I doubt it—but take your own course ; it's nothing to me if you like to cut your own throat."

In reality Babcock would have preferred that Campion should not see Sybil just yet, but in any case he felt tolerably tranquil as to the course she would take, and his indifference was not so very much overdone.

Campion had not waited to hear the end of this last remark ; in another minute he was driving to Regent's Park as fast as a smart hansom could take him.

He was sanguine at first; he was to be allowed to appeal to her—why should he despair ? When she had

once heard him, she could not believe him capable of such mad and motiveless cruelty.

But somehow, by the time the cupola-topped corner of Sussex Place was in sight, he felt his courage and hope failing him ; and the cab stopped, all too soon, at the house in which he would have to explain what he himself was at a loss to understand.

7. *A Painful Interview*

" Why didst thou promise such a beauteous day,
And make me travel forth without my cloak
To let base clouds o'ertake me in my way ? "—*Sonnets*.

CAMPION was shown into the pleasant morning room, bright with daffodils and narcissus, where—as he had earnestly hoped—he found Sybil alone. She was standing by the mantelpiece, and he thought she had been crying, though her eyes were dry as they rested on him for an instant.

He had meant to go to her side at once, but something in her glance checked him, and he stood near the door waiting for her to speak. At last she said, in a rather muffled voice, and without looking at him, " You might have warned me ! "

" Of what ? " he said.

" That I was—like that."

" But—good heavens ! you are *not* like that. How can you think so ? "

She gave a dreary little smile : " Of course I don't think so, really. I know I'm not so hideous as that—you thought so yourself once—but if I'm not, what made you paint me so ? "

" I never did paint you so," he said eagerly.

" Can you prove it ? " she said, and her face seemed to lighten with sudden hope. " Oh ! if you can only show me I am wrong—that it couldn't possibly have been you——"

He knew too well—the unhappy man—that such

A FALLEN IDOL

evidence as could be had would probably be unfavourable. He dared not appeal to proof.

" Sybil," he said brokenly, " at present—I can't. I may never be able to prove that. I have only my word—but is not that enough ? "

" No," she said ; " not now—not after yesterday."

" What did I say yesterday," he said, " that could make it difficult for you to believe me now."

" Didn't you try to avoid me at the station ? " she asked. " I couldn't understand it then : it seems quite natural now. And you passed it off with some story of letters I hadn't answered ; you accused poor Aunt Hilary of intercepting them ! And then—then you did your best to frighten me by telling me how bad your prospects were. You must have wanted me to break off our engagement. I was very blind—wasn't I ?—not to understand. I would insist on saying the wrong thing ! Then you began to reproach yourself. I think you were beginning to be the least bit sorry, when it was too late, and you tried to persuade me not to go to the Grosvenor this afternoon—but—ah, you wouldn't tell me why, even then ! "

His head began to wheel; what fatality was this which turned his most innocent speeches into damaging admissions ?

" I know, I know," he cried, " appearances may be against me—but, oh ! Sybil, never mind them, put them all aside and trust me. Ask yourself what possible motive I could have had in treating you so ! "

" Motive ? Perhaps," she said, " you may have thought I was getting too conceited, and needed a sharp lesson in public ; or else you were offended that last time in the studio, because I was not so pleased with my portrait as you thought I ought to be, and so you determined to give me some real cause to complain ; or was it that you did believe I had grown tired of you, and this was your revenge ? "

" My God ! " he groaned between his teeth. " Is that **what you think of me ?** "

" What else am I to think ? Is there anyone but you, clever enough to paint like that, who could or would have done such a thing ? Ah, Ronald, don't persist in denying it. I can bear anything but that. I know you get gloomy fits sometimes, when you feel doubtful of everything and everybody : tell me you did it in one of these, that you never meant to go so far when you began. Only be open with me : nothing else will be of the slightest use. I would try to make allowances for you, but you won't let me. Surely I am making it easy for you ! "

" Easy ! " he cried. " I might have done many things in one of my black moods—but that, never ! Why, even when I lost heart most, I can't charge myself with a single disloyal or harsh thought of you, Sybil ; ah, you don't believe me ! Is there no way of making you feel I am speaking the truth ? "

She was looking at him wistfully, only longing herself to be convinced, but the facts were too strong ; that portrait—only one hand could have given those touches, the hand of one who knew her face well enough to misrepresent it so subtly, and there was his self-reproach yesterday, his manner at the Grosvenor that afternoon. If he was innocent he could surely hold out hopes of proving it—he did not even do that—no, it was too much to believe ; she checked herself in the half-movement she had made towards him.

" It's no use," she said. " I can't—I can't. Why won't you say what I ask you ? "

" Why ? Because it wouldn't be true. Sybil, must this miserable portrait come between us ? "

" You talk as if / had painted it ! " she cried indignantly. " Is it for you to make little of it like that ? Oh, Ronald, I wouldn't have cared *how* ugly you had made me look—at least I shouldn't have cared in this way—if I could only think you had done it honestly, or mistakenly, or from anything but a kind of mean spitefulness. Can't you see that unless this is cleared up—and you *know* you can clear it up if you choose—we can never be the same to one

A FALLEN IDOL

another again ? So long as you go on protesting your innocence I can't listen. I know you did it, and nothing you can say to the contrary will ever change me ! For the last time, won't you admit that you have treated me unkindly—unworthily ? Is that so much to ask ? "

" In the sense you mean, too much," he replied.

" Then I have done," she said. " I gave you every chance ; I would have done my best to forgive you, however hard I found it ; but you refuse even to admit yourself in the wrong. You prefer everything to come to an end between us, and perhaps it is best."

" If you can misunderstand me so cruelly," he said, " I suppose it must end here."

He walked to the window and looked out, as through a mist, over the enclosed paths and urns and flowerbeds, to the Park palings across the road, with the sparkling lake and rolling green slopes beyond. He knew that this time the breach was serious between them. When she could believe such things of him, in spite of his earnest assurances that they were false—then it was time to part ; and yet the unhappy man had never loved her half so much as now, when for a moment her affection had got the better of her wounded pride, and she had offered him forgiveness, if he would only stoop to take it. Unhappily that was just what he could not do. It was a hopeless business—they must part.

" Yes, it must end," said Sybil. " Please go now. I cannot bear much more."

" And to think how happy I was yesterday about this time ! " he said, " Yesterday ? Two hours ago—I was happy then——And now ? "

" That is enough," said Sybil. She was drawing off a ring from her finger. " You must take this back," she continued, holding it out to him. " Yes, I wish it, and there are other things to be sent to you. And my letters if—if they are not burnt, you will return them ? "

" To-night," he said, " with your present—the idol you gave me once."

A PAINFUL INTERVIEW

" I don't want it," she said. " I want you to keep it. You promised to keep it always. Don't part with it now—it is the last thing I shall ask of you. If you see it now and then, and it reminds you of this——I don't think you deserve to forget it too soon——"

" I shall want no reminder," he said. " But I won't part with it, if that is your wish. And now—good-bye, Sybil."

" Good-bye," she said, almost inaudibly. She was still by the chimney-piece, looking at him with such piteous, proud eyes, her head slightly inclined, her mouth taking a pained downward droop, and that was the last he saw of her.

Henceforth the whole world would be disenchanted for him. He felt like a child coming out from an afternoon pantomime into the foggy, greasy streets, with the commonplace of home in prospect, where fairy principles are impossible.

As he went out the page gave him a sealed envelope, which, being in no mood to read letters just then, he put unread in his pocket as he strode across the Park.

Sybil heard the door close upon him ; her heart seemed to shut at the same moment, as she stood for some time stunned by the new loneliness which had come upon her. How could he have done it ? What had she done that he could humiliate her like that ? And then to persist that he was innocent!

Was wounded vanity responsible for some part of her resentment ? It would be strange if it were not; she had felt the natural pleasure of a pretty girl in having her portrait painted, had even indulged certain harmless anticipations of triumph, and all this had been rudely shattered. The picture was cruelly like her, charged with the bitterest mockery, the keenest caricature ; for months to come she would grow hot at the sudden, often-recurring thought that it was there in the gallery, and people were smiling at it; that anyone who spoke to her had seen it, and was tracing the resemblance. It was all very paltry, no doubt, but she could not help it*

A FALLEN IDOL

And, to do Sybil justice, the real bitterness for her lay in the fact that it was her lover who had done all this ; and had done it from some quite unworthy motive which he was ashamed to justify or even confess.

Still, as she thought of it—of the bitter contrast between the present and the dreamy tender past of only a few hours ago, she broke down and stole hurriedly to her room, where she locked herself in, to give full vent once for all to the grief that threatened to overpower her.

But when the fit was past, her spirit came to her help ; no one, not even Mrs. Staniland, should discover how sorely she had been stricken ; and so at dinner that evening she made pathetically brave attempts to talk and behave to her as usual—which, however, did not greatly deceive that quick-sighted old lady.

" Pretends she doesn't care already," she said to herself. " Well, well, she won't have to pretend long."

Campion, whom we left entering the Park, retraced—just as he had done the day before—the route Sybil and he had taken together ; but this time, from that obscure impulse of self-torture which makes some men go out of their way to intensify their misery.

He found a ghastly satisfaction in standing under the same trees ; he waited some time for an opportunity of sitting on the same seat, as on the preceding afternoon.

There was the swan Sybil had laughed at yesterday, the stately bird whose dignity forbade him to hurry after crumbs, and who in consequence was perpetually being out-manoeuvred by the more active and less particular ducks. He was unchanged, with the same vicious snaps when his triumphant rivals came within reach, the same croaking commentary of blended complaint and satisfaction.

Brutal persons who have never loved will probably observe that there was nothing extraordinary in this ; seeing that Nature, animate and inanimate, is rather in the habit of—to use a familiar phrase—" carrying on business as usual during the alterations " in the affairs of most individuals.

A PAINFUL INTERVIEW

But a lover, as may often have been remarked, never quite gets over the impression of the unfeelingness of things in not responding to his darker moods. He can forgive Nature for declining to dance to his piping, but she is unpardonable when he mourns unto her, and she shows no indication of echoing his lament.

Campion did not return home until he had exhausted the fund of bitter-sweet memories ; but, like Sybil, he might have been more miserable if he had felt less ill-used. And as he turned towards St. John's Wood and Romanoff Road, he was already setting himself to find some means of tracing the deed to its cowardly author, and resolving to spend the next day, if he could obtain permission, in restoring the portrait to its original state.

He did not remember Mrs. Staniland's letter until he was at home, and then he opened it with an uneasy curiosity ; from a lady of her benevolence it was slightly vindictive in its sentiments.

" In case," she wrote, " you are thinking of destroying all traces of your ill-deed before the Gallery is open to the public, I write to inform you that I shall permit no such thing. The picture is mine, and I forbid you to touch it or interfere with it in any way ; and if you have a spark of gentlemanly feeling left in you, you will respect my wishes whether you are strictly bound to or not. I understand that the portrait could not in any case be removed without a royal order, but however this is, it is my wish that it remains where it is. It is too absurdly unlike my niece to injure her, whilst the insult to myself, when explained, may serve to show the danger of entrusting you with similar commissions, and the ingratitude which is ever the portion of those who try to serve others. I enclose a cheque : though I should be quite justified in throwing the portrait on your hands after what you have done."

As will be observed, the fact which had chiefly impressed Mrs. Staniland was the wanton introduction of that fatal idol: the misrepresentation of Sybil was a minor

A FALLEN IDOL

offence in comparison, though she was not sorry that her niece should think otherwise.

Campion cursed his ill-luck as he read this prohibition, and tore the cheque which accompanied it into pieces. His hands were to be tied, then, and he was more angry on Sybil's account than his own. And all this had been caused by some hidden enemy, who must have a grudge against him—whom had he offended lately? As the author of *Friends in Council* says, one should ask oneself in such a connection what one has *said*, rather than what one has done; but Campion, though he had a rough tongue at times, did not seek the origin there. The only man at all likely, he considered, to have a grudge against him was Lionel Babcock, whom he had outstripped in Sybil's favour.

And with a flash the conviction seized him that Babcock had done this thing in revenge upon them both. The more he thought over it the more irresistible it seemed, and his heart was swelling with rage when Bales announced the very man who had kindled it.

Babcock came in with an air of conscious moral superiority: "There was something I meant to say to you when we met this afternoon," he began.

"There's something I mean to say to you now," said Campion savagely. "Sit down."

"Come now," said Babcock, with irritating calm, "there's no occasion to glare at me—I'm not going to reproach you—far be it from me to——"

"You reproach me—do you know what I'm beginning to believe, Babcock?"

Babcock put on his glasses. "No," he said, "but I hope it's a faith with some comfort in it."

"I believe you're at the bottom of this business."

"Sorry for you, I'm sure. How long have you felt like that?"

"I'm not in a mood to stand any tomfoolery," said Campion. "If you've played me this dastardly trick——"

A PAINFUL INTERVIEW

" No melodrama, please," protested Babcock languidly.
" In plain words, what's it all about ? "

" In plain words, you are the man who altered that—that—portrait."

Babcock took a long breath. " So that's your game, is it ? I am the man, by Jove ! Well, you're a cool hand, Campion. And when am I supposed to have performed this trifling feat ? "

" I don't know, but I will find out, Babcock."

Babcock laughed in a gentle, indulgent manner : " You should have made inquiries before you selected your scapegoat," he said. " Portrait painting's so very much my strong point, isn't it ? Why, confound your impudence, don't you know I ran over to Paris the day after you told me of your"—(here he grinned)—" your engagement. I only returned this week—now, then ! "

Campion's theory fell in ruins ; clearly Babcock was not the man—but who was ?

" Babcock," he said awkwardly, " I'm very sorry. I was too hasty, you must make allowances—this has upset me a good deal. I hardly know what I'm doing."

" Oh ! I fancy you have a very fair idea," said Babcock. " You didn't do so badly. Lucky for me I had an *alibi*, or by Jove, you might have got some to believe you ! It's almost beyond a joke, but, as you say, I can make allowances for a man in your desperate case. Well, you've said your say, and very instructive it was—now I'll have mine. Some time ago, I left a landscape, a rather important piece of work, for you to put a figure in. After what has passed, it occurred to me that on the whole I'd rather have it back, whether you've touched it or not. So I've come for it."

" I see," said Campion ; " you think I'm capable of doing it a mischief ? "

" Well," said Babcock, " you might have an accident with it, you know—you seem to be unfortunate."

" Oh, as it happens, I've done what you asked me to

A FALLEN IDOL

do ! I took some pains with it ; you'll find it somewhere about the studio if you like to go down."

Babcock seemed a little embarrassed. He was disappointed at finding himself under any obligation. " Oh, I'm sure I'm deeply obliged. Don't you move, I'll fetch it." And he disappeared in the direction of the painting-room.

Presently he returned with the picture. " Upon my soul, Campion, I did not expect this," he said with strong feeling.

" Not at all," said Campion. " You needn't trouble to thank me."

" Thank you ! " said Babcock, exploding. " What the devil do you mean by this kind of thing ? First that poor little girl, and then me. What have we done, eh, to be served like this ? "

" You asked me to put a figure in the foreground—well, I have, what more do you want ? What's wrong ? " said Campion fiercely.

" I brought you a thoroughly English scene, Campion. I told you I wanted some picturesque and appropriate foreground object. Now, a half-naked nigger may be picturesque, but I'll be shot if it's appropriate——"

" As I painted an old hedger, I don't exactly see——" began Campion, when Babcock thrust the painted side of the canvas under his eyes.

There, squatting in the air in the exact centre of the picture was the figure, disproportionately large, of a coffee-coloured individual with a close-shaven head and half-shut eyes, a string of beads round his gaunt neck, and a scanty garment of bright yellow hanging over one sharp shoulder.

" That your idea of a hedger ? " said the enraged Babcock. " It's a dirty Indian, sir, a fakir ! When did you ever see anything nearer that than a nigger minstrel in Epping Forest, I should like to know ? Ajid now, perhaps you'll have the goodness to explain the point."

" Babcock," he said at last, " I know what you must think ; I admit it looks very bad. But I never intended

to paint a Hindoo. I never had a native model. I don't know how it came there."

"Then I will help you," retorted Babcock. "Look here, Campion, you've always been fond of the dry, sarcastic style of jokes; you've indulged me with it lots of times; you thought I didn't see them, but I did. Now you've come out as a practical joker, and you've gone just a step too far. It might be safe to go and pillory a poor little girl who sat for her portrait, but to ruin a man's picture who trusted in you to give him a lift is a game you may lose at. Outsiders will think it has an ugly look. There is such a thing as professional jealousy!"

Campion laughed a little contemptuously. "Rather far-fetched that, Babcock?"

"Is it, though? Do you suppose any dealer will give me twopence for it, or exhibit it as it stands? If I try to tinker it up I shall spoil it, to a certainty. And that was the best thing I'd done—I shall never catch the same effect again—as you knew!"

"Come," said Campion, "I can't account for it, but there's no harm done after all, I can put it right for you in no time."

Babcock halted between the wish to save his picture, which he did not feel able to do without risk himself, and the dawning prospect of gaining a crushing victory over his rival.

"Ail!" he said unpleasantly. "So you're beginning to be ashamed of yourself, and want the thing hushed up."

"Nothing of the sort," said Campion haughtily. "If I have done anything at all it was without the slightest intent. In my sleep, perhaps some kind of unconscious cerebration—I can't say; but at least, I have done nothing to be ashamed of. You can believe me or not, of course, and accept my offer or leave it, as you please."

"I can't stand humbug. You've got a nasty temper, and it's broken out in this form," said Babcock. "Drop this rubbish about 'not intending' and *unconsciousness,' and all that! Own you've done a shabby thing and

A FALLEN IDOL

are sorry for it, and—I don't want to make a fuss—you can alter the picture if you choose. I'll hold my tongue about it."

" I've admitted all I have to admit. I shall certainly not apologise when I don't feel guilty."

" Very well, then, I take the picture away as it is. If anyone asks me how it comes to have this glaringly idiotic appearance I can only tell them ; and if they don't think you show very well in the matter that's not my fault. And Mrs. Staniland and her niece will be coming to me before long."

Campion turned white. Must Sybil be taught to believe him guilty of a second infamy even meaner than the first ? Well, he was powerless, he knew that morally he was innocent, and he would not be so untrue to himself as to imply the contrary.

" I can't help it, Babcock," he said ; " say and think and do just whatever you please."

Babcock took up his canvas and went to the door. " You're a pig-headed fellow, Campion," he said ; " I'd have let you down easier than some fellows would, but I won't stand this posing as an innocent martyr. It's simply sickening. I warn you I shall make no secret of this—to anyone."

Campion made no answer, and Babcock took his leave with the picture.

Alone once more, Campion set himself to fathom this second mystery ; here, at least, was a transformation of which he could suspect no one—the landscape had never been out of his hands.

Anxiously he plunged his thoughts back to the period of high-strung nervous exaltation in which he had finished the portrait. Nothing was clear—till suddenly, as he sat trying to penetrate the gloom, a ray seemed to pierce the darkness for an instant, and he shuddered. In sheer terror at himself and what might crawl to light if he persisted, he shut down the slide of his mental lantern and strained his memory no more.

But now he felt assured that his hand had in actual fact painted the fakir, he did not recollect why or how, but he had the dread that he might recollect at any moment.

And what broke him down utterly and completely was the obvious inference that if he could paint this Hindoo beggar and forget it absolutely, he might equally have perpetrated that horrible travesty of his dearly-loved Sybil.

In that case he could never clear himself: there was no one to accuse, no one to detect. His own hand had betrayed him, and he must bear the consequences as he might.

8. *Reopened Wounds*

" Self-sway'd our feelings ebb and swell:
Thou lov'st no more ;—Farewell ! Farewell ! "—*Arnold*.

MAY was a fortnight old before Babcock had succeeded in inducing Mrs. Staniland to keep a long-standing promise to visit his new studio : an end which he attained by mentioning casually that he would ask Nebelsen, the Scandinavian Chela, to meet her.

When the time came, he began to entertain misgivings that she would keep the appointment without thinking it advisable to bring Sybil, and he saw them both enter with intense thankfulness.

Sybil and he had met once or twice since the Grosvenor episode, and he had been surprised to find how little it seemed to have affected her. She was as animated as ever, the same witchery shone in her clear eyes, the same light-heartedness rang in her voice—or he, at least, failed to discover any alteration. She was paler, a little thinner, perhaps, but neither to an alarming nor an unbecoming extent.

She was surprised herself—for many a tempest of secret anguish had swept over her ; there were humiliating times when she caught herself pardoning, or rather forgetting, all the wrong that had been done to her, and only longing,

A FALLEN IDOL

praying, to have her lover, repentant or unrepentant, once more at her feet.

But these were moments of weakness, of which she was duly ashamed even at the time ; and in public her spirit came to her aid, and compelled her to resume her ordinary manner, while she was still further reinforced by the temporary oblivion of private suffering, which is perhaps the best boon society has to bestow.

She had no particular objection to accompany her aunt that afternoon ; she had known Babcock since her school-days, and did not dislike him, though she never treated him quite seriously. He had been kind, too, and more considerate than might have been expected about the portrait ; and she was as glad to see him as she was to see anybody now.

He was radiant with satisfaction : " Delighted to welcome you to my little workshop/" he said, as he took her hand. " Do you approve ? "

" Very magnificent indeed, Lionel," she said.

It was a sumptuous studio, with a good deal of old armour and tapestry, skins and fan-palms, amongst which an easel with all the latest improvements was doing penance, possibly for idleness, in a corner.

" Well," said Babcock ; " Fve great faith in surroundings, you know. One must saturate the brain with colour and form before one attempts to produce the beautiful : don't you agree ? "

" I think the brain ought to be squeezed at intervals, Lionel," said Sybil. " This room is a perfect picture ; but then it's the only one to be seen ? "

" We shall probably find his pictures when we go to the Academy," said Mrs. Staniland.

" I—ah—didn't send in this year," explained Babcock. " They've found out that I don't depend on art for bread and cheese, and when they once know *that* you haven't a chancel So I cut the Academy. There was a little bit of mine at the British Artists' last autumn, though : a ' Note in Crimson and Sable '—parcels-post van on the

Embankment by electric light—which I suppose you saw ? "

" And nothing since that! " cried Sybil.

" Nothing/' said Babcock, in a low tone that he tried to make pregnant with meaning. " Nothing that I could ever dare to show you—now."

If he had been counting on feminine curiosity he was baffled, for she merely laughed, and observed : " Then I think it's too disgraceful of you " ; and before he could go on Mrs. Staniland created an unwelcome diversion by asking whether Mr. Nebelsen was coming, with the implication that she should consider herself defrauded if he was not.

" Oh ah ! " said Babcock carelessly. " He's here—he's somewhere about."

" And you let me stay here talking ! " she cried. " Let us go to him at once."

So Babcock had to comply and lead the way to a Moorish arch, where he drew aside the *portiere*, and revealed a little octagon boudoir with stained-glass windows, beneath which a person of a somewhat unusual appearance was seated on a divan, with a patience which struck the mean between dignity and humility.

Axel Nebelsen was a Norwegian by birth, but had been brought up in Germany. He had been educated for the medical profession, but, having accompanied a scientific expedition to India, had there been led to abandon science for theosophy, to which his temperament—dreamy and abnormally developed in some directions—found itself powerfully attracted.

r Since then he was understood to have passed much of his time in seclusion, endeavouring to prepare himself for the further ordeals necessary to complete initiation ; and he was now in England for purposes the nature of which no one, himself not excepted, clearly understood.

He was a striking-looking figure, as he sat there in the dim yellow and green light. His age might have been anything between thirty and forty ; his long biscuit-

A FALLEN IDOL

coloured hair was parted in the middle, and fell in spiral curls to mingle inextricably with his beard ; he had pale-blue visionary eyes, with a ring of opal light round each iris, a broad innocent nose, and a mouth which no amount of hair could invest with decision.

He extended his peculiarity even to his dress, which was a long, close-fitting sort of caftan, round which a broad red sash was knotted. He took the precaution to use a less unconventional garb for outdoor wear ; but, even as it was, he always left a little crowd of his own collection on the doorstep of any house he entered.

He started as from a vision when the others entered, but he neither rose nor offered his hand, and only sat smiling with a vague sweetness.

" Here he is, you see," said Babcock, as if he was exhibiting him. " All alone in here."

" Not alone—most of the time," said the Chela, " and not hier." He spoke English with an amount of fluency that rendered him occasionally unintelligible.

Mrs. Staniland, according to her wont, took complete possession of him. " Ah ! " she said, with infinite relish. " That's how I like to hear you talk ; now go on—don't let's waste time in trivialities. Be interesting. We never finished our delightful little chat about Karma and Nirvana. Do you know I find theosophy most enlarging for the ideas ? And, positively, if I hadn't been brought up to be quite so orthodox, I should be very much tempted to adopt your doctrines. But I suppose I'm too old ? "

" Yes," said the Chela, with refreshing candour ; " it is late now to begin."

" Still," pursued Mrs. Staniland, " I like to keep up with all the new movements, and when I find one that deserves a little encouragement, I'm only too glad to do anything for it."

" Matam," said the Chela stiffly, " Theosophy is not all in need to be, as you say, upon the back smacked."

" Oh—of course I quite understand that—still, it can

do you no harm to be more widely known, *can* it ? And I should be very pleased to bring together a little circle of influential friends to meet you, if you would tell them something about all these wonderful things."

" The Western World is not as yet ripe for all the most wonderful," said the Chela.

" Oh, but I could pick you out some really ripe people," urged Mrs. Staniland ; " do come and show us phenomena, just as I hear you did at Mrs. Mason Green's, where I met you first."

" I cannot promise to do you a phenomenon, until the brothers have been consulted, but I will come and talk to you, if you like."

" You were going to tell me something when we met last about a wonderful teacher you had out in India, Mr. Nebelsen," said Mrs. Staniland. " I should so like to hear."

" About my guru or Mahatma ? Yes," said the Chela, " he is a quite wonderful man, who has evolved himself into what we call a ' sixth rounder ' by developing his higher principles—never can I mention his name without reverence pronounce, that wise and well-educated adept whose occult title is Shang Gasba."

" And now tell us, Nebelsen, what has he taught you ? " said Babcock.

" Much that I cannot speak of. From him I learn all I know of the existences in *Akasha*, the shells, and lost and earth-bound souls which infest the atmosphere ; his instruction has taught me how to leave my body, and with thought-like quickness through unlimited space to wander, to materialise objects out of the cosmic dustbin, or to resolve matter again into its constituent elements, to transport things in one instant many thousand miles. And with the counsels of my revered master, I am able to command the tremendous Nature forces by simple will-power to control."

" But do you ever do it ? " inquired Babcock.

" Never," replied Nebelsen.

A FALLEN IDOL

" That's where I think you make a mistake. You might raise the tone of your miracles, my dear fellow ; there's a very good opening just now for a new faith, but naturally people want to be sure it's a going concern before they invest in it."

" I am often teased to broduce manifestations, but they are only allowed oggasionally when the brothers are in the humour. You would not believe how they dislike to show themselves off, and my own respected guru is in that respect himself the worst of all."

" Bad policy," said Babcock, " you'll never get Theosophy into our heads by rapping."

" The adepts haf no wish to gonvince the Western World."

" Then they might have left it alone altogether. As it is, they give you a shilling, and won't let you change it, or even let the world see it's a good one ! "

" Arcane Knowledge addresses himself at Faith and not at Reason," said the Chela. " It is perhaps true that the brothers garry this a leedle far, and so I haf tolt my Mahatma."

" How often do you see him ? " Mrs. Staniland asked.

" I never have seen him—all our communications are in writing. I write to him a long ledder, and he sends it back in an hour or two hours with an answer."

" Do you think he would care to come to me when you do ? " said Mrs. Staniland, " because I will send him a card with pleasure."

" No, he would not accept," answered Nebelsen, evidently a little aghast at the suggestion. " He is in Thibet always."

" Then how does he answer you in an hour or two ?

" To an occultist it is quite easy—the ledder is forwarded and returned on a magnetic current."

" And you send your own letters in that way ? "

" No, I gif them to a frient who is more advanced ; he sends them for me, and returns them answered—it is most gonvenient," said the Chela.

REOPENED WOUNDS

During this conversation Sybil's attention had slightly wandered. This studio recalled by force of contrast another which was not magnificent; and a strong manly face, with the keen quizzical eyes that could be so tender at a word from her, rose before her. Suppose Ronald were to come to her and beg forgiveness, suppose he insisted masterfully that he had only read her a well-needed lesson—would she have firmness enough to maintain her ground? If she could only believe that he had not intended to gain his freedom, if he could but persuade her of that, she might—but, after all, there was no danger of losing her dignity as a justly offended woman—he never would come now!

"What are you looking so serious about?" asked Babcock, crossing to her side.

"Am I serious? I think I was wondering why you have a grand piano. I never heard you play."

"Oh, yes," he said in a weary high-pitched tone, "I strum a little; it is one of my few pleasures" (if so it was at least a simple one, for he restricted himself to one finger). "Won't you come and try it?"

She rose and passed into the studio with him. "Yes," he said, leaning languidly on the instrument, "my piano is my favourite companion, my constant consoler. I fly to it when I am restless, heartsick, overworked—I'm glad I amuse you."

Sybil could never maintain her gravity when he struck the pathetic note.

"You are too funny when you want to be pitied—and for overwork too. Now confess that most of your painting is done at this piano, though I must say," she added as she played softly, "you have let it get frightfully out of tune—or is the poor thing heartsick too?"

He was rather angry. "I wish you could be serious. You never seem to consider me a real painter."

"I will if you will only paint a real picture. But you are so abominably lazy that I don't believe you ever will."

He was not offended, for such is our fallen nature that

A FALLEN IDOL

most men accept this reproach from a woman as implying a compliment; besides she was affording him the opening he had been waiting for. " You wrong me," he said. " I may not do all I might, but then I have no one to inspire me, to urge me on, to care what work I produce."

" No," she agreed sympathetically. " And it's too bad to expect you to do anything till you find somebody who will do all that for you—isn't it ? "

" You turn everything into ridicule," he said impatiently, " and yet I could show you a picture if I chose, that will prove to you that I can work when I take the trouble."

" Then please do."

" Once I looked forward to showing it to you—but that is all over. I cannot show it—least of all to *your*

" And why ? "

" Because it has been ruined."

" I thought an oil painting was never hopeless ! At least you could show it to me. Who knows, I might encourage you—it is probably much better than you think, and surely you need not dread my opinion."

" Sybil," he said, " it is best that you should not see it—this time, perhaps, you will take my warning ! "

He risked the allusion, which, however, escaped her at the moment; she was pleased to be sceptical as to the existence of any picture. How far Babcock was sincere in his wish to keep her from seeing it, he probably could not have said himself ; he had a distinct grievance. He wanted her to know it for many reasons, but with all his affectations, he was no fool, and was quite alive to the danger of seeming to force his inquiry.

Sybil laughed mischievously. " You shall not escape like that. If you refuse me, you will not refuse Aunt Hilary, or if you do, I shall know what to think."

And she went back to the octagon room, in time to hear her aunt, after questioning Herr Nebelsen closely upon the precise hue of her *aura*, observe " Not really ; a sort of purplish mauve—how truly hideous ; the very *last*

colour I should care to be seen in ! Do tell me, now, is there anything I can do to change it ? " Sybil's appeal, coming at that moment, was not too amiably received.

" If Lionel has any hesitation in showing you his picture," she replied, " depend upon it, he has excellent reasons. I'm surprised you should condescend to press him ! "

" Don't be hard on a fellow, Mrs. Staniland," said Babcock. " I shall be very happy to show the canvas to you, and leave you to say whether I am not right."

" This is getting mysterious ! " said Sybil, " so there really *is* a picture ! Do go, auntie."

Mrs. Staniland was struck by something in Babcock's manner, and followed him into a room beyond the studio, leaving her niece to entertain the Chela.

Sybil eyed him rather apprehensively as he sat there—he looked so very mystic and uncanny. Presently he fixed his pale eyes upon her and said in his deep guttural tones, " You are not much interested in occultism—you do not even perhaps believe that such things can be ? "

" It's no good saying pretty things to him if he really can read thoughts," she considered, and decided upon perfect candour.

" It is a good deal to believe all at once, you know," she said. " I don't pretend to understand it, but I should have thought if you had all these marvellous powers you might make some use of them."

" How use of them ? " he demanded.

" It isn't such a happy world surely," she said, " that there is no one in it to be saved from danger, or temptation, or misery of some sort. If you can read the future and see forces at work that we can't see, you might do so much to warn or help people, if you chose ! "

" It is not engouraged," he said, a little reluctantly ; " we have, you see, to be very careful not to interfere with the operation of Karma. And shust think, what is any one human earth life, only a schmall leedle bead upon a long string of successive entity-ingarnations ! Its suffer-

A FALLEN IDOL

ings ? Either they are punishments deserved in the previous life, or else they are in the next to be recompensed—no, no, that we who are adepts must not display a sensational bower is, believe me, a wise and prudent arrangement—many times has my Mahatma explained that to me."

Sybil said nothing, though her expression was not one of entire conviction, and before the Theosophist could bring any further arguments to bear upon her, Mrs. Staniland called her, rather to her relief, to come at once to the room where Babcock's picture was to be seen, and she obeyed with some curiosity.

" Quite right of Lionel to consider your feelings, my dear," said Mrs. Staniland, who was standing before an easel on which the canvas had just been placed, " but I knew you were too sensible to mind seeing it, and I thought it as well that you should."

" I like the landscape part, Lionel," said Sybil, after examining it, " you are not quite so lazy as I accused you of being—only," and she drew her eyebrows together, ' what does that extraordinary figure mean in the middle of it—and what is it sitting on ? "

" Ah, my dear ! " said Mrs. Staniland, with a sigh of portentous meaning, " that is the point ! "

" That's just the thing," said Babcock, " that I'm not responsible for."

" It was like this, my dear," explained Mrs. Staniland. " Lionel has been telling me all about it. He'd painted the landscape, and Sieditoff wanted it for his gallery in Bond Street, only he thought it ought to have a figure in the foreground. Well, and so Lionel took it to a friend of his who was a good figure-painter—Lionel has never gone in for figure-painting—and he told him what an opportunity this was for him and asked him to do it, and he said he would. And this is what he chose to do—a horrid figure which is too ridiculously absurd, hanging in the air, and out of all proportion and keeping besides ! And Lionel is afraid Sieditoff won't take it now, and if he does,

he can't sell it, and he daren't try to scrape it out or paint it over for fear of making it worse. It was a piece of jealousy and deliberate spite on the friend's part."

"What a hateful, mean wretch he must be!" cried Sybil. "But why," and then she stopped—"do I know him? Oh, don't say it was *he*. Aunt Hilary, you might, yes, you *might* have spared me this!" and her short upper lip quivered indignantly.

"I thought it necessary it should not be hidden from you, my dear," said the old lady calmly.

"Then please understand, both of you, as you are kind enough to discuss my affairs together," said Sybil, haughtily, "that it was not necessary at all. I wanted no warning to tell me that Mr. Campion is a treacherous friend; whatever he chooses to do now does not concern me in the least, and you insult me when you think it can!"

And she turned away with the gesture of an offended princess. She was very angry indeed—all the angrier because she had needed the warning only too well.

Listening to the Chela's conversation was better than remaining there after that, and she went back to the little alcove with the stained glass.

Babcock followed her out of the room with discomfited eyes. "That's just what I was afraid of, you know," he said in an undertone; "she'll blame *me* most over this business!"

"Not when she has had time to cool—it was far better to undeceive her once for all; she was not half as angry as she ought to have been about the other matter. I could see from several things that she was quite disposed for a reconciliation, which would never have done! But that is all over now, if I know her; she's the kind of girl to be far more unforgiving for anybody else's injury than her own."

"She's a darling—I know that," muttered Babcock.

Mrs. Staniland looked at him with a rather surprised approval. "So you are beginning to find that out?" she said. "At last!"

A FALLEN IDOL

" I've known her ever since she was a little girl with long hair, don't you know," said Babcock, " and a ripping little girl she was too ! Only, somehow, I never fell quite so desperately in love till I heard she was engaged to that confounded Campion ! And—and do you think there's a chance for me ? "

" If you don't worry the poor child too soon—yes. It is quite what I should wish for her myself, and so would her father, I'm sure. You may count upon my doing all I can for you ! "

" Thanks. And you think I can make my mind pretty easy ? "

" I don't say that. You must be patient and bide your time, and let her forget that most worthless and ungrateful young man, and then—and then we shall see."

Something in Sybil's appearance as she came back to him struck the Chela, who was beginning to feel a decided interest in this pale proud English girl, who looked so sensitive and so sweet.

" Tell me," he began almost at once, " you have seen in there something which has disturbed you, and made you unhappy—not so ? "

" Yes, a little," said Sybil, too miserable just then to repel his curiosity. " I was reminded in the picture of a per—I mean of things I hoped I had forgotten. Please don't ask me any more."

" I am going now," he said, " to make a leedle bersonal gonfession. It is not quite what I myself think, that which I shust now say of not interfering und so weiter. You see, as yet I am only what you would call a * half-fledge,' I gannot yet trust to my own indisgrection. My Mahatma, who is a very wise man, does not encourage it—he is always in the way. He is berhaps right, and I haf not yet enough brogress made to direct my powers with gomplete cocksurety. Still I do not know—without moch bractice can no berfection be, and my heart's beloved Mahatma is not in material things a man of business.

" And I tell you, you haf made me reflect. Till now

I never use my occult power except in quite a schmall way, and not at all for benevolent ends. But the first time, and I bromise you this, the first time that I see a case in which my esoterical stoddies-acquirements of advantage might becom, I hesitate not, whether my Mahatma is willing or not, to exberiment. You shall see that occult powers is not entirely an imagination's work."

Sybil only smiled, for even then the Chela's confidences and solemn conviction of his own mystic attainments appealed to her sense of humour, but she was somewhat impressed by him notwithstanding. She could not think him a charlatan ; she was sure he was perfectly sincere and simple-minded in his queer rhapsodies and cloudy philosophy.

Mrs. Staniland and Babcock were not long in reappearing, and the visit, which, from Babcock's point of view, had not proved wholly unsuccessful, was brought to a close.

A very unusual humility in Babcock's manner as he went down the stairs of the flat by Sybil's side made her feel an impulse of self-reproach. After all, it was not his fault; he had even tried to keep from her what she had just learnt.

So her eyes were contrite and sweet, without a trace of coquetry or malice in them, as she said, " I didn't mean to be cross to you just now. It was not fair to treat you so ; *you* were kind at least! "

His face cleared visibly. " That's right. We're fellow-partners in misfortune ; we've both been—I mean the same—that is, we ought to be drawn together more by it all! "

As the words left him he wished he had held his tongue, for Sybil instantly froze, and did not speak again until they reached the carriage.

When Babcock returned to his own flat after seeing his visitors off, he found Nebelsen standing before his picture. " Like it ? " he said.

" No—not at all," replied the Chela. " Why have you bainted a yogi performing *his japa* in the yoga posture ? "

A FALLEN IDOL

" I thought you would say that. Poor little Miss Elsworth couldn't stand that yogi either ; it upset her most awfully ! "

" Why then do you baint so as to upset people awfully ? " demanded the Chela. " You have learnt that in India—yes ? "

" If you must know, Nebelsen, that idiotic Hindoo isn't my work at all ; it was done, for some low purpose of his own, by a scoundrel named Campion."

" But it upset that so charming Mees Elsvort ! "

" Yes—that's a long story. But the upshot of it is that he had almost trapped her into consenting to marry him, till he played very much the same trick upon her that he did on me."

" I see—I see well," muttered the Chela, " it was that, then, which she to forget desired. Tell me, where does this Gampion live ? I want to look him up, and rebroach him ! "

" You shall have his address, old boy ! " said Babcock, with much heartiness, and he gave it to the Chela, who departed with all the exaltation of a great mission.

It was evident to him that the English girl, who had spoken with such pensive sadness of the duty of helping those in danger, spoke with a strong personal meaning. It was an appeal—and he was to have the privilege of coming to her rescue.

His highly-trained faculties had detected in an instant that the pictured yogi was not a mere copy of the ordinary religious mendicant from some Indian sketch-book ; there were marks upon him which, to the Chela's experienced eyes, betrayed an occultist of no mean skill ; an occultist, however, who had used his knowledge for unworthy ends.

This unscrupulous painter was clearly in league with this follower of the Black Magic. He had been subjecting an innocent maiden to ruthless persecution. Well, he should find that she was not so helpless as he fondly imagined.

" And she," he muttered, " she shall recognise that there is at last something in Theosophy ! "

9. *Put to the Test*

¹¹ If it is true what the Prophets write,
That the heathen gods are all stocks and stones ;
Shall we, for the sake of being polite,
Feed them with the juice of our marrow-bones ? "—*Blake*.

WHEN a young man of spirit finds himself suddenly scorned and rejected by the mistress he adores, his most obvious course is to plunge into reckless dissipation, which may haply reach her ears, a result of which the advantages are too clear to need demonstration. Nor must he omit to rail against the false one and her sex with all the cynicism he can command. But Ronald Campion, hard hit as he was, could not have been a young man of spirit, for he did neither the one nor the other. Not the first, because, in spite of everything, he still hoped, and was determined to do nothing now which might hereafter keep him from Sybil's side. Not the second, because, even in his most poignant despair, he admitted that Sybil could not have acted otherwise than she had done. She was still his ideal, parted from him by a misunderstanding which he could only trust to live down in time, though it is sometimes a sanguine proceeding to enter into a tontine with misunderstandings—they are apt to thrive as do annuitants.

But for some time his life " crept on a broken wing," and he lounged about other men's studios rather aimlessly, and smoked continuously, and was a good deal at his club, where he perhaps played more poker than was good for his pocket, even if he did not lose more than the fair value of temporary forgetfulness.

Then he left town, to make some studies of apple-blossom, and broom, and thorn ; but he could not stay away long, and for the first time the loveliness of Spring had lost its charm for him.

His only chance of peace of mind lay in desperate hard work, and he came back resolved to throw his whole

A FALLEN IDOL

energy into completing some studies he had made earlier in the year for his next picture.

There was little peace of mind, however, in his own studio, where his nerves and temper were constantly being tried by a series of petty mishaps and small worries.

Most of us have had short experiences of this kind, when inanimate objects seem inspired by a perverted ingenuity of malice—a quite indispensable article, for example, emulating the violet in its retiring modesty, and when, and not until, the need for it has ceased, turning up in some obvious place with a brazen assumption upon it of having been there from the first. And in the search we have barked ourselves, it may be, in all the most impossible places, and against furniture which goes positively out of its way to annoy us ; we have overturned our most fragile possessions, and they have broken other things yet more cherished ; we have made ourselves hot and fidgety, and generally unfit for whatever we have to do.

Perhaps a " burst " of this kind lasts at most five minutes, but if the reader can conceive it extending over hours, and over days, some idea may be formed of *Campion's* state of mind at the end of it.

Accidents, small but exasperating, were continually taking place in his studio : he had not a cast or study on his walls which was not injured or defaced in some way ; and Bales, after denying the damage as long as possible, ascribed it at last to cats—though it was hard to see what the most rigid feline prudery could object to in graceful copies from Greek or Etruscan antiquities.

Campion was perpetually haunted by an unspeakably tormenting impression that he ought to do something—he did not know what—at once, that time was pressing, and the thing still undone.

And this would make him so restless, so nervous, irritable, and captious, that his models refused to sit to him, and his friends grew chary of looking him up.

PUT TO THE TEST

He was in his sitting-room one night, moodily smoking, and wondering whether he could summon sufficient energy to go as far as his club in the course of the evening, when Bales brought him in a foreign-looking card on which the name of " Axel Nebelsen " was printed.

" Can't say as I like the looks of him myself," observed his factotum. " I told him, bein' a furriner, as you weren't in need of no models at present, but he wouldn't take a denial, and I caught him a-eyein' of the umberellas very suspicious."

The name did not happen to suggest anything to Campion just then, and it was late for a stranger to call. However, he was spared the trouble of deciding whether to receive him or not, for the Chela had followed Bales in and motioned to him to leave the room, which, after glancing at Campion for confirmation, he did, with an air of disclaiming all responsibility for anything that might follow.

Nebelsen said nothing for some moments, but only stood, stiff and silent, within the radius of the lamp, and fixed his eyes solemnly upon the astounded painter, who began to feel distinctly uncomfortable, and moved within easy reach of the bell.

" Your guilty gonscience tells you already for what I am hier ! " began the Chela at last.

" It has not mentioned it at present," said Campion. " Hadn't you better take a chair and tell me yourself ? "

" Ha ! " cried Nebelsen with a snort, " you think to make a tomfool of me with this diabolical hell's-coolness ! If you do not know, why do you so startled look at me ? "

" My dear sir," expostulated Campion, " it is not so usual as you seem to think for me to receive distinguished foreigners in a state of obvious excitement."

" I am hier, then, to tell you that your evil bractices must all this night to an end come. You see, I know well who and what you are ! "

" If you are under any impression that I'm the Patriarch Job, you may find yourself mistaken presently," observed Campion.

A FALLEN IDOL

" You are a gowardly bersecutor of beauty and innocence—that is what you are ! "

" Let me advise you, for your own sake, not to be an ass ! "

" Rather would I an ass than a serpent be ! "

" Your tastes have evidently been considered. Now, look here : will you be civil and come to the point, or do you want me to pitch you out of the window ? What on earth do you mean by all this balderdash ? "

" If I speak to you in balderdash," said the Chela, who seemed to attach another meaning to the term, " it is only because you haf well deserved. The oder day I was in Mr. Babcock's studio, where also came a yong laty, lofely and schweet as the lily, and her name was Elsvort—have you heard enoff ? "

" A good deal too much ! " cried Campion, whose temper was roused at last. " What right have you to mention that young lady to me ? Will you leave the house at once ! "

" Not at all," said the Chela, with an unconscious reminiscence of Poe's raven, " you must hear. I was there when she saw the shape you bainted for Mr. Babcock—now at last I preek you ! "

" Yes," said Campion, " if it's any gratification to you—you have. I'll hear you ; tell me everything. She saw it, then ! Well, what did she do ? what did she say ? "

" I tell you only this—you will never brevail, never—she regards you with an unspeakable horror-agitation."

" Ah ! " said Campion, " and—and she sent you here to tell me so, eh ? "

" No one send me. I com on my own head," said Nebelsen.

" And I'm afraid you will go out in the same way," said Campion, " unless you can give me some reason for this interference."

" Listen," said the Chela : " you do not seem to me all gorrupt as yet. Obey the brompting of your bedder ainchel, and let your natural heart-gootness bobble up fresh again and safe you from Avitchi before too late.

PUT TO THE TEST

Renounce this Faust-gombact, this fiend, master or servant; meddle no more with the bad Black Magic ! "

Campion stared at him helplessly. " Is there anything else you would recommend me to do ? " he said ; " sell my thoroughbred broomstick, and give up my little trip to the moon ? Don't let any false delicacy restrain you from mentioning it."

" Beware ! you cannot blay with me," said Nebelsen seriously.

" I was not proposing to play with you," retorted Campion, who was gradually forgetting his annoyance ; " now can't you tell me what it's all about ? "

" You haf brocured som Indian yogi to help you to indimidate Mees Elsvort to betroth herself to you ; you haf dabbled in magic of the left-hand side. Well, if you are mystic, I also am mystic, and behindt me is my ever-honoured Mahatma, Shang Gasba. It is White Magic against the Black—I and my master against you and your mendicant fakir ; think what chances haf you ! "

" It sounds sporting," said Campion, " but, my dear, good man, you 're talking arrant bosh. I 'm not a mystic, I don't enter into unholy alliances with Indian beggars, I 'm not acquainted with sacred mendicants ; but I should not have imagined they would be of much assistance in a European love affair."

The Chela passed his hand across his forehead with a bewildered air. " You are speaking the truth," he said, " I feel it ; all the time I was wondering that your aura could of so favourable a colour remain. Still, if it is not a yogi, and you are not to blame, why did you baint a yogi in mystical meditation ?—where haf you seen such a thing ? It is very gurious."

" I've done a more curious thing than that," said Campion, " and I know just as little how I came to do it."

Nebelsen sat down opposite to Campion and laid a hand upon his knee. " It may perhaps be that only Theosophy can supply the exblanation. Forgif me that I

A FALLEN IDOL

so hasty was, and tell me what it is you do not understands"

There was a kind of ponderous innocence about this Germanised Norwegian, which was rather engaging, and Campion found himself completely disarmed by it.

" Shall I ? " he said. " Well, it can do no harm, and at all events, you are sure to believe me." And he told him how cruelly and inexplicably his portrait had been altered, and how everything had been persistently going wrong ever since.

The Chela heard him with the deepest attention, and, when he had finished, touched him on the breast with his forefinger to emphasise the importance of what he was going to say.

" There are people who would tell you in my place that it was a case simply of ungonscious cerebation. I say—bah ! "

" But you're not going to confine yourself to that explanation ? " said Campion.

" At first I gonfess I was gombletely buzzled. Now I com to the gonclusion that you are being molested by one of those semi-intelligent greatures of the astral light which we call ' elementals ' whom you haf attracted into your neighbourhood."

" Ah ? " said Campion gravely.

" You see, you are evidently what in our philosophy is termed a ' sensitive,' and your spirit has berhaps becom odylyzed by the aura of this disingarnate bersonality, this elemental, until between your own astral part and the disembodied spirit an identity of molecular vibration is at times established—is that clear ? "

" Simplicity itself," said Campion.

" Is it not ? " said the Chela, highly delighted with his own perspicacity ; " and now you understand ? "

" But what does this thing mean by spoiling my canvases ? " demanded Campion.

" Probably it could not itself tell you ; in these elementals there is a gurious blayfulness."

PUT TO THE TEST

" If that is an elemental's notion of fun, I can't follow him," said Champion. " Well, Herr Nebelsen, you have found a theory, but I want something more. I want to get at that elemental and punch his head and take his fun out of him. I dare say you will say that is impossible, and I'm much of the same opinion myself. But you must have some remedy to suggest ? "

" A remedy ? oh yes ! " said the Chela ; " there is one which all initiates recognise as very good against hostile elementals : send to your *apotheker* for one—or bedder, for two—ounces nitre, and put them in a plate with one ounce vitriol—it will drive him away—most likely."

Champion could retain his gravity no longer—he roared with laughter. " Why not beetle-poison ? " he said most disrespectfully. " My dear sir, I can't help it. I'm afraid you can't assist me very much, though it's kind of you to wish to try."

" Let me dry still more," said the Chela. " You laugh now : some day, perhaps, you do not laugh. On a word from you, I will place all my occult faculties in your service. I will even—though it will probably make him very cross—with my venerable Mahatma communicate."

Champion shook his head laughingly. " No, no, my dear Herr Nebelsen," he said. " It's only fair to tell you I can't believe in all these things. They seem to me the merest moonshine."

" Moonshine, perhaps," said the Chela, rising to go. " Only remember—moonshine is not less real as sunshine."

And he glided out and down the small garden path, with the air of a man who was above the empty ostentation of vanishing.

But when he was alone he was dispirited by the result of his mission. This English maiden was no beauty in distress after all ; her emotion at the sight of Champion's work was merely a revival of wounded female vanity ; he could do nothing for her.

And he had been so positive. Where had his clair-

A FALLEN IDOL

voyant insight gone, to be so much at fault ? His finer and more spiritual faculties were being dimmed and corrupted by so much forced contact with grosser natures ; why, wondered poor Nebelsen, had the Mahatma sent him to this materialistic city ? why could he not have studied in peace under the wing of the good brothers ?

Still he had something to do now. Here was a psychical mystery to be unravelled. What a triumph for Theosophy if he were to be permitted to find the clue ! And then that sweet Miss Elsworth would smile with approval and confess that Theosophists had real powers and could use them for unselfish ends.

Whether it was that Campion did not follow the nitre and vitriol prescription, or from other causes, things went no better with him after the Chela's visit. He began to have a dismal conviction that they never would go well again.

Bills came in, and he was beginning to be pressed for money. The probate proceedings, on which so much depended, were naturally—it was only the beginning of June—far enough from a hearing ; but from all he could learn the will was not likely to survive its eccentric author by many months.

He would have instructed a solicitor to look after his interests if he had seen the least prospect of being able to pay the lightest costs, but it mattered little since, in any case, his legacy was doomed.

And then, for two or three days he had been obliged to be idle, having strained his right hand in shifting his furniture.

All of which did not tend to improve his temper ; and when, one afternoon early in June, the Chela walked into his studio unannounced, Campion only just repressed an expression of his irritation.

Nebelsen was evidently excited. " I came at once," he cried, " I could not wait. I haf shust now to the Grosvenor Galerie been. I went " (and here his face became a little pink) " to see Mess Elsvort's bortrait—ach, it is *schruHich* ! "

PUT TO THE TEST

Campion had already begun to repent his confidences. " I am quite aware of that," he said, " but I don't enjoy talking about it."

" No, no—not of that ; but I want to tell you how I find there a something that has an altogether new theory inspired."

" I don't feel quite up to Theosophy just now," said Campion wearily. " Suppose we talk of something else ? "

" Oh, yes, you will hear this," said Nebelsen persuasively. " In Mr. Babcock's picture is an Indian yogi, and in that portrait is an Indian—perhaps a Burmese—idol. You could not have done either one or the other, because you have never seen them. Now why should both——? "

" I don't know whether it affects your theory," said Campion, " but if I can't explain the yogi (and I confess I can't) the idol can be perfectly well accounted for. I painted it from—from something I happen to have by me."

" So ! " said the Chela ; evidently this had upset his latest theory. " You have it still here ? "

" Somewhere. I was rearranging my things the other day, and I put it on a shelf out of the way."

" May I have it down to examine ? " And Campion brought the idol from its retirement, not with the best grace in the world, for the fact was, it had been banished because he had taken a strong dislike to it.

Nebelsen carried it carefully to a side-table, and, folding his arms, regarded it thoughtfully for some time ; then he came nearer, and seemed to be testing the air with his outspread fingers, and finally he turned to Campion in triumph.

" At last, and this time without a doubt, I have the glue ! " he cried.

" You don't say so ? " said Campion carelessly.

Nebelsen caught him by the sleeve and led him up to the image. " I am going to tell you a thing by which you will be much surprised. All your unluck and hard lines are by this blacid-seeming gross-leg caused."

A FALLEN IDOL

Campion looked at him sharply for a moment, suspecting some hidden meaning ; but the Chela was quite innocent of any allusion to the secret engagement, of which he had never heard.

" I tell you," he repeated, " I haf no longer any doubt ; it radiates quite perceptibly an evil magnetism. I feel it from here."

" What a funny person you are, Nebelsen ! " said Campion, laughing in spite of himself.

" I am not fonning, I am quite serious. What, do you not beleaf ? "

" Not a bit. I was brought up ' a happy Christian child,' Nebelsen, as our nursery verse says. I can't believe in a working idol."

" As an idol—no. But may he not haf been so saturated with the bersonal magnetism of a very bowerful medium that he finally attains an automatic gonsciousness to himself ? "

" I should have thought it slightly improbable."

" Answer me only this. Are there no oggurrences you remember which you can distinctly gonnect with that image ? I beg you to be gandid."

Campion reflected conscientiously. " Let me see," he said. " The boy who brought it here w^Tas run over just at the door—boys always are getting run over. My fellow Bales and I came to grief when we tried to put it up on a bracket in my room, and there was a pretty big smash ; and I believe it fell down again with Bales when he was taking it to be washed ! "

" You see," cried Nebelsen, " but there is more to tell, is there not ? "

" Well," said Campion reluctantly, " it did kill a dog certainly—at least the dog upset the pedestal, and that thing fell down and flattened the poor brute. And, oh, well, I dare say you could pick out several other coincidences about as striking if you took the trouble."

" Seferal goincidences together an inference make. I tell you, and I am sure of it, that—in some way even

PUT TO THE TEST

I do not pretend to understand—that image is imbued with a force which enables it to protect itself ! ”

“ You mean to tell me you seriously believe all this bosh ? Look here : I'll settle this at once, and then I hope you'll let me hear no more of it. Here goes for your self-conscious image ! ”

He took the idol by its conical head and jerked it contemptuously on to the floor. It bounded in three long skips, duck-and-drake fashion, across the floor, and rolled through a large mirror which was leaning against the wall, and the fragments of glass cut gaping rents in some newly stretched canvases and finished studies behind.

Nebelsen pointed to the idol, which was smiling amidst the debris like a sleeping infant. “ You call that no proof ? ” he said triumphantly.

Campion was amused at his obstinacy. “ If you are going to see marvels in everything,” he said, “ why, I could make a bowl do the same thing any day ; but I suppose you would call that offended dignity, too. Nebelsen, I *must* cure you of this nonsense, it's so bad for you. We'll try it again with a more subtle sort of outrage. Ah ! I think this will do.”

Nebelsen had already replaced the image upon a table, and Campion took a tube of carmine which happened to be near, and with his thumb drew a broad smear across the idol's eyes, to the Chela's extreme horror.

“ Take care,” he cried. “ It is not wise to irritate him too far ! ”

“ That ought to draw him, if he has the spirit of a zoophyte,” said Campion ; “ but he bears it, Nebelsen, you see—” smiles as he was wont to smile “—and I still breathe ! ”

“ We shall see,” was the Chela's sole observation. He seemed at once disappointed and relieved.

“ Ah, you're incorrigible ! ” said Campion, laughing. “ Never mind, we won't quarrel about it.”

“ You will not object if I submit the case to my Mahatma for his advice ? ” said Nebelsen,—“ I will get

A FALLEN IDOL

the Brother who is over hier to forward a gommunication for me. And, if it is not too great an interference with Karma, and if the Mahatma happens in a goot temper to be, I shall perhaps an answer which will gonfirm my obinion receive, and be able then to tell you what you ought next to do."

" Dojust as you please about it, Nebelsen," said Campion. " But I can't promise to follow your directions."

10. *Conviction*

ON the evening of the day when Nebelsen had accused the idol, Campion went to his club, and, as had become a habit of his, joined the " poker "-playing set in the card-room. But that night he did not play long ; whether the light was bad, or he was more than usually careless in glancing at his hand, he found himself betting confidently on a supposed " red-flush " or a " sequence " of hearts and diamonds, when the final challenge to show his cards would invariably reveal the presence of an unsuspected spade or club, which of course, by the laws of " poker," was fatal to his pretensions. Even then he could not accept the ruling of the rest without some protest, and found himself so continually at variance on the question of suits and sequences, that at last, after losing more heavily than usual, he left the game in disgust, only just refraining from hinting his suspicion of a combination to persuade him against his own senses. This, as he saw when he had grown cooler, was not probable conduct in such a place ; but the men had certainly behaved very oddly, and he decided to avoid the card-room for the future.

He had quite dismissed the incident, however, by the following day, when he was able to return to the study he was making for his next picture, a scene from " Christabel " ; the lost sense of power and delight in work came back to him.

His friend Perceval, who looked in about this time,

was surprised by his animation. "Hear you made yourself rather unpleasant at the club last night," he began; "some of the younger fellows thought you meant to charge them with cheating, and swear they'll bring the matter before the committee."

"Cheating!" said Campion, who, now he came to think of it, was afraid he might have gone too far, "such an idea never entered my head. I'm sorry they should have misunderstood me like that. All I thought was that it was a practical joke between them, for when I found they all insisted my hearts were spades, why, you know it was annoying; and I had nothing but red flushes all through."

"Hum," said Perceval, going up to the study, "got a red flush here, too, I see—what is it?"

Campion, deserting the classics for romance, had chosen as his subject the first meeting of the lovely lady Christabel and the dangerous Geraldine in the wood.

"I remember," said the elder artist, on being told the subject; "but wasn't it a * midnight wood,' and hadn't one of them 'a silken robe of white, that shadowy in the moonlight shone,' if I remember my Coleridge? Why have you made 'em meet at *sunset*?"

"You call that sunset! I thought I had caught rather a good moonlight effect myself."

"Oh, very well; but—crimson moss and scarlet turf! Come, Campion, this is more eccentric than ever."

"Crimson? scarlet? Nonsense! Greys and greens, you mean. Why, where are your eyes, 'making the green one red' like this?"

"I may be wrong," said Perceval, with a quiet forbearance that provoked Campion.

"May be! My dear fellow, you *are*" he said. "We'll soon settle it," and he shouted down his tube for Bales, who presently appeared, as usual under protest.

"Were you requiring me for any purpose in particular?" he said. "I was just going about those frames you ordered; but of course if I'm *wanted* here I can stay."

A FALLEN IDOL

" Just come over and tell Mr. Perceval and me what strikes you as the chief colour in this picture."

Bales coughed behind his hand, and looked from one man to the other. At last he said, with a feeling that it was a case for caution and periphrasis, " Well, if it was me, I shouldn't leave it about loose where there was a bull ! "

" Are you going to tell me it's red ? " cried Campion.

" Pillar-boxes is fools to it," returned Bales sententially, and Campion dismissed him impatiently.

When they were alone, Perceval said kindly : " Don't let this upset you ; it's overwork, that's all. Only, if I were you, I should see some one about it, you know."

Campion turned a ghastly face upon him, " I see," he said ; " I'm colour-blind, then ? "

" I'm afraid there's some temporary affection—bless you, it's the commonest thing in the world," said Perceval, " nothing to give way about, man. Just stick to black and white for a few days and see an oculist, and you'll be all right. I'll make it all right with those fellows at the Club, so you needn't worry about that. By the way, there was that head of Cybele of mine you wanted to make some studies of—now's your time. I'll send it over to you, only be careful with it. I had the cast taken expressly for me at Athens, and I don't believe I could get it replaced."

" Thanks," said Campion, " it's very good of you."

" Don't talk rubbish ! And, see here : I've taken a houseboat for the summer—it's at Wargrave just now—why not run down for a few days ?—come with me next Saturday."

" If this lasts," said Campion, " I shan't be able to trust myself near a river."

" Pooh ! it won't last. I shall expect you, then, and let you know about the train—that's all right ; and you shall have the Cybele this evening."

After he had gone, Campion gave himself up to the gloomy realisation of his future—colour-blind, why, it

was only a degree better than total blindness ! Henceforth he could trust no tints, no hue that might for the moment delight his eye, and if he tried to place them on canvas, his palette, too, would lie to him ! It was the end of his career as a colourist, unless he could unlearn all he knew and paint, as a man with no ear may play, powerless either to correct or enjoy his own performance.

As he sat with his face buried in his hands, crushed by this last blow, a hand was laid on his shoulder, and he turned, to find the Chela.

" Ha, Nebelsen ! " he said wildly, " you come in time to congratulate me—I've just discovered I'm colour-blind. Pleasant that for a painter, eh ? "

" And now at last you beleaf ? " cried Nebelsen.

" Believe ? in what ? Oh, I see what you mean," and Campion glanced at the smeared face of the idol, which was almost pathetic in its gentle resignation. " Nebelsen, it's too ridiculous—I won't believe it ! "

" Have you the head so hard ? " said the Chela. " The test was yours."

" I tell you this is serious ; for Heaven's sake, don't drag that foolish idol into it. Can't you let me forget ! " And Campion, anxious to remove all traces of an act which, in this last affliction, seemed so frivolous and puerile, caught up a piece of old Venetian embroidery, which happened to come first to hand, and hastily wiped the idol's downcast eyes. " Now that's done with," he said. " If I could clear my own eyes as easily—but, oh, if I could have thought all that—" (He had come back to the Christabel again.)—" Green, I must be a hopeless case ! No one can cure me. By Jove, though, if—if I see it as it really is now, I must *be* cured ! But why—how ? "

And he sat down, trembling violently. " Good God ! Nebelsen," he said hoarsely, " you were right after all—it's too horrible."

" Never mindt," said the Chela encouragingly, " now that the spell is reversed. Besides, I bring you a goot tiding. I haf a gommunication from my revered Mahat-

A FALLEN IDOL

ma received. The Brother through whom it came found it this morning brecipitated in blue bencil upon his blotting-bad, and sent it on at once to me. It points out the only way for you to remove out of all your troubles, but the way is luckily quite simple. I tolt you my Mahatma was a defer man ! "

Campion gave a little groan ; but after swallowing the idol, he could hardly strain at a Mahatma. " Well, what does *he* say ? " he asked.

" I am going to read. I must tell you at beginning, his English is very fonny. Listen ! "

" ' Quite true,' he begins, ' the idol is the mechanism of most of your friend's sea of troubles, though your theory to account for it is the feeblest fiddle-faddle and stuff of a fat-witted beetle-head.' (There is noding stiff at all about my dear old Mahatma.) ' Only one who was a ninnyhammer and a goose-cap would suppose that an image could possibly be charged with electro-magnetism. As you have chosen to worry me about it, I tell you plainly that the only way out of the Gordian knot with which your friend is stuck in the mud '—(I gannot think where he gets all his words and phrases—nor can the Brother who sets them down) ' is at once to return the idol to the hand from which it came. As for your idiotic——' (and then he writes some more in a friently way).

" You see, it is simple and quite easy," he concluded ; " only return the idol to the place you bought it at—you can do that perfectly well."

" It happens to be a present," said Campion.

" To the giver, then—that is bedder still ! "

" It's impossible, I tell you, Nebelsen. If that's the best suggestion your Mahatma can make, he might as well have left it alone."

" But why ? tell me why."

" Isn't it obvious ? How can I, if I believe—and, Heaven help me, I do believe—this cursed thing is able to injure those who cross its path, in some unaccountable

way—how can I send it back to some one who thought sh-he was doing me a kindness in giving it ? "

" But if the Mahatma says it is the only way," put in the Chela.

" If it was the only way to save my soul, I hope I shouldn't do it. Just ask yourself, Nebelsen. How can I tell what infernal trick it may play if I do send it back ? I couldn't be such a scoundrel to send it without a word of warning, and if I warn, would anyone in his senses take it in at all ? No, your Mahatma may be a very learned person—but he doesn't seem to understand European notions."

" It is true," said the Chela, " he does not know the world—not *this* world ; he is not, as I always say, a bractical man of business. I gonfess I do not understandt his advice hier—it does not seem at all equitable. I am afraid he has not given all his mindt to what to him is only an earthly trifle."

" You mustn't disturb him again on my account. There's sure to be a way out of it somehow. We will find it together."

" You will not do as the Mahatma advises ? "

" Most certainly not! "

" Then I am sorry—but I cannot any more advise you. I am his Chela, and whether he is right or wrong, I cannot ask for his wisdom and then act quite anoder way."

" Is that occult etiquette ? " said Campion with a bitter smile. " You throw up the case, then ? Very well, if you must leave me to fight that inf—that influential image all alone, I must see what I can do with it. I wish now, Nebelsen, you had left me in my ignorance—what was the good of opening my eyes if you mustn't do anything for me ? I've lost all my nerve : look at my hand ! I shall go mad if I think of this much longer. How can I believe in an idol ?—and yet I do, and that's the worst of it ! Don't stay and listen to my raving—you can't do any good. Go, Nebelsen, like a good chap, go and leave me—I can't say in peace—but go ! "

A FALLEN IDOL

And Nebelsen, not without much reluctance and compassion, went.

When Nebelsen had gone, Campion sat and stared at that uncanny idol of his with growing dismay ; he did not know what to think about it. He was ashamed of believing that it could harm him, and yet his experiments had given him a sharp lesson.

In defiance to all reason, he must recognise that he had to deal with a mysterious force which was only too ready to avenge the least failure in respect to an absurd image ; he had no theories about it—the idol might be a mere conductor, a sort of consecrated Leyden jar, or it might have a horrible life of its own. He only knew that when it was insulted it struck back, and generally below the belt.

It had remitted its last stroke, but there was small comfort in that, when the unseen finger might touch him again at any time.

And he knew all this, and had no one to advise him. Nebelsen might not be remarkable for profound wisdom, but at least he understood these things : he had exposed the offender. Now he was gone, Campion could not even speak of his sufferings to anyone else, for who else would believe in them ?

What was he to do ? He might smash this idol ; but he persuaded himself that he was prevented by his promise to Sybil ; though, to tell the honest truth, the reason was that he was afraid to do anything of the kind. *

As for sending it back to her, he was incapable of even thinking of such a thing. If Nebelsen's Mahatma knew anything, and it really desired to return to her hand, it could be for no good purpose, he was sure, and he would never allow this sinister shadow to touch his lost love if he could prevent it.

Suppose he were to get rid of it in some way ? There was his unlucky promise, twice given. Of course, Sybil, if she knew all, would in common humanity release him ; but what would she think if he asked to be relieved ? What reason could he give with the least plausibility ?

And if he did without her permission, and some day, as he had not even yet ceased to hope, they met again, would not one of her first questions be whether he still had her gift, and would not an answer in the negative be quite fatal?

At all events, he would do nothing for a little while; very likely there was some natural explanation after all. For the average healthy-minded young Englishman will not go over to fetich-worship without a struggle, and Campion had moments of indignant revolt against the terror that haunted him.

And as he fell back again within its dominion, he began to wonder whether it would always be content with annoying, but still temporary, acts of vengeance, and direct its destructive power solely against his household effects. What if it were only toying with him, catlike, all this while, and reserving some tremendous doom as the finishing stroke?

It was an ugly thought, but he could not get rid of it; he was afraid at last to be alone in the studio with the idol, and went out for a restless stroll.

On his way back he passed a florist's, where he bought the most expensive flowers he could see in the window, and arranged them after his return in his rarest piece of pottery.

He called Bales, and told him to take them into the painting-room. "Anywhere in particular?" Bales asked. "No," said Campion, with affected carelessness, "it's of no consequence, it doesn't matter—at least" (and he showed a slight confusion here), "now I come to think of it, you may put it on the carved cabinet, just in front of that Indian idol. Yes, put it there, Bales—nowhere else. And I shall dine out this evening."

He came home late. Not even to himself would he acknowledge that he had determined to *soigner* his idol, if it was possible to do so and preserve any self-respect at all. "I may try my hand at painting those flowers to-morrow," he had told himself, though he was not

A FALLEN IDOL

believed, " and in the meanwhile—why the deuce *shouldn't* they be on that cabinet ? "

But somehow, before he went to his bedroom he took a light into his studio, to assure himself that Bales had made no mistake about the flowers.

The flowers had evidently been placed on the cabinet; but now they lay scattered and crushed at its foot, and the pottery which had held them was broken into a hundred pieces ; while the idol kept its usual place above, with something now, to Champion's excited fancy, of deadly and implacable hostility upon its glistening countenance.

As he stood there in the big painting-room, where all but that particular corner was lost in gloom, his flesh crept at the thought that this thing was not to be cajoled nor appeased by anything he could do—he had humbled himself for nothing—his offering was rejected with scorn.

And then, in the dead silence, with the shadows shooting and contracting about him as the light shook in his trembling hand, Champion, from some impulse he could not resist, spoke to this image.

" What do you want ? " he said in a hoarse whisper. " Only tell me that. Whatever you are—be reasonable."

But the ugly thing gave no reply, no sign of relenting ; and, disgusted with his own superstition, Champion went to bed in a state of stony despair.

The next morning he rose with a weary impatience of his surroundings ; he felt that he ought to do something to break the spell of horror, but he wanted resolution to deal summarily with his formidable incubus—his nerves were unstrung, and he felt ill and discouraged.

So when he found, with the cast which Perceval had sent according to promise, a note saying that he was going down to his houseboat that very day, and proposing that Champion should come with him at once, instead of waiting till Saturday, he welcomed this as a means of escaping from the idol and its vague suggestions of evil, and accepted eagerly.

Before he left Bales came up with a troubled countenance : " About that there vawse of flowers, sir," he began, " I think you ought to be told——"

Campion stopped him. " I know—I know," he said hurriedly : " it's all right. I — I had an accident with it last night."

Who could have thought that he would sink to such Paganism as this ? to lay offerings before a barbarous idol, and when it spurned them, actually to shield it at his own expense ! Let no one imagine that Campion did not feel this degradation—he despised himself for it bitterly.

Bales's usually wooden face became quite a battleground for emotions. " Oh, very well, sir, I'm sure," was all he could manage to say ; but when he was by himself, his perplexity found a vent.

" Now what indooed the governor to tell me that ? " he asked himself. " Can't say I see what he's up to at all. However, so long as *he's* satisfied, 'tain't none o' my business."

And Campion had driven off with the thought that perhaps Bales had suspected or seen something. To have his miserable plight known to his servant would be intolerable, and Campion's sole comfort was in the recollection of Bales's systematic scepticism.

i i . *Mystifications*

AFTER one or two postponements, Mrs. Staniland's projected esoteric evening was actually about to come off. She had often exerted herself before for the benefit of struggling geniuses, to whom she had been of real assistance. Ill-natured people were apt to compare her benevolence to that of the fabled snark, which " collects though it does not subscribe," and it was perhaps true that her heart opened more readily than her purse. After all, money is not the only or the most valuable contribution in all cases, and even of

A FALLEN IDOL

money Mrs. Staniland could be liberal when she saw occasion.

But it was quite a new sensation to her to figure as the protectress of a rising faith, which might with a little timely assistance regenerate society, and she received her friends with deep satisfaction. "I do think," she assured several of them, "that we are going to have a most interesting evening—dear Mr. Nebelsen hopes to be allowed to go quite beyond the usual phenomena."

The rooms filled, and as the chariot-wheels which bore the hero of the evening still tarried, there was little to distinguish the gathering from an ordinary evening party. Young men stood talking, with the usual conviction that it was uncommonly good of them to talk at all, down to the eager girl faces upturned to catch their utterances; here and there some one, with an evident pride in his social dexterity, would pick his tortuous way through the groups until he dropped into the conversational opening he desired, much as the marble in the game of nursery billiards zigzags down a maze of pins.

Everybody seemed to be talking at once at high pressure and full speed, and the effect at a short distance was painfully suggestive of the monkey-house; but there were the usual silent individuals without whom no social evening would be complete—the men who don't know a soul, and who are to be seen sometimes herding together for mutual encouragement, like cattle in wind; more often brooding apart in corners, wondering why they came, and eyeing one another with a furtive misanthropy.

There were the airy little greetings, which not unfrequently carried a hidden sting; and the gushing welcomes intended least of all for the actual recipient; the slow beat of fans, and the restless shifting of crush hats.

The only distinguishing features were a certain suppressed excitement, and the fact that the talk ran everywhere in the same groove—the probable nature of the Chela's performances, concerning which there was much vague speculation.

" Mr. Babcock, come here and tell me all about this Herr Nebelsen," said Mrs. Pontifex in her imperious matronly tones. " What will it be like ?—you've seen it before, I know."

" Well, let me see," said Babcock. " If you can conceive a cross between a rather clumsy foreign conjurer and a half-trained performing canary, you'll get a faint idea of the kind of thing."

" Is it amusing, then ? " inquired the lady solemnly.

" There's an element of quiet fun, without vulgarity, about it, certainly," said Babcock. " We must make him bring out his best miracles—we shall have you a full-blown Buddhist, Mrs. Pontifex, before the evening's over! "

He was passing on in the endeavour to reach the spot where Sybil stood, by one of the open windows, when he was again delayed, this time by little Mrs. Venham Honiton.

" Tell me, Mr. Babcock, isn't it getting fearfully late ? I really don't think this prophet man can be coming now, if he ever meant to, for they're obliged of course to be very particular where they go just at starting, aren't they ?—they can't go *everywhere*. It's a great disappointment to dear Mrs. Staniland, no doubt, after getting us all here to meet him ; but perhaps she was a little too ready to take his acceptance for granted—don't you think so ? I am so grieved about it! "

" Well, I wouldn't begin to despair yet," said Babcock ; " I think he is pretty sure to turn up some time."

" Ah ! " said Mrs. Honiton admiringly, " you are always so good-natured, and willing to look at the bright side ; but I feel quite a conviction we shall not hear much Buddhism to-night. Yes, I see by your eyes you're as much struck as I was by that pale Elsworth girl—did you *ever* see anyone so gone off in your life ? "

" Can't say I see any startling change for the worse," said Babcock, who was thinking Sybil looked particularly charming that evening.

A FALLEN IDOL

" Well, a woman notices these things more perhaps. / see it. Not that I ever admired her, though some people, I dare say, called her pleasing once. I declare I'm getting quite good-natured in my old age."

" Oh, you're a long way off *that* at present, don't you know," said Babcock, not particularly caring in which sense she chose to apply his consolation ; and then he made his escape, and worked his way by slow approach to where Sybil was standing with a girl friend, who was her inconveniently devoted admirer.

" Mr. Babcock, don't you call it too bad—this hard-hearted person here sternly refuses to prepare me for what we are to see ? "

" But if I don't know myself! " protested Sybil.

" I can prepare you both," said Babcock. " There will be signs and wonders, astral shapes all over the room ; we shan't see them, but we shall know they're here, because Nebelsen will tell us so. There will be elementary thought-reading, or rather spelling ; and you must try and coax him to give us a portent that never fails to surprise and delight the young—the materialisation of an esoteric pudding in an astral hat."

" Poor Mr. Nebelsen—he really believes in it all," said Sybil.

" Well, he believes in himself," said Babcock. " But here comes the mystic man at last. Isn't he being mobbed, though ? And he pretends he don't like it."

Nebelsen was feeling a supreme exaltation at the prospect of being at last allowed to unveil some of the mysteries of occultism to a larger assembly than he had ever yet addressed ; the Brotherhood, through their representative, had withdrawn their opposition; he felt himself in so highly electrical a condition as to be capable of producing phenomena far more startling than any he had hitherto ventured upon.

Might he not, in this drawing-room, one of the resorts of frivolous fashion (it was nothing of the kind, but he knew no better), accomplish results which would bring all

thoughtful London around him ? Nothing was needed but courage and unlimited faith in himself.

" Really, dear Herr Nebelsen," Mrs. Staniland was saying, " I began to be afraid you had deserted me ; but so long as you are here at last—and you know this is a great opportunity for you ; some of the people here to-night would be real acquisitions to *any* religion, and quite open to conviction, too. As for me, I'm too old, you tell me, to change my views, but I take a great interest in your cause, for all that. And now, do tell me, is there anything you would like done by way of preparation ? Should the room be darkened, or chairs moved, or anything ? Please give your own directions."

" Everything will do as at present quite well," said the Chela. " I shall only ask a leedle less talking from laties and schendlemen."

Conversation, after two or three rebellious outbursts, was finally quelled. The Chela took up a position on the hearthrug, from which he contemplated his audience through moony spectacles with a gaze of dreamy emotion.

" Sybil darling," whispered her friend. " I'm getting so frightened ! Will they turn out the lamps, do you think ? You are so brave—do let me hold your hand."

And Babcock too would have professed panic if he could have hoped to share the remedy.

The Chela had already started with a rapid and enthusiastic, though slightly incoherent harangue on the stupendous powers which were to be attained by the human will when guided and fortified by occult training. He discoursed upon these at such length that his hearers showed slight but unmistakable signs that their attention was wandering, though it took Nebelsen some time longer to discover that he was expected to " cut the dialect and come to the 'osses."

Then, by way of introduction to the more recondite mysteries, he obtained sharp double raps and silvery tinkles from unexpected quarters.

A FALLEN IDOL

" It's quite dreadful ! " cried Miss Tremlett. " I don't believe it's *right* ! "

It is quite possible, however, to overdo bell-sounds, and it must be owned that the Chela, in his artless pleasure at his own performances, produced them in profusion long after they had lost their first freshness ; but the flagging interest was revived when he announced an intention of borrowing a cigarette.

" For even a student as myself," said Nebelsen, taking a cigarette from the case some one had fetched from his overcoat—" even for myself, to disintegrate a thing, and afterwards to create it exactly the same again, is nothing at all. We have only to restore it to the cosmic raw material, and then again to evolve it. Somebody, please, will make his private mark on this cigarette? "

Pen and ink were procured, and a large cross and a couple of small blots marked upon the cigarette, which the Chela then held over the flame of a candle until it was burnt.

" In five minutes," he said, " if you will open the top of the piano I see in that other room, you will find there your cigarette."

Now, it may be well here to make it clearly understood that there could be no possibility of collusion or substitution ; the owner of the cigarette was a complete stranger to Nebelsen, nor had Nebelsen been in the house before that evening, while all present had seen the ink-marked cigarette slowly burning. The experiment, beyond all doubt, was perfectly genuine, and this, in the face of certain recent exposures, cannot be too much insisted upon.

As soon as the five minutes were up, there was a general movement towards the piano, the top of which Babcock raised amidst great excitement.

" Well ? " said the Chela impatiently, as he stood on the hearthrug, " why do you not take it out ? "

" I think, do you know," said Babcock blandly, " we'd better give it another five minutes."

" You need not be afraid," said Nebelsen, with

dignified contempt, " he vill not bah-it you ! Why, then, do you not take him out for all to see ? "

" Well, I would," said Babcock, " only it's a very singular thing ; but he ain't there ! "

" Not at all singular," retorted the Chela, with some temper, " when you are there, diffusing a garnal and gross influence by which the magnetic gurrents must totally disorganised be ! If you will only allow Mees Elsvort to go near the piano, the cigarette will be able in peace to reconstruct himself."

Babcock shrugged his shoulders, and retired with sentiments the reverse of amiable at this public reproof, and Sybil, not best pleased at being thus singled out, approached the instrument and looked in. " Really," she said at last, " I can't see anything either."

" No," said the Chela, who did not seem particularly abashed. " I am going to dell you why ; the phenomenon has failed simply begause the cigarette was not with my own bersonal magnetism sufficiently imbregnated. I made too great hurry to destroy it ; I ought to have kept it upon me a longer time."

(" Up his sleeve," suggested Babcock, under his breath.)

" But nevere mindt, it has noding to say ; we vill try again once more."

But Mrs. Staniland, perhaps from doubt whether cigarettes were likely to improve the tone of her piano, intervened here : " Oh no, dear Herr Nebelsen, you mustn't trouble to do it all over again. You see, we all quite understand the process. I think we would rather see some other phenomenon, if you don't mind."

" Anoder ! You are still not satisfied ! Do not be frightened, anybody, but there is one of the Broderhood hier in astral form upon the balgony. Now we shall be able to have a very gurious and beautiful manifestation ! Perhaps this lady who is opposite " (and he bowed to Mrs. Pontifex) " will be so gracious to think of zomthing she has long ago lost and would be joyful to see again ? "

" Don't you hope she'll ask for her *figure* ? " whispered

A FALLEN IDOL

Mrs. Venham Honiton ; but Mrs. Pontifex was so fortunate as to be able to remember nothing, and the Chela appealed to the company generally, who, from a mean dread of being compromised as witnesses, avoided his eye with singular unanimity.

At last an elaborately dishevelled lady, with a sad smile and a low *trainante* voice, said : " When I was quite a child I had a possession I dearly, dearly loved—a poor old doll with no legs and arms and no features—just an ordinary ninepin it was, but it was almost the only thing I cared for in the world ! Do you know, I have so often wished I could see its poor old round head and long neck once more ? "

There was a touch of pathos about this that touched all with any tendency to sentiment. The Chela himself was charmed by the simplicity and poetry of the request, which he readily undertook to gratify.

For some minutes he stood with folded arms, absorbed and silent, with his eyes bent on one of the open windows. At length he came out of his reverie with a start: " I f you will look inside the chair upon which you are sitting, there will your long-lost ninepin be," he said.

The lady started up with a cry of rapture : " How *can* I thank you ! " and then she gave a pretty little moan of dismay. " But—*inside* the chair ! Oh, Mrs. Staniland, may I, *may* I have it cut open ? I'm a selfish wretch, I know ; but I should so like to see my poor old plaything once more ? "

" Oh, my dear," said Mrs. Staniland, " how can you wait to ask ? Cut it open by all means."

It was a large armchair, very luxuriously padded, and when the cretonne covering was removed it revealed a richly brocaded stuff, imitated from an old pattern ; this was slit up with as little damage as possible, and a white lining appeared underneath, which was also cut open ; the condition of each covering proving conclusively that it could not have been tampered with, for the stitches were strong and the material still unfrayed.

MYSTIFICATIONS

The excitement reached a climax; the floor was gradually strewn with hair and flock from the disembowelled chair, which began to present a limp and emaciated appearance ; but nowhere in its recesses was the interesting ninepin.

" Are you sure it's not in one of the *poufs* ? " asked Mrs. Honiton, with questionable good faith.

" I don't think Mrs. Staniland would like all her chairs opened, like oysters, don't you know," remonstrated Babcock.

" Particularly for such a very problematical pearl."

" Well, perhaps not," was the rejoinder. " But how warm the poor man's getting—I quite feel for him ! "

" I am sorry," the Chela confessed, with his first approach to confusion," but here, among so many indifferent or opposing individualities, I cannot concentrate my will power upon a common ninepin. If I continue till morning light I shall do nothing ; never, never. And the Broder out on the balcony is gone away ! "

This statement was received in chilling silence, broken by a few dry coughs ; Mrs. Honiton, who had just refurnished her drawing-room, decided that it was not expedient to have the Chela at her own house, and Mrs. Staniland already regretted that she had allowed hers to be the scene of such & *fiasco*.

" Perhaps," suggested Babcock," your Mahatma might do something for you if you ask him ? "

The Chela seemed struck by an idea. " Now listen," he said half-aloud. " My Mahatma is far away in Thibet: don't you think that if I write to him and get a letter back here in this room, those people will believe ? "

" Not a doubt of it," said Babcock. " Capital notion ! How will it come ? "

" It will flutter from the ceiling down," said the Chela.

" I want you all to have still patience," he said, addressing the assembly. " I am going to write to my Mahatma in Thibet, and you shall see the answer when it arrives, and hear also what he has to say."

A FALLEN IDOL

Babcock conducted him to a small writing-cabinet, where the Chela hastily scribbled a few lines. " I shall next place it on a magnetic current, and it will instantly to Thibet transported be," he explained as he stepped out upon the balcony and stood there, holding out his mystic billet in the warm starlit stillness.

In spite of themselves, the majority were impressed by the sight of the tall strangely attired figure standing silent there, and there was a murmur of approbation when he re-entered, saying quietly, " It is gone, and now, until the ledder arrive, berhaps some laty will a liddle song sing ? "

Some one sang " Good-bye," and after the applause had subsided, the Chela said excitedly, " The ledder will be soon hier, in anoder minute ! "

" Sharp work to and from Thibet in ten minutes ! " said Babcock.

" There is no time and no space for the true adept," answered Nebelsen ; but the anxiously awaited letter unaccountably declined to deliver itself. " If somebody would again upon the biano blay ? " the Chela suggested at last, feeling himself very much in the situation of the priests whom Baal so ungratefully left in a sacerdotal lurch.

But at last, when the general attention was despairingly directed to the performer who was just sitting down at the piano, a sudden exclamation from Babcock startled the room, and all eyes perceived a pink cocked-hat note slowly sailing down from the ceiling and drifting towards the Chela's feet.

In the reaction which followed all gathered eagerly round him, while, with flushed face and triumphant smile, he picked up the mysterious missive. " I tolt you," he said proudly, " the Mahatma has vindicated the cause by sending to you this greeting," and he reverently unfolded the cocked hat and began to read the contents to himself.

Many who had remained sceptical and unmoved

through all the preceding marvels began to waver now, and on all sides there was a consuming anxiety to hear what the Mahatma had to say. It was not gratified.

Nebelsen, after studying the note with a confused and angry face, crushed it in his hand and thrust it into his sash.

"But mayn't we look?" cried Mrs. Honiton. "I should so love to see what an occult note looks like?"

"I am not able to communicate the contents," said the Chela.

"Too tremendous for our weak minds to grasp?" inquired Babcock.

"Quite right," was the answer; "to read it aloud would not be of advantage, and after this I do not think I shall succeed in obtaining any more results this evening."
*

The announcement brought back the former frost in increased severity; eyebrows were significantly lifted, and smiles of private incredulity freely indulged in. Nobody had a good word to say for a faith which was not even able to entertain them for a single evening.

Mrs. Staniland began to send people downstairs where a light supper had been provided. "You never touch supper, I know, Herr Nebelsen," she said as she passed him.

"To-night, yes," he replied.

"Oh, then, perhaps you will take some one down by-and-by?" she said, with a marked contrast to the distinction she had shown him earlier in the evening, and left him standing, humbled, but patient, in the emptying room, where he aroused Sybil's compassion.

"I mustn't—till I've seen everybody else go," she said to Babcock, who was hoping to secure her as his companion. "Nobody has asked that pretty Miss Chatterton; come with me and be introduced." When she had got rid of him thus, and only a few scattered couples were left, she went up to Nebelsen. "Will you be very good and take me down for some supper?" she said.

A FALLEN IDOL

" Not now, it's crowded, and it will be pleasanter out on the balcony."

She stepped outside, and he followed with reverential submission. When they were both seated, Sybil made some ordinary remark ; but he was so long silent that she began to feel uncomfortable.

At last he spoke. " I haf seddled in my mind to renounce my Mahatma," he said, glancing at her to see how she took this tremendous piece of information.

" Have you ? " said Sybil, feeling, in spite of her sympathy, a very strong inclination to laugh. " Why ? "

" Begause," said Nebelsen vehemently, " he is so imbolite, he does not know how to behafe. In Thibet they are—well, not schendlemen, and a long time I haf borne it batiently. But to-night it is too much. I drusted all to him—and he leaf me quide alone ! Other Chelas of less standing are assisted to make manifestations, but for me there is noding done. So from to-night I will no longer a Chela be—I chuck up."

" I'm so glad," said Sybil. " I think it's so sensible of you."

" You do ? And you are glad that I renounce ? Ah, you do not know how happy you make me when you say that ! "

" And don't you believe in Theosophy any more ? "

" I beleaf the same as ever—yes. That to-night I obtained only a few phenomena makes noding—it is not ungommon that the will-bower and magnetic currents will not work : there will be agsidents and breakdowns—shust as on a railway line. And, as you saw, there *did* arrive the ledder from my Mahatma."

" But you wouldn't show it to us, you know."

" That is where my Mahatma was so ingonsiderate. He wride me a ledder, but he take care that I should be unable to show it or read it. I will tell you, so that you will see how insulting he can make himself. When I open the note I see in Greek characters, and forgif me

that I repeat such words to you at all, but I see written there—' *Do not a damfool be !* ' "

Sybil was obliged to caress her lips somewhat assiduously with the feathery head of her fan before she could express her indignation with becoming gravity.

" After that, you know, there must be an end come. And so to-night I shall write him a formal resignation. He has never taken any pains when I consult him. Sometimes he never answers one word; sometimes the answer when it comes, is—well, it is not much. I will tell you one instance. There is a young friend of mine, a bainter—but you know him, he made that bad picture of you in the gallery—he is named Campion."

" Well ? " said Sybil, suddenly serious.

" Well, for several weeks he is very unlucky—altogether, as you say, off his colours. He loses his name, his friends, and his money and his work ; he is ill, he worries, and he cannot tell why ; and all the time he never guessed till I told him that it was all caused by one little ugly idol."

" And when you told him," said Sybil, " did he believe it ? "

" At first—no ; but in the end—yes, as much almost as I. And this will show you what my Mahatma is like—I write to ask him what is the best thing for Mr. Campion to do, and he replies that the only way is to send the idol back to the giver ! and that is surely the one thing which Mr. Campion will not do."

" Why ? " asked Sybil, shocked that Ronald could put any faith in such an extravagant explanation, and hoping to find he was less credulous than Nebelsen seemed to believe.

" Because he says it would be cowardly and selfish, and I confess he is quite right* and the Mahatma has made a grand moral mistake to give such advice at all. No matter, now ; once more, I shall be able myself to help Mr. Campion ! "

" Herr Nebelsen," said Sybil earnestly, " I don't think you ought to encourage him in these morbid fancies—I

A FALLEN IDOL

beg your pardon, but how can I speak of them as anything else ? You can't seriously believe yourself that an idol can have any sort of power ! "

" Exactly the same as Mr. Campion say at first. But let me tell you how he was convinced/' and he gave her an account of the experiment with the red paint, and its sequel.

" And is he afraid now ? "

" When I see him last he was derribly afrait, and I cannot help thinking that unless somthing is soon done that idol will do a moch worse act. Till now he plays the Poltergeist, but that cannot always continue."

Sybil gave a little shiver. " I wish you hadn't told me all this," she said. " And now let us go in."

Nebelsen strengthened his intended apostasy that evening both by lobster salad and champagne, and his heart was strangely light as he trudged home, firmly resolved upon renouncing his Mahatma before he went to bed.

And yet, for a Chela thus to cut himself adrift from his esoteric guide is a step whose tremendous importance needs no demonstration. Why, then, did Nebelsen turn his back on the dazzling vista of pure spirituality and omniscience, towards which he had been struggling so long, in sudden disgust at a discipline that might be supposed to have grown familiar ? How could he give up all with scarcely a regret ?

Alas for the weakness of human nature, which is not to be expelled by the esoteric folk ! The advantages of his guru's counsel, the prospect of initiation, of Nirvana itself, all had become as nothing to the infatuated Chela in comparison with a pair of grey eyes and a sweet piquant face. For years he had allowed his heart to float far above in the vague immensity—only to haul it in at last like a kite, and lay it at the feet of a girl.

12. *For Old Sake's Sake*

AS Sybil thought over Nebelsen's revelations, she found it difficult wholly to resist the impression they made upon her. They had aroused the superstition which, in spite of education, is more or less latent in so many of us.

What if this wild story were really true ? She could not forget all she had been told when she first bought that most ill-chosen gift. Had not misfortune attended all who had had anything to do with it ? The man who dug it up, the ship which brought it over, the curiosity dealer himself.

And then there was her own experience. It had been the means of betraying her to her aunt at the worst possible moment, and so separating her from Ronald, who otherwise would never have had reason to doubt her so unjustly. He had used this idol to point the insult of that cruel portrait !

She was afraid to let herself think of all this ; she would not believe it. The really dreadful thing was that *Ronald* should believe, and be unhinged by it.

Yes, if Nebelsen was to be trusted, Ronald was convinced there was some dangerous force in this mysterious image. He had been told that he might escape if he were only to return it to her, and yet he refused. It was terrible that his strong intellect should be so thrown off its balance ; but she was touched at the same time by his refusal to shift his supposed danger to herself. Surely he could not be altogether bad after all—he still cared for her.

But the constant sight of this idol was evidently having a bad effect upon his imagination, distempered by ill-health or overwork, or some such cause, and perhaps she was in some way accountable for these gloomy fancies of his.

Was it not she who had insisted upon his keeping it

A FALLEN IDOL

by him, and could she leave him to fall more and more under his gloomy delusion, when, by a little sacrifice of her pride, she might restore him to a more healthy state of mind ?

She had only to insist upon taking the idol back, and when he saw that nothing alarming happened to her, he would be cured of his morbid fancies. Perhaps Nebelsen's Mahatma, whoever he might be, was right in this at least.

Impulsive Sybil no sooner conceived this resolve than she was impatient to carry it out. She must save Ronald, and if—well, if there was anything dreadful about the idol, as to which she could not reason away all her terrors,—it was only just that she should bear the brunt of its inexplicable malice.

The following day was Sunday, and as the afternoon drew on, Miss Sybil, who was accustomed to restrict her devotions to the morning service, astonished her aunt by announcing that she was going to church again that evening.

Mrs. Staniland, as Sybil had anticipated, did not propose to accompany her, but sent one of the housemaids, who attended in the worst of tempers, having made other plans for spending the evening.

The church was a very short distance from Romanoff Road, and the service was over before the light had begun to fail. As they came out, Sybil told the maid as indifferently as she could that she wanted to call at Mr. Campion's studio for something she had left there.

Sybil knew she was going to do a rather unconventional thing. There was no need even for her to go in person, she could have sent some one perfectly well.

But she was anxious about Ronald's condition ; she wanted to see him herself, and form her own opinion as to his state of mind. Besides, he would probably refuse to give the idol up unless she made him understand that he must do so.

She could not help shrinking from the possible results

of receiving back this thing, which might after all bring ill-luck with it. But that must be all nonsense—and at the worst, at the first sign of anything at all sinister, she could always get rid of the suspected one, whereas poor Ronald would probably feel hampered by his engagement to keep it.

And she was supported by a secret excitement: she was about to see him again—her dread of supernatural powers, her pride were alike powerless to prevail against that thought, and her heart fluttered from other causes than fear, as she walked on with the sulky Louisa, past the little gardens, fragrant with lilac and privet, towards the house where Campion lived and worked.

Romanoff Road looked more Arcadian than ever in the warm Sabbath stillness, and under a sky which was just beginning to melt from throbbing blue to a luminous green. There was no one to be seen except a pair of *endimanchh* lovers parting at a corner, and the lamp-lighter beginning his rounds at the end of a turning.

And now Sybil was at the studio door, and it seemed to her that some one was within. Ronald often sat and smoked there, she knew, in the evenings.

She had Louisa as *chaperon*, or rather duenna, but she began to wish she had not come, and to hesitate. Suppose Ronald's man or a model were to come to the door, what should she say ?

Her hand was already on the bell, when from within a peal of laughter rang out on the silence, and she shrank back terrified.

For it was laughter that conveyed an insult, full of coarse triumph and cynical mockery, and yet—it was like Ronald's laughter, as it might become after some sad deterioration.

She turned to the maid with a white face and startled eyes : " I—I don't think I will go in just now after all, Louisa. Mr. Campion seems engaged."

" Just as you think best, Miss, I'm sure," said Louisa primly, and they went back to Sussex Place.

A FALLEN IDOL

Had Ronald seen her coming ? Did he fancy she came because she still——No, even he could not be so worthless as to think that ! But all that story about the idol must have been a hoax, or an attempt to work upon her feelings, and she had believed it, and that was why he laughed in that hateful way !

Well, she could let him know that she was not such a dupe as he imagined, and if, as she could easily understand, he really wanted to part with the idol, why, she cared far too little to think of preventing him.

On his return to his lodgings, which were in a quiet street in Paddington, Nebelsen set about the business of repudiating his Mahatma. It took him some hours to compose a document which should strike a poignant remorse into his guru's unsympathetic bosom, but he finished it at last. " I will not send it by Babu Chowkydaree Loll," he reflected, " because he will want to talk and to argue, and induce me to retract, and I do not wish to retract. I will despatch it to the Mahatma myself by occult means. He will get it quite as soon."

And then his pupillage was over, the vision of transcendent knowledge and power faded, he could no longer flatter himself with the secret consciousness of superiority to the rest of mankind : he had deliberately reduced himself to their level.

But for the next few days he enjoyed an inexpressible relief ; the vaguely tremendous tests which would try his nerve and knowledge to the utmost loomed before him no more ; he need not now repress the softer feelings and mortify his flesh ; he could be as sentimental as his heart desired—and he was.

Not that he had forgotten Champion and his affairs altogether : on the contrary, he was anxious to help him now that he was no longer hampered by his Mahatma.

And by frequent study of the message which had been " precipitated " by means of the Babu, Nebelsen had arrived at a new reading, which supplied a solution

at once more practicable and more equitable than the first, and put the Master's judgment in a better light.

He was so delighted at his own ingenuity, that he determined to go to Campion at once and impart his discovery, but, while he was preparing to do so, there came a sharp rap at his door, and the painter entered.

" You com at a goot time," said Nebelsen cheerfully.

Campion said nothing ; he only stood and looked. Possibly he was struck by the change in the mystic's appearance, for the ex-Chela had returned to the garb of ordinary citizens, and had sacrificed his curls and the greater part of his beard, leaving his ochre-coloured hair short and rather spiky. He had destroyed his own picturesqueness without even attaining the conventionality such a sacrifice deserved.

" Ach ! " he said, " I forgot—you haf not seen me since I renounced the Mahatma."

" No," said Campion, " and I wish to Heaven I had never seen you before ! When did I ask you to interfere between Miss Elsworth and myself ? Read that—I found it when I came back to town last night."

He tossed a note on the table before Nebelsen, who read :

" ⁱ I don't know what object you may have had in trying to induce me, through Mr. Nebelsen, to take back my present, but I am sure now that it was not a very creditable one. I shall not ask you to return the idol because, if you don't want it yourself, I want it even less. If you really think yourself still bound by what I was so foolish as to make you promise, of course you are nothing of the kind, and are quite at liberty to get rid of it by all means, as soon as ever you please ! ' "

" I do not understands" said Nebelsen as he laid it down.

" Then I'll explain. You've been talking to her, and by some infernal blundering or other made her think I was asking her to take that idol back ! "

" But why should she take it back ? "

A FALLEN IDOL

" You've read the letter ; it was her present to me when we were engaged. She made me promise never to part with it."

" Mees Elsvort gif you that idol ? You are engage—betroth to her," repeated the Chela blankly. It came upon him with a terrible shock ; he scarcely knew till then how far his hopes had gone.

" Not now, it was broken off some time since " (the Chela's dream re-formed itself, like the severed sylph in the *Rape of the Lock*), " but I still hoped, till I read that. Thanks to you, it's all over this time ! "

" But let me tell you this—it is about your idol," Nebelsen broke in, " I haf shust disgovered there has been a leedle misdake——"

" It was more than a little mistake when you took upon yourself to mention my affairs to Miss Elsworth. I was going to write to her, but you have put an end to all that. Now after this, Nebelsen, I'll trouble you to leave me to manage my own business."

" I say only this : the real advice that my Mahatma wrote——"

" I don't care to know it. I wish I had never been idiot enough to confide in you," said the angry Champion ; " you've done more harm by your meddling and muddling than that miserable idol could if it was everything you say it is. And I've had enough of it. I am free to turn that thing loQse as soon as I please now, and I can do that without anybody's assistance. And in future, perhaps, you'll be kind enough not to interfere."

The poor Chela was deeply hurt; he had meant to serve Champion ; he did not even yet quite understand how he had offended, so that he could offer no defence. But, as Champion concluded, Nebelsen's pride and anger were kindled at last. He had meant till then to give the painter the benefit of his latest discovery, but if he would not be warned, why, after all, it was no longer any business of his.

Why should he take any further interest in maintain-

FOR OLIBHJKE'S SAKE

ing the credit of Theosophy ? If th[^]yM[^]Hlteia allowed himself to blunder, he might correct hisl err for himself — it was Karma.

So his eyes blazed red like a hungry dog's **he** said, heatedly, " You are ungrateful, and a pighead. V k t a i n l y, I do not any more drouble myself with you. haf refused to listen to what I dry to say. Very we shall not again speak. I vash my hands at you."

When the interview was over it is only too m psto be feared that Nebelsen was rather relieved than wise that his hitherto unsuspected rival had refuseo|| warning. He could safely trust the idol, he though, B dispose of all Campion's pretensions for the future. From which reflections it may appear that the ex-Chela. had already somewhat deteriorated from the lofty and passionless standard of thorough-going theosophy.

Campion, too, was not dissatisfied with the result of his visit. He had freed his mind, and disembarassed himself of the muddle-headed mysticism in which he was ashamed of having placed such little confidence as he had felt.

The next thing to be done was to get rid of the idol, as he now felt himself at liberty to do. He was beginning to feel less superstitious about it ; its behaviour had, so far as he knew, been most exemplary since he had been away up the Thames, and he had almost argued himself out of the notion that it could possess any sort of intelligence, but for all that he was determined not to have it about him any longer.

It had such painful associations ; it was in the way in his painting-room ; it was so infernally ugly. He had innumerable most excellent reasons for his resolution, and he was quite certain that anything like alarm or apprehension was not amongst them.

One would think it was easy enough to dispose of a superfluous ornament or curiosity, but in this case there were difficulties. For reasons he would not admit, even to himself, Campion did not attempt to destroy his idol,

A FALLEN IDOL

nor could he conscientiously bestow it upon a friend, or even press it upon some passing stranger. Perhaps it was some lingering regard for the Mahatma's suggestion that inspired him to take the idol up to Hanway Street, find the old man who had sold it to Sybil, and see if he could not be induced to take it back.

There was an old man in one of the curiosity shops there, but he flatly denied having sold the idol, though Campion rightly or wrongly suspected from his look that he had seen it before. He declined to purchase on the plea that idols were "dull," and there was no demand at all for them.

At another shop, Campion offered the idol at so low a price that it was declined with a promptness that seemed due to a doubt whether it had been honestly come by.

That was unpleasant, and at the next place he asked an extravagant sum, enlarging upon the rarity and workmanship of the Indian effigy in such terms that the proprietor said he could not think of depriving him of such a treasure. He then gave up Hanway Street and crossed to Wardour Street, where he made some futile attempts to leave it to be disposed of on commission. No one would give it house room.

He was beginning to grow tired of carrying this most unmarketable idol about London, when at last, towards dusk, he passed a pawnbroker's, a seedy little shop near Paddington Green, which seemed as if it could not be very exclusive.

No one was near; he was not likely to meet any acquaintances in that neighbourhood, and Campion slipped through the swinging door at the back and, after a little bargaining to save appearances, was accommodated with a trifling advance, and came out again with a sigh of relief.

Then for the first time that afternoon he began to doubt whether he was justified in circulating such a solidified curse; was it not almost as bad as selling a dog with a suspicion that it was sickening for hydrophobia?

This made him very uneasy until he had persuaded himself that the cases were altogether different. He would not have let Sybil take it to save his life, but that was from his desire to shield her from the remotest possibility of a danger, which (with the single exception of himself and the Chela) there was probably hardly a person in England who would not laugh to scorn. Indeed, now that the idol was out of his hands, he began to disbelieve in it again himself.

Yet, perhaps he was not sorry to find that he had mislaid the pawnticket, and thus was protected from any temptation to return and redeem the dangerous pledge. The search which he made for the missing ticket was neither long nor vigorous.

A day and a half passed in delightful immunity. Campion's spirits rose now this weight was removed, and he was thinking rather contemptuously of the Chela's blundering attempts to solve a problem which was so obvious and simple, when a note was brought him in an unfamiliar handwriting.

The letter was apparently the production of one who in his kindest actions always contrived to protect himself against a too-exuberant gratitude.

It began by stating that the writer, who remained anonymous, was unknown to Campion, but had followed his career with interest, and had been shocked to discover the straits to which an artist of such promise and talent was evidently reduced. Thinking that the article with which he had been compelled to part was very probably endeared to Mr. Campion by association, the writer felt sincere pleasure in restoring it to him, which the fortunate discovery of the pawnticket bearing his name and address enabled him to do. All he asked in return was that Campion should in future do his best, by amending his ways, to avoid such degrading necessity.

Campion, with a dismal prevision of what was coming, undid the parcel, and the idol, looking more cheerful than ever, rolled out of it.

A FALLEN IDOL

It was kindly meant, no doubt, but it was a mistake for all that—a liberty which Campion characterised in his strongest language. As it happened, he was so unused to any transactions with pawnbrokers that it had never occurred to him to give a false name and address, he had merely thought of depositing the idol and getting away as soon as possible, and had not time to invent precautions.

However, that piece of carelessness, followed by the dropping of the ticket, had given this officious stranger the necessary clue, and all the business of freeing himself from the disgusting piece of *bric-a-brac* must be gone through over again. This time he decided not to try to sell or pawn the image—after all, it was possibly selfish, he now saw, and certainly undignified. He would simply lose it, and then no one would be compelled to have any connection with it, and his conscience would be clear.

He was determined not to let another night pass with such a thing in his house, and he got into the Park that evening shortly before the gates closed, bearing the idol under the cape of his coat. Near the ornamental water he found an empty seat, the very seat where he had sat with Sybil when she had first told him of her gift. Here Campion abandoned his idol, and fled guiltily.

But, as he was letting himself into the studio, he felt a touch at his sleeve, and looking round saw that he had been followed by a Chinaman. He had probably been attached to the Chinese Court at the Health Exhibition, or else engaged as an interpreter at the police courts, for he spoke English.

"How do, John?" he said, with a nod of friendly familiarity.

"How are *you*?" said Campion, "who are you, and what do you want?"

"Found your joss, John, all lite," and to Campion's unmitigated disgust, his Oriental friend produced the irrepressible idol.

"How do you know it's mine?" asked Campion, but the Chinaman only grinned and nodded.

FOR OLD SAKE'S SAKE

" John knew," was all he would condescend to explain, " and John poor, velly poor, give John tea for bringing backjoss." (He had a bewildering way of using " John " to denote both the first and second persons.)

" Confound you ! " said Campion angrily ; and then, remembering that it was not the Chinaman's fault, he added, " Of course I'm much obliged to you—and all that, but the thing is of no further use to me—do you understand ? You may keep it, if you like. I dare say you're more accustomed to the care of idols than I am—take it home, worship it, make it happier than ever I did—do you see, it's for *you* ! "

The Chinaman, however, did not seem at all disposed to profit by Campion's munificence. " John Clistian, no heathen," he explained proudly, " not my piecy joss."

He deposited it on the doorstep of the studio, and spread out his hands in abnegation.

" Give John tea," he repeated.

Evidently the converted Chinaman entertained a secret awe of the pagan symbol, and would have none of it. He did not actually propose to join Campion at the tea table, as his request seemed to imply ; that was merely a euphemism of his for money ; and when this was understood and acted upon, he soon took his departure and vanished in the summer dusk.

Campion carried his idol into the painting-room, with a groan of resignation, and set it in its familiar place on the cabinet. It might be only another series of coincidences, but for all that, though he was not nearly so inclined as he had been to credit the idol with large supernatural powers, he did not like the persistency with which it returned, time after time, to his roof. It seemed so very much as if it really was actuated by some semi-intelligent design.

" I suppose I must keep it here to-night," he said, feeling utterly helpless ; and inwardly resolved schemes for the morrow. He was agreeably surprised the next morning to find that the idol had refrained from any further

A FALLEN IDOL

demonstrations during the night; it is true that there were more than the usual number of bills and one county court summons on his breakfast table, but he could hardly believe the idol adaptive enough to make use of such weapons.

No, it was apparently on its best behaviour in the hope of being allowed to stay ; but that could not be ; not again would he expose himself to a demoralising dread. Harmless or potent, the thing must go, and this time no one should have a chance of assisting it to find him again !

He had meant to wait till nightfall before carrying out his plan, but after painting all the morning, he felt so giddy and confused that he determined to get the deed done while he was still capable of action. He placed the idol inside a small leather bag and strapped it down, after which he walked out with his burden towards North Bank.

It was a lovely afternoon, so hot that the warm air felt like a caress, and as Campion leaned over the parapet of the canal bridge, he enjoyed full possession of his faculties again, and only waited to be quite secure from observation before executing his purpose ; for the spectacle of a well-dressed young man deliberately casting a bag into a canal might attract notice, and even suspicion.

Very few people were about, however ; the children were all at home lying down after their dinners, no carriages had yet appeared in the drive, only one errand-boy loitered by the palings, and he had his back turned, and no barge glided through the oily-green water under the hanging foliage. A universal *siesta* seemed to obtain in that non-commercial region.

Now was his time. It was horribly like drowning a kitten, but he let the bag fall as if by accident and saw it sink with a sullen splash. Then, as the last ripple radiated from the place it had struck and spread to either bank, he turned away, with a sigh of relief.

He had done it at last. If the idol had been capable

of understanding its situation, it would surely have made some resistance before submitting to be confined in a watery prison, like the Djinn Solomon sealed up in the coffer.

Somehow he did not feel inclined to risk a return of his headache by going back to his hot studio, with the sickly smell of paints and mastic, and he turned into the park, thinking he might pass away the afternoon there ; but the lake reflected a dazzling glare, and the turf was dotted with basking tramps, and in the shade under the trees he was haunted by torturing memories of his lost love.

He did not stay long there, and, as he turned into Marylebone, a passing omnibus carrying an advertisement of the Military Tournament at Islington suggested a method of killing time, and so it came about that an hour or so later he was underneath the gallery which surrounds the Agricultural Hall, picking his way through the dim and narrow space filled with a motley crowd of masked and leather-jacketed competitors, lifeguardsmen, looking unfamiliar to civilian eyes, in caps, shell-jackets, and white buckskins ; artillery guns, harnessed and unharnessed, and policemen. From above and all around rolled thunders of applause, but nothing could be seen until he came to a large gangway, through which he looked up the vast hall with its chocolate plain vanishing in a haze of light, above which rose dim tiers of heads, and the blue panes of the crudely-tinted arch of glass and iron.

In the arena the artillery contest was just finishing, and the winning team was driving round at the gallop, deftly shaving the posts, and ploughing up the tan in brown spurts at all the corners ; he stood at the gangway for a time, watching the brightly touched uniforms, the glancing coats of the horses, and the lead-coloured gun, as they flashed in and out of the broad shafts of light. .

He was moving away, when he fancied he saw in the stream of people who were passing him the face which was never long out of his thoughts ; it was only for a

A FALLEN IDOL

second, and then there was a cry that the team was coming out, and an order to stand back from the gangway.

The warning was promptly obeyed ; the crowd divided, hastily retreating to a safe distance, with the single exception of a girl who did not seem to have heard the order, or understand what was coming. There she stood, alone in the opening, looking dreamily back as if in search of some one, and close upon her, the team was bearing down, while, owing to the sharpness of the corner, the officer in command would see nothing till too late.

And the girl, as Campion saw at once with a thrill of horror, was Sybil Elsworth ! He called to her to stand back ; nobody else seemed to have eyes for her danger till then, when a general shout was raised.

Whether she was confused by that, or by a mutual recognition, or her deadly peril, could not be known, but she advanced with uncertain steps into yet more direct danger, and then stopped, fascinated by fear, and evidently powerless to move a step.

Campion brushed aside some bystanders who stood in his way, and rushing out into the open space, caught her and drew her back, just as the heavy gun swept by with the rattle of gear and clank of metal through the gangway, and pulled up sharp some yards beyond the spot where Sybil had been standing . . . another second—and, well as the team was handled—nothing could have saved Sybil from a sudden and terrible death.

He kept his arm round her, and, if at first she seemed inclined to reject the support, she submitted after one quick side-glance at his face, which was softened by a reverent joy, though the shadow of his recent horror still lingered upon it.

And the stream of people moved on backwards and forwards, and few knew how nearly they had missed assisting at a tragedy ; in fact, no one took any further notice except a military-looking man, who came up immediately in the greatest anxiety, and he had the excuse of being Sybil's father.

" Good God ! " he said, " it was the nearest thing—I saw it all, and was coming as well as I could in that crush. You would have been killed before I could get anywhere near you, but for this gentleman—why, you *know* him ? " he broke off, as if suddenly enlightened by something in her expression.

" Can't you guess who it is, Dad ? " said Sybil, with the faintest smile ; and a light broke over the Colonel's face as he shook Campion's disengaged hand with fervour.

" Why, to be sure ! " he cried, " of course—to think we should have met like this. Well, my little girl, under Providence " (he jerked this in as a kind of safeguard) " owes her life to you. I was just taking her down for a cup of tea, and we got separated somehow, and the next time I saw her, she was—well, we won't talk about it. Couldn't have made your acquaintance at a better moment ! And now," added the Colonel, with a sly chuckle at his own tact and penetration, " I had better go back and tell my sister where you are, eh ? You take her somewhere for a good strong cup of tea, and that will put her all right again. Sybil will tell you where to find us afterwards."

And, before either Ronald or Sybil could say a word, the Colonel had gone off and left them together. Sybil could stand and walk without assistance now, and was little the worse for the shock. She drew away slightly and stood looking at him from under her long eyelashes, as if she expected him to speak.

" Sybil," said Campion, " I suppose I ought to say—Miss Elsworth—it's not my fault that I'm forced upon you in this way—you must admit that."

" Is it very painful for you ? " she said, half amused and half wistful.

" Tell me what you wish me to do, Sybil."

" You were told to take me somewhere where there was tea," she said meekly.

A wild incredulous joy seized Campion at her words, for he saw clearly that, for some reason, she was angry with him no longer.

A FALLEN IDOL

And leaving the reunited pair at this stage, the story must go back for a few moments, if only to account for the Colonel's singular complaisance.

He had only returned from India within the last two days, and Mrs. Staniland had insisted upon his coming with them that afternoon ; she had taken four seats, two of them at some distance from the others, and the fourth seat was to be occupied by Lionel Babcock.

For the time had come, in her opinion, when Babcock might propose to Sybil with perfect confidence, and, Mrs. Staniland, being an old lady who liked her own way even in details, had arranged that her niece should be won in the course of this particular afternoon, and in some part of the Agricultural Hall.

The Colonel was strictly enjoined not to monopolise his daughter, which, as he was growing fonder and prouder of her every moment, he thought hard. He had rejoiced greatly to hear that Campion's engagement was broken off, less on account of its undesirability, than of the opportunity it left for making his daughter's acquaintance, before a lover could step in between them—and now a fresh lover was at hand already, and the Colonel felt an injured man.

However, his sister was so ardent in her advocacy of Babcock, and discoursed so earnestly on the necessity of protecting Sybil from falling again into Campion's clutches, that the Colonel yielded at last. " If you say he's a good fellow," he conceded—" well, I shall see him at this tournament affair, and then we can talk about it."

But, to Mrs. Staniland's chagrin, the fourth chair remained unoccupied, though the Colonel, who sat in it, delighted with his daughter's pleasure in things military and with her looks and her talk, and all that was hers, felt he could manage to bear it if Babcock stayed away altogether.

It was very hot where they were, and he thought at last she was looking pale, and suggested that she should

come somewhere for afternoon tea, to which Sybil—who was finding the artillery contest beginning to pall, and had a secret dread that they might take it into their heads to fire the gun—assented willingly enough, and the father and daughter departed, leaving Mrs. Staniland, who remained in case Babcock should arrive.

Presently, Mrs. Staniland saw her brother coming along the chairs beaming,—“ Become of Sybil ? ” he said, in answer to her inquiries, “ oh, it's all right, she's in good hands. Whom should we meet downstairs but this young Babcock, and, I remembered your orders, Hilary, and it struck me, by Gad, they'd get on better without a third party. Wasn't that right, eh ? And I like the fellow, I must say ; he deserves her for his pluck.” And with this the Colonel told the incident of the gangway. “ If she had fallen, nothing could have saved either of 'em ; it was touch and go, by Gad ! Think of losing my little Sybil just when—and in that way ! ”

“ Horace, it's wonderful, a special providence, really, and you've done *quite* the right thing ! Lionel will have something to tell us when he comes back.”

So in high good humour, Mrs. Staniland watched the light cavalry, as they made their horses lie down and afford cover behind which they discharged their carbines ; and her content lasted until she saw a well-gloved hand held out and Babcock, elaborately attired, was standing over against her chair.

“ Well—is it all right ? ” she asked, anxiously.

“ Oh yes, thanks. Couldn't get here before, don't you know.” He had delayed from policy, thinking it well that Sybil should begin by missing him, and unwise to appear too eager.

“ And where is the dear child ? ” continued Mrs. Staniland. “ Oh, Lionel, when I think of what might have been but for your bravery. And is it all settled ? Where did you leave her—does she want me ? ”

“——Meaning ? ” inquired Babcock laconically.

“ Why—why, *Sybil!* haven't you come from her ? ”

A FALLEN IDOL

" Eh ? " said Babcock. " Sybil! Haven't seen a sign of her ! "

" Horace, what does this mean ? do try and collect yourself—*this* is Mr. Lionel Babcock."

The Colonel's jaw dropped as he bowed mechanically. " Then, then—who was the *other* fellow ? " he murmured blankly.

" Ah ! " commented Mrs. Staniland, in a bitter undertone, " if you have come all the way from India for *this*——"

And probably the Agricultural Hall did not contain a lady of her years and position in a worse temper.

13. *In which the Luck Turns more than Once*

PERHAPS, considering that Campion's conduct still required explanation, Sybil may be charged with some want of firmness in waiving the past as she did. But, setting aside the fact that it is not easy for a generous girl to be very severe upon a man who—whatever his offences may have been—has just saved her from imminent danger at the risk of his own life, Sybil was really too overjoyed to see Campion just then to give a thought to her dignity.

It was a relief, after all she had heard, to find him so little changed ; she could not look at him and believe that he had allowed any troubles, real or imaginary, to degrade him ; she could not doubt that he loved her still as devotedly as ever.

And then she had recently learnt from Perceval himself, to whom she had happened to sit next at dinner the evening before, that, whoever it had been who had frightened her from the studio that Sunday evening, it was certainly not Ronald, who, as the Academician had distinctly said, had been his companion on the houseboat from Friday till Monday. Perceval had not recognised her as the original of the Grosvenor portrait, which was not perhaps

THE LUCK TURNS MORE THAN ONCE

astonishing, so that by a few judicious and apparently careless questions, she was able to obtain some facts about Campion's recent fortunes that bore out much of the Chela's story.

As for Campion, he felt it must be all a mocking dream from which he would wake in his own studio or the club smoking-room, but *in* the meantime the vision was carried out with the most perfect realism, even to the advertising placards in the refreshment room, and the doubtful tablecloths ; and he and Sybil were at one of the little tables, with only a bowl of very cloudy sugar between them, and she was resting her chin in her palm and looking at him as she used to do—it was altogether a pleasanter dream than any he had been accustomed to of late.

" I want to tell you," she began, with a certain effort, " how sorry I am I wrote you that horrid letter."

" It was all Nebelsen's blundering," said Campion.

" But you don't think now that I ever dreamed of asking you—you of all persons in the world—to take back that idol ? "

" Not now. I didn't then, till—till I was obliged to believe you were trying to frighten me into coming to you. And I did come—oh, Ronald, I must tell you—I came to the studio to take it back." And she described her visit; when she came to the strange laugh Campion grew pale.

" I know you were not there," she added hastily. " You were with Mr. Perceval at Wargrave, he told me. But who was it ? "

" If I were to tell you what I believe, you would think me mad," he said. " But, thank Heaven, you didn't go in ! "

" Ronald, you don't mean that you believe my idol had anything to do with it ! It was a *laugh* I heard—a laugh like yours would be if you had grown wild and bad."

" I know," he said gravely. " For all I can say, it may have had some object in making you think you heard me. Confound its impudence ! it's capable of anything."

A FALLEN IDOL

" But, *dear* Ronald, do think what you are saying : an idol ! "

" I know, Sybil, I know it must sound mad—but I firmly believe there is something evil in that accursed image. And I can't help suspecting it must have some special spite against you. I confess I'm deeply thankful you were not induced to go in."

" It was not as clever as Red Riding Hood's wolf," said Sybil ; " it drove me away. But I can't bear for you to have these horrible fancies about it. I wish—oh, *how* I wish I had never bought it for you ! I can't imagine how I came to buy it," she cried remorsefully. " It seemed just the right thing then. And now promise me—promise you won't keep it a day longer ! "

" Don't be uneasy, dearest, it is all right at last, though you would scarcely believe how hard I found it to shake it off." And here Campion gave her an account of his various abortive attempts to part with it.

" It almost seems," said Sybil, " as if the thing had taken some dreadful liking to you."

" If it has," said Campion, with a vindictive satisfaction, " I rather fancy I've damped its growing attachment this time. It must be exceptionally fond of me if it retains any affection at the bottom of a canal, inside a leather bag—for that's where it is just now, Sybil. And only see how the luck turned directly. I come straight here, and meet you. Better still, your father, who I expected would be prejudiced against me, is as jolly and friendly as possible ! "

Sybil's eyes had a mischievous sparkle in them. " Yes, but I've been thinking," she said demurely, " that perhaps poor dear father didn't quite gather who you were."

" But he recognised me ! "

" Yes, as Lionel Babcock. He was to have met us here."

A cloud passed over Campion's face. " Babcock ! " he exclaimed. " Sybil, tell me, am I in time still ? "

THE LUCK TURNS MORE THAN ONCE

" Do you suppose I should let you be here if you were not ? But oh, Ronald, I don't like to think what I might have been driven to do in the end, if I had had to give up all faith in you. I nearly lost it several times, and I am sure Aunt Hilary hopes to get her own way even now/'

" But you won't let her ! You do believe in me now, Sybil ? "

" I can't help it," she said simply, " though I don't understand it all yet."

" Nor I, for that matter ; but so long as you trust me through everything, nothing can part us again, can it ? "

" Nothing shall. And if father once came to know you——Shall you be at the Academy soiree to-night ? we are going."

" Perceval gave me a ticket. I hadn't intended to use it, because, you see, when they haven't hung you, it isn't a particularly pleasant way to spend the evening ; but I will go now."

" And," continued Sybil, " if by any chance I can't bring you together to-night, I shall insist on taking father to see you to-morrow, and Aunt Hilary may say just whatever she chooses. We are going to be happy again after all, Ronald ; you will see how well everything will go now."

Ronald wished the waiter would look another way, so that he might gain possession of Sybil's hand, which lay so temptingly near him, but the waiter, who possibly carried a blighted heart under his dress shirt, kept a sardonic eye upon them, and his chin-tuft had a contemptuous twist.

" If it never goes worse than this ! " Campion was saying, and at that moment Mrs. Staniland swept into therefreshment room with the manner of a Queen Eleanor, followed by the Colonel looking as if he would very much rather not have come, while Campion felt that, after all, the waiter's eye had its advantages.

Campion rose and stood upon his defence ; Mrs.

A FALLEN IDOL

Staniland drew one of the light chairs up to the table and sat down, while the waiter drew near expectantly. She was evidently in an extremely bad temper, which was not improved by the necessity of ordering a cup of coffee before she could get rid of the waiter and open fire.

" Well, Mr. Campion," she began, " do you think this is creditable behaviour on your part ? "

" I have done nothing discreditable to my knowledge, Mrs. Staniland/' he replied stiffly," our meeting here was quite an accident, and Colonel Elsworth himself asked me to take charge of your niece/'

" Took you for some one else," growled the Colonel.

" Sybil, *you* knew there must be some mistake, and you made no effort to enlighten your father ; he has only been home two days, and you deceive him already ! "

" Father," pleaded Sybil, " I hadn't seen Ronald for so long, and then he saved my life ! "

" Jove, Hilary, you know^t," said the Colonel, in an undertone to his sister, " she's right there."

Mrs. Staniland was not to be mollified ; it was too bad this detrimental should have turned up just when her plans seemed about to succeed. " He may have saved her life," she said ; " I was not there ; but even if he did, he had no right to presume upon it. We won't detain you here any longer, Mr. Campion."

Mrs. Staniland scarcely returned his farewell, and the Colonel did so with a constraint that cost him a secret effort; the young fellow might be as ineligible as possible, but he thought his sister was rather hard on him ; however, he had made a mess of it, and concluded to hold his tongue till he saw his way more clearly.

But Campion cared little. Sybil believed in him, Sybil loved him still ; sooner or later things would come right, he could wait now.

As he came out into the passage again and passed the gangway, the hall was enlivened with a military spectacle so brilliant and so unwarlike, that the strictest Quaker

THE LUCK TURNS MORE THAN ONCE

might be enchanted by it—the musical ride of the Household Cavalry.

But he was in no mood to be allured by it just then; the vast hall seemed too small to contain his happiness ; he had to seek the open air and the crowded streets.

He walked fast and hard (for a great joy, like a great grief, demands action of some sort), and got back to St. John's Wood by a long round some time before it was necessary to begin to dress for the *soirée*.

After a fashion, he had already dined somewhere, though he probably could not have said what his dinner consisted of, and so there was nothing to do now but sit in his studio and build castles in the air.

Most people would not have thought his prospects particularly hopeful : his reputation as a painter had certainly fallen off ; he had bills to meet, and no notion where to turn for money ; but he had shaken off the hideous image that was sapping all his confidence and courage, and immediately his whole horizon had brightened. What did he care for the past now ? it had not divided him from his darling ; she was true to him, and he would win her yet.

So he dreamed as the dusk drew on, and the clock in the studio struck eight, and then nine. In half-an-hour or so he would begin to dress. It was unusually dark for the time, he thought, so dark that he could not see the clock, and could scarcely believe it was no more than nine. Just then a church clock began to strike—it took a long time surely to strike nine ; he counted the strokes . . . *twelve*. He lit a candle to reassure himself, and then saw something which struck consternation and despair into his soul. Above the clock rose the too familiar countenance, bland and beaming as ever, of the thing he had fondly believed to be smothered in the black mud of the canal!

How had it burst the confines of its bag and returned thus out of the depths to confound him ? It was not muddy, it was not damp, it bore no traces of its temporary

A FALLEN IDOL

seclusion—and then he missed Perceval's cast, the lovely little head of Cybele of which he had been enjoined to be so careful.

What if, from the confusion his head had been in, or under the strange illusion which this diabolical image seemed to shed around it at will, he had substituted the cast for the idol ? That would account for its lamblike submission, for its presence here still.

And now it was too late to go to the soiree and meet his darling that evening ; the idol must have corrupted his clock, and caused it to lull him into a false security. His ill-luck had returned with this hideous effigy ! He felt recaptured by the old superstitious dread.

What was he to do ? Must he submit to this ill-omened presence in the house, and when Sybil was to bring her father there next day ? How could he tell what its malice might not suggest, and its occult resources enable it to carry out ?

Whatever it was, limited as it might be in power and intelligence, it had shown already a marvellous readiness in adapting itself to circumstances, as if able in its new surroundings to observe and turn its observations to account with hyper-oriental subtlety.

It might have some deep and consistent design through all this, but if it really meant anything but sheer malevolence, it surely might find some clear means of conveying its wishes. As it was, he dared not let Sybil endanger her life by venturing within range of it. He must find some method of reducing it at least to temporary harmlessness, only what was left which had not been tried and proved a failure already ?

We must leave Campion endeavouring to grapple with his revived difficulty, and return to Babcock. The Colonel's mistake at the Military Tournament had upset Mrs. Staniland's plan, and, without telling Babcock more than was desirable, she gave him to understand that he would have to postpone speaking to Sybil till later. He was not particularly uneasy, even though he guessed to

THE LUCK TURNS MORE THAN ONCE

whose care she had been entrusted ; Campion must long ago have given up all pretensions or he would not have acted as he had done ; most probably the interview was equally involuntary and irksome on both sides.

The Colonel came back to his seat alone, explaining that his sister had gone home with his daughter, who was feeling the shock she had received—Babcock and he watched the rest of the entertainment in company and silence, but the invitation to dine with them that evening, upon which Babcock had reckoned, was not given. " Didn't hit it off with him, somehow," he reflected afterwards ; " never mind, Fve got the women on my side."

He had fortified himself with a good dinner, and driven home to dress, when he found Nebelsen at the door of his flat.

" Were you coming to look me up ? " he said.

" I wanted to consult you as a worldling," said Nebelsen,

" Come in, I can spare you ten minutes, and then I must dress. I'm due at the Academy soiree in an hour. Now," said Babcock, as he lighted candles, " what can I do for you ? "

" How is the custom in this country for a suitor who wishes a young maiden for his betrothed—does he first to the baronet speak ? "

" All depends, Nebelsen. You've more chance with the parent if you speak to him first, but you've less chance with the girl as a general rule. You don't mean to say you're asking for your own information ? Is this why you've got yourself up with entirely new scenery and effects—are you in love ? "

" She is so fair," said Nebelsen, " with eyes like the stars, and a soul snow-pure."

" Yes, but my dear chap, you can't marry on stars and snow, don't you know. Has she got any other property ? "

" I do not know. I haf not ask."

" Well, have you ? "

" Enough with what I shall gain at giving Philosophy lessons to live upon with care."

A FALLEN IDOL

" Doesn't sound hopeful—take my advice, and stick to a single life/'

" You say that because you are bachelor, and a despiser of all domestigated joys."

" Shows how much you know about it, Nebelsen. Do you see this ticket ? " and he took one from his chimney-glass. " This card is my passport to felicity ; when the porter takes it, he will take my bachelor existence too. You don't follow ? Well, Fm going to meet the sweetest girl in the world at this same soiree, and I've made up my mind to ask her to have me this very evening."

" And you haf no doubts what she will say ? "

Babcock smiled. " Well, I don't want to boast, but I fancy I've as good a chance as any other fellow. I used to be afraid of that confounded Campion, but he has done for himself now."

" Campion ! It is not possible that you are speaking of Miss Elsvort ? "

" Ah, I forgot you knew something of them ; but there's no harm in mentioning names ; you see, it's time I married, and she's a dear little girl, I don't see how I could do better, do you ? "

" No ! " said the Chela, in a low voice, " not you, and not the greatest in the land, could do better."

He was greatly discouraged by finding a rival where he had hoped for a confidant. What chance had he against this worldling with his wealth and his easy self-confidence ?

" Glad you think so," said Babcock. " Well, of course, this is all in the strictest confidence at present. I only told you to get you out of that notion of yours that I was a confirmed bachelor. And now there's just five mintues left for your own love-affairs. I thought, by the way, you were vowed to celibacy all your life ? "

" It was not a vow, only it is found that even the purest affection is rather a hindrance to occult progress, but that matters not now since I haf renounced occultism, my Mahatma, further initiation—all, all! "

THE LUCK TURNS MORE THAN ONCE

" You don't mean to tell me you've only just found them out ? "

" I believe in them just as before, only my Mahatma is become indolerable ; you remember at Sussex Place, the letter which came. Ach ! you gannot fancy what was within ! "

" Unless it recommended you by any chance not to be a condemned fool ? " said Babcock.

" You know—but how then ? "

" How ? Simply because I wrote it." And Babcock burst into a shout of laughter—" scribbled it off while you were out on the balcony ! Greek character ; because you knew my hand, and I didn't know your Mahatma's. Then I gave it a twist up in the air behind everybody's back—and there's one occult communication accounted for ! So you took it all in, and actually went home and solemnly renounced your Mahatma, and the Bounding Brothers of Thibet, and all their works on the strength of it ! Why, I made sure that you would see through my little joke, though I was pretty certain you wouldn't say so at the time ; it's too funny ! "

" Yes, it is too fon-ny ! " said Nebelsen, savagely. " They will think me a worthless apostate, which will very amusing be, and I haf renounced all the hopes which made this earth-life bearable. I shall be quoted in their annual rebort as a failure ; all because of your fon. Ah, you are a so charming humorist, Mr. Babcock, that you will appreciate a leedle biece of psychical fon in return for yours. You are to meet this yong laty at the Academy to-night ? "

" Well," said Babcock, " have you any objection ? "

" Yes, you do not see her to-night ! Another, a rival perhaps whom you do not fear, will speak in your place, and it will not be your cause he will plead——. You will not be there ! "

" I should like to see anyone try to stop me."

" You are going to see me. You may not know that in agomblishments of an electro-biological kind I am, as

A FALLEN IDOL

you would call, a high-distinguished dab. Often, only by always looking at him haf I a man from eating his dinner brevented. You think not, eh ? "

" On the contrary," said Babcock ; " I've no doubt you could spoil any man's dinner if you gave your mind to it. But I've had mine."

" Still you shall haf an illustration of what I can do with my will-powers."

" Look here, Nebelsen, of course I know it's all bosh ; but I won't have any tricks played on me."

" If it is bosh it cannot affect you. See now, I direct my will against yours. I wish you to give me your admission ticket."

" Nonsense ! " said Babcock, in a thick, sleepy tone. " Are you mad ? Give you that ! . . . Well, don't make a fuss ; I don't mind letting you have it to look at ; not to keep, mind. I'm acting of my own free will ; of my own free . . . There, *take* the ticket ! "

" And now," said Nebelsen, as he took the card and stood looking steadfastly at the uneasy Babcock, " go and sit down in that chair."

" See you damned first !" spluttered Babcock. " Well, why shouldn't I sit down ? " he added as he obeyed, " it happens to be a favourite chair of mine. . . . I was going there before you spoke. Confound you, Nebelsen, what are you doing to me ? Take those eyes of yours off ; take them off, I say ! "

" You will not stir till it is twelf o'clock."

" It's a devilish comfortable chair, I can tell you, but if you think——Nebelsen, give me that ticket back ; I see what you're after. . . . That rascal Campion's at the bottom of this ! Give me that ticket, will you ? Oh, very well, I've changed my mind ; I shan't go out to-night . . . it's too much trouble. Don't imagine you've anything to do with it. I choose to sit here, that's all 1 "

And he sat motionless, his prominent eyes fixed in a cataleptic stare ; however Nebelsen's power may have been assisted by the fact that his subject had been recently

THE LUCK TURNS MORE THAN ONCE

dining, the weaker will of the two just then was certainly Babcock's.

" A thousand thanks for your so kind gift of a ticket," said the Chela benignantly. " I tell Mees Elsvort you are sleepy, and not able to com yourself. Goot night! "

Babcock probably heard and understood, but he made no answer, and Nebelsen shut the door with a guttural laugh at the success of his experiment.

That evening the rows of guests who line each side of the Vestibule at Academy soirees and lend such suggestions of landing at Folkestone to the ceremony of reception, were much entertained by the demeanour of a spectacled foreigner, with a short and spiky yellow beard, whose appearance, as he bowed to the President, provoked discreet but hearty merriment behind the shrubs.

Nebelsen, however, was unaware that his dress suit had not learnt as yet to accommodate itself to his figure, nor would the fact have interested him had he known it. He was absorbed by one idea just then—to find the fair English maiden and speak as his heart bade him.

It is never very easy to find the right person in a crush, nor are the Academy rooms adapted to the pursuit. Nebelsen made his way painfully from room to room, with a tormenting conviction that his object was always a room ahead of him, and then, just when he had given up in despair, he saw her behind a marble group in the Sculpture Gallery.

Sybil, too, had been scanning faces with slowly waning hopes. Why did not Ronald come? Surely nothing would have kept him away that night, if all were well.

So her face lighted up at the sight of that queer-looking friend of his, and he welcomed the greeting as a favourable sign. " You have something to say to me, haven't you? " she said, taking advantage of the fact that her aunt was too far away to hear. " I think I *should* like an ice or something, if you can take me out of this crush. . . . Mr. Perceval, will you tell my aunt that I shall be back almost directly? " And before Mrs.

A FALLEN IDOL

Staniland who, on her side, was impatiently expecting the twice-defaulting Babcock, could notice what was happening, Nebelsen, with no very clear idea where he was going, was mounting a staircase by Sybil's side.

Sybil seemed to him more enchanting than ever that evening, and he was beginning to expand with triumph at the idea of having outwitted Babcock, when her first words somewhat dashed his confidence.

" You do come from him, don't you ? " she said, " Ah ! I knew it ! No—no ice, thank you " (they were passing a buffet at the head of the stairs). " See, this library looks quiet. Now tell me—why isn't he here ? "

It was cool and dim in the library, with its sombre colouring of morocco and mahogany seen by shaded lamps. They had the place to themselves, and Nebelsen could not have found a better opportunity, though his thoughts were too sadly fluttered by this ill-timed reference to Babcock to avail himself of it just then.

" He was a leedle schleepy after his dinner," he said ; " he ask me to make his abology."

" Herr Nebelsen ! cried Sybil, " I can't believe that—you are deceiving me ! something—some misfortune has happened to him—please tell me all ! "

" No, no, he is quite well—there has noding happen, and ach ! Mees Elsvort, beleaf me, he is not vorthy for you so moch to care ! "

" You are against him too ? I thought you were his friend ! "

" Not any longer—he has done it himself. And I am afraid I shall make you angry, and yet—if you only could tell me it is not lof you felt for Mr. Babcock ? "

Had anyone else asked such a question she would have been angrier, but Nebelsen had a child's naif unconsciousness of offending. " You've no right to any answer when you put such questions as that," she said, " still, just this once I will satisfy your curiosity. Mr. Babcock is nothing to me—do you understand—nothing ! "

" Ah ! how you make me glad ! " he exclaimed, with

THE LUCK TURNS MORE THAN ONCE

a deep sigh of relief, which Sybil imagined was on Campion's account.

" Then Ro——Mr. Campion has not told you ? " she said. " I thought you came from him. You know we were once engaged, and then it was broken off ; and I shall always be very, very grateful to you because you first made me suspect that there might be an excuse for him I could never have dreamed of. And now I am sure of it, and—and we met only this afternoon, and everything is as it used to be."

The poor man's castle came rattling down about his ears. Perhaps it was the dust it made that choked and blinded him for a few moments.

He was indeed unfortunate. No sooner had Campion, as he imagined, hopelessly disqualified himself, than a new rival presented himself in the shape of Babcock, and just when he had ceased to be formidable, Campion reappeared triumphant.

" No," he said, " I did not know—I did not know that."

" Yes ! And Herr Nebelsen," she added anxiously, " he was to have been here to-night, but it is so late, and I can't help feeling uneasy, even when he has got rid of the idol at last."

" How got rid ? " inquired Nebelsen ; and Sybil told him what she had been told herself.

" I tell you, nefer will he get rid of it in such way ; it will come back efery time more and more angry," he said, when he had heard her story. " He will not understandt what it wants, and I myself, I can only guess. But I suspect that in the Mahatma's ledder was a misdake which makes a great difference."

" But you can find out, surely ? " urged Sybil.

" Not unless I gonsult Shang Gasba, and you forget we gorresbond no more, I have gast him off. Yes, I am sorry," said Nebelsen, with a gloomy satisfaction he could not altogether disguise, " but I am af rait Mr. Campion is haying more trouble with that idol, and that is why he is not here to-night."

A FALLEN IDOL

" Oh, but it can't be that ; it's all so impossible ! " cried Sybil, " and yet *he* believed it . . . it may be all true—that wicked thing may have come back ! Oh, Herr Nebelsen, do help us ! "

" Too late," he said, " without my Mahatma I cannot know if I am right about the misdake, and the remedy, and with him I quarrel."

" But you can make friends with him again ; he may be more amiable when you come to know him better. And if Ronald is in danger ! See, Herr Nebelsen, I gave him that thing, and if any more mischief were to come from it, it would kill me, it would indeed ! "

" You ask me to do all this ! " he cried, almost savagely ; " to groffle back to my Mahatma's feet like a beaten buppy ! If I never had seen you so would I still gon-tented be. For your sake I renounce my Mahatma and my Chelaship both, begause I would be free to lof—yes, I tell you it was lof, and for you ! And now you want me to eat my vorts, to put my bride in my bocket and gonfess myself a gommon fool—all for Mr. Champion ! "

Sybil was beyond all measure surprised and shocked ; it had never occurred to her that there was any room in Nebelsen's head for thoughts of love. " I am so sorry, so very sorry," she said, looking at him with mournful eyes in which wonder was still lingering. " If I had known, I would never have pained you like this. And now you have told me, I can't of course ask for your help. After all, we may be frightening ourselves about nothing, don't you think so ? But it is the uncertainty that's so dreadful, and the not having any idea what to do ! "

Her sorrow and resignation seemed to produce a revulsion in Nebelson. " Do not veep, please," he entreated ; " o r I also shall veep—and I veep so schtrong. I haf been a fool, ever to beleaf you might lof me—ever to think I could be like other people happy. And since I cease to be a chela, I grow selfish, and my sixth brinciple is slowly berishing. There is taincher in that idol, and something tells me now he has not done with Mr. Champion. If it

THE LUCK TURNS MORE THAN ONCE

is not too late, I will try to get reconciled with my Mahatma. To-morrow early I go to Mr. Chowkydaree Loll (he is the brother, you know, who was the medium for our communications), I will promise anything—I will groffle and roll and abologise blentifully. And then perhaps they will tell me the best thing to do, and if I was right in my suspicion that there was a leedle misdake in the last message."

It may be thought that the Chela was rather a broken reed to rely upon in any emergency, but Sybil was glad to secure his assistance notwithstanding. If the idol was really disposed of, there would be no occasion for Nebelsen's services, but if it had reappeared and meant mischief, the person who predicted the danger was, after all, best able to cope with it.

For a great foreshadowing of evil had come over her, and Ronald's failure to keep his word seemed more and more significant; she was restless, feverish with the dread of what might even now be taking place, and Nebelsen was the only person who understood her terrors in the least.

"And will you go to Mr. Campion at once, and warn him of all you suspect? If you wait till to-morrow you may not be in time. Dear Herr Nebelsen, tell me you will go to-night!"

"It is late now," he said, "past twelf—but if it is your wish, I go."

She made him take her back to the Sculpture Gallery at once, and leave her to listen to her aunt's speculations regarding Babcock's non-appearance, while her own thoughts were engaged in trying to account for another's absence, which surely nothing but an unforeseen calamity could have caused.

Nor would she have been in any way relieved could she have known the result of Nebelsen's visit; for he found the little house and studio in Romanoff Road dark and silent, and he came away at last, not having dared to ring or knock, with a disquieting conviction that his repentance and his help had come too late.

A FALLEN IDOL

" I will go to Mr. Loll at once—he is never an early bedgoer," he decided, " he will tell me if I am right, and, who knows—there may be time yet! But ach ! " he reflected, " more and more I dread that, through the knavishness of that Babcock, and my own folly and falling away, it is out of my power to help now, when I would willingly do so ! There was too much stillness in that house."

14. *Antceus the Second*

" All confused I could not know
Whether I suffered, or I did :
For all seemed guilt, remorse, or woe,
My own or others, still the same
Life-stifling fear, soul-stifling shame."—*Coleridge*.

FOR some time after recognising the unpalatable fact that the idol possessed a " homing instinct " far surpassing that of the most domestic cat, Campion sat and stared at it with blank and intense disgust. It would take no hints and offer no suggestions ; it was only too easy to offend it, and apparently impossible to get rid of it. Willingly would Campion have exchanged it for Frankenstein's much-quoted monster, for from that creature you knew the worst to expect; and it had the tact to absent itself for considerable periods. But none could say what this petrified enigma wanted, or how far it would go in asserting its dignity. For the present, it sat there and simpered, as though in apology for its pertinacity ; but poor Campion had learned to hate its flaccid smile with a deadly hatred, all the deadlier because it was so largely tempered by fear.

What was he to do with it ? He must do something, and quickly, too ; the hour was late, and he would not give it hospitality for another night.

It was useless to attempt to lose it again—he *would* return ; Campion " knew him well," as the song says. And then the perplexing direction of Nebelsen's dubious Mahatma recurred to him. What if that person, assum-

ing him to exist, cultivated the obscurity of the Delphic Oracle ? What if " the hand from which it came " was a Mahatmaism for the earth which had held it so long in its grasp ? What if the idol, like an impecunious classic shade, only craved decent burial ?

Campion was not the man to resist so rational a desire. The plan commended itself to him for many reasons. Even if he was mistaken, the idol could work but little bale at the bottom of a good deep hole ; it would be out of his sight, out of the house, where it could not harm his Sybil.

It is painful to have to record such superstition on the part of a sturdy and healthy-minded young Englishman, but let those who are disposed to deride Campion's uneasiness ask themselves candidly whether his experiences did not justify some degree of apprehension.

At all events, he wrapped the image in the piece of drapery which had already been spoilt in its service, and providing himself with a palette-knife as the best implement at his disposal, he went out into the weedy little plot of ground in front of his house, and began his task.

It was a close, airless night, with a murky sky through which the very moon looked hot and flushed. Campion found it warmer and more difficult work than he had imagined to dig with such a substitute as he had for a trowel. However, he scratched up the mould in little showers as well as he could, and while thus engaged, he heard the heavy-booted tramp of a night constable ringing down the flags of that quiet road.

Campion did not disturb himself. There is no police regulation forbidding a man to bury any of his household gods in his garden ; it may be eccentric, but it is not unlawful. So he hummed, like Juvenal's penniless traveller.

The steps came nearer. Now and then the constable stopped to try a gate, or flash his bull's-eye through a keyhole, or listen at areas ; but at last, just as Campion had constructed a really handsome hole for the idol's reception, the steps paused at his own gate, and a patch

A FALLEN IDOL

of light from the lantern danced over the garden and up the house-front.

"What are you doing of in there, eh?" said a voice across the railings.

"Well," said Campion, "I don't suppose you would ever guess."

"I guess you can't be up to any good at this time o' night, if that's what you mean."

"Why," cried Campion, with sudden recognition, "I ought to know that voice. Isn't your name Yarker?"

"Quite correct, sir, Mrs. Staniland's man that was. And I reckonise you now, Mr. Campion, sir. But without wishing to make trouble, I don't reckonise what business you can have inside of another party's front garden."

"But it's my own garden—this is my house! Have you forgotten that in your new duties?"

"I can't say," said Yarker loftily, "that I ever give the subick much attention, beyond knowing you were a artist. You see, when I was at Sussex Place, I always used to bear a sort of a prejudice like against you, not for what you was, for I'm one of them that draws no distinctions in that way. If a man feels he can't get a living in any other way except as a artist, let him *be* a artist, I say. / don't blame him for it."

"Those are broad views, Yarker," observed Campion.

"Some may call 'em so, but they're mine. Well, as I was saying, I didn't take to you all the same, you was too free and easy to please *me*. I didn't like your conversation when you lunched with us; I didn't hold with your perlitical views—you don't mind me a-telling you this now?"

"I'm only sorry you didn't drop me a hint at the time."

"It wasn't for want of inclination; but as you mayn't be aware, perhaps, there's a social etiquette in these things. No butler that respects himself would take it upon him to interfere, let the family violate his feelings ever so in their talk. And that was one of the things that made service go against me so. You don't only put your body into a livery, you put your pussonal opinions and your sentiments. I've

heard ignorance talked at table to that extent, I could 'ardly 'and the dishes for indignation—but it wasn't my place to say more than 'ock or sherry ! ' "

" And you get more freedom of opinion in the Police ? "

" Well, I don't know," said Yarker thoughtfully, " I don't get what I call yuman serciety."

" Why, you've all the—what-is-it ?—V Division, haven't you ? "

" Ah ! but the Police, take 'em as a body, ain't what I call an intellectual lot. You don't get much exchange of ideers on or off duty amongst them. I assure you, that for general information there was a little club of gentlemen's men that I used to belong to, which I've not met their equals in the Force up to now."

" And you find yourself pining for intellectual society ? " asked Campion.

" Well, sir, I do. Not that I regret the change for some things. As a policeman I'm more looked up to by the outside public. I've more weight, and I find I've gained influence in my former suckle when I go amongst it. But it's lonely—there's no denying it; it's got to be a pleasure to me to talk with almost anybody. You can see that by my staying here talking to you."

" Yes, but if your country calls you," said Campion, continuing his excavations, " you mustn't let me selfishly monopolise you, you know."

" There's no hurry for a minute or two," said Yarker. " It would make you laugh if I was to tell you what I took in my head when I first saw you in here. I couldn't get it off my mind as you was trying to get rid of something."

" Perhaps I am," said Campion.

" Ah, but I mean something unlawful, such for instance as a unlicensed burial now ; there was a case down Kensal Green way last week. That was a baby."

" Sorry to disappoint you," said Campion, laughing, " but as a matter of fact——"

He had elaborated his hole and was preparing to deposit the idol at the bottom of it, when a horrible thing hap-

A FALLEN IDOL

pened : the thing *moved*—moved under the wrappings in his hand.

He dropped it as if it had bitten him. " As a matter of fact," he continued, without knowing what he was saying, " F m only doing what I have a perfect right to do in my own interests ; every householder can—abate a nuisance I think you call it——But I am keeping you."

" No, you are not keeping *me*, thank you, sir," said Yarker cheerfully. " As I said, a little conversation is a treat to me. Did you say you was a baiting something, sir, for a nuisance—a trap, I take it ? "

" Yes," said Campion, stealthily putting out his hand to assure himself by touch that his imagination had deceived him, and that nothing stirred inside the drapery.

" I suppose now," he continued, not knowing how he was to get rid of the official, and seeking desperately for a safer topic—" I suppose you have a good many opportunities of studying—ah—astronomy on your beat ? "

" Well," said Yarker, " I knoo all I care to know about that already—there's Charles's Wain now—I can point *him* out with anybody."

" Oh," said Campion, acutely feeling his own inanity, " and—and the Great Bear—do you know that ? "

" I seem to have heard of the Great Bear ; and ain't there a constellation called the Plough, too—and Uriah's Belt ? "

" Why, you're quite an astronomer ! " cried Campion.

" Oh, I've read in my time, mind you, and it's wonderful how much more a man finds he knows than he thinks he did when he numbers off like. But there, I get a-talking, and all the time I never asked you what it was you was trapping ! "

" Drains ! " said Campion wildly, " my garden's overrun with them ! "

" You needn't answer me back like that," said Yarker ; " if I'm willing to talk free and familiar, it isn't for you to take advantage of it. I asked a civil question, and if

you're going to talk flippant, it's time I left you to yourself and went on with my rounds."

And to Campion's intense delight, he moved slowly away, obviously insulted.

However, he came back to observe, " A policeman has his feelings, you know, and to be put off as if you was being too inquisitive when you ask a friendly question—why, well—*there* ! "

Campion was about to say nothing, but it seemed expedient to soothe his ruffled feelings. " Hang it, man ! it was only a joke," he said, " Nothing to get hurt about. There, you must find it thirsty work these warm evenings."

" Thank you, sir, I'm sure," said Yarker, " I'll take it in the spirit it was intended—though of course they're not open now—and well, there's no occasion for hurry yet awhile ; you go on with what you were doing of, and don't mind me."

But, somehow, Campion was afraid to touch the idol while that ugly impression of its having wriggled was still fresh. The only way to get rid of Yarker was clearly to wound his feelings—he must try again.

" I suppose, after all, you are sent out to perform certain duties," he said ; " don't you think you'd better attend to them ? "

" Well," said Yarker, stiffening instantly, " now you put it in that pointed way, perhaps I had. One of my duties, as it 'appens, is to inquire into anything of a suspicious appearance. Now suppose I was to think it my duty to inquire into that hole—where would you be, eh ? "

" You wouldn't be much the wiser," said Campion ; " but there, Yarker, I didn't mean to offend you—only, well—I came out here to be *alone* ! "

Yarker had uttered his threat without any direct intention of carrying it into execution, and Campion's last words convinced him that there was no real foundation for suspicion.

" I've no wish to intrude on you ! " he said, " I'll wish you good evening."

A FALLEN IDOL

" Good evening," said Campion, and his heart leaped. It leaped as far as his mouth the next moment, however, for suddenly, just as the constable was moving off for the last time, there arose a wild, muffled wail, as startling as the night-scream of a peacock.

" Hello ! " said Yarker, stopping, " where did that come from ? "

As if to set the point beyond dispute, the horrible thing inside the wrappings began to howl and roar with renewed vigour, and Yarker stepped back to the railings and turned his lantern full upon the bundle. " What's those stains ? " he said.

" Paint," said Ronald, for the stuff still retained the colour that had been wiped from the idol's face.

" Ha ! " said Yarker, and he undid the gate and stalked round to where Campion sat helpless on the worn turf, wondering if he was going mad.

" Now I'm not going to have any more nonsense about this," he said, with a complete change of manner—the butler was merged in the constable yearning for distinction—an honourable endorsement on the charge sheet and promotion—" that's *blood*, that is, and you know it. Open that bundle, Mr. Campion."

With a grim anticipation of Yarker's astonishment when he saw the idol, Campion unfolded the drapery and, as he did so, rose to his feet with a hoarse cry.

The rays of Yarker's lantern fell directly upon the bundle, revealing a sight at which Campion felt his brain swim. The idol was *alive*—or rather, in its place was a changeling which, in some grotesque fashion, resembled it. As Campion stared, fascinated, into its smooth yellowish face, the eyelids slowly went up and two cold, glassy eyes returned his gaze with a steady malevolence, and then the whole face worked, and the thing broke out anew into a resounding bellow.

" So that's what you were after, eh ? " said Yarker, " oh depravity, depravity ! "

" You can't be more surprised than I am," said poor

Campion ; " I don't know what makes it go on like this."

" Enough to make it, I should think, when in another five minutes it would have been all over with it. Mr. Campion, I couldn't have believed it of you—what harm did that pore innocent ever do to *you* ? "

Campion kept an obstinate silence ; *he* was the innocent one of the two, but of what use would it be to tell a policeman so ? He began to realise that, at last, the idol was roused—that he was on the brink of a terrible scrape.

" It's a mistake, I tell you—a mistake," he faltered.

" You're right," said Yarker, " you see what comes of leading a nasty idle life. There'd have been murder done if I hadn't happened, by a lucky Providence, to be passing — i f you haven't been jobbing at it with that knife already, as it is. This is a bad business, but I must do my duty. I arrest you on a charge of attempted child-murder, and anything you may say now is liable to be took down and used against you. Now, sir, come along with me quiet."

" Yarker, my good fellow ! " he protested, " you're all wrong—do you hear ? It's not what you think—you can't mean to get me locked up ! "

" Now, am I to sound my whistle and bring my mate from Marlborough Road, or will you come pleasantly like a gentleman, arm in arm along of me ? "

" Let me go in and leave a message with my man," urged Campion.

" Not if I know it—you can send messages to-morrow—once more, do you want me to whistle ? "

Campion had to submit. Escape was madness, where he was known and would be tracked at once ; besides, escape would be an admission of his guilt.

" Yarker," he said impressively, " I give you my word you will not be defeating the ends of justice in any way ; you will not harm a living soul, if you let yourself be persuaded by me now to take a sovereign—I mean a five-pound—or rather, a ten-pound note—and—and go away and think no more of this little incident."

A FALLEN IDOL

" You were not quite so proficient with your tips at Sussex Place," said Yarker. " No, sir, there's things as can't be squared not at no price. Excuse me, while I make a note of what you said : ' incident,' was the term you employed, I think ? Thank you, sir. Now I'm ready, and we'll be jogging along."

" I'll come quietly," said Campion, with a groan. " Spare me as much as you can."

" We'll stroll along as if we'd just met and were chatting casual—I don't want to act otherwise than as a gentleman if you're sensible ; so give up that instrument, and I'd better take this unfortunate infant myself—there ! Now then, sir."

Yarker strode along by his prisoner's side with one hand within his arm ; for some time he kept a solemn silence, while Campion glanced with a dull interest at the pragmatic face under the helmet, and the letter and number gleaming on the collar.

But the constable was not the man to walk long without attempting conversation ; he was burning with curiosity and that passion for cross-examination which distinguishes members of even longer standing in the Force.

" Heigho, Mr. Campion ! " he began, " I little thought when I used to enounce you at Sussex Place, that one day I should have to show you into a police-station."

Campion made no reply : " Come, sir, be pleasant," said Yarker, " I'm trying to make this walk as agreeable as I can—meet me arfway, sir. If you'd *like* to give some account of how you came to contemplate such a predicament, why, I'm here to listen, and it will pass the time if it does no more."

" The less I say, the better," was all Campion said in reply to this exhortation.

" I wouldn't say that, sir. Of course I'm not holding out no promises, nor yet threats ; but still, if you could bring yourself to tell me, quiet like, why you took such a rash hact into your head, you might find it a relief. I

should be inclined to surmise now, that you'd been led into it gradual ? "

" Surmise as much as you please—only keep it to yourself."

" Now, now," remonstrated Yarker, " why bring any temper into it ? / ain't angry with you. I'll change the conversation if you prefer it. . . . See how the moon's gone in since we've been chatting ; seems to me there's a storm brewing somewhere—the air's that stifling. I'm rather partial to a moon on my beat. It's company like—not, of course," he added considerably, " that I'm not in the best of company at the present moment. Now some folks tell you they see an old man in the moon, and a dog, and what not—all I can make out is a female's face, all twisted like as if she'd a bitter taste in her mouth—is that how you see it ? It ain't no use a damming of the poor moon. . . . Now don't get 'ard," he resumed. " About this 'ere babby now. This feels to me like a fine-grown child I've got here—it's uncommon heavy. Wonderful how sensible children are ! it's as good as gold now it knows it's safe. Don't you feel just a bit sorry for it, now it's over, sir, eh ? It isn't everyone as likes babies, but, lor ! there's ways of keeping separate from 'em without burying them in holes in a garden, now ain't there, sir ? Why, you could ha' sent it to the workhouse or the Foundling, now, and here you've gone and got yourself into a serious mess like this ; there ain't no sense in it, sir, as you must see yourself by this time."

" Confound you, *will* you hold your tongue ? " Cam-pion burst out, exasperated.

" Do you think I'm talking for my own pleasure ? I only do it to keep your spirits up—it ain't every constable that would make himself so affable, I can tell you, and if it wasn't for your being an old acquaintance. . . . There's a dance going on somewhere near here, you can tell that by the 'ansoms ! Are you a dancing gentleman, sir ? Oh, yes, I remember you used to come to our dances occasionally. Well, well, there's no harm in *dancing*—if

A FALLEN IDOL

you'd never done worse than that ! " And here Yarker drew a moralising sigh. " About how old might this here child be ? It's as quiet as any Christian. Not, I dessay, as you'd ever think to have it christened ? . . . Now what *is* the good of all that bad language ? "

That walk seemed to Campion like a ghastly dream-pilgrimage, with Yarker's conversation—which was largely prompted by mingled malice and curiosity—as a running accompaniment. Now and then the constable stopped to try a gate or a window-fastening, and once he reported himself to a " fixed-point " sergeant, but nothing interrupted his small-talk long.

All at once, a man in evening dress passed them close and then stopped and turned back.

" Campion ! " he cried, " the very man I was coming to look up ! "

It was Babcock, who had recovered from his recent lethargy, and, too late for the soiree, had started to find Campion, who he expected would reach St. John's Wood about the same time, and whom he believed to be the instigator of the liberties Nebelsen had taken with him.

He was the last man Campion expected or desired to see just then. He thrust his hat down over his eyes and took refuge in obstinate silence. " Here," said Babcock, " just turn back with me ; I've something to say to you."

" Very sorry, sir, but he's got an appointment with me at present," said Yarker.

Babcock laughed. " Why, you haven't found *dynamite* on him, have you ? "

" No, no—not so bad as that, Mr. Babcock, sir," said Yarker, who knew him well.

" Do you mean to tell me you're really taking him to the station ! " cried Babcock, in astonished delight. " What have you been about, Campion ? Why don't he answer, Yarker, eh ? "

" Well," said Yarker, " you can see for yourself that he ain't in no condition to answer questions."

" By Jove ! " cried Babcock, as Campion accepted this excuse resignedly. Anything was better than having to reveal his awful position to his rival and enemy. " So he's been kicking up a row, eh ? dear-dear-dear ! Well, Yarker, I mustn't interrupt you—two are company—don't be rough with him, poor devil ! "

And he went off hastily, lest he might be called upon to furnish bail, which he had no desire whatever to do under the circumstances.

" Pleasant-spoken little chap, Mr. Babcock, ain't he ? " said Yarker, when they were alone, " and liberal with his 'arf-crowns. I'm downright fond of Mr. Babcock, I am—aren't you, sir ? Well, there's no occasion to bust out like that anyhow—you *are* behaving unsociable to-night, I must say ! "

And he said no more now, for they were in a narrow, quiet street with a square building at one end, over the door of which burned a lamp with a blue pane ; one or two night-prowlers joined them here and accompanied them to the threshold, but Yarker shut the door sharply in their faces, and Campion found himself in a brightly lit room with dingy buff-coloured walls and a dado of mottled green ; there were a table and benches at one end, and at the other a little inner office like a hotel bar.

Yarker deposited the bundle on the table. " You sit down here, sir," he said to Campion, " we'll attend to you presently ; the inspector's engaged with that gentleman just now."

Against the wall was a small railed-in space, breast-high, with a wicket at the side, and penned up in this was a rumpled and dirty little man, who smiled affectionately at the inspector, for whom he seemed to have conceived a violent fancy, though he evidently considered it a " good point of cunning," as Bacon says, to give a different address every minute.

This took time, and Campion had ample leisure to think calmly over his situation. How would it end ?

A FALLEN IDOL

The idol had waited long before striking—but it had taken a deadly revenge at last. It had overwhelmed him in a scandal from which, whether he was exonerated or not, his name would never recover. But how *could* he be exonerated ? What plausible explanation could he give and how account for the infant, the palette-knife, the pit he had dug ? And a thought which nearly drove him mad—what would Sybil think when she came to know ?

The little man, smiling more than ever, had suddenly and completely collapsed, like a concertina or a Chinese lantern, inside the rails, and they fished him delicately out by the coat-collar, and propped him up against a bench close to Campion, whom he informed, as a great secret, that he was " ash nearly drunk ash twopensh."

" Now, sir ! " said Yarker importantly ; and presently Campion found himself inside the railed dock, with the bar clicked upon him.

" A child, eh ? " said the inspector, who regarded the affair as a mere matter of business. " Dead or alive ? "

" Alive, sir," said Yarker, " leastwise, it was when I first found it. Bellering horful, sir."

" Why didn't you send round for the doctor at once ? There, go at once, somebody, and don't lose any more time ; leave the child where it is now, we can do no good till we know what the doctor says."

More minutes of suspense, during which Campion strained his eyes to catch some indication of life under the folds. He could see none—the bundle lay ominously stiff and silent, and a new horror chilled his blood. What if this diabolical thing had completed its revenge by *dying* ? If he were charged with actual murder, convicted, *hanged* ! He clutched the rail with moist palms as he thought of it—he would have joyed just then to hear it give even one of those hideous yells—anything to get rid of this uncertainty !

The divisional surgeon—a short, rough, bustling man—came in : " Now, then, fetch that child over here by **the lamp**, will you, and **let** us **have** a look at it," he said.

Yarker brought the bundle to him, and stood by as the surgeon slowly unrolled the folds. Campion's heart beat hard. " *What* did you say this was ? "

" Infant, doctor/' said Yarker, whose gaze was directed to the ceiling.

" *You're* a pretty policeman ! " said the surgeon, contemptuously ; " there's no infant here."

The idol had relented, then—ah ! the relief of it !

Yarker rubbed his eyes : " Well, I could ha' sworn I heard it howl," he said ; " but, if it ain't that, doctor, what is it ? "

" You've been wool-gathering, you know, 247. I shall have to report you for this," said the inspector.

" Mr. Campion, sir, you can bear me out, sir ! " said Yarker ; " you heard it, and saw it, sir, too."

" I told you at the time you were mistaken," said Campion ; " you wouldn't listen."

" And quite right, too, as it happens," said the surgeon ; " do you see what this is, inspector ? "

The inspector touched it gingerly. " It looks to me," he said, " like some form of dynamite."

" Exactly—I've never seen it in this particular form, but I've no doubt in my own mind that it is dynamite."

Dynamite ! Well, thought Ronald, it was serious enough—but at least it was more respectable than the other charge.

" Why the devil couldn't you say so at once, 247, eh ? " said the inspector ; " you've made me make a false entry—what's come to you, to take a parcel of dynamite for an infant ?—you'll hear of this again, let me tell you ! "

The unfortunate Yarker, with his dreams of promotion shattered, stood dumb and trembling as the inspector altered the charge with some temper. " Now, sir," he said to Campion, " do you wish to say anything at this stage ? "

" No," said Campion, " except that I know nothing whatever of any dynamite."

A FALLEN IDOL

" Very well, you will be detained for the night on suspicion, and to-morrow, when we've made inquiries, you will be taken before the sitting magistrate at the Marylebone Police Court—put him in number 3."

And so Campion found himself locked in a cell; he sat there for long with faculties benumbed, wondering what would come next, and staring at the gaslight in the corridor as it flickered through the corrugated glass.

He knew perfectly well that he had lost Sybil now—her father and aunt would never consent to her marriage with a man whose name had figured in the police reports. And when, only that afternoon, he had regained his darling, when she was actually to have brought her father to see him next day—oh, it was hard, hard !

He tried to think whether he could have acted differently ; why did this Indian fiend behave in this unconscionable way ? he had tried to get rid of it—what more could he do ? what else did it want ?

And his excited fancy began to speculate upon the compromising avatar which the idol might next choose to assume ; it could not be long in finding out that it had made an error in the second transformation ; or had it some even fell purpose in this ? Did it intend to explode and involve itself and him in common ruin—was *that* its revenge ? And Sybil would hear *where* he had perished—and never know why !

And so the night dragged on, and now and then there were military tramlings and rough brief reports, and orders indistinctly heard ; at times came the roars of the wild beasts at the neighbouring Zoo, and the drunken prisoner, who occupied an adjoining cell, where he seemed to sleep but badly, beguiled his wakefulness by repeatedly recommending a female by the name of Jennie to " wait till the clouds rolled by."

And when this had apparently lasted for hours, Campion fell asleep on the bench, and his troubles and perplexities slipped away for one long, vague second.

15. *The Day After*

CAMPION opened his heavy eyes to find the blue light of morning streaming in through the glass pane of his cell-door ; cocks were crowing lustily from neighbouring back gardens, vendors were crying mackerel in the streets outside, milk-cans were clattering, and boys whistling—the suburb was awaking with its usual short-lived cheerfulness.

All these familiar sounds jarred hideously upon Campion just then ; they heralded his humiliation. In another two hours or so he would be standing in a police-court dock, charged with—well, whatever new crime the taste and fancy of this Proteus of an idol might see fit to fasten upon him ! His name would be in all the evening papers, the magistrate would probably remand him, and refuse bail. Oh, the bitter shame of it all !

His heart was consumed with helpless rage at the utter impracticability of his situation. Thought recoiled from it baffled, and he fell at last into a state of what he believed was stoical calm, which was actually a stunned torpor.

At last a constable—not Yarker—unlocked his door. " Inspector wishes to see you, sir, in the office," he said civilly enough, and Campion followed him to the room in which he had been charged the night before.

The inspector looked up with a distinctly worried expression. " Look here, sir," he began, " we're not used to this kind of thing here. I've taken two distinct charges against you for the same thing, and I should like to hear any answer you may have now before we go any further with the case."

" I reserve my defence," said Campion, " all I can say is, whatever the charge is, I'm innocent of it."

" Come, sir, if you'll tell me what the thing was that No. 247 found on you, I may meet you farther than you fancy."

A FALLEN IDOL

Was it a trap ? It might be—but Champion decided upon perfect candour as his only chance.

" You won't believe me," said Champion, " but it was neither more nor less than an Indian image—in fact, an idol."

" Right, sir," said the inspector, " and if you'll cast your eye into that bucket, you'll see it." And in the bucket of water was the idol, head downwards, but not appearing to resent the indignity.

Champion breathed freely ; whether it had relented, or had merely arrived at the end of its resources, it evidently did not intend to carry things further at present.

" Well," said the inspector, " I don't know how I came to detain you—I really don't. I made certain last night, and so did the surgeon, that it was one of those dynamite preparations ; it's been locked up safe in my inner room all night in that bucket, and it certainly don't look anyway like an explosive now. Can't you explain it anyway ? "

" I think," said Champion, " you're the person to explain things."

The inspector coughed. " I am sure," he said, " you're not the gentleman to make any fuss about this little mistake. You see, we're bound to look after ourselves, naturally, and if you were not willing to meet us half-way, why, we could make it unpleasant for you, as it is. It does no man any good, in the long run, having the police against him. If you follow me, sir——"

Champion saw that his immediate discharge was only a matter of arrangement, the inspector being mainly anxious to avoid the consequences of any public complaint or proceeding ; and shortly after, to his own intense surprise, he left the station a free man.

How delicious the June morning was ! The shadows stretched blue and cool across the roads, the lilacs dangled fragrantly over the garden palings, bright-faced girls cleaned steps or shook mats at the doors, and he noted all these things with a new pleasure.

THE DAY AFTER

It promised to be a very hot day ; already the heat made a pearly haze in the middle distances, and heavy lurid clouds, touched with pink and gold, rose like a mountain range at the end of each long vista ; Campion walked slowly with his detested burden under his arm, half-expecting it to develop some fresh peculiarity.

He was annoyed, as he went in by the studio door, to find Bales there dusting. " You're up early, sir, this morning ! " said the man, with his eye on the idol, which it was useless to conceal.

" Why, yes, / *am* rather early, Bales," said Campion, in a tone he hoped was jaunty.

" If you *must* go out without telling no one and stop out all night, which I made sure something had happened," said the unmollified Bales, " there don't seem no sense in taking that there idol along with you. My poor wife thought it had been stole, she did, but as I told her, there ain't no one likely to steal it, I says. But you've been making quite a companion of it these last few days. I'd sooner set up a monkey, if it was me, I would."

At any other time Campion might have recommended him to mind his own business, but he was too demoralised just then to do anything but make a lame attempt to account for himself. " Why, you see," he said, " I didn't know I should be out so long. I met an old acquaintance, and he—he takes an interest in these things, and I was detained so long over it that he insisted on putting me up for the night."

To which explanation, which was both superfluous and disingenuous, his henchman merely vouchsafed a snort, indicative of more than doubt.

" There's that furrin party as used to have all them curls waiting to see you," he added ; " he said he couldn't stop long. I told him I thought you was a-bed."

And Campion, on going to his room, found Nebelsen just about to leave.

Campion felt a certain embarrassment at the recollection of their last interview, but the Chela was evidently

A FALLEN IDOL

willing to resume the old footing, and the painter was in no mood just then to decline any overtures.

" Ha ! " said Nebelsen, as he observed the idol, which his friend was still carrying under one arm. " So you haf him still ? "

" Yes," said Campion wearily, " he doesn't seem tired of me yet. Fve given him the slip several times—but he always turns up smiling. Last night I tried putting him in a hole."

" And he would not remain—no ? " said the Chela sympathetically.

" He not only would not remain, but he managed to put *me* in the hole instead," said Campion, " with the pleasing result that we both spent the night in a police-station."

" Ach ? " cried the Chela, " wunderbar ! But I knew always that alone you could nefer esgape—you may dry and dry, but always will it the same be. And now when I haf learnt still more—but you will not listen, you think I am stuffing ! "

" Nebelsen," said Campion, rather shamefacedly, " if you'll forget how I behaved last time, and help me like a good fellow, I shall be grateful. Fve found out by bitter experience that Fm no match for this devilish thing alone ! "

" Begause you are all on the wrong track. I tell you, last night I meet your lofely Mees Elsvort, and—and I haf som talk with her. I want to gif her some bleasure, and I find there is now but one way. And so if you will only gonsent to place yourself entirely in my hand, I will see if there is not yet a way to bacify that idol."

" Well," said poor Campion helplessly, " do just what you think best. I leave it all to you. Only tell me what you are going to do."

" It is something which I nefer before haf done, but which, I am quite sure, by a leedle effort and faith, I shall be now able to perform," said Nebelsen. " But listen, and I tell you from the beginning. When you com to see

me that oder day, I had shust on a sodden had the suspicion that my Mahatma had not after all given you bad advice. The message, you know, was through the Babu Chowkydaree Loll, by occult means brecipitated, and it struck me all soddenly that either by a want of goncentration of the Mahatma, or begause the Babu was not just then attending, an *h* was quite possibly along the astral current by mistake for an */* brojected. So late last night I went to Mr. Loll and ask him if it might not be so, and he quite agrees. More ; he has tolt me a legend which, for me, accounts for nearly all that has occurred. Now do you understandt ? "

" Why," said Campion, " I'm afraid Fm still rather fogged, Nebelsen."

" I cannot stay now to clear your fog—in a leedle vile I com back and egsblain exactly what I am going to do and why. Now there is no time ; I must go and fetch my steel wand, and do som oder businesses, and then I begin to vork fqr you."

" But in the meantime," objected Campion, " how do I know that this beastly thing mayn't begin *again* ! "

" It is too soon yet, after so moch force-manifestations. Leave him down in your paint-room till I can com at him. Oh, he will be all quiet! I answer for him."

Of what Nebelsen intended to do Campion, of course, had not the vaguest conception, though he gathered that it would be performed with a wand ; he could only pray that it might have as little of the ludicrous in its operation as was compatible with the nature of the case, and just as hopeful persons spend money on advertised remedies, because it seems clear from the advertisements that other people believe they have been benefited, so was he infected by Nebelsen's unquestioning faith in his latest nostrum.

Campion had not, of course, forgotten Sybil's promise to bring her father that day, though it had seemed extremely uncertain for a time whether he would be at home to receive them. Fortunately the worst was over now, and yet he began to doubt whether this interview,

A FALLEN IDOL

if it came, would be much of a success, and when, later in the morning, Colonel Elsworth was shown down to the painting-room—alone, Campion felt a pang of dread. Why had not Sybil come ? Was she angry with him for not appearing last night ? and if so, how should he excuse himself ?

The Colonel looked, and indeed felt, by no means at his ease; he did not relish his mission, which he had been despatched upon, as the result of a long interview between his sister and daughter the night before, and he was an easygoing, peace-loving man, who hated giving pain.

" Now, Mr. Campion," he began, embarrassment making him brusque, " I've called to tell you plainly that anything like an engagement between my daughter and you can't be—it's quite out of the question—now don't you see that yourself ? "

Campion answered that he should not dream of asking Sybil to bind herself in any way, still less to share his present difficulties, but he hoped that a time would come when he should be justified in asking her to renew their engagement.

" That's all very well," said the Colonel; " still you will do me the favour not to hope for anything so—so unsuitable, by Gad. From all I hear, sir, till yesterday—when I'm bound to say you behaved uncommonly well—you've not shown yourself very deserving of such a girl as my Sybil. You'll not deny that, I suppose ? "

" I deny that I have ever consciously done anything to make me deserve her less. If you will tell me where you think I have acted unworthily, I think I shall be able to make you see you have done me an injustice."

The Colonel, however, after all Mrs. Staniland's fulminations against her former *protege*, only retained a general impression that he had taken an advantage of her by overcharging her for a worthless portrait of Sybil, which her father had not yet been to see. " We won't go into that, sir," he said loftily, " there's no need. I dare say you could find excuses enough, if that were all.

But my sister gives me to understand that Sybil was taken by surprise yesterday afternoon, and said more than she really felt, and—and in short, as a gentleman, you wouldn't wish to press any advantage you may have had under such circumstances."

" Does she, your daughter, make that appeal ? " said Campion, " or do you ? "

" I am here to make it for her, sir ; these are things a young girl can best say through her father."

" If she will write and tell me that it is as you say, or if you would let her speak to me, I would never trouble her again. And, even as it is, I only ask leave to hope. I can't give that up, unless she orders me to."

" Do you suppose I should tell you a lie ? " demanded the Colonel hotly. " If Sybil had come with me, she would, I haven't the smallest doubt, tell you exactly what I tell you now, and that is——"

" Mrs. Staniland and Miss Helsworth," said Bales, opening the upper door, and Sybil, with a look of constrained fear in her eyes, came down the steps, and stood between the two men.

" Let her speak for herself," said Campion, with a chill at his heart.

" Ha ! " said the Colonel, " Sybil, this is irregular, you know, irregular. You had no business to come here ! "

" It's not my fault, Horace," said Mrs. Staniland, who had just made her appearance ; " she found out that you had gone here, and nothing I could say would prevent her from coming too—so of course I had to accompany her ! "

" Well, now she is here," said the innocent Colonel, " let her tell Mr. Campion downright that she finds she mistook her feelings yesterday. Don't be frightened, my love ; he has promised to take your word."

" Are you *mad*, Horace ! " said Mrs. Staniland in an angry whisper ; " it's for *you* to put a stop to this, and at once. The idea of leaving it to her ! "

Sybil was looking from her father to Campion, with a puzzled contraction of her eyebrows. " I don't under-

A FALLEN IDOL

stand," she said. " Ronald, why do you look at me like that ? *What* am I to tell him, Father ? "

" You told me she felt like that ! " the Colonel was saying aside to his sister.

" *Would* feel like that, in time," she rejoined. " You are to tell him nothing," she said to Sybil, " leave him to your father and me."

But Sybil had gone to her lover's side. " Nothing has happened to you, then ? " she said softly, " tell me, why didn't you come last night ? I — I made so sure you would ! "

He felt he could not tell her the whole truth. " I was —unavoidably detained," he said, cursing himself for the stiffness in both phrase and tone.

" I didn't think you would let anything detain you," she said, rather sadly. And just at that moment her eyes fell on the idol, which was on a chair by a window, with the palette-knife, which had so nearly provided it with a grave, and which the inspector had returned to Campion with other confiscated property.

" Oh ! " she cried, with an awe-struck reflection, " *it* has come back. Was it that which detained you, Ronald ? "

" Yes," he said, " it is the old story, only worse—much worse."

" Sybil," broke in Mrs. Staniland, " your father wishes you to go home with me at once. How the most ordinary proper pride can allow you to speak to Mr. Campion at all, after the manner in which he has thought fit to insult you, and the ingratitude (not that you would think anythink of that) with which he has rewarded me, is one of those things I can't attempt to understand ! "

" Father," pleaded Sybil, " don't send me away—not just yet! You don't know how you and Aunt Hilary both misunderstand Ronald. He has done nothing—at least whatever he did do he never meant—it is all the idol ! "

" All the idol ? " repeated the Colonel blankly. " Do you know what you're talking about, my dear child ? "

" Yes, yes," she repeated wildly, " look at it—that ugly

thing on the chair. And it was J who gave it to him, that's the worst of it ! Oh, I know I explain very badly, but then I don't in the least understand it myself."

" Then I shouldn't try to explain it," said Mrs. Staniland, tartly. " I have very good reason to know that idol—unhappily, and the less Mr. Campion says about it the better. Anyone else would have got rid of it long ago ! "

" I don't know how anyone else would have managed," said Campion ; " no one could have tried harder to get rid of it than I have ; but the confounded thing won't go,"

" Won't go ? " said the Colonel, " that's a curious way of speaking."

" I have tried to sell it," said Campion drearily, " but no one will buy, or say ' thank you ' for it. I even pawned it, and a kind friend redeemed it. I lose it, and it gets itself brought home somehow. I drop it into a canal, but it doesn't stay there. I tried to bury it, and it—well, it *wasn't* buried ! "

" Doesn't seem to be a bad sort of idol," said the Colonel critically, passing by these statements as wilful exaggerations ; " usual kind of Buddhist image, seen scores of 'em in Burmah. Why should you be so anxious to get rid of it ? what's wrong with it ? "

" I don't know," said Campion, " I can only say that ever since it came into this house nothing has been as it used to be. It *began* by killing Mrs. Staniland's dog for merely barking at it, as she will tell you herself." (Mrs. Staniland here intimated that she could give a very different version of that accident.) " In an evil hour I painted it into a portrait I was doing of your daughter, and in some abominable way, when I saw it again, the idol had absorbed all her features and given her its own. I can't believe my Academy pictures would have been what they were if I had not been in a sort of way bewitched. I splashed its face with paint once, as a test—and I was perfectly colour-blind till I wiped it clean again. There must be *something* wrong with it ! "

" With yourself you should say," said Mrs. Staniland,

A FALLEN IDOL

" if you really believe all you're telling us. It lies between two things : either you are under a delusion, or—well, I leave the inference to you."

" Then I'm under a delusion, too," said Sybil, " for I believe it! And, ah ! here is Mr. Nebelsen, he believes it too—he will tell you so."

The Colonel was understood to say something about " confounded nonsense " as Nebelsen entered by the studio door, and joined them with a look of mystic enthusiasm and determination on his face.

" That in that leedle idol there are maleficent properties resident ? " he said in answer to Sybil, " certainly I beleaf him. More also, I com hier now expressly to egsblain to Mr. Campion how and why, aggording to my latest solutions-theory, this is scientifically bossible, and brobable even ! "

" Father, you will listen too ? " cried Sybil. " Mr. Nebelsen—my father," she added, as the Colonel gave a grudging acknowledgment of the introduction.

" If Herr Nebelsen is going to try to persuade us that idolaters are right, and we are wrong," put in Mrs. Staniland, " I must really ask to be excused."

" We had better hear anything Mr. Nebelsen may have to tell us," said the Colonel resignedly. And the Chela was by no means loth to detail his latest discovery to the larger audience.

As for Campion, it was no doubt ungrateful on his part, but he wished Nebelsen had come at any other time. He had an instinctive dread that the excellent theosophist would throw new and more ridiculous lights upon the question, and that his last scientific solution would be as practical as its predecessors.

However, it was useless to think of interfering. The Chela, evidently in a state of high and solemn enjoyment, was already beginning to discourse.

" First of all what I haf to tell you," he began, " is that your idol is most likely not a Buddhist emblem at all. He is, or so my good friend the Brother Chowkydaree Loll

THE DAY AFTER

thinks, a Jaina idol, and the Jains, as you know, are still a flourishing sect in India. You do not see what difference that makes ? Well, I am going to tell you. Their images are all to commemorate some one who when alive was shust a very holy man—a ' tirthankar ' he is titled. Now there is a tradition that, within the last hundert year, some one for a time got into the Saints' Galendar without any business, and afterwards turns out to be not a true tirthankar at all, but only an impostor. And what the Brother Loll beleafs, and I also, is that, not unlikely, that idol there on the chair is the very same which once was erected to him.

" I know what you all are thinking—if he was an impostor, how can his idol in any way fearworthy becom ? Wrong ; begause the more impostor, the more will his idol work—not of course that his idol can do anything at all—that is too absurt for anyone to beleaf ! But an impostor, and barticularly if he has dead on a sodden gone, is more likely to manifest—I will show you why.

" All these sainted men in their earth-lives have been yogis and ascetics, instructed in the oggult nature-secrets, and engaged in evolving out their higher fagulties, and becoming spiritualised. Therefore, if the yogi of whom this is the idol was trully all he was supposed, when his body is dead, he is all sixth and seventh principles—he has done altogether with the earth and all further ingarnations upon it ; he is away zomwhere, everywhere egstasising so happy in the gonscious non-existence of Nirvfina. What has he to do with any idol ? Noding—noding whatefer !

" But now, if he is not holy, or not so spiritualised as he pretended, but a great large humbug only—what then ? All his life he has a part acted, of one who has gonquered the garnal passions and desires, and in his inside he knows well it is quite oderwise. Why should he such a mask wear ? From pride and from ambition, from the love to asdonish, and to be by the gommon beoples revered and homaged. And, the same while, he has really such occult

A FALLEN IDOL

skill as every fakir or yogi, who all are adepts in their low way, would possess.

" Very well ; this impostor sham dies, his body is berished away from him, and yet he has not Nirv&na deserved; he has even probably his spiritual *ego* so starved that it no longer exists, and his doom is that for ever the whole individuality is in the fifth principle centred ! "

Here Nebelsen paused either for effect or breath ; and the Colonel, hopelessly at sea, but thinking he ought to say something, said " Quite so," with a rudimentary yawn.

" Yes," continued Nebelsen, " he is now no more than a shadowy entity, an invisible ghost essence, gombounded of the passions and desires which had too much vitality to berish with the body, and are yet too moch of the earth to rise far away from it.

" And this Thing is gonscious to some extent; it has all the faculties and powers, though they too will slowly decay, which are of the pure intellect, and all the dominant thoughts and ideas of his life remain as a power and force, until they of their own violence exhaust themselves.

" You do not see yet ? I am goming to it. What will be the dominant ideas of an impostor who all his life has aimed to be respected and feared ? Why, of gourse the surviving remnants of his individuality will all be gonerced in maintaining his reputation, and his reputation is in his idol bersonified. With his occult skill, which he still has, it is easy enough to arrange leedle miragles for him, and exact homage, and bunish unbelievers—I have no doubt his idol was for a time quite generally respected.

" Then—whether he was perhaps found out, or his worship put down—it must have com somehow to the end, for, years after, this idol, if it is the same, was out of the earth dug. And all these years that his idol is buried, what is the tirthankar spirit about ? Noding—he is paralysed, lying torpid and dormant, storing up force like the electric eel, until his idol is again disgovered, and he has something once more to think about.

" Next over hier to Englandt he corns, but at first he

docs not understandt—everything is diiferent, and he feels only that no one any more pays notice to his idol, which makes him very annoyed, and so, whenever he can, he bunishes and he bunishes—and noding ever comes of it !

" That is how, even after he comes hier, he behafes, but by this time this bersonality, so greedy for homage-worship, is more and more growing able to remember, and to observe and galgulate, though quite what he meant by his first tricks no one can tell you. Perhaps he himself could not explain ; perhaps it was only cross temper. But to me it seems that he wanted to sebarate poor Mr. Campion from Mees Elsvort, from all his friends, and have him altogether to himself. So, from time to time, his will-power, of which he is all made-up, is goncentrated upon this so unfortunate Mr. Campion, and that is perhaps why he so often rather guriously bainted—for you see, when the stream of this volition is directed upon him, then will he not what is in his own mind uppermost baint, but only such subjects what are then occupying that dead tirthan-kar's psychical energies. And those subjects are, most probably, chiefly himself as he used formerly to be, and his idol representation as it now is."

" I see," said Campion, interested in spite of himself. " And that is how you would explain my putting the idol in that portrait, and painting that fakir—why, it may even account for the barbaric colouring in those unlucky Academy pictures of mine ! "

" Perhaps, either vanity, or malice, or jealousy, I cannot say. But all the time a stronger purpose than all is slowly shaping himself ; by his brankish tricks he is striving, more and more, to make himself disliked."

" With some success," remarked Campion ; "*I don't like him.*"

" But why ? ach ! even I myself could not till quite lately guess. At last he has found out that, hier, in this land, his idol is not abreciated—he now desires to go away where it will be at home. So that my dear Mahatma was so right to say as he did, for I must now

A FALLEN IDOL

tell you I have no doubt, and so also Mr. Chowkydaree Loll, that what he *meant* to write was—* Return the idol to the *land*, not hand, from which he came.

" Then to aggomplish this result, the imitation tir-thankar spirit puts all the bressure he can upon Mr. Campion, and Mr. Campion can only respond to his wish to go by trying himself to part with him—but no, that is not what he wants at all, and every time he is taken out, he comes back, always a leedle more angry."

" And where *does* he want to go to ? " said Campion, " because Fve no desire to detain him."

" To India, of course—but over all India there are Jains, and Mr. Loll does not even know to which part the legend belongs. But there at least you haf an explanation. I gif it you for what it is vurt."

And Nebelsen, having finished his lecture, looked about him with much innocent satisfaction. His hearers received it, as might be expected, in various manners.

The Colonel, who did not happen to have had any previous acquaintance with Theosophical doctrines, seemed considerably taken aback, and gasped where he had begun by gaping. Mrs. Staniland was undisguisedly angry, holding that a mystic should mind his own business, instead of trumping up fantastic excuses for a young man whose treachery and ingratitude it was so highly undesirable to palliate just then. Sybil was mystified, and more uneasy than ever ; and Campion, though secretly impressed by this new theory of his persecution, failed to see that it greatly improved matters.

" *Welly* Horace," said Mrs. Staniland, breaking the silence, " are you satisfied—aren't you going to say something ? "

The Colonel pinched his chin. " Ton my word," he said, " I don't exactly know *what* to say—it's a queer story—very queer."

" But do you believe in an angry idol ? you must be able to say that! "

" Why, of course," said the Colonel, " that's all non-

sense ! still, I must say, I think if I were Mr. Campion, I shouldn't like to have it about me. I *do* think that."

" And pray why ? "

" Well, this Indian magic's a curious thing. I've seen something of it in my time ; makes you doubt your own senses, by Gad ! And then, when you come to look at it, it is rather too bad to put these native gods about our houses as ornaments. We shouldn't like it if a Parsee stuck up—well, say one of our eagle lecterns," said the Colonel, casting about for an illustration, " and made a hatstand of it. We should call it bad taste on his part now."

" Oh, there's no question about Mr. Campion's *taste* in this matter. But I can see you half-believe already. Thank goodness, here comes a rational person—how did you find out we were here, Lionel ? "

" They told me at Sussex Place," he replied. " I wanted to explain my absence last night. I must say, Campion," he added, looking him meaningly in the face, " I didn't expect to find you *here* ! "

" Not in his own studio ? " cried Sybil, resenting an indefinable something in his tone; " he's not *you*> Lionel."

The unhappy Campion was dumb. He suddenly remembered when and how he had met him the night before, and the misunderstanding that Yarker's well-meant evasion must have occasioned ; worse still, he saw that Babcock remembered too, and meant mischief.

" And Nebelsen, too ? " said Babcock, " dear me ; two unexpected pleasures ! " On reflection he concluded not to make any allusion to the Chela's electro-biological performance. " I suppose, Campion," he went on, " the magistrate thought a fine would meet your case, eh ? "

" What magistrate ? " cried Mrs. Staniland, scenting a special providence.

" Hasn't he told you ? " said the amiable Babcock, who had realised from Sybil's expression that extreme measures were necessary. " After all, though, I don't suppose you

A FALLEN IDOL

would be here like this if he had. But it's *his* story, I won't spoil it ! "

" And I , " said Campion, " see no occasion to tell it. "

" Pardon me, " said Mrs. Staniland acidly, " there is *every* occasion. "

" It's unfair to press him, " said Babcock, " for, really, now, judging from what I saw, I doubt if he can remember it himself. And everyone has his own ideas about how to spend an evening with combined profit and pleasure. "

" Ronald was with *me* yesterday afternoon, " said Sybil, proudly; " I'm not afraid to hear what he did afterwards! "

" You have that quality, my child, " said Babcock, suavely, " which the poet tells us is superior to a Norman extraction ; take my advice, and ask no questions. "

" Ronald, " said Sybil, with a sweet imperiousness, " tell *me* ! "

The hopelessness of telling such a story, then and there, came upon him with a crushing force. By what evidence could he support it ? Who would believe him against Babcock ? He turned away with a stifled groan. " Everything's against me ! " he said, " I can't tell even *you*, Sybil ! "

And at this moment the door above opened, and Bales's stolid walnut face looked down upon them : " Some one called and says he must see you at once, sir, " he announced, " from the police-station. "

Was this infernal idol about to being some new disaster upon him ? when, too, he had thought to have done with policemen for a while ! Campion's heart seemed to reverse its action ; he stood helpless, speechless, in the track of this unknown advancing calamity.

" What police-station ? " Mrs. Staniland inquired, in an awful voice.

" I don't know, of course, " said Babcock, " but I should imagine it was the establishment which had the honour of receiving him last night. "

" This is too disgraceful ! " cried Mrs. Staniland indignantly.

THE DAY AFTER

But Sybil had come nearer to her lover's side. " Papa, Aunt Hilary ! " she cried, " he has done nothing disgraceful ; it is that idol again ! Ronald, was it not ? "

" You know I would never deceive you, darling/" he said. " It was."

" Bah ! " cried the Colonel, in violent revolt, " there *are* limits, really, Mr. Campion ! You can't make that ridiculous image the scapegoat for everything, you know ! "

" Why not ? " observed Babcock softly. " Worship of idols, we all know, is not unfrequently attended by excess, especially of the kind in which he seemed to have been indulging when I had the pleasure of meeting him, under police escort, early this morning."

" It's a lie ! " said Campion, fiercely, " I *was* arrested last night; I did spend it in a police-station ; but for nothing of that kind ! If I told you how I came to be taken up, you wouldn't believe me ! "

" /would, Ronald," said Sybil, " I know you have done no wrong ! "

" God bless you, darling ! " said the poor man brokenly ; " I was speaking to the others, and to them it's useless defending myself, I know."

" Then I think," said Mrs. Staniland, " there's nothing to keep us here any longer."

" One minute," said Babcock, " I have been informed I'm a liar. I should like to have that point cleared up. And I shouldn't wonder if the policeman (whom we are keeping waiting all this time) could throw some light on it if we sent for him. Shall we see ? "

" Do you agree to that, Mr. Campion ? " said the Colonel, with stiff politeness.

Campion knew only too well, after the inspector's hint, that the police were not likely, in their own interests, to admit that they had been mistaken ; but he had ceased to keep any hold on the situation ; things might end as they pleased, if only they would end quickly.

" I agree," he said apathetically ; " Bales, you can show the man down here."

16. *Braved !*

"As if Man, made for the contemplation of Heaven and all noble objects, should doe nothing but kneele before a little Idoll !"—*Bacon*.

BALES, his wooden features betraying a lively curiosity, returned to usher in a policeman in uniform, and found the door more difficult to shut than usual.

"Why, the man's *Yorker* !" cried Mrs. Staniland, who seemed to consider this fact, for some reason, a fresh personal injury.

It was Yarker ; he was standing on the top step, his air of potential insolence had vanished, and he was fondling his helmet with a constraint which somehow inspired Campion with a sudden hope that his visit might after all be unprofessional.

"Yes, madam," he was saying, with a graceful butler's inclination, oddly out of keeping with his uniform ; "I hope I see you well, and you, Miss Sybil. I called to see Mr. Campion, I was not aware that he was receiving, and if agreeable, I can look in again."

"Oh, you may just as well speak now !" said Campion.

"I don't know as I can," said Yarker. "It was only that I wanted to apologise, being new to the Force, for my part in what happened last night." He was hesitating between reluctance to make so public a confession, and the advantage of speaking before possible advocates.

"You see, sir, the inspector sent for me after you had gone and told me what had transpired, and he says, 'Two hundred and forty seving, you've exceeded your duty—but I don't want to get you suspended, you being an admirable orficer so far/—he says, 'unless I can help it. So, if you can indooce the gentleman to promise to pass over your conduck,' says he, * I shan't take no more notice.' So as soon as I had done giving evidence in a case I was in charge of at Marybone (as vilent a case as I've experienced so far), I come on 'ere to arsk you if you

would be so kind as to look it over, and not bring it before the press in any way, sir, which might be my ruing, and me not being actuated by any personal enmity, which is a thing I should no more carry with my uniform, sir, than what I should a pot 'at. And there's always a difficulty in seeing distinct in the dark, sir."

Campion breathed again ; the constable was a good angel in disguise.

" I will say no more about it," he said, affecting a judicial sternness, " on one condition."

" Namely, sir ? " said Yarker.

" That you tell Mrs. Staniland and Colonel Els worth here, exactly what took place last night; as if you were in the witness-box, mind. I promise you you shall have no cause to regret it."

" As if I was in the box ? " said Yarker, drawing a long breath. " Well, sir, if you desire it so, I'm sure." And he began, with that air of a favourite scholar repeating a lesson, which marks all police evidence. " On the night of yesterday, the —th of June, between the hours of twelve and one, hay hem, while on duty in this road, I passed the pris— I mean, Mr. Campion's 'ouse, and see him apparently occupied in digging in the front garding. He says to me ' I'm trapping my drains,' to which I says ' Ho ! ' knowing that couldn't be. Then I noticed as he was burying somethin', and (which I'm sure I can't tell how I could be so mistook) come to the conclusion that he was interring a infant illegally and contrary to law. So I took him into my custody. On the way (I'm aware this isn't strictly hevidence)—but on the way we met Mr. Babcock, and knowing Mr. Campion was not inclined for talking in his situation, and as Mr. Babcock was not the sort of gentleman to think the wuss of no one for being a bit merry and fresh like, I conveyed the impression to his mind that I wanted Mr. Campion for what—meanin' no offence to you, ladies—we call in the Force the * hordinary drunk.' And, in course, I was sure Mr. Babcock was too much the gentleman to mention it again."

A FALLEN IDOL

" What it is to have a character, Lionel ! " cried Sybil, at which Babcock looked more than a little foolish.

" Well," continued Yarker, " when I took him into our orfice, the doctor and the inspector both say as what Fd found him with was not a infant nohow, and—on what grounds it's not for me to say—they pernounced it to be a dangerous explosive. So we locked the parcel up in the inspector's room in a pail o' water, and detained Mr. Campion for inquiries. And in the morning, if you'll believe *me*, we found that what was in the pail was nothing more nor less nor one of these Heastern hidols, such as you might see in a tea-shop ; and the inspector discharged Mr. Campion at once on his own responsibility—and that's all I know about it."

When Yarker had been dismissed with a mind lighter and pockets heavier than when he came, there was another long silence. Babcock, who had really believed that his former friend had taken to bad courses and deserved to be exposed, was digesting his disappointment—as was Mrs. Staniland hers. The poor Colonel was completely staggered. A matter-of-fact British officer of more than middle age, even if his ideas on many things are still in a state of suspension, can hardly be expected to swallow so large a dose of the supernatural without a mental gulp or two.

Nebelsen availed himself of the pause. " Can you not see how, more than ever, this proves that my suspicions are gorrect ? " he cried, triumphantly. " This departed tirthankar sees that his idol is about once again to be buried, and you remember that he can still, as an adept, hallucinations produce—why, then, should he not use his power to save the image ? "

" Oh, of course, if you talk like that ! " cried the Colonel, " but why, if it began as a baby, didn't it keep it up ? "

" Perhaps it was difficult, or not desired the hallucination any longer to sustain. But we gannot possibly determine anything except the plain facts."

" Well, look here ! " said the Colonel, " look at the idol now—is it doing anything ? You're not going to tell me it's *still* hallucinating ? "

" I do not think it. From so much force-expenditure as the personality must have made, there will be a recoil-period ; and besides, he has accomplished his aim. Mr. Campion will not again try to bury it."

" Well—no," said Campion, " he may make himself easy about that."

" Now he will save himself up for his real object—to be to the spot on which he formerly flourished, with no more delay sent back."

" And as we don't know it, and are not likely to guess it," said Campion, " I suppose I may, in the words of the weather prophet, ' expect fresh disturbances ' ? "

" There is a way," said Nebelsen, solemnly—" diffigult and dangerous—but a way still, and I am now about to try it."

" And what do you propose to do ? " asked the Colonel.

" I shall, by goncentrating my will-power, compel this invisible spirit of the false tirthankar himself to materialise. He will then be able to be asked questions and to answer ; then I can gonvince him that, if he only will help, we are willing to assist him to return—it is the only way."

There was something so unostentatiously self-assured in his manner, that even Babcock was impressed for the moment, and Mrs. Staniland was seized with unmitigated horror.

" Mr. Nebelsen," she said, " let me go before you begin, I can't stay here and see an evil spirit raised ! "

" No one must stay except me only," he said, as he began to describe a large figure upon the bare boards with a piece of Campion's charcoal.

" May I ask," said the Colonel, inspecting it curiously, " what that is ? "

" The sacred tetragram of all mystics," explained the Chela, still drawing. " See, at each angle I write one

A FALLEN IDOL

ledger of the mirific name—the four Buddhas who came and have passed away."

"Ha! exactly," said the Colonel; "and what's it for?"

"To step inside, if the spirit when he appears should rampageous becom. I wish I could have had some leedle lamps of naphtha burning with them, it is more safe—but there is no time for that. And now," he added, as he rose to his full height, "now I am prepared, and perhaps, if you would care to hier how I succeed, Mr. Campion will tell you where you can all wait till it is over."

"There is my sitting-room," said Campion, "if you will come there. Nebelsen," he added in a lower voice, "are you quite sure anything will come of this? For Heaven's sake, don't let this end in some ghastly foolery?"

Nebelsen turned upon him with an air of solemn offence. "It will end either that I com to a seddlement with him—or that I myself am into bieces torn," he said.

Campion was infected by his earnestness. "Then I can't let you face this thing alone," he answered; "I will stay too."

"No, no," protested the Chela, "that will only make it more taincherous for both! Go with those beoples, and by and by, when it is time, I com for you. One vort before you leaf me—you must gif me perfect liberty to act for you, oderwise can I noding do!"

"My dear fellow," said Campion, "if you really can get me out of this frightful business, make any terms you please—but I'm afraid you are going to find yourself disappointed."

"I imblore you to say noding to me just now that is disgouraging—I want all my faith—and you dry to frighten her away!" said Nebelsen pathetically. "Now go, and if I do not com soon to fetch you, it will be begause"—and here he wiped his eyes—"begause I shall be all torn up!"

"You shall not run the risk!" cried Campion, "it's not worth it. I'll put up with anything rather than let you do it—give it up, Nebelsen. I wish it!"

"You forget," said the Chela, "there is anoder whose

happiness depends on me. And, between you and me, I do not believe he could get at me, inside my leaden tetragram—even if he is so bad enough to try. And now I am too far gone to stop—take them all away."

He produced a small steel wand from his pocket, and pointed with it imperiously to the door.

"Where is this room of yours, Mr. Campion?" said the Colonel, "because really, it's all so extraordinary, that I'm rather curious to see the end of it."

So there was nothing for Campion to do but allow the Chela to have his way, and conduct the whole party to his room, for they all decided to remain; Mrs. Staniland, from a feeling that if she consulted her own wishes and went, her brother would do something foolish; and Babcock to watch the case on his own behalf.

Campion felt his position more forlornly ridiculous than ever; hope as he might, he could not really believe that Nebelsen would make good his professions. If he had believed, he would not have deserted him so readily—he knew only too well he was clutching at a straw.

And Sybil, too, while she never doubted the Chela's sincerity, could not banish the uncomfortable recollection of his *fiasco* in her aunt's drawing-rooms, when he was quite as serenely self-confident.

So that as they all sat there, they formed anything but a cheerful party, and might excusably have been mistaken for patients preparing for a *tete-a-tete* with their dentist, while the physical atmosphere, charged as it was with the storm that had been gathering for some time, served to increase their depression.

The brilliant sky of the morning had changed to dull copper and livid green, against which houses took a chalky tone, and chimneys sent up smoke in straight threads of black, yellow, and white; the trees rustled uneasily in the hot dry air, and the sparrows' twitter had a note of alarm in it. The quiet neighbourhood was hushed to a deeper and expectant stillness, as if it shared their suspense.

A FALLEN IDOL

" And how long are we expected to sit here like this ? " demanded Mrs. Staniland, unable to bear the silence any longer.

" If we wait till Nebelsen evolves a ta-thankee—or whatever it is—out of the depths of his inner consciousness, " said Babcock, " I should say, a considerable time."

" I don't think you were absolutely pressed to stay, Babcock," remarked Campion, whereupon his rival, who had every reason for remaining, held his peace.

" I wish," said Mrs. Staniland, " I wish I could feel I was doing right in remaining at all ! "

" We're as well here as anywhere else," said the practical Colonel, " till this storm has burst."

" Oh, dear ! " moaned his sister, " don't you hear something ?—it's awful."

It was growing darker and darker, and Nature still held her breath. From the studio below a sound as of strange tongues came fitfully through the two closed doors, and at last were heard outside, and the next moment Nebelsen had entered the room and closed the door behind him, with the deftness of a wild-beast tamer leaving the lion-cage.

They could not see his face for the gloom, but they heard him breathing hard and quick.

" Well ? " cried everybody.

" It has been derrible hard labour," he said, " but I made him com. Oh, I can tell you he made me run inside my tetragram quick—he did not like at all to be materialised. Now he is a leedle bit galm. I haf tried him with Sanskrit, and Pali, and Tamil, and he does not seem quite to gombrehend. But it is true that what he wants is to be taken to his own land, and I haf promised for you that he shall."

" Where does he want to go to ? " asked Campion, " because, by Jove, he shall be packed off by the next P. and O."

" He will not tell me till I bring you," said Nebelsen,

" and—and you must not pack him away alone—you also yourself must go ! "

" *I?* " cried Campion, " nonsense ! "

" Oh yes, you must go also, he must have some one who can be trusted to build him up again a leedle temple, and restore his worship as it formerly was."

" My good sir' expostulated Campion, " do you really imagine I'm going out to India as high priest to that confounded image—why, hang it all, Nebelsen, I should never hold up my head again ! "

" Too late now to gomblain," said the Chela gloomily. " I haf arrainched it so—you gave me *carte blanche* ! "

The combined unreasonableness and absurdity of such an arrangement drove Campion furious. " If *that's* what you call arranging, Nebelsen," he said, " I can only tell you it seems to me you've landed me in a worse mess than ever ! But I repudiate it. As if I could possibly go out to India and build a shrine to set that humbugging thing going again ; it's monstrous—absurd ! And I shall just make that tirthankar understand that I'm not going to have any nonsense about this. His idol must go out alone like any other parcel. Everything shall be done handsomely. I'll pay its carriage all the way—wherever it is—take a berth for it, if he makes a point of it. I'll insure the beastly thing heavily ; but he'll have to look after it himself. I won't ! "

" Oh, that is wild boy's talk," said Nebelsen. " Do you know what this bad spirit will do if you go back now and disaboint him ? "

" I don't," said Campion, " and I don't care."

" I'll tell you. He'll most likely strike you through your dearest one," said Nebelsen in a quivering whisper ; " and she—*she*, and not you, is in danger by your obstinacy ! "

Campion set his teeth. " I see," he said, " you've left me no choice then, Nebelsen. There—I give in ... I'll go ! "

" It is not moch to do," said the Chela encouragingly. " Shust to go out to India with your idol and build him his leedle temple-shrine and com away."

A FALLEN IDOL

" But, confound it, sir ! " the Colonel almost shrieked, " you ought to know that you can't go out there on such an errand as that—you'd have all the natives in a ferment directly. Why, the Government wouldn't hear of it ! "

" We do not *want* the Government to hear of it," said the Chela.

" You can't seriously mean that you are going out to deliberately lower our nation in the eyes of the heathen by encouraging them in their idolatrous practices ? " cried Mrs. Staniland, " after all we've spent for years and years on mission funds ! Mr. Ronald Campion, I can hardly believe that even you will do that ! "

Sybil was trembling. " Don't go, Ronald," she entreated. " Don't trust yourself far away alone with that wicked creature. It will play you false. Oh, for my sake, don't go ! "

" You don't know all, darling," said Campion, " if what Nebelsen tells me is true, I *must* go. Mrs. Staniland, Colonel Els worth, do you suppose I don't see the risk, and the absurdity, and—well—the impropriety of this journey ? Do you think I shall enjoy my voyage ? I have to go, and I shall go—and there's no use saying any more about it ! "

He was prepared to make ever such an ass of himself rather than risk any harm to Sybil's dear head.

Babcock burst into a sneering laugh. " You may have pressing reasons for getting beyond the jurisdiction," he said, " but I doubt if you and the idol will get much farther than Monaco."

" Ach ! " retorted Nebelsen, " even now you do not beleaf ! "

" Well," said Babcock, " there may be a ghostly tirthankar ramping about in Campion's studio, but we've only your word for it ! "

" It is only through two doors," said the Chela, " go and see for yourself if you dare I "

" Thanks very much," said Babcock, " but it's no business of mine. I see no necessity for moving. Per-

haps the Colonel—will you step down and see Bogie, eh, Colonel ? "

" I will not, sir," said the Colonel testily ; " I don't give any opinion one way or the other—but unless I proposed to face that thing, I see nothing very courageous in sneering at it behind its back. I wish it was over somehow."

" Let us go, Nebelsen," said Campion, but Sybil stopped them.

" Oh, think first what you are going to do ! " she cried. " Herr Nebelsen, how can it be right to lend yourselves to help that idol to deceive more people. What good can ever come of it ? "

" No goot," said Nebelsen, " it is the only way, that is all."

" There are other ways," she rejoined, " if you have not been mistaken in your own powers. Didn't you tell us there were magnetic currents along which you could send things for immense distances wherever you wished ? Why can't you send him by one of those ? "

" He does not want to go that way," said the Chela, " and it is not surbrising, for you see I haf not had great bractice with the gurrents ; sometimes they will not altogether vork, and the magnetical force stream will into gontact with some oder com, and so the body which was committed to it is not found to arrive, but instead flies off into trackless Gosmic space-regions."

" But that wouldn't matter to us ! " said Sybil, " it would be all the better—he couldn't do any harm in trackless space ! "

" Nebelsen," said Campion, " you know how far your powers go, but it seems to me this accomplishment gives you the upper hand of the idol altogether. Why, you can project him where you like—to Fu&i^yama, Chimborazo, the North Pole, anywhere—and if he goes off the track, why, that's *his* affair ! "

Nebelsen hung back. " I am sure my Mahatma would not approve," he objected.

A FALLEN IDOL

" If he approved of your plan, he'll approve of this," said Campion, impatiently ; " come back with me now, Nebelsen, and do it."

The Chela pulled himself together. " What I can I will do," he said, " I cannot do any more—let us go."

Without trusting himself to speak to Sybil, Campion left the room with Nebelsen. There was a little passage between the door they had left and that which opened upon the painting-room, and in this passage Campion felt himself seized violently by the arm, and heard Nebelsen whisper through the gloom—

" I could not tell *her*" he said in the greatest agitation, " this thing what she wants me to do . . . but—but——"

" But what ? " said Campion, as he hesitated painfully.

" I can treaten at him, of gourse, and if you wish it, I will—but if he takes me at the vort—/ *haf quite forgotten how it is done !* "

Campion gave a short laugh. " Well, we're in for it now, Nebelsen," he said drily, " and under the circumstances, I think I'll ask you to go in first."

17. *Brutum Fulmen*

CAMPION'S state of mind as he followed Nebelsen down into the painting-room was curiously contradictory ; he could not divest himself of a feeling of awe at what he might be confronted with in another moment; at the same time he had an angry suspicion that he was being made a fool of. He could see nothing, for it was almost as dark as night, and besides, a large folding screen stood at the foot of the steps intercepting his view. Behind this screen Nebelsen made a fresh stand. " There is yet anoder thing," he whispered, " to transbort that idol he must first be in the hands taken ! "

" Well," said Campion, " I'll fetch it for you, if that's all."

" **But** you don't understandt! " exclaimed Nebelsen, " **that** is shust a thing what the tirthankar will never **bermit!**"

" Well, we can't skulk behind here much longer," said Campion, recklessly, " let us come out in the open and have it out with whatever it is that's there ! Never mind if you can *do* the thing or not, Nebelsen, *tell* him you will, and see if bluster won't make him climb down ! "

" So—I will bloster as goot as I can," said the Chela, " but my plan was bedder."

And Campion, not without a sense of shame, came out and stepped instinctively inside the charcoal diagram on the floor, " *il ne croyaitpas*," perhaps, " *mats il craignait*" in spite of himself.

Through the open north window the sky showed a deep and murky red, and in the intense gloom below he could just make out the form of the idol squatting on a chair in the corner, its head and one shoulder touched by such light as there was. It seemed to sit there in deadly composure, like some cold, venomous creature pausing to strike more surely, and though he could see no sign of any other presence in the room, he had a consciousness which he could not account for that something malign was watching there in the shadow.

Nebelsen seemed to have braced his nerves completely. " See ! " he cried, with an accent almost of triumph, " did I not tell you ? And now you yourself can see ! "

" What ? where ? " cried Campion, with an involuntary start.

" There—in the corner—behind the idol, floating cross-legged in the air as in your picture—there, with his evil grey face and the white eyes which so angrily roll ! "

" I see nothing," said Campion; and the Chela, gripping his friend's wrist in his cold fingers, began to roll out long and unintelligible words, which seemed to Campion to have a defiant ring in them.

" He is moved ! " he cried, " now you can see—you *must* see how he brandishes with his arms ! "

But whether Campion's eyes saw any clearer than before will never be known for certain now—his lips have ever **since been sealed upon** the subject.

A FALLEN IDOL

However this may be, there is at least no mystery as to what took place next. As the two men stood there, a shaft of intense light made a purplish glare on the darkness, and at the same instant the heavily-charged clouds overhead rushed together with an explosion which shook the earth, and the echo crashed, boomed, rolled, with sundry capricious relapses and recoveries, making a mad circuit, as it seemed, of the entire solar system, and then ceased abruptly with a far-off metallic clank—as though it had cannoned into Mars, whereupon the long-stagnant air shivered and began to circulate once more.

Campion, on whose retina the jagged flash seemed indelibly branded, reeled back against a cabinet with a horrible fear that he had lost his eyesight—but from this he was presently relieved by seeing Sybil and the others around him.

" Oh," cried Sybil, piteously, " the lightning has struck him—I was sure it had ! " But he was promptly able to reassure them.

" And is poor Mr. Nebelsen safe, too ? " inquired Mrs. Staniland.

It had grown somewhat lighter and, on turning round, they all saw the Chela huddled up inside his mystic diagram, motionless, his face hidden in his arms.

" Oh, don't touch him ! " cried Mrs. Staniland ; " don't let me see his face. . . . He's dead, I *know* he is ! "

And the same thought seized them all—until the Chela slowly rose with a dazed look. " Where am I ? " he stammered ; " ah, I remember. . . I haf in a trance-state been. Mees Elsvort, your will is aggomplished. That so accursed idol is now safely on the top of Cotopaxi landed. I myself haf seen him arrive. For once the current has successfully worked 1 "

" My dear good Nebelsen," said Babcock, from the other end of the room, " I don't want to ask rude questions—but some of it at all events seems to have been left behind—look there ! "

The chair on which the idol had lately been placed

Was now a blasted and collapsed wreck, and all around it were scattered half-fused fragments of some spar-like substance.

" See ! " said Babcock, " this looks like its ugly head, and here's a bit of its pedestal, with a sort of tige scratched on it, and there's a foot and hand—looks as if it had got on the wrong current and run into something, Nebelsen, eh ? "

The Chela folded his arms calmly, without appearing to be at all put out by this slight inconsistency. " I remember now more clearly," he said ; " the other was a vision only. I threaten him with Cotopaxi—and it was enoff. He threw up his cardsgame, and in despair he invoked that lightning—and then, as you see, was shaddeder unto pieces."

" And where is the—the gentleman himself now ? " inquired the Colonel, who had certainly lost some of his colour.

" The false tirthankar-geist ? " said Nebelsen. " Oh, now that there is no longer his idol to care for, he cannot any more hold together. He is dissolved, degomposed, and once again into the mighty Magrogosm reabsorbed."

" And a deuced good thing too ! " said the Colonel. A conclusion with which few, perhaps, will be found to disagree.

What can be said of Nebelsen's theory ? Had the spirit of this long dead Indian occultist used his old mastery over the powers of Nature to effect his final annihilation ? Or had he intended to call down lightning to avenge him, and instead been hoist with his own petard ? Or—an even more important point—had there ever been a ghostly tirthankar at all in attendance upon that particular idol, or was the story adapted to **it** by the dusky and esoteric Chowkydaree Loll ? These are questions which everyone will decide for himself according to his own inclination and capacity for the marvellous, and, whatever flaws may exist in Nebelsen's theory, **Campion** has not as yet succeeded in finding **a more plausible explanation of his mysterious woes**—though,

A FALLEN IDOL

to be sure, this may be due to the fact that he has never troubled himself to try.

Sybil, at all events, was not inclined just then to under-rate Nebelsen's services. She went to him and held out her hand. "We are very grateful to you," she said, smiling.

"It is nothing," said the Chela, with becoming modesty, "at least—it was not much."

Babcock put on his glasses. "You'll excuse my impertinent curiosity," he said, "but even now I can't quite gather what it was you *did* do?"

"I did those," he said, proudly indicating the shattered idol.

"Unless you mean that you ordered the thunderstorm—in which case no one of course can very well contradict you," said Babcock, "that strikes me as rather a strong assertion. Come, isn't it just barely possible that that palette knife I see on the floor there attracted the lightning?"

"I will not reply to such absurd and fanciful subordination," said Nebelsen with much dignity.

"Well, I must say," said the Colonel, who now that it was lighter and the storm was already growling in the distance, had veered round to his former incredulity, "that seems a plain straightforward way to account for it. Fact is, all this thunder in the air upset our nerves a bit, don't you think so, Mr. Campion?"

Campion laid his hand on Nebelsen's shoulder. "I don't know," he said; "I was frightened enough just now. I can't pooh-pooh the danger quite so soon, I want a little more time before I forget all the trouble Mr. Nebelsen took on my behalf."

"Gleichviel," said the Chela, "so you are satisfied, what matter whose is the credit? But now," he added, "I must say goodbye, and for ever. Yes, I am going to travel far away, to find my beloved Mahatma."

"I understood you weren't on speaking terms?" said Babcock,

"Through your monkey drink, for a time I lost confi-

dence ! " retorted Nebelsen," and even so rash and strong-headed as to renounce him became. My guru, who was harsh and severe perhaps, but nefer more than I deserved that he was ! But" (and here he addressed Sybil and Campion) "it is a strainch thing, and you hartly will gombrehend how it could be—yet it is quite true. I wride a ledder, a broud shtiff ledder, in which I formally renounced my goot old Mahatma—who had nefer done noding, and this ledder I broject for myself by the occult telegraph. Well, will you beleaf that, only last night, I find that very same ledder in my bocket unopen ! Mr. Chowkydaree, who is a great adept, as you know, tolt me he has very grand reason to think it quite brobable as my revered guru nefer received it at all ! If so, he knows noding, and it is all well—but, ach ! I have a need to gonfess and tell him all, and for that I must myself see him. Communications through a more advanced theosophist as Mr. Loll—well, they are not so brivate. And the Babu himself quite agrees—he is anxious for me to go and seek my Mahatma for myself far away in Thibet, and he wishes very moch that I find him, and I also—for Thibet you know is large and my Mahatma a leedle—what you call, shy—I may haf to hunt a long while."

" And when do you start ? " asked Campion, who secretly shared the Chela's last apprehension.

" To-night—it is not goot for me hier gontending with the maleficent forces of so much gombined incredulousness. I long to throw myself upon the galm bosom of Shang-gasba, my guru, and find strength for the spirituuous tests I must som day undergo. And I want to be alone and do som thinking. So, my dear Mees Elsvort, I wish you farewell. I beleaf you are going to haf now a happy earth-life. And, for successive ingarnations, it must surely be that one so gracious and so schweet will ever bedder and bedder Karma generate. But think sometimes of me as I go up along my thorn-springled climb-road to gomplete initiation, and pardon me that I shall not dare, for a time at least, to think of you ! "

A FALLEN IDOL

He raised her hand in both his and kissed it, and as he did so there was a moisture in his pale eyes which, it may be feared, was not the result of any esoteric exaltation.

The next minute, without deigning to take leave of any but the two lovers, he had vanished out of their lives and no one—unless haply the brothers at Bombay—knows what has become of him since, or whether he is still stalking his somewhat *farouche* Mahatma in the mountain fastnesses of far Thibet.

"Now, Mr. Champion" said Mrs. Staniland, "a few words with you, please!" And he left Sybil and crossed to where the old lady stood, looking both grim and embarrassed. "I see from my passbook," she began, "that you do not seem to have presented the cheque I sent you for my niece's portrait. Has it miscarried?"

"I tore it up," he said, curtly; and her face lightened.

"You felt—and very properly—that you would not be justified in accepting money for what you had done?"

"Not as you offered it."

"Well, you decline at all events, and—and I should not dream of hurting your feelings by offering it to you again; but of course I can't keep the portrait now."

"It is mine again!" he cried. "Ah, if you had only said so at once!"

"I did not know then about the cheque," she said, with a deeper tint on her apple cheeks. "And I was angry—and quite rightly—then. But it is understood, then—the whole transaction is at an end? I keep the money, and the portrait is yours to destroy as soon as it comes back from the Grosvenor. I don't wish, on calmer reflection, to perpetuate a work which can only damage your reputation in so many ways."

"You are very considerate—if it comes a little late," he said. And the truth was that Mrs. Staniland had been blaming herself for some time for paying so large a sum without necessity. She had bought with it the right to

revenge, but revenge is too perishable a commodity to seem long an equivalent for hard cash.

Meanwhile Babcock was engaging the Colonel, blissfully unaware that he had already inspired that officer with a secret but cordial dislike. "Of course," he began, "you and I, as men of the world, know what to think of all this tomfoolery ; but, unless you put your foot down pretty firmly, I'm afraid, from all I've seen to-day, that your daughter may, ah—allow herself to be impressed by it!"

"You may leave that to me, sir," said the Colonel, with a little movement of weak irritation, for he felt no anxiety to put his foot down on Babcock's behalf, and yet he foresaw that he might be obliged to do so.

Babcock was astute enough to have discovered already that whatever chances he might have had with Sybil had been hopelessly lost in the course of the morning, and he now devoted all his energies to upsetting his rival.

"You don't seem to understand, Colonel," he said, "that, unless you are careful, you will have Sybil flinging herself away on that scoundrel over there ; but perhaps that wouldn't displease you ?"

"I should most certainly put a stop to anything of the kind," said the Colonel coldly, "so you need give yourself no further trouble. But, as far as the young fellow himself is concerned, he seems to me a gentlemanly, nice young fellow enough. What have you got against him ?"

"I should have thought there was enough against him ; and I don't see myself how all the occult hanky-panky in the world can whitewash him," said Babcock waspishly. "I think I've some reason to bear a grudge against him, too. He deliberately ruined the best picture I ever painted, or ever shall paint!"

And he told again his oft-repeated story of the fakir and the British landscape, which it so happened the Colonel had not till then heard in all its bearings, and which, as Babcock told it, made things look very black **against** his **rival**.

A FALLEN IDOL

" You're right," said the Colonel at the end of it, with a feeling that this would at least strengthen his case against Campion ; " that was a shabby thing to do—he's a dangerous fellow, and I must get rid of him."

He crossed to where Campion was standing with Mrs. Staniland, and addressed him with a marked change in his manner. " We have had some extraordinary statements this morning," he began, " and we were required to accept them as excuses for your behaviour. But there can be no excuse for the disgraceful way in which you betrayed your friend Babcock—for he was your friend then ; you have probably, he tells me, crippled his artistic career ! "

" I can only say," said Campion, " that I did it in all innocence—if poor Nebelsen hasn't convinced you that some abnormal influence was over me, nothing I can say will. I offered to paint out the fakir as soon as I saw what I had done, but Babcock declined to let me touch it. And really, if he thought it was crippling his career, he would hardly let Sieditoff exhibit it by artificial light at a shilling a head ! "

" You didn't tell me that! " said the Colonel to Babcock.

" Don't see how it affects what *he* did," replied Babcock, rather sulkily.

" As I said," Campion continued, " I've as little to do with any credit for the thing as for any blame, as far as intention goes—but he might set off the one against the other, particularly as Sieditoff told me (without knowing I had any part in it) he had bought the picture entirely for the eccentricity of the thing."

" Well, I must say," said the Colonel, " I think you might have mentioned it."

And soon after this, Babcock, perceiving from the Colonel's manner that he had over-reached himself, withdrew, without even having the courage to try to conciliate Sybil, as he had promised himself he would do before he left.

" Well, Mr. Campion," said the Colonel, " I won't say—I can't say, that we may not have been led to misunderstand you in some respects. I don't mind admitting that, whatever may be said about—er, well, any alleged supernatural incidents, I can't take upon myself to consider you very greatly to blame in all this."

" For *my* part," said Mrs. Staniland, " my opinion has not altered in the least—nor will it, Horace ! "

" Ah—precisely," he said hastily, " I don't know that mine has—only, well, after all, Hilary ! "

" What my brother is trying to say," interrupted Mrs. Staniland, " is that, though he is willing to admit there may be excuses for you (though I confess I can't agree with him), that cannot possibly affect his objections to any engagement with Sybil—he is quite firm upon that, are you not, Horace ? "

" Quite firm—that is, well, you're not in a position to marry, you know, are you ? " said the Colonel.

" But if I were to be so some day ? " he hazarded eagerly.

" We will consider that when the day comes," said Mrs. Staniland sharply. " At present you're not—and we must decline to hear of it. ' Sufficient for the day '—and I do think there has been more than sufficient! We are going, Sybil."

" Good-bye, dear Ronald ! " said Sybil, successfully ignoring her aunt's presence. " If only you won't lose heart, they can't part us for very long ! I feel so sure that now we have really seen the end of that detestable idol, you are not going to be unfortunate much longer. And then, Ronald, you won't let any false pride stand in your way—you will come to me, and we shall be all the happier for what has been ! "

" If it could only be so," he said sadly. " At least I will hope."

And they took her away from him, and he was alone again, reduced to find such solace as he could in the memory of those last words and looks of hers.

A FALLEN IDOL

Bales swept up the idol and committed it to its last dusthole. " Talk o' lightning ! " he grumbled, sceptical to the last, " as if it hadn't something better to do than smashing himages ! Don't tell *me*—did it himself with the poker, and would ha' done it earlier if he'd ben me ! Well, here's riddance to bad rubbish, anyhow ! " which was the idol's sole epitaph.

And now Campion was confronted with a fresh dilemma, the parting legacy of his ruthless tormentor. What was he to do about the cast that Perceval had lent him with so many cautions ? That precious head of Cybele, which was now submerged, in the idol's stead, at the bottom of the Paddington canal !

There was no use in putting it off. He must go to his friend at once and, at the risk of displeasing him seriously, tell him, well—as much of the truth as he was likely to believe. So he left the house with this laudable intention, which, however, an accident prevented him from putting into practice.

For on the way he passed a police-station—not the one which had extended its hospitality to him on the night before—and outside was a placard describing the discovery in the canal of a bag which struck him as being not unlike his own.

And, as he learnt inside, it *was* his own ; it seemed that the solitary errand-boy whose back was turned when Campion threw the bag over the bridge, had been attracted by the splash, and, being a sharp youth, had instantly informed a policeman, with the result that the bag was recovered before its contents were in any way injured.

Campion had to go through some unpleasant interviews before he could persuade the officials to give him up the bag ; but he succeeded at length, and Perceval, when his Cybele was restored to him, never had the faintest suspicion that it had played *Gilda* to Campion's *Rigoletto*.

Whether the idol's share in a series of disasters was

or was not imaginary, it is certain and somewhat singular that its disappearance was coincident with the dawn of a happier state of things. The very next morning brought a telegram from Messrs. Moore, Bradshaw, and Moore, who, it may be remembered, were the firm employed in propounding the will under which, had it only been unopposed, Campion would be entitled to a comfortable legacy.

This telegram announced that (probably from some unsuspected weakness in the disputant's case) the opposition had suddenly collapsed, and submitted an agreement under which all imputations were to be withdrawn on certain terms, and the will admitted to probate ; and thus Campion found that the legacy which he had long since given up as hopeless was actually to be his without further dispute or possibility of failure.

It need not be said he lost no time in writing to the Colonel, and when Babcock heard of this, and perceived decided symptoms of wavering on the father's part, he was roused to make one last effort for what even he was beginning to see was a decidedly forlorn hope. His plan was simple, and a development in fact of the experiment in his own studio. The Colonel was to be worked up to pay a visit to the Grosvenor and see for himself how shamefully his daughter had been held up to public ridicule. If that did not put a spoke in his rival's wheel, Babcock thought, it must roll on triumphant.

Mrs. Staniland, still an uncompromising ally of his, had no difficulty in bringing her brother to further the scheme, and accordingly on the Monday after, the scene in Campion's studio, the Colonel casually announced at lunch that he thought of going to the Grosvenor that afternoon—would Sybil come with him ? Mrs. Staniland interposed—Sybil was not strong enough to bear such a trial again. Dear Horace must not think of taking her ; she herself would accompany him instead.

For the moment Sybil was willing enough to be excused. But the thought that she might show her **trust**

A FALLEN IDOL

in her lover by going nerved her to face that mocking portrait once more. It was not his work, and she would tell them so as they stood before it. She would not fail in her loyalty to Ronald, the more so as she suspected the source from which the proposition originally came.

So on that Monday afternoon, for the first time since that eventful Saturday, she entered the Gallery—this time with a mind prepared for what she was to see there. " You know, Dad dear," she said, as they went upstairs, " painters see people so differently, and—and oh ! if you find something you don't like in it, remember Ronald was painting the idol too ! "

" Pshaw ! " said the Colonel, whose mind had quite regained its usual strength. " Where is this thing, eh, Sybil ? I'll tell you what I think when I see it."

Mrs. Staniland declined to enter the East Gallery, and sat down to wait in the larger room. So Sybil went with her father alone ; she wished herself well over the next five minutes—would people stare and smile as they had done that other time ? But now that she knew, or rather felt, that Ronald had no part in this, for his sake she could bear it all—she would make excuses, persuade the Colonel, if she could, that the picture rather flattered her than otherwise—anything but seem to join, even by implication, in the cry against her poor, persecuted Ronald.

The Gallery was not, of course, as full as when she had last seen it ; still there was a fair attendance, and ah !—again there was a knot of people before her portrait ! She turned faint for the moment—she felt as if she could *not* face it.

But she was brave, and steeled herself to go on. Once more the glass in front of the canvas baffled them for a time, and then her courage failed her—she shut her eyes.

" Well," her father was saying, " I don't call that such a bad likeness ; I call it an uncommon good likeness, by Jove ! what did your aunt mean ? "

Sybil ventured to open her eyes again. What wonderful thing was this which happened ? The idol was gone

out of the canvas ; on the dragon pedestal lay a spray of white azaleas, and she herself—oh ! could she be as lovely as that!

For the pictured face had the bloom of youth and health ; the cold malignity had died out of the eyes, and left only a subdued amusement; the expression, with all its animation and witchery, spoke of nothing that was not womanly, and tender, and true.

As Sybil stood there, trying to realise what had happened, and what it might mean, Mrs. Staniland rejoined them.

" Horace," she said, " what do you think I just happened to overhear ? You know the Dorados ? American millionaire—daughter going to marry Lord Udimore—oh, don't be so stupid, you *must* have heard of them. At any rate, you have now ! Well, they were sitting next to me in the other room, and I actually heard them—they spoke so loud—arranging that Miss Dorado's portrait should be painted on her marriage—by whom do you think ? Positively by Mr. Ronald Campion ! Why, it may make his fortune, and yet one would think they must have seen———Why, what, *who* is this ? "

" It's Ronald's idea of me," said Sybil demurely,—" as I appear without my idol."

" Good gracious ! " was all that Mrs. Staniland felt equal to remarking for the moment, but presently she said to the Colonel in a very awed and serious tone, " Horace, I have always felt that there may be occurrences we, with our limited knowledge, cannot expect to understand. I assure you when I last saw this picture—and now as soon as the actual idol is destroyed, the portrait is everything it ought to be ! If you see no significance in that, I am sorry for you ! You have treated that young man very badly, Horace, and I think it right to tell you so plainly."

But the alteration which had worked such a reaction in Mrs. Staniland's feelings was, as a matter of fact, not entirely due to Campion's agency.

A FALLEN IDOL

Now that the picture was his once more, Campion could retouch it as he pleased, and, by bringing special influence to bear, had obtained the necessary permission ; and, accordingly, the day before, when the Gallery was closed even to Sunday visitors, he had gone then to do what he could to repair the mischief. He found, however, that, in some way for which only Nebelsen could have accounted, the mischief had been repaired already. The portrait was as he had originally painted it, except that the idol's pedestal was vacant, and all he had to do was to paint in the flowers he had brought for that purpose.

And now, on this Monday afternoon, the fancy seized him to go and see how his rehabilitated portrait looked, and it chanced that, at the moment the Colonel was trying to adjust his views to meet his sister's sudden change of front, he saw Campion himself enter the gallery.

They had withdrawn some distance from Sybil, and her back was turned to them all three. Mrs. Staniland made a signal that he was to approach, and he went up with an anxious heart.

" Am I to have my answer—here ? " he said.

" Why—you see," began the Colonel, who had not had time to learn his lesson yet, and boggled helplessly, " you see, Mr. Campion——"

" Nonsense, Horace ! you had better leave this to me," said Mrs. Staniland. " Now, Mr. Ronald Campion, if you're so very anxious to have your answer at once, the best advice I can give you is to go over there, and ask Sybil yourself for it! "

And he went; and the answer that awaited him being a foregone conclusion, it is only necessary to add that the tale of Campion's misfortunes ended almost where it began, with as small prospect of ever being resumed as his sincerest well-wishers could desire for him.

THE TALKING HORSE

I. *The Talking Horse*

IT was on the way to Sandown Park that I met him first, on that horribly wet July afternoon when Bendigo won the Eclipse Stakes. He sat opposite to me in the train going down, and my attention was first attracted to him by the marked contrast between his appearance and his attire : he had not thought fit to adopt the regulation costume for such occasions, and I think I never saw a man who had made himself more aggressively horsey. The mark of the beast was sprinkled over his linen : he wore snaffle sleeve-links, a hard hunting-hat, a Newmarket coat, and extremely tight trousers. And with all this, he fell as far short of the genuine sportsman as any stage super who ever wore his spurs upside down in a hunting chorus. His expression was mild and inoffensive, and his watery pale eyes and receding chin gave one the idea that he was hardly to be trusted astride anything more spirited than a gold-headed cane. And yet, somehow, he aroused compassion rather than any sense of the ludicrous : he had the look of shrinking self-effacement which comes of a recent humiliation, and, in spite of all extravagances, he was obviously a gentleman ; while something in his manner indicated that his natural tendency would, once at all events, have been to avoid any kind of extremes.

He puzzled and interested me so much that I did my best to enter into conversation with him, only to be baffled by the jerky embarrassment with which he met all advances, and when we got out at Esher, curiosity led me to keep him still in view.

Evidently he had not come with any intention of mak-

THE TALKING HORSE

ing money. He avoided the grand stand, with the book-makers huddling in couples, like hoarse lovebirds ; he kept away from the members' inclosure, where the Guards' band was endeavouring to defy the elements which emptied their vials into the brazen instruments ; he drifted listlessly about the course till the clearing-bell rang and it seemed as if he was searching for some one whom he only wished to discover in order to avoid.

Sandown, it must be admitted, was not as gay as usual that day, with its " deluged park " and " unsummer'd sky," its waterproofed toilettes and massed umbrellas, whose sides gleamed livid as they caught the light—but there was a general determination to ignore the unseasonable dampness as far as possible, and an excitement over the main event of the day which no downpour could quench.

The Ten Thousand was run : ladies with marvellously confected bonnets lowered their umbrellas without a murmur, and smart men on drags shook hands effusively as, amidst a frantic roar of delight, Bendigo strode past the post. The moment after, I looked round for my incongruous stranger, and saw him engaged in a well-meant attempt to press a currant bun upon a carriage-horse tethered to one of the trees—a feat of abstraction which, at such a time, was only surpassed by that of Archimedes at the sack of Syracuse.

After that I could no longer control my curiosity—I felt I must speak to him again, and I made an opportunity later, as we stood alone on a stand which commanded the finish of one of the shorter courses, by suggesting that he should share my umbrella.

Before accepting he glanced suspiciously at me through the rills that streamed from his unprotected hat-brim. " I'm afraid," I said, " it is rather like shutting the stable-door after the steed is stolen."

He started. " He was stolen, then," he cried ; " so you have heard ? "

THE TALKING HORSE

I explained that I had only used an old proverb which I thought might appeal to him, and he sighed heavily.

"I was misled for the moment," he said : "you have guessed, then, that I have been accustomed to horses ?"

"You have hardly made any great secret of it."

"The fact is," he said, instantly understanding this allusion to his costume, "I—I put on these things so as not to lose the habit of riding altogether—I have not been on horseback lately. At one time I used to ride constantly—constantly. I was a regular attendant in Rotten Row—until something occurred which shook my nerve, and I am only waiting now for the shock to subside."

I did not like to ask any questions, and we walked back to the station, and travelled up to Waterloo in company, without any further reference to the subject.

As we were parting, however, he said, "I wonder if you would care to hear my full story some day ? I cannot help thinking it would interest you, and it would be a relief to me."

I was ready enough to hear whatever he chose to tell me; and persuaded him to dine with me at my rooms that evening, and unbosom himself afterwards, which he did to an extent for which I confess I was unprepared.

That he himself implicitly believed in his own story, I could not doubt; and he told it throughout with the oddest mixture of vanity and modesty, and an obvious struggle between a dim perception of his own absurdity and the determination to spare himself in no single particular, which, though it did not overcome my scepticism, could not fail to enlist sympathy. But for all that, by the time he entered upon the more sensational part of his case, I was driven to form conclusions respecting it which, as they will probably force themselves upon the reader's own mind, I need not anticipate here.

I give the story, as far as possible, in the words of its author ; and have only to add that it would never have been published here without his full consent and approval.

THE TALKING HORSE

My name (said he), is Gustavus Pulvertoft. I have no occupation, and six hundred a year. I lived a quiet and contented bachelor until I was twenty-eight, and then I met Diana Chetwynd for the first time. We were spending Christmas at the same country-house, and it did not take me long to become the most devoted of her many adorers. She was one of the most variously accomplished girls I had ever met. She was a skilled musician, a brilliant amateur actress ; she could give most men thirty out of a hundred at billiards, and her judgment and daring across the most difficult country had won her the warm admiration of all hunting-men. And she was neither fast nor horsey, seeming to find but little pleasure in the society of mere sportsmen, to whose conversation she infinitely preferred that of persons who, like myself, were rather agreeable than athletic. I was not at that time, whatever I may be now, without my share of good looks, and for some reason it pleased Miss Chetwynd to show me a degree of favour which she accorded to no other member of the house-party.

It was annoying to feel that my unfamiliarity with the open-air sports in which she delighted debarred me from her company to so great an extent; for it often happened that I scarcely saw her until the evening, when I sometimes had the bliss of sitting next to her at dinner ; but on these occasions I could not help seeing that she found some pleasure in my society.

I don't think I have mentioned that, besides being exquisitely lovely, Diana was an heiress, and it was not without a sense of my own presumption that I allowed myself to entertain the hope of winning her at some future day. Still, I was not absolutely penniless, and she was her own mistress, and I had some cause, as I have said, for believing that she was, at least, not ill-disposed towards me. It seemed a favourable sign, for instance, when she asked me one day why it was I never rode. I replied that I had not ridden for years—though I did not add that the exact number of those years was twenty-eight.

THE TALKING HORSE

" Oh, but you must take it up again ! " she said, with the prettiest air of imperiousness. " You ought to ride in the Row next season."

" If I did," I said, " would you let me ride with you sometimes ? "

" We should meet, of course," she said ; " and it is such a pity not to keep up your riding—you lose so much by not doing so."

Was I wrong in taking this as an intimation that, by following her advice, I should not lose my reward ? If you had seen her face as she spoke, you would have thought as I did then—as I do now.

And so, with this incentive, I overcame any private misgivings, and soon after my return to town attended a fashionable riding-school near Hyde Park, with the fixed determination to acquire the whole art and mystery of horsemanship.

That I found learning a pleasure I cannot conscientiously declare. I have passed happier hours than those I spent in cantering round four bare whitewashed walls on a snorting horse, with my interdicted stirrups crossed upon the saddle. The riding-master informed me from time to time that I was getting on, and I knew instinctively when I was coming off ; but I must have made some progress, for my instructor became more encouraging. " Why, when you come here first, Mr. Pulvertoft, sir, you were like a pair o' tongs on a wall, as they say ; whereas now—well, you can tell yourself how you are," he would say; though, even then, I occasionally had reason to regret that I was *not* on a wall. However, I persevered, inspired by the thought that each fresh horse I crossed (and some were very fresh indeed) represented one more barrier surmounted between myself and Diana, and encouraged by the discovery, after repeated experiments, that tan was rather soothing to fall upon than otherwise.

When I walked in the Row, where a few horsemen were performing as harbingers of spring, I criticised their riding, which I thought indifferent, as they neglected

THE TALKING HORSE

nearly all the rules. I began to anticipate a day when I should exhibit a purer and more classic style of equestrianism. And one morning I saw Diana, who pulled up her dancing mare to ask me if I had remembered her advice, and I felt proudly able to reply that I should certainly make my appearance in the Row before very long.

From that day I was perpetually questioning my riding-master as to when he considered I should be ripe enough for Rotten Row. He was dubious, but not actually dissuasive. "It's like this, you see, sir," he explained, "if you get hold of a quiet, steady horse—why, you won't come to no harm; but if you go out on an animal that will take advantage of you, Mr. Pulvertoft, why, you'll be all no-how on him, sir."

They would have mounted me at the school; but I knew most of the stud there, and none of them quite came up to my ideal of a "quiet, steady horse"; so I went to a neighbouring job-master, from whom I had occasionally hired a brougham, and asked to be shown an animal he could recommend to one who had not had much practice lately. He admitted candidly enough that most of his horses "took a deal of riding," but added that it so happened that he had one just then which would suit me "down to the ground"—a phrase which grated unpleasantly on my nerves, though I consented to see the horse. His aspect impressed me most favourably. He was a chestnut of noble proportions, with a hogged mane; but what reassured me was the expression of his eye, indicating as it did a self-respect and sagacity which one would hardly expect for seven and sixpence an hour.

"You won't get a showier Park 'ack than what he is, not to be so quiet," said the owner. "He's what you may call a kind 'oss, and as gentle—you could ride him on a packthread."

I considered reins safer, but I was powerfully drawn towards the horse; he seemed to me sensible that he had a character to lose, and to possess too high an intelligence

wilfully to forfeit his testimonials. With hardly a second thought, I engaged him for the following afternoon.

I mounted at the stables, with just a passing qualm, perhaps, while my stirrup-leathers were being adjusted, and a little awkwardness in taking up my reins, which were more twisted than I could have wished ; however, at length, I found myself embarked on the stream of traffic on the back of the chestnut—whose name, by the way, was Brutus.

Shall I ever forget the pride and ecstasy of finding that I had my steed under perfect control, that we threaded the maze of carriages with absolute security ? I turned him into the Park, and clucked my tongue : he broke into a canter, and how shall I describe my delight at the discovery that it was not uncomfortable ? I said, " Woa," and he stopped, so gradually that my equilibrium was not seriously disturbed ; he trotted, and still I accommodated myself to his movements without any positive inconvenience. I could have embraced him for gratitude : never before had I been upon a beast whose paces were so easy, whose behaviour was so considerate. I could ride at last ! or, which amounted to the same thing, I could ride the horse I was on, and I would " use no other." I was about to meet Diana Chetwynd, and need not fear even to encounter her critical eyes.

We had crossed the Serpentine Bridge, and were just turning in upon the Ride, when—and here I am only too conscious that what I am about to say may strike you as almost incredible—when I heard an unfamiliar voice addressing me with, " I say—you ! " and the moment afterwards realised that it proceeded from my own horse !

I am not ashamed to own that I was as nearly off as possible ; for a more practised rider than I could pretend to be might have a difficulty in preserving his equanimity in this all but unparalleled situation. I was too much engaged in feeling for my left stirrup to make any reply, and presently the horse spoke once more. " I say," he

THE TALKING HORSE

inquired, and I failed to discern the slightest trace of respect in his tone—"do you think you can ride?" "You can judge for yourself how disconcerting the inquiry must have been from such lips. I felt rooted to the saddle—a sensation which, with me, was sufficiently rare. I looked round in helpless bewilderment, at the shimmering Serpentine, and the white houses in Park Lane gleaming out of a lilac haze, at the cocoa-coloured Row, and the flash of distant carriage-wheels in the sunlight: all looked as usual—and yet, there was I on the back of a horse which had just inquired "whether I thought I could ride"!

"I have had two dozen lessons at a riding-school," I said at last, with rather a flabby dignity.

"I should hardly have suspected it," was his brutal retort. "You are evidently one of the hopeless cases."

I was deeply hurt, the more so because I could not deny that he had some claim to be a judge. "I—I thought we were getting on so nicely together," I faltered, and all he said in reply to that was, "*Did you?*"

"Do you know," I began, striving to be conversational, "I never was on a horse that talked before."

"You are enough to make any horse talk," he answered; "but I suppose I *am* an exception."

"I think you must be," said I. "The only horses I ever heard of as possessing the gift of speech were the Houyhnhnms."

"How do you know I am not one of them?" he replied.

"If you are, you will understand that I took the liberty of mounting you under a very pardonable mistake; and if you will have the goodness to stand still, I will no longer detain you."

"Not so fast," said he: "I want to know something more about you first. I should say now you were a man with plenty of oats."

"I am—well off," I said. How I wished I was!

"I have long been looking out for a proprietor who

would not overwork me : now, of course, I don't know, but you scarcely strike me as a *hard* rider."

" I do not think I could be fairly accused of that," I answered, with all the consciousness of innocence.

" Just so—then buy me."

" No," I gasped : " after the extremely candid opinion you were good enough to express of my riding, I'm surprised that you should even suggest such a thing."

" Oh, I will put up with that—you will suit me well enough, I dare say."

" You must excuse me. I prefer to keep my spare cash for worthier objects ; and, with your permission, I will spend the remainder of the afternoon on foot."

" You will do nothing of the sort," said he.

" If you won't stop, and let me get off properly," I said, with firmness, " I shall *roll* off." There were some promenaders within easy hail ; but how was I to word a call for help, how explain such a dilemma as mine ?

" You will only reduce me to the painful necessity of rolling on you," he replied. " You must see that you are to a certain extent in my power. Suppose it occurred to me to leap those rails and take you into the Serpentine, or to run away and upset a mounted policeman with you—do you think you could offer much opposition ? "

I could not honestly assert that I did. " You were introduced to me," I said reproachfully, " as a *kind* horse ! "

" And so I am—apart from matters of business. Come, will you buy, or be bolted with ? I hate indecision ! "

" Buy ! " I said, with commercial promptness. " If you will take me back, I will arrange about it at once."

It is needless to say that my own idea was to get safely off his back : after which, neither honour nor law could require me to execute a contract extorted from me by threats. But, as we were going down the mews, he said reflectively, " I've been thinking—it will be better for all parties, if you make your offer to my proprietor *before* you dismount." I was too vexed to speak : this animal's

THE TALKING HORSE

infernal intelligence had foreseen my manoeuvre—he meant to foil it, if he could.

And then we clattered in under the glass-roofed yard of the livery stables ; and the job-master, who was alone there, cast his eyes up at the sickly-faced clock, as if he were comparing its pallor with my own. " Why, you *are* home early, sir," he said. " You didn't find the 'orse too much for you, did you ? " He said this without any suspicion of the real truth ; and, indeed, I may say, once for all, that this weird horse—Houyhnhnm, or whatever else he might be—admitted no one but myself into the secret of his marvellous gifts, and in all his conversations with me, managed (though how, I cannot pretend to say) to avoid being overheard.

" Oh, dear no," I protested, " he carried me admirably—admirably ! " and I made an attempt to slip off.

No such thing : Brutus instantly jogged my memory, and me, by the slightest suggestion of a " buck."

" He's a grand 'orse, sir, isn't he ? " said the job-master complacently.

" M—magnificent! " I agreed, with a jerk. " Will you go to his head, please ? "

But the horse backed into the centre of the yard, where he plunged with a quiet obstinacy. " I like him so much," I called out, as I clung to the saddle, " that I want to know if you're at all inclined to part with him ? " Here Brutus became calm and attentive.

" Would you be inclined to make me a offer for him, sir ? "

" Yes," I said faintly. " About how much would he be ? "

" You step into my orfice here, sir," said he, " and we'll talk it over."

I should have been only too willing, for there was no room there for the horse, but the suspicious animal would not hear of it : he began to revolve immediately.

" Let us settle it now—here," I said, " I can't wait."

The job-master stroked away a grin. No doubt there was something unbusinesslike and unpractical in such

THE TALKING HORSE

precipitation, especially as combined with my appearance at the time.

" Well, you 'ave took a voilent fancy to the 'orse and no mistake, sir," he remarked.

" I never crossed a handsomer creature," I said ; which was hardly a prudent remark for an intending purchaser, but then, there was the animal himself to be conciliated.

" I don't know, really, as I can do without him just at this time of year," said the man. " I'm under 'orsed as it is for the work I've got to do."

A sweet relief stole over me : I had done all that could be expected of me. " I'm very sorry to hear that/' I said, preparing to dismount. " That is a disappointment ; but if you can't there's an end of it."

" Don't you be afraid," said Brutus, " *he'll* sell me readily enough : make him an offer, quick ! "

" I'll give you thirty guineas for him, come ! " I said, knowing well enough that he would not take twice the money.

" I thought a gentleman like you would have had more insight into the value of a 'orse," he said : " why, his action alone is worth that, sir."

" You couldn't let me have the action without the horse, I suppose ? " I said, and I must have intended some joke.

It is unnecessary to prolong a painful scene. Brutus ran me up steadily from sum to sum, until his owner said at last: " Well, we won't 'aggie, sir, call it a hundred."

I had to call it a hundred, and what is more, it was a hundred. I took him without a warranty, without even a veterinary opinion. I could have been induced to take my purchase away then and there, as if I had been buying a canary, so unaccustomed was I to transactions of this kind, and I am afraid the job-master considered me little better than a fool.

So I found myself the involuntary possessor of a Houyhnhnm, or something even worse, and I walked back to my rooms in Park Street in a state of stupor. What was I to do with him ? To ride an animal so brutally

THE TALKING HORSE

plainspoken would be a continual penance ; and yet, I should have to keep him, for I knew he was cunning enough to outwit any attempt to dispose of him. And to this, Love and Ambition had led me ! I could not, after all I had said, approach Diana with any confidence as a mere pedestrian : the fact that I was in possession of a healthy horse which I never rode, would be sure to leak out in time, and how was I to account for it ? I could see no way, and I groaned under an embarrassment which I dared not confide to the friendliest ear. I hated the monster that had saddled himself upon me, and looked in vain for any mode of escape.

I had to provide Brutus with stabling in another part of the town, for he proved exceedingly difficult to please : he found fault with everything, and I only wonder he did not demand that his stable should be fitted up with blue china and mezzotints. In his new quarters I left him for some days to his own devices : a course which I was glad to find, on visiting him again, had considerably reduced his arrogance. He wanted to go in the Row and see the other horses, and it did not at all meet his views to be exercised there by a stableman at unfashionable hours. So he proposed a compromise. If I would only consent to mount him, he engaged to treat me with forbearance, and pointed out that he could give me, as he expressed it, various " tips " which would improve my seat. I was not blind to the advantages of such an arrangement. It is not everyone who secures a riding-master in the person of his own horse ; the horse is essentially a generous animal, and I felt that I might trust to Brutus's honour. And to do him justice, he observed the compact with strict good faith. Some of his " tips," it is true, very nearly tipped me off, but their result was to bring us closer together ; our relations were less strained ; it seemed to me that I gained more mastery over him every day, and was less stiff afterwards.

But I was not allowed to enjoy this illusion long. One day when I innocently asked him if he found my

hands improving, he turned upon me his off sardonic eye. " You'll *never* improve, old sack-of-beans " (for he had come to address me with a freedom I burned to resent); " hands ! why, you're sawing my mouth off all the time. And your feet * home,' and tickling me under my shoulders at every stride—why, I'm half ashamed to be seen about with you."

I was deeply hurt. " I will spare you for the future," I said coldly ; " this is my last appearance."

" Nonsense," he said, " you needn't show temper over it. Surely, if I can put up with it, *you* can ! But we will make a new compact." (I never knew such a beast as he was for bargains !) " You only worry me by interfering with the reins. Let 'em out, and leave everything to me. Just mention from time to time where you want to go, and I'll attend to it,—if I've nothing better to do."

I felt that such an understanding was destructive of all dignity, subverting, as it did, the natural relations between horse and rider ; but I had hardly any self-respect left, and I consented, since I saw no way of refusing. And on the whole, I cannot say, even now, that I had any grave reason for finding fault with the use Brutus made of my concessions ; he showed more tact than I could have expected in disguising the merely nominal nature of my authority.

I had only one serious complaint against him, which was that he had a habit of breaking suddenly away, with a merely formal apology, to exchange equine civilities with some cob or mare, to whose owner I was a perfect stranger, thus driving me to invent the most desperate excuses to cover my seeming intrusion : but I managed to account for it in various ways, and even made a few acquaintances in this irregular and involuntary manner. I could have wished he had been a less susceptible animal, for, though his flirtations were, merely Platonic, it is rather humiliating to have to play " gooseberry " to one's own horse—a part which I was constantly being caUgi upon to perform !

THE TALKING HORSE

As it happened, Diana was away in Paris that Easter, and we had not met since my appearance in the Row ; but I knew she would be in town again shortly, and with consummate diplomacy I began to excite Brutus's curiosity by sundry careless, half-slighting allusions to Miss Chetwynd's little mare, Wild Rose. " She's too frisky for my taste," I said, " but she's been a good deal admired, though I dare say you wouldn't be particularly struck by her."

So that, on the first afternoon of Diana's return to the Row, I found it easy, under cover of giving Brutus an opportunity of forming an opinion, to prevail on him to carry me to her side. Diana, who was with a certain Lady Verney, her chaperon, welcomed me with a charming smile.

" I had no idea you could ride so well," she said, " you manage that beautiful horse of yours so very easily—with such light hands, too."

This was not irony, for I could now give my whole mind to my seat; and, as I never interfered at all with the steering apparatus, my hands must have seemed the perfection of lightness.

" He wants delicate handling," I answered carelessly, " but he goes very well with *me*"

" I wish you would let me try his paces some morning, Pulvertoft," struck in a Colonel Cockshott, who was riding with them, and whom I knew slightly : " I've a notion he would go better on the curb."

" I shall be very happy," I began, when, just in time, I noticed a warning depression in Brutus's ears. The Colonel rode about sixteen stone, and with spurs ! " I mean," I added hastily, " I should have been—only, to tell you the truth, I couldn't conscientiously trust anyone on him but myself."

" My dear fellow ! " said the Colonel, who I could see was offended, " I've not met many horses in my time that I couldn't get upon terms with."

" I think Mr. Pulvertoft is *quite* right," said Diana.

THE TALKING HORSE

" When a horse gets accustomed to one he does so resent a strange hand : it spoils his temper for days. I never will lend Wild Rose to anybody for that very reason ! "

The Colonel fell back in the rear in a decided sulk. " Poor dear Colonel Cockshott ! " said Diana, " he is so proud of his riding, but I think he dragoons a horse. I don't call that *riding*, do you ? "

" Well—hardly," I agreed, with easy disparagement. " I never believe in ruling a horse by fear."

" I suppose you are very fond of yours ? " she said.

" Fond is not the word ! " I exclaimed—and it certainly was not.

" I am not sure that what I said about lending Wild Rose would apply to *you*," she said. " I think you would be gentle with her."

I was certain that I should treat her with all consideration ; but as I doubted whether she would wholly reciprocate it, I said with much presence of mind, that I should regard riding her as akin to profanation.

As Brutus and I were going home, he observed that it was a good thing I had not agreed to lend him to the Colonel.

" Yes," I said, determined to improve the occasion, " you might not have found him as considerate as—well, as some people ! "

" I meant it was a good thing for *you* ! " he hinted darkly, and I did not care to ask for an explanation. " What did you mean," he resumed, " by saying that I should not admire Wild Rose ? Why, she is charming—charming ! "

" In that case," I said, " I don't mind riding with her mistress occasionally—to oblige you."

" You don't mind ! " he said ; " you will *have* to, my boy,—and every afternoon ! "

I suppressed a chuckle : after all, man is the nobler animal. I could manage a horse—in my own way. My little *ruse* had succeeded : I should have no more forced introductions to mystified strangers.

THE TALKING HORSE

And now for some weeks my life passed in a happy dream. I only lived for those hours in the Row, where Brutus turned as naturally to Wild Rose as the sunflower to the sun, and Diana and I grew more intimate every day. Happiness and security made me almost witty. I was merciless in my raillery of the eccentric exhibitions of horsemanship which were to be met with, and Diana was provoked by my comments to the sweetest silvery laughter. As for Colonel Cockshott, whom I had once suspected of a desire to be my rival, he had long become a "negligible quantity"; and if I delayed in asking Diana to trust me with her sweet self, it was only because I found an epicurean pleasure in prolonging a suspense that was so little uncertain.

And then, without warning, my riding was interrupted for a while. Brutus was discovered, much to his annoyance, to have a saddle-rack, and was even so unjust as to lay the blame on me, though, for my own part, I thought it a mark of apt, though tardy, retribution. I was not disposed to tempt Fortune upon any other mount, but I could not keep away from the Row, nevertheless, and appeared there on foot. I saw Diana riding with the Colonel, who seemed to think his opportunity had come at last; but whenever she passed the railings on which I leaned, she would raise her eyebrows and draw her mouth down into a little curve of resigned boredom, which completely reassured me. Still, I was very glad when Brutus was well again, and we were cantering down the Row once more, both in the highest spirits.

"I never heard the horses here *whinny* so much as they do this season," I said, by way of making conversation. "Can you account for it at all?" For he sometimes gave me pieces of information which enabled me to impress Diana afterwards by my intimate knowledge of horses.

"Whinnying?" he said. "They're *laughing*, that's what they're doing—and no wonder!"

"Oh!" said I, "and what's the joke?"

"Why, *you* are!" he replied. "You don't suppose

THE TALKING HORSE

you take *them* in, do you? They know all about you, bless your heart!"

"Oh, do they?" I said blankly. This brute took a positive pleasure, I believe, in reducing my self-esteem.

"I dare say it has got about through Wild Rose," he continued. "She was immensely tickled when I told her. I'm afraid she must have been feeling rather dull all these days, by the by."

I felt an unworthy impulse to take his conceit down as he had lowered mine.

"Not so very, I think," I said. "She seemed to me to find that brown hunter of Colonel Cockshott's a very agreeable substitute."

Late as it is for reparation, I must acknowledge with shame that in uttering this insinuation, I did that poor little mare (for whom I entertained the highest respect) a shameful injustice; and I should like to state here, in the most solemn and emphatic manner, my sincere belief that, from first to last, she conducted herself in a manner that should have shielded her from all calumny.

It was only a mean desire to retaliate, a petty and ignoble spite, that prompted me thus to poison Brutus's confidence, and I regretted the words as soon as I had uttered them.

"That beast!" he said, starting as if I had touched him with a whip—a thing I never used—"why, he hasn't two ideas in his great fiddle-head. The only sort of officer *he* ought to carry is a Salvationist!"

"I grant he has not your personal advantages and charm of manner," I said. "No doubt I was wrong to say anything about it."

"No," he said, "you—you have done me a service," and he relapsed into a sombre silence.

I was riding with Diana as usual, and was about to express my delight at being able to resume our companionship, when her mare drew slightly ahead and lashed out suddenly, catching me on the left leg, and causing intense agony for the moment,

THE TALKING HORSE

Diana showed the sweetest concern, imploring me to go home in a cab at once, while her groom took charge of Brutus. I declined the cab ; but, as my leg was really painful, and Brutus was showing an impatience I dared not disregard, I had to leave her side.

On our way home, Brutus said moodily, " It is all over between us—you saw that ? "

" I felt it ! " I replied. " She nearly broke my leg."

" It was intended for me," he said. " It was her way of signifying that we had better be strangers for the future. I taxed her with her faithlessness ; she denied it, of course—every mare does ; we had an explanation, and everything is at an end ! "

I did not ride him again for some days, and when I did, I found him steeped in Byronic gloom. He even wanted at first to keep entirely on the Bayswater side of the Park, though I succeeded in arguing him out of such weakness. " Be a horse ! " I said. " Show her you don't care. You only flatter her by betraying your feelings."

This was a subtlety that had evidently not occurred to him, but he was intelligent enough to feel the force of what I said. " You are right," he admitted ; " you are not quite a fool in some respects. She shall see how little I care ! "

Naturally, after this, I expected to accompany Diana as usual, and it was a bitter disappointment to me to find that Brutus would not hear of doing so. He had an old acquaintance in the Park, a dapple-grey, who, probably from some early disappointment, was a confirmed cynic, and whose society he thought would be congenial just then. The grey was ridden regularly by a certain Miss Gittens, whose appearance as she titupped laboriously up and down had often furnished Diana and myself with amusement.

And now, in spite of all my efforts, Brutus made straight to the grey. I was not in such difficulties as might have been expected, for I happened to know Miss Gittens slightly, as a lady no longer in the bloom of youth, who

still retained a wiry form of girlishness. Though rather disliking her than not, I found it necessary just then to throw some slight effusion into my greeting. She, not unnaturally perhaps, was flattered by my preference, and begged me to give her a little instruction in riding, which—Heaven forgive me for it!—I took upon myself to do.

Even now I scarcely see how I could have acted otherwise : I could not leave her side until Brutus had exhausted the pleasures of cynicism with his grey friend, and the time had to be filled up somehow. But, oh, the torture of seeing Diana at a distance, and knowing that only a miserable misunderstanding between our respective steeds kept us apart, feeling constrained even to avoid looking in her direction, lest she should summon me to her side !

One day, as I was riding with Miss Gittens, she glanced coyly at me over her sharp right shoulder, and said, " Do you know, only such a little while ago, I never even dreamed that we should ever become as intimate as we are now ; it seems almost incredible, does it not ? "

" You must not say so," I replied. " Surely there is nothing singular in my helping you a little with your riding ? " Though it struck me that it would have been very singular if I had.

" Perhaps not singular," she murmured, looking modestly down her nose ; " but will you think me very unmaidenly if I confess that, to me, those lessons have developed a dawning danger ? "

" You are perfectly safe on the grey," I said.

" I — I was not thinking of the grey," she returned. " Dear Mr. Pulvertoft, I must speak frankly—a girl has so many things to consider, and I am afraid you have made me forget how wrongly and thoughtlessly I have been behaving of late. I cannot help suspecting that you must have some motive in seeking my society in so—so marked a manner."

" Miss Gittens," said I, " I can disguise nothing : I have."

THE TALKING HORSE

" And you have not been merely amusing yourself all this time ? "

" Before Heaven," I cried with fervour, " I have *not* ! "

" You're not one of those false men who give their bridle-reins a shake, and ride off with ' Adieu for evermore ! '—tell me you are not ? "

I might shake *my* bridle-reins till I was tired and nothing would come of it unless Brutus was in the humour to depart; so that I was able to assure her with truth that I was not at all that kind of person.

" Then why not let your heart speak ? "

" There is such a thing," I said gloomily, " as a heart that is gagged."

" Can no word, no hint of mine loosen the gag ? " she wished to know. " What, you are silent still ? Then, Mr. Pulvertoft, though I may seem harsh and cruel in saying it, our pleasant intercourse must end—we must ride together no more ! "

No more ? What would Brutus say to that ? I was horrified. " Miss Gittens," I said in great agitation, " I entreat you to unsay those words. I — I am afraid I could not undertake to accept such a dismissal. Surely, after that, you will not insist ! "

She sighed. " I am a weak, foolish girl," she said ; " you are only too able to overcome my judgment. Then, Mr. Pulvertoft, look happy again—I relent. You may stay if you will ! "

You must believe that I felt thoroughly ashamed of myself, for I could not be blind to the encouragement which, though I sought to confine my words to strict truth, I was innocently affording. But, with a horse like mine, what was a man to do ? What would you have done yourself ? As soon as was prudent, I hinted to Brutus that his confidences had lasted long enough ; and as he trotted away with me, he remarked, " I thought you were never going." Was he weary of the grey already ? My heart leaped. " Brutus," I said thickly, " are you strong enough to bear a great joy ? "

THE TALKING HORSE

"Speak out," he said, "and do try to keep those heels out of my ribs."

"I cannot see you suffer," I told him, with a sense of my own hypocrisy all the time. "I must tell you—circumstances have come to my knowledge which lead me to believe that we have both judged Wild Rose too hastily. I am sure that her heart is yours still. She is only longing to tell you that she has never really swerved from her allegiance."

"It is too late now," he said, and the back of his head looked inflexibly obstinate; "we have kept apart too long."

"No," I said, "listen. I take more interest in you than you are, perhaps, aware of, and I have thought of a little plan for bringing you together again. What if I find an opportunity to see the lady she belongs to—we have not met lately, as you know, and I do not pretend that I desire a renewal of our intimacy——"

"You like the one on the grey best; I saw that long ago," he said; and I left him in his error.

"In any case, for your sake, I will sacrifice myself," I said magnanimously. "I will begin to-morrow. Come, you will not let your lives be wrecked by a foolish lovers' quarrel?"

He made a little half-hearted opposition, but finally, as I knew he would, consented. I had gained my point: I was free from Miss Gittens at last!

That evening I met Diana in the hall of a house in Eaton Square. She was going downstairs as I was making my way to the ball-room, and greeted me with a rather cool little nod.

"You have quite deserted me lately," she said, smiling, but I could read the reproach in her eyes, "you never ride with us now."

My throat was swelling with passionate eloquence—and I could not get any of it out.

"No, I never do," was all my stupid tongue could find to say.

THE TALKING HORSE

" You have discovered a more congenial companion," said cruel Diana.

" Miss Chetwynd," I said eagerly, " you don't know how I have been wishing——! Will you let me ride with you to-morrow, as—as you used to do ? "

" You are quite sure you won't be afraid of my naughty Wild Rose ? " she said. " I have given her such a scolding, that I think she is thoroughly ashamed of herself."

" You thought it was *that* that kept me!" I cried. " Oh, if I could tell you ! "

She smiled : she was my dear, friendly Diana again.

" You shall tell me all about it to-morrow," she said. " You will not have another opportunity, because we are going to Aix on Friday. And now, good-night. I am stopping the way, and the linkman is getting quite excited over it."

She passed on, and the carriage rolled away with her, and I was too happy to mind very much—had she not forgiven me ? Should we not meet to-morrow ? I should have two whole hours to declare myself in, and this time I would dally with Fortune no longer.

How excited I was the following day : how fearful, when the morning broke grey and lowering : how grateful, when the benignant sun shone out later, and promised a brilliant afternoon : how careful I dressed, and what a price I paid for the flower for my buttonhole !

So we cantered on to the Row, as goodly a couple (if I may be pardoned this retrospective vanity) as any there ; and by and by, I saw, with the quick eye of a lover, Diana's willowy form in the distance. She was not alone, but I knew that the Colonel would soon have to yield his place to me.

As soon as she saw me, she urged her mare to a trot, and came towards me with the loveliest faint blush and dawning smile of welcome, when, all at once, Brutus came to a dead stop, which nearly threw me on his neck, and stood quivering in every limb*

THE TALKING HORSE

" Do you see that ? " he said hoarsely. " And I was about to forgive her ! "

I saw : my insinuation, baseless enough at the beginning, was now but too well justified. Colonel Cockshott was on his raw-boned brown hunter, and even my brief acquaintance with horses enabled me to see that Wild Rose no longer regarded him with her former indifference.

Diana and the Colonel had reigned up and seemed waiting for me—would Brutus never move ? " Show your pride," I said in an agonised whisper, " Treat her with the contempt she deserves ! "

" I will," he said between his bit and clenched teeth.

And then Miss Gittens came bumping by on the grey, and, before I could interfere, my Houyhnhnm was off like a shot in pursuit. I saw Diana's sweet, surprised face : I heard the Colonel's jarring laugh as I passed, and I — I could only bow in mortified appeal, and long for a gulf to leap into like Curtius !

I don't know what I said to Miss Gittens. I believe I made myself recklessly amiable, and I remember she lingered over parting in a horrible emotional manner. I was too miserable to mind : all the time I was seeing Diana's astonished eyes, hearing Colonel Cockshott's heartless laugh. Brutus made a kind of explanation on our way home : " You meant well," he said, " but you see you were wrong. Your proposed sacrifice, for which I am just as grateful to you as if it had been effected, was useless. All I could do in return was to take you where your true inclination lay. I, too, can be unselfish."

I was too dejected to curse his unselfishness. I did not even trouble myself to explain what it had probably cost me. I only felt drearily that I had had my last ride, I had had enough horsemanship for ever !

That evening I went to the theatre, I wanted to deaden thought for the moment; and during one of the intervals I saw Lady Verney in the stalls, and went up to speak to her. " Your niece is not with you ? " I said ;

THE TALKING HORSE

" I thought I should have had a chance of—of saying goodbye to her before she left for the continent."

I had a lingering hope that she might ask me to lunch, that I might have one more opportunity of explaining.

" Oh," said Lady Verney, " but that is all changed ; we are not going—at least, not yet."

" Not going ! " I cried, incredulous for very joy.

" No, it is all very sudden ; but,—well, you are almost like an old friend, and you are sure to hear it sooner or later. I only knew myself this afternoon, when she came in from her ride. Colonel Cockshott has proposed and she has accepted him. We're so pleased about it. Wasn't dear Mrs.——delightful in that last act ? I positively saw real tears on her face ! "

If I had waited much longer she would have seen a similar display of realism on mine. But I went back and sat the interval out, and listened critically to the classical selection of chamber-music from the orchestra, and saw the rest of the play, though I have no notion how it ended.

All that night my heart was slowly consumed by a dull rage that grew with every sleepless hour ; but the object of my resentment was not Diana. She had only done what as a woman she was amply justified in doing after the pointed slight I had apparently inflicted upon her. Her punishment was sufficient already, for, of course, I guessed that she had only accepted the Colonel under the first intolerable sting of desertion. No : I reserved all my wrath for Brutus, who had betrayed me at the moment of triumph. I planned revenge. Cost what it might I would ride him once more. In the eyes of the law I was his master. I would exercise my legal rights to the full.

The afternoon came at last. I was in a white heat of anger, though as I ascended to the saddle there were bystanders who put a more uncharitable construction upon my complexion.

Brutus cast an uneasy eye at my heels as we started : " What are those things you've got on ? " he inquired.

THE TALKING HORSE

"Spurs," I replied curtly.

"You shouldn't wear them till you have learnt to turn your toes in," he said. "And a whip, too ! May I ask what that is for ?"

"We will discuss that presently," I said very coldly ; for I did not want to have a scene with my horse in the street.

When we came round by the statue of Achilles and on to the Ride, I shortened my reins, and got a better hold of the whip, while I found that, from some cause I cannot explain, the roof of my mouth grew uncomfortably dry.

"I shall be glad of a little quiet talk with you, if you've no objection," I began.

"I am quite at your disposal," he said, champing his bit with a touch of irony.

"First, let me tell you," I said, "that I have lost my only love for ever."

"Well," he retorted flippantly, "you won't die of it. So have I. We must endeavour to console one another !"

I still maintained a deadly calm. "You seem unaware that you are the sole cause of my calamity," I said. "Had you only consented to face Wild Rose yesterday, I should have been a happy man by this time !"

"How was I to know that, when you let me think all your affections were given to the elderly thing who is trotted out by my friend the grey ?"

"We won't argue, please," I said hastily. "It is enough that your infernal egotism and self-will have ruined my happiness. I have allowed you to usurp the rule, to reverse our natural positions. I shall do so no more. I intend to teach you a lesson you will never forget."

For a horse, he certainly had a keen sense of humour. I thought the girths would have snapped.

"And when do you intend to begin ?" he asked, as soon as he could speak.

I looked in front of me : there were Diana and her accepted lover riding towards us ; and so natural is di-

THE TALKING HORSE

simulation, even to the sweetest and best women, that no one would have suspected from her radiant face that her gaiety covered an aching heart.

" I intend to begin *now*," I said. " Monster, demon, whatever you are that have held me in thrall so long, I have broken my chains ! I have been a coward long enough. You may kill me if you like. I rather hope you will; but first I mean to pay you back some of the humiliation with which you have loaded me. I intend to thrash you as long as I remain in the saddle."

I have been told by eye-witnesses that the chastisement was of brief duration, but while it lasted, I flatter myself, it was severe. I laid into him with a stout whip, of whose effectiveness I had assured myself by experiments upon my own legs. I dug my borrowed spurs into his flanks. I jerked his mouth. I dare say he was almost as much surprised as pained. But he *was* pained !

I was about to continue my practical rebuke, when my victim suddenly evaded my grasp ; and for one vivid second I seemed to be gazing upon a bird's-eye view of his back ; and then there was a crash, and I lay, buzzing like a bee, in an iridescent fog, and each colour meant a different pain, and they faded at last into darkness, and I remember no more.

" It was weeks," concluded Mr. Pulvertoft, " before the darkness lifted and revealed me to myself as a strapped and bandaged invalid. But—and this is perhaps the most curious part of my narrative—almost the first sounds that reached my ears were those of wedding bells ; and I knew, without requiring to be told, that they were ringing for Diana's marriage with the Colonel. *That* showed there wasn't much the matter with me, didn't it ? Why, I can hear them everywhere now. I don't think she ought to have had them rung at Sandown though : it was just a little ostentatious, so long after the ceremony ; don't you think so ? "

" Yes—yes," I said ; " but you never told me what became of the horse."

THE TALKING HORSE

" Ah ! the horse—yes. I am looking for him. I'm not so angry with him as I was, and I don't like to ask too many questions at the stables, for fear they may tell me one day that they had to shoot him while I was so ill. You knew I was ill, I dare say ? " he broke off: " there were bulletins about me in the papers. Look here."

He handed me a cutting on which I read :

" THE RECENT ACCIDENT IN ROTTEN ROW.—There is no change as yet in Mr. Pulvertoft's condition. The unfortunate gentleman is still lying unconscious at his rooms in Park Street ; and his medical attendants fear that, even if he recovers his physical strength, the brain will be permanently injured."

" But that was all nonsense ! " said Mr. Pulvertoft, with a little nervous laugh, " it wasn't injured a bit, or how could I remember everything so clearly as I do, you know ? "

And this was an argument that was, of course, unanswerable.

2. *A Matter of Taste*

PART I

IT is a little singular that, upon an engagement becoming known and being discussed by the friends and acquaintances of the persons principally concerned, by far the most usual tone of comment should be a sorrowing wonder. That particular alliance is generally the very last that anybody ever expected. " What made him choose *her*, of all people," and " What on earth she can see in Aim," are declared insoluble problems. It is confidently predicted that the engagement will never come to anything, or that, if such a marriage ever does take place, it is most unlikely to prove a success.

Sometimes, in the case of female friends, this tone is even perceptible under their warmest felicitations,

THE TALKING HORSE

and through the smiling mask of compliment shine eyes moist with the most irritating quality of compassion. " So glad ! so delighted ! But why, *why* didn't you consult *me*?"—this complicated expression might be rendered : " I could have saved you from this—I was so pleased to hear of it ! "

And yet, in the majority of cases, these unions are not found to turn out so very badly after all, and the misguided couple seem really to have gauged their own hearts and their possibilities of happiness together more accurately than the most clear-sighted of their acquaintances.

The announcement that Ella Hylton had accepted George Chapman provoked the customary sensation and surprise in their respective sets, and perhaps with rather more justification than usual.

Miss Hylton had undeniable beauty of a spiritual and rather *exalte* type, and was generally understood to be highly cultivated. She had spent a year at Somerville, though she had gone down without trying for a place in either " Mods." or " Greats," thereby preserving, if not increasing, her reputation for superiority. She had lived all her life among cultured people ; she was devoted to music and regularly attended the Richter Concerts, though she could seldom be induced to play in public ; she had a feeling for art, though she neither painted nor drew ; a love of literature strong enough to deter her from all amateur efforts in that direction. In art, music and literature she was impatient of mediocrity ; and, while she was as fond as most girls of the pleasures which upper middle-class society can offer, she revered intellect, and preferred the conversation of the plainest celebrity to the platitudes of the mere dancing-man, no matter how handsome of feature and perfect of step he might be.

George Chapman was certainly not a mere dancing-man, his waltzing being rather conscientious than dream-like, and he was only tolerably good-looking. On the

other hand, he was not celebrated in any way, and even his mother and sisters had never considered him brilliant. He had been educated at Rugby and Trinity, Cambridge, where he rowed a fairly good oar, on principle, and took a middle second in the Moral Science Tripos. Now he was in a solicitor's office, where he was receiving a good salary, and was valued as a steady, sensible young fellow, who could be thoroughly depended upon. He was fond of his profession, and had acquired a considerable knowledge of its details ; apart from it he had no very decided tastes ; he lived a quiet, regular life, and dined out and went to dances in moderation ; his manner, though he was nearly twenty-six, was still rather boyishly blunt.

What there was in him that had found favour in Ella Hylton's fastidious eyes the narrator is not rash enough to attempt to particularise. But it may be suggested that the most unlikely people may possess their fairy rose and ring which render them irresistible to at least one heart, if they only have faith to believe in and luck to perceive their power.

So, early in the year, George had plucked up courage to propose to Miss Hylton, after meeting and secretly adoring her for some months past, and she, to the general astonishment, had accepted him.

He had a private income—not a large one—of his own, and had saved out of it. She was entitled under her grandmother's will to a sum which made her an heiress in a modest way, and thus there was no reason why the engagement should be a long one, and, though no date had been definitely fixed for the marriage, it was understood that it should take place at some time before the end of the summer.

Soon after the engagement, however, an invalid aunt with whom Ella had always been a great favourite was ordered to the south of France, and implored her to go with her ; which Ella, who had a real affection for her relative, as well as a strong sense of duty, had consented to do.

THE TALKING HORSE

This was a misfortune in one of two ways : it either curtailed that most necessary and most delightful period during which *fiances* discover one another's idiosyncrasies and weaknesses, or it made it necessary to postpone the marriage.

George naturally preferred the former, as the more endurable evil; but Ella's letters from abroad began to hint more and more plainly at delay. Her aunt might remain on the Continent all the summer, and she could not possibly leave her ; there was so much to be done after her return that could not be done in a hurry ; they had not even begun to furnish the pretty little house on Campden Hill that was to be their new home—it would be better to wait till November, or even later.

The mere idea was alarming to George, and he remonstrated as far as he dared ; but Ella remained firm, and he grew desperate.

He might have spared himself the trouble. About the middle of June Ella's aunt—who, of course, had had to leave the Riviera—grew tired of travelling, and Ella, to George's intense satisfaction, returned to her mother's house in Linden Gardens, Notting Hill.

And now, when our story' opens, George, who had managed to get away from office-work two hours before his usual time, was hurrying towards Linden Gardens as fast as a hansom could take him, to see his betrothed for the first time after their long separation.

He was eager, naturally, and a little nervous. Would Ella still persist in her wish for delay ? or would he be able to convince her that there were no obstacles in the way ? He felt he had strong arguments on his side, if only—and here was the real seat of his anxiety—if only her objections were not raised from some other motive ! She might have been trying to prepare him for a final rupture, and then—" Well," he concluded, with his customary good sense, " no use meeting trouble halfway—in five minutes I shall know for certain ! "

. . . .

A MATTER OF TASTE

At the same moment Mrs. Hylton and her daughter Flossie, a vivacious girl in the transitionary sixteen-year-old stage, were in the drawing-room at Linden Gardens. It was the ordinary double drawing-room of a London house, but everything in it was beautiful and harmonious. The eye was vaguely rested by the delicate and subdued colour of walls and hangings ; cabinets, antique Persian pottery, rare bits of china, all occupied the precise place in which their decorative value was most felt ; a room, in short, of exceptional individuality and distinction.

Flossie was standing at the window, from which a glimpse could just be caught of fresh green foliage and the lodge-gates, with the bustle of the traffic in the High Street beyond ; Mrs. Hylton was writing at a Flemish bureau in the corner.

" I suppose," said Flossie meditatively, as she fingered a piece of old stained glass that was hanging in the window, " we shall have George here this afternoon."

Mrs. Hylton raised her head. She had a striking face, tinted a clear olive, with a high wave of silver hair crowning the forehead ; her eyebrows were dark, and so were the brilliant eyes ; the nose was aquiline, and the thin, well-cut mouth a little hard. She was a woman who had been much admired in her time, and who still retained a certain attraction, though some were apt to find her somewhat cold and unsympathetic. Her daughter Ella, for example, was always secretly a little in awe of her mother, who, however, had no terrors for audacious, outspoken Flossie.

" If he comes, Flossie, he will be very welcome," she said, " but I hardly expect him yet. George is not likely to neglect his duties, even for Ella."

Flossie pursed her mouth rather scornfully : " Oh, George is immaculate ! " she murmured.

" If he was, it would hardly be a reproach," said her mother, catching the word ; " but, at all events, George

THE TALKING HORSE

has thoroughly good principles, and is sure to succeed in the world. I have every reason to be pleased/

" Every reason ?—ah ! but *are* you pleased ? Mother, dear, you know he's as dull as dull ! "

" Ella does not find him so—and, Flossie, I don't like to hear you say such things, even in Ella's absence."

" Oh, I never abuse him to Ella ; it wouldn't be any use ; she's firmly convinced that he's perfection—at least she was before she went away."

" Why ? do you mean that she has altered ?—Have you seen any signs of it, Flossie ? "

Mrs. Hylton made this inquiry sharply, but not as if such a circumstance would be altogether displeasing to her.

" Oh, no ; only she hasn't seen him for so long, you know. Perhaps, when she comes to look at him with fresh eyes, she'll notice things more. Ah, here *is* George, just getting out of a hansom—so he has played truant for once ! There's one thing I *do* think Ella might do—persuade him to shave off some of those straggly whiskers. I wonder why he never seems to get a hat or anything else like other people's ! "

Presently George was announced. He was slightly above middle height, broad-shouldered and fresh-coloured ; the obnoxious whiskers did indeed cover more of his cheeks than modern fashion prescribes for men of his age ; and had evidently never known a razor ; he wore a turn-down collar and a necktie of a rather crude red ; his clothes were neat and well brushed, but not remarkable for their cut.

" Well, my dear George," said Mrs. Hylton. " we have seen very little of you while Ella has been away."

" I know," he said awkwardly ; " I've had a lot of things to look after in one way and another."

" What ? after your work at the office was over ! " cried Flossie incredulously.

" Yes—after that ; it's taken up my time a good deal."

" And so you couldn't spare any to call here—I see ! "

said Flossie. " George," she added, with a sudden diversion, " I wonder you aren't afraid of catching cold *I* How *can* you go about in such absurdly thin boots as those ? "

" These ? " he said, inspecting them doubtfully—they were strong, sensible boots with notched and projecting soles of ponderous thickness—" why, what's the matter with them, Flossie, eh ? Don't you think they're strong enough for walking in ? "

" No, George ; they're the very things for an afternoon dance, and quite a lot of couples could dance in them, you see. But for walking—ah, I'm afraid you sacrifice too much for appearances."

" I don't, really ! " George protested in all good faith ; " now *do* I, Mrs. Hylton ? "

" Flossie is making fun of you, George ; you mustn't mind her impertinence."

" Oh, is that all ? Do you know, I really thought for the moment that she meant they were too small for me ! You like getting a rise out of me, Flossie, don't you ? "

And he laughed with such genuine and good-natured amusement that the young lady felt somehow a little small, and almost ashamed, although it took the form of suppressed irritation. " He really ought not to come here in such things," she said to herself ; " and I don't believe that, even now, he sees what I meant."

Just at this point Ella came in, with the least touch of shyness, perhaps, at meeting him before witnesses after so long an absence ; but she only looked the more charming in consequence, and, demure as her greeting was, her pretty eyes had a sparkle of pleasure that scattered all George Chapman's fears to the winds. Even Flossie felt instinctively that straggly-whiskered, red-necktied, thick-booted George had lost none of his divinity for Ella.

They did not seem to have much to say to one another, notwithstanding ; possibly because Ella was called upon to dispense the tea which had just been brought in.

THE TALKING HORSE

George sat nursing the hat which Flossie found so objectionable, while he balanced a teacup with the anxious eye of a juggler out of practice, and the conversation flagged. At last, under pretence of renewing his tea, most of which he had squandered upon a Persian rug, he crossed to Ella: "I say," he suggested, "don't you think you could come out for a little while? I've such lots to tell you and—and I want you to go somewhere with me."

Mrs. Hylton made no objection, beyond stipulating that Ella must not be allowed to tire herself after her journey, and so, a few minutes later, Miss Hylton came down in her pretty summer hat and light cape, and she and George were allowed to set out.

Once outside the house, he drew a long breath of mingled relief and pleasure: "By Jove, Ella, I am glad to get you back again! I say, how jolly you do look in that hat! Now, do you know where I'm going to take you?"

"It will be quietest in the Gardens," said Ella.

"Ah, but that's not where you're going now," he said with a delicious assumption of authority; "you're coming with me to see a certain house on Campden Hill you may have heard of."

"That will be delightful. I do want to see our dear little house again very much. And, George, we will go carefully over all the rooms, and settle what can be done with each of them. Then we can begin directly; we haven't too much time."

"Perhaps," he said with a conscious laugh/* it won't take so much time as you think."

"Oh, but it *must*—to do properly. And while I've been away I've had some splendid ideas for some of the rooms—I've planned them out so beautifully. You know that delightful little room at the back?—the one I said should be your own den, with the window all festooned with creepers and looking out on the garden—well——?"

" Take my advice" he said, " and don't make any plans till you see it. And as for plans, these furnishing fellows do all that—they don't care to be bothered with plans."

" They will have to carry out ours, though. I shall love settling how it is all to be—it will be such fun."

" You wouldn't call it fun if you knew what it was like, I can tell you."

" But I *do* know. Mother and I rearranged most of the rooms at home only last year—so you see I have some experience. And what experience can *you* have had, if you please ? "

Ella had a mental vision as she spoke of the house in Dawson Place where George lived with his mother and sisters—a house in which furniture and everything else were commonplace and *bourgeois* to the last degree, and where nothing could have been altered since his boyhood ; indeed she had often secretly pitied him for having to live in such surroundings, and admired the filial patience that had made him endure them so long.

" I've had my share, Ella, and I should be very sorry for you to have all the worry and bother I've been through over it ! "

" But when, George ? How ? I don't understand."

" Ah, that's my secret! " he said provokingly ; " and you know, Ella, if we began furnishing now, it would take no end of time, with all these wonderful plans of yours, and—and I couldn't stand having to wait till next November for you—I couldn't do it ! "

" Mother thinks the marriage need not be put off now^r," said Ella simply, " and we shall have six weeks till then ; the house can be quite ready for us by the time we want it."

" Six weeks ! " he said impatiently, " what's six weeks ? You've no idea what these chaps are, Ella ! And then there are all your own things to get, and they would take up most of your time. No, we should have had to put it off, whatever you may say. And that would mean

THE TALKING HORSE

another separation—for, of course, you would go away in August, and I should have to stay in town : the office wouldn't give me my fortnight twice over—honeymoon or no honeymoon !

Ella looked completely puzzled. " But what are you trying to prove *now*, George ? "

" I was only showing you that, even though you have come back earlier, we couldn't possibly have got things ready in time, if I hadn't——" but here he stopped. " No, I want that to be a surprise for you, Ella ; you'll see presently," he added.

Ella's delicate eyebrows contracted. " I like to be prepared for my surprises, please, George. Tell me *now*."

They had turned up one of the quiet streets leading to the hill. They were so near the house that George thought he might abandon further mystery, not to mention that he was only too anxious to reveal his secret.

" Well, then, Ella, if you must have it," he said triumphantly, " the house is very nearly ready *now*—what do you think of that ? "

" Do you mean that—that it is furnished, George ? "

" Papered, painted, decorated, furnished—everything, from top to bottom ! I thought that would surprise you, Ella ! "

" I think," she answered slowly, " you might have told me you were doing it."

" What, before it was all done ? That would have spoilt it all, dear. I should have written, though, if you hadn't been coming home so soon. And now it's finished I must say it looks uncommonly jolly. I'm sure you'll be pleased with it—it looks quite a different place."

She tried to smile : " And did you do it all yourself, George ? "

" Well, no—not exactly. I flatter myself I know how to see that the work's properly done, and all that; but there are some things I don't pretend to be much of a hand at, so I got certain ladies to give me some wrinkles."

Ella felt relieved. She was disappointed, it is true—hurt, even, at having been deprived of any voice in the matter. She had been looking forward so much to carrying out her pet schemes, to enjoying her friends' admiration of the wonders wrought by her artistic invention. And she had never thought of George, somehow, as likely to have any strikingly original ideas on the subject of decoration, although she liked him none the less for that.

But it was something that he had had the good sense to take her mother and Flossie into his confidence : she knew she could trust them to preserve him from any serious mistakes.

" You see," said George, half apologetically, " I would ever so much rather have waited till you came back, only I couldn't tell when that would be. I really couldn't help myself. You're sure you don't mind about it ? If you only knew how I worked over it, rushing about from one place to another, as soon as I could get away from the office, picking up bits of furniture here and there, standing over those beggars of painters and keeping 'em at it, and working out estimates and seeing foremen and managers and all kinds of chaps ! I used to get home dead-tired of an evening ; but I didn't mind that : I felt it was all bringing you nearer to me, darling, and that made everything a pleasure ! "

There was such honest affection in his look and voice ; he had so evidently intended to please her, and had been in such manifest dread of any further separation from her, that she was completely disarmed.

" Dear George," she said gently, " I am so sorry you took all the trouble on yourself ; it was very, very good of you to care so much, and I know I shall be delighted with the house."

" Well," said George, " I'm not much afraid about that, because I expect our tastes are pretty much the same in most things."

They were by this time at the house, and George, after a little fumbling with his as yet unfamiliar latchkey,

THE TALKING HORSE

threw open the door with a flourish and said, " There you are, little woman ! Walk in and you'll see what you shall see ! "

No sooner was Ella inside the hall than her heart sank : " Looks neat and nice, doesn't it ? " said George cheerfully. " You'd almost take that paper for real marble, wouldn't you ? See how well they've done those veins. I like this yellowish colour better than green, don't you ? It looks so cool in summer. That's a good strong hall-lamp—not what you call high art, exactly—but gives a rattling good light, and that's the main thing. Here, I'll light it up for you—confound it ! thejr haven't turned the gas on yet. However, there's too much sunshine for it to show much, if they had. This linoleum is a capital thing : you might scrub as long as you liked and you'd never get *that* pattern out ! "

" No," Ella agreed, with a tragic little smile, " it—it looks as if it would last."

" Last ! I should just think so ! And here's a hat-stand—you could almost swear it was carved wood of some sort, but it's only cast-iron painted ; indestructible, you see ; they told me that was the latest dodge—wonderful how cheaply they turn them out, isn't it ? "

" I thought you said you were helped ? "

" Oh, I didn't want any help *here*—this is only the passage, you know ! "

Yes, it was only the passage—and yet she had been picturing such a charming entrance, with a draped arch, a graceful lamp, a fresh bright paper, a small buffet of genuine old oak, and so on. She suppressed a sigh as she passed on ; after all, so long as the rooms themselves were all right, it did not so very much matter, and she knew that her mother's taste could be trusted.

But on the threshold of the dining-room she stopped aghast. The walls had been distempered a particularly hideous drab ; the curtains were mustard yellow ; the carpet was a dull brown ; the mottled marble mantel-piece, for which she had been intending to substitute

one in walnut wood with tiles, still shone in slabs of petrified brawn ; there was a huge mahogany sideboard of a kind she had only seen in old-fashioned hotels.

" Comfortable, eh ? " remarked George. " Lots of wear in those curtains ! "

Unhappily there was, as Ella was only too well aware. " You did *this* room yourself too, then, George ? " she managed to say, without betraying herself by her voice.

" Yes, I chose everything here. You see, Ella, we shall only use this room for meals."

" Only for meals, yes," she acquiesced with a shudder ; " but—George, surely you said mother had helped you with the rooms ? "

" What ! your mother ? No, Ella ; her notions are rather too grand for me. It was Jessie and Carrie I meant. Just come and see what they've made of my den."

Ella followed. The window—which had commanded such a cheerful outlook into one of the pretty gardens, with a pink thorn, a laburnum-tree or two, and some sycamores which still flourished fresh and fair on Campden Hill—was obscured now by some detestable contrivance in transparent paper imitating stained glass.

" That was the girls' notion," said George, following the direction of her eyes ; " they fixed it all themselves—it was their present to me. Pretty of them to think of it, wasn't it ? I call it an immense improvement, and, you see, it's stuck on with some patent cement varnish, so it can't rub off. You get the effect better if you stand here—*now*, see how well the colours come out in the sun ! "

If only they *would* come out ! But what could she do but stand and admire hypocritically ? Her eyes, in spite of herself, seemed drawn to that bright-hued sham intersected by black lines intended to represent leading ; of the room itself she only saw vaguely that it was not unworthy of the window.

" Nothing to what they've done with the drawing-room ! " said innocent George, beaming ; " come along, darling, you'll scarcely know the place."

THE TALKING HORSE

And Ella, reduced to a condition of stony stupor, followed to the drawing-room. She did not know the place, indeed. It was a quaintly-shaped, irregular room, with French windows opening upon the garden on one side and a deep bow-window on another ; when she had last seen it, the walls were covered with a paper so pleasing in tone and design that she had almost decided to retain it. That paper was gone, and in its place a gaudy semi-Chinese pattern of unknown birds, flying and perching on sprawling branches laden with impossible flowers. And then the furniture—the " elegant drawing-room suite " in brilliant plush and shiny satin, the cheap cabinets, and the ready-made black and gilt overmantel, with its panels of swans, hawthorn-blossom, and landscapes sketchily daubed on dead gold—surely it had all been transferred bodily from the stage of some carelessly mounted farcical comedy !

Ella's horrified gaze gradually took in other features—the china monkeys swinging on cords, the porcelain parrots hanging in great brass rings, huge misshapen terra-cotta jars and pots, dead grass in bloated drain-pipes, tambourines, beribboned and painted with kittens and robins, enormous wooden *sabots*, gilded Japanese fans, a woolly white rug and a bright Kidderminster carpet.

" Oh, George ! " burst involuntarily from her lips.

" I knew you'd be pleased ! " he said complacently ; " but I mustn't take all the credit myself. It was like this, you see : I felt all right enough about the other rooms, but the drawing-room—that's *your* room, and I was awfully afraid of not having it exactly as it ought to be. So I went to the girls, and I said, * You know all about these things—just make it what you think Ella will like, and then we can't go wrong ! ' We had that Grosvenor Gallery paper down first of all. " Choose something bright and cheerful," I said, and I don't think they've chosen badly. Then the pottery and china and all that—those are the girls' presents to *you*, with their best love."

" It—it's very good of them/' said poor Ella, on the verge of tears.

" Oh, they think a lot of you ! They were rather nervous about doing anything at first, for fear you mightn't like it ; but I told them they needn't be afraid. " What I like, Ella will like,' I said ; and, I must say, no one could wish to see a prettier drawing-room than they've turned it into—they've a good deal of taste, those two girls."

Ella stood there in a kind of dreary dream. What had happened to the world since she came into this house ? What was this change in her ? She was afraid to speak, lest the intense rebellious anger she felt should gain the mastery. Was it she that had these wicked thoughts of George—poor, kind, unsuspecting, loving George ? She felt a little faint, for the windows were closed and the room stuffy with the odour of the new furniture and the atmosphere of the workshop ; everything here seemed to her commonplace and repulsive.

" How about those plans of yours now, Ella, eh ? " cried George.

This was too much ; her overtried patience broke down. " George ! " she cried impulsively, and her voice sounded hoarse and strange to her own ear ; " George ! I must speak—I must tell you !——" and then she checked herself. She must keep command of herself, or she could not, without utter loss of dignity, find the words that were to sting him into a sense of what he had done and allowed to be done. Before she could go on, George had drawn her to him, and was patting her shoulder tenderly. " I know, dear little girl," he said, " I know ; don't try to tell me anything. I'm so awfully glad you're pleased ; but all the money and pains in the world wouldn't make the place good enough for my Ella ! "

She released herself with a little cry of impotent despair. How could she say the sharp, cruel speeches that were struggling to reach her tongue now ? It was no use ;

THE TALKING HORSE

she was a coward ; she simply had not the courage to undeceive him here, on the very first day of their reunion too !

" You haven't been upstairs yet," said George, dropping sentiment abruptly ; " shall we go up ? "

Ella assented submissively, much as even this cost her ; but it was better, she reflected, to get it over and know the very worst. However, she was spared this ordeal for the present ; as they returned to the hall, they found themselves suddenly face to face with a dingy man, whose face was surrounded by a fringe of black whiskers and crowned by a shock of fleecy hair.

" Who on earth are you ? " demanded George, as the man rose from the kitchen-stairs.

" No offence, sir and lady ! Peagram, that's *my* name, fust shop round the corner as you go into Silver Street, plumber and sanit'ry hengineer, gas-fittin' and hartistic decorating, bell-'anging in all its branches. I received instructions from Mr. Jones that I was to look into a little matter o' leakage in the back-kitchen sink ; also to see what taps, if hany, required seem' to, and gen'all'y to put things straight like. So I come round, 'aving the keys, jest to cast a heye over them, as I may term it, preliminary to commencing work in the course of a week or so, as soon as I'm at libity to attend to it pussonally."

" Oh, the landlord sent you ? All right, then."

" Correct, sir," said the plumber affably. " While I've been 'ere, I took the freedom of going all over this little 'ouse, and a nice cosy little 'ouse you've made of it, for such a nouse as it is ! You've done it up very tysty—very tysty you've done this little 'ouse up ; and I've some claim to speak, seein' as how I've had the decoration throughout of a many 'ouses in my time, likewise mansions. You ain't been too ambitious, which is the error most parties falls into with small 'ouses. Now the parties as 'ad the place before you—by the name o' Rummies—well, I dare say they satisfied theirselves, but the 'ouse never looked right—not to *my* taste, it didn't! "

A MATTER OF TASTE

" George, get rid of this person ! " said Ella rapidly, under her breath, in French. Unfortunately, George's acquaintance with that tongue was about on a par with the plumber's, and he remained passive.

The plumber now proceeded to put down his mechanic's straw-bag upon the hall-table, which he did with great care, as if it were of priceless stuff and contained fragile articles ; having done this, he posed himself with one elbow resting on the post at the foot of the staircase, like a grimy statue of Shakespeare.

" Ah," he said, shaking his touzled head, " this ain't the fust time I've been 'ere in my puffessional capacity, not by a long way. Not by a long way, it ain't. Mr. Rummies, him as I mentioned to you afore, and a nice pleasant-spoken gentleman he was, too—in the tea trade—Mr. Rummies, he alius sent round for me whenever there was hany odd jobs as wanted doin', and in course I was alius pleased to get 'em, be they hodd or hotherwise."

" Er-exactly," said George, as soon as he could put in a word ; " but you see, this lady and I——"

The plumber, however, did not abandon his position, and seemed determined that they should hear him :

" I know, sir—I see how things were with you with 'arf a glance ; but afore we go any further, it's right you should know 'oo I am and all about me. Jest 'ear what I'm goin' to tell you, for it's something out of the common way, though gospel-truth. It's a melinkly reflection for a man of my station of life, but "—and here he lowered his voice to a solemn pitch—" I've never set foot inside of this 'ere 'ouse without somethink 'appens more or less immejit. Ah, it's true, though. Seems almost like as if I brought a fatality in along o' me. Don't you interrupt; you wait till I'm done, and see if Fm talking at random or without facks to support me. Well, *fust* time as ever I was sent for 'ere was in regard to drains, as they couldn't flush satisfactory. I did my work and come away. Not three weeks arter, Miss Rummies, the

THE TALKING HORSE

heldest gell, was took ill with typhoid. Never the same young lady again—nor yet she never won't be neither, not if she lives to a nundered. 'Nothing very hodd about *that*?' says you. Wait a bit. Next time, it was the kitching copper as had got all furred up like. I tinkered that up to rights, and come away. Well, afore I'd even made out my account, that identical copper blew up and scalded the cook dreadful! 'Coppers will play these games,' you sez. All right, then; but you let me finish. Third time there was a flaw in one of the gas-brackets in the spare room. I soddered it up and I come away. Soon arterwards, a day or two as it might be, Mrs. Rummies 'ad 'er mar a-stayin' with her, and the old lady slep' in that very room, and was laid up weeks! 'Curus,' says I, when I come to 'ear of it, 'very curus!' and it set me a-thinkin'. Last time but one—'ere, lemme see—that was a bell-'anging job, I *think*—no, I'm wrong, it was drains agen, so it were—drains it was agen. And the *next* thing I 'eard was that Mrs. Rummies was a-layin' at death's door with the diffthery! The last time—ah, I recklect well, I was called in to see if somethink wasn't wrong with the ballcock in the top cistin. I see there was somethink, and I come away as usual. That day week, old Mr. Rummies was took with a fit on the floor in the back droring-room, which broke up the 'ouse!

"Now, I think, as fair-minded and unprejudiced parties, you'll agree with me that there was something more'n hordinary coinside-ency in all that. I declare to you!" avowed the plumber, with a gloomy relish and a candour that was possibly begotten of beer, "I declare to you there's times when I do honestly believe as I carry a curse along with me whenever I visits this 'ere partickler 'ouse! and, though it's agen my own hinterests, I deem it on'y my dooty, as a honest man, to mention it!"

Under any other circumstances, the plumber's compliments on her taste and his lugubrious assumption of character of the Destroying Angel would have sorely tried, if not completely upset, Ella's gravity; as it was,

she was too wretched to have more than a passing and quite unappreciative sense of his absurdity. George, having the quality of mind which makes jokes more readily than sees them, took him quite seriously.

" Well," he answered solemnly, " I hope you won't bring us bad luck, at all events ! "

" / 'ope so, sir, I'm sure. I 'ope so. It will not be by any desire on my part, more partickler when you're just settin' up 'ouskeeping' with your good lady 'ere. But there's no tellin' in these matters. That's where it is, you see—there's no tellin'⁵. And, arter all my experience, with the best intentions in the world, I can't go and guarantee to you as nothink won't come of it. I wish I could, but, as a honest man, I can't. If it's to be," moralised this fatalistic plumber, " it is to be, and that's all about it, and no hefforts on my part or yours won't make hany difference, will they, sir ? "

" Well, well," said George, plainly ill at ease, " that will do, my friend. Now, Ella, what do you say—shall we go upstairs ? "

" Not now," she gasped, " let us go away—. Oh, George, take me outside, please ! "

" Dash that confounded fool of a plumber ! " said George, irritably, when they were in the street again ; " wonder if he thinks I'm going to employ him after that ! Not that it isn't all bosh, of course——Why, Ella, you're not tired, are you ? "

" I — I think I am a little—do you mind if we drive home ? "

Ella was very silent during their short drive. When they reached Linden Gardens she said, " I think we must say good-bye here, George. I feel as if I were going to have a headache."

" You poor little girl ! " he said, looking rather crest-fallen, for he had been counting upon going in and being invited to remain for dinner, " it's been rather too much for you, going over the house and all that—or was it that beastly plumber with his rigmaroles ? "

THE TALKING HORSE

" It wasn't the plumber/" she said hurriedly, as the door was opened, " and—good-bye, George."

" How easily girls do get knocked up !" thought George, as he walked homeward, " a little pleasant excitement like this and she seems quite upset. She was delighted with the house, though, that's one blessing, and I mustn't forget to tell the girls how touched she was by their presents. What a darling she is, and how happy we shall be together ! "

PART II

ONCE safely at home, Ella hastened upstairs to her own room, where, if the truth must be told, she employed the half-hour before dinner in unintermittent sobbing, into which temper largely entered. " He has spoilt it all for me ! How *could* he—oh, how could he ? " ran the burden of her moan. At the dinner-table, though pale and silent, she had recovered composure.

" A pleasant walk, Ella ? " inquired her mother, with rather formal interest.

" Yes, very," replied Ella, trusting she would not be questioned further.

" I believe I know where you went ! " cried indiscreet Flossie. " You went to look at your new home—now, *didn't* you ? Ah, I thought so ! I suppose you have quite made up your minds how you mean to do the rooms ? "

" Quite."

" We might go round to all the best places to-morrow," said Mrs. Hylton, " and see some papers and hangings—there were some lovely patterns in Blank's windows the other day."

" And, Ella," added Flossie, " I've been out with Andrews after school several times, to Tottenham Court Road, and Wardour Street, and Oxford Street—oh, everywhere, hunting up old furniture, and I can show

you where they have some beautiful things—not shams, but really good ! ”

“ You know, Ella,” said Mrs. Hylton, observing that she did not answer, “ I want you to have a pretty house, and you and George must order exactly what you like ; but I think you will find I may be some help to you in choosing.”

“ Thank you, mother,” said Ella, without any animation ; “ I — I don't think we shall want much.”

“ You will want all that young people in your position do want, I suppose,” said Mrs. Hylton, a little impatiently ; “ and of course you understand that the bills are to be my affair.”

“ Thank you, mother,” murmured Ella again. She didn't feel able to tell them just yet how this had all been forestalled ; she felt that she would infallibly break down if she tried.

“ You seem a little overdone to-night, my dear,” said her mother frigidly ; she was naturally hurt at the very uneffusive way in which her good offices had been met.

“ I have such a dreadful headache,” pleaded Ella. “ I — I think I overtired myself this afternoon.”

“ Then you were very foolish, after travelling all yesterday, as you did. I don't wonder that George was ashamed to come in. You had better go to bed early, and I will send Andrews in to you with some of my sleeping mixture.”

Ella was glad enough to obey, though the draught took some time to operate ; she felt as if no happiness or peace of mind were possible for her till George had been persuaded to undo his work.

Surely he could not refuse when he knew that her mother was prepared to do everything for them at her own expense !

And here it began to dawn upon her what this would entail ! George's words came back to her as if she heard them actually spoken. Did he not say that the house had been furnished out of his savings ?

THE TALKING HORSE

What was she asking him to do ? To dismantle it entirely ; to humiliate himself by going round to all the people he had dealt with, asking them as a favour to take back their goods, or else he must sell them as best he could for a fraction of their cost. Who was to refund him all he had so uselessly spent ? Could she ask her mother to do so ? Would he even consent to such an arrangement if it was proposed ?

Then his sisters—how could she avoid offending them irreparably, perhaps involving George in a quarrel with his family, if she were to carry her point ?

As she realised, for the first time, the inevitable consequences of success, she asked herself in despair what she ought to do—where her plain duty lay ?

Did she love George—or was it all delusion, and was he less to her than mere superfluities, the fringe of life ?

She did love him, in spite of any passing disloyalty of thought. She felt his sterling worth and goodness, even his weaknesses had something lovable in them for her.

And he had been planning, spending, working all this time to give her pleasure, and this was his reward ! She had been within an ace of letting him see the cruel ingratitude that was in her heart ! " What a selfish wretch I have been ! " she thought ; " but I won't be—no, I won't ! George shall *not* be snubbed, hurt, estranged from his family on my account ! "

No, she would suffer—she alone—and in silence. Never by a word would she betray to him the pain his well-intentioned action cost her. Not even to her mother and Flossie would she permit herself to utter the least complaint, lest they should insist upon opening George's eyes !

So, having arrived at this heroic resolve,, in which she found a touch of the sublime that almost consoled her, the tears dried on her cheeks and Ella fell asleep at last.

Some readers, no doubt—though possibly few of our

heroine's sex—will smile scornfully at this crumpled rose-leaf agony, this tempest in a Dresden teacup ; and the writer is not concerned to deny that the situation has its ludicrous side.

But, for a girl brought up as Ella Hylton had been, in an artistic *milieu*, her eye insensibly trained to love all that was beautiful in colour and form, to be almost morbidly sensitive to ugliness and vulgarity—it was a very real and bitter struggle, a hard-won victory to come to such a decision as she formed. Life, Heaven knows, contains worse trials and deeper tragedies than this ; but at least Ella's happy life had as yet known no harder.

And, so far, she must be given the credit of having conquered.

Resolution is, no doubt, half the battle. Unfortunately, Ella's resolution, though she hardly perceived this at present, could not be effected by one isolated and final act, but by a long chain of daily and hourly forbearances, the first break in which would undo all that had gone before.

How she bore the test we are going to see.

She woke the next morning to a sense that her life had somehow lost its savour ; the exaltation of her resolve overnight had gone off and left her spirits flat and dead ; but she came down, nevertheless, determined to be staunch and true to George under all provocations.

" Have you and George decided when you would like your wedding to be ? " asked her mother, after breakfast, " because we ought to have the invitations printed very soon."

" Not yet," faltered Ella, and the words might have passed either as an answer or an appeal.

" I think it should be some time before the end of next month, or people will be going out of town."

" I suppose so," was the reply, so listlessly given that Mrs. Hylton glanced keenly at her daughter.

" What do you feel about it yourself, Ella ? "

" I ? oh, I—I've no feeling. Perhaps, if we waited—

THE TALKING HORSE

no, it doesn't matter—let it be when you and George wish, mother, please ! "

Mrs. Hylton gave a sharp, annoyed little laugh : " Really, my dear, if you can't get up any more interest in it than that, I think it would certainly be wiser to wait ! "

It was more than indifference that Ella felt—a wild aversion to beginning the new life that but lately had seemed so mysteriously sweet and strange ; she was frightened by it, ashamed of it, but she could not help herself. She made no answer, nor did Mrs. Hylton again refer to the subject.

But Ella's worst tribulations had yet to come. That afternoon, as she and her mother and Flossie were sitting in the drawing-room, " Mrs. and the Miss Chapmans " were announced. Evidently they had deemed it incumbent on them to pay a state visit as soon as possible after Ella's return.

Ella returned their effusive greetings as dutifully as she could. She had never succeeded in cultivating a very lively affection for them ; to-day she found them barely endurable.

Mrs. Chapman was a stout, dewlapped old lady, with dull eyes and pachydermatous folds in her face. She had a husky voice and a funereal manner. Jessie, her eldest daughter, was not altogether uncomely in a commonplace way : she was dark-haired, high-coloured, loud-voiced—generally sprightly and voluble and overpowering ; she was in such a hurry to speak that her words tripped one another up, and she had a meaningless and, to Ella, highly irritating little laugh.

Carrie was plain and colourless, content to admire and echo her sister.

After some conversation on Ella's Continental experiences, Jessie suddenly, as Ella's uneasy instinct foresaw, turned to Mrs. Hylton. " Of course, Ella told you what a surprise she had at Campden Hill yesterday ? Weren't you electrified ? "

A MATTER OF TASTE

" No doubt I should have been," said Mrs. Hylton, who detested Jessie, " only Ella did not think fit to mention it."

" Oh, I wonder at that ! I hope I wasn't going to betray the secrets of the prison-house ? " Jessie was fond of using stock phrases to give lightness and sparkle to her conversation. " Ella, the idea of your keeping it all to yourself, you sly thing ! But tell me—would you ever have believed Tumps"—his sisters called George " Tumps"—" could be capable of such independent behaviour ? "

" No," said Ella, " I—indeed I never should ! "

" Ha, ha! nor should we! You would have screamed to see him fussing about—wasn't he killing over it, Carrie ? "

" Oh, he was, Jessie ! "

" My son," explained Mrs. Chapman to Mrs. Hylton, " is so wonderfully energetic and practical. I have never known him fail to carry through anything he has once undertaken—he inherits that from his poor dear father."

" I don't quite gather what your brother George has been doing, even now ? " said Mrs. Hylton to Jessie.

" Oh, but my lips are sealed. Wild horses shan't drag any more from me ! Don't be afraid, Ella, I won't spoil sport ! "

" There is no sport to spoil," said Ella. " Mother, it is only that—that George has furnished the house while I have been away."

" Really ? " said Mrs. Hylton politely ; " that is energetic of him, indeed ! "

" Poor dear Tumps came home so proud of your approval," said Jessie to Ella, " and we were awfully relieved to find you didn't think we'd made the house quite too dreadful—weren't we, Carrie ? "

" Yes, indeed, Jessie."

" Of course," observed the latter young lady, " it's always so hard to hit upon another person's taste exactly—especially in furnishing."

THE TALKING HORSE

"Impossible, I should have thought," from Mrs. Hylton.

"I hope Ella is of a different opinion—what do you say, dearest?"

"Oh" cried Ella hastily, with splendid mendacity, "I—I liked it all very much, and—and it was so much too kind of you and Carrie. I've never thanked you for—for all the things you gave me!"

"Oh, *those*! they ain't worth thanking for—just a few little artistic odds and ends. They set off a room, you know—give it a finish."

"Young people nowadays" croaked old Mrs. Chapman lugubriously in Mrs. Hylton's courteously inclined ear, "think so much of luxury and ornament. I'm sure when I married my dear husband, we——"

"Now, mater dear, you really *mustn't*!" interrupted the irrepressible Jessie; "Mrs. Hylton is on *our* side, you know. She likes pretty things about her—don't you, Mrs. Hylton? And, talking of that, Ella, I hope you thought our glyco-vitrine decoration a success? We were perfectly surprised ourselves to see how well it came out! Just transparent coloured paper, Mrs. Hylton, and you cut it into sheets, and gum it on the window-panes, and really, unless you were told or came quite close, you would declare it was real stained glass! You ought to try some of it on your windows, Mrs. Hylton. I'll tell you where you can get it—you go down——"

"I'm afraid I'm old-fashioned, my dear," said Mrs. Hylton, stiffly; "if I cannot have the reality, I prefer to do without even the best imitations."

"Why, you're deserting us, I declare! Ella, you must take her to see the window, and then perhaps she will change her opinion."

"I always tell my girls," said Mrs. Chapman, in her woolly voice, "when I am dead and gone they can make any alterations they please, but while I am spared to them I like everything about the house to be kept exactly as it was in their poor father's lifetime."

" *Isn't* she a dear conservative old mummy ? " said Jessie to Ella in an audible aside. " Why, I do believe she won't see anything to admire in your little house—at least, if she does, the dear old lady, she'd sooner die than admit it ! "

The Chapmans went at last, and before they were out of the house Mrs. Hylton, with an effort to seem unconcerned, said : " And so, Ella, you and George have done without my help ? Of course you know your own affairs best ; still, I should have thought—I should certainly have thought—that I might have been of some assistance to you—if only in pecuniary matters."

" George preferred that you should not be troubled," stammered Ella.

" I am not blaming him. I respect him for wishing to be independent. I own to being a little surprised that you should not have told me of this before, though, Ella. But for that chattering girl, I presume I should have been left to discover it for myself. I wonder you cannot bring yourself to be a little more open with your mother, my dear."

" Oh, mother ! " cried Ella in despair, " indeed I was going to tell you—only, I did not know myself till yesterday. At least, that is——" she broke off lamely, fearing to reflect on George.

" I find it hard to believe that George would act without consulting you in any way. It is strange enough that he should have undertaken to furnish the house in your absence."

" But if I couldn't be there ! " pleaded Ella—" and I couldn't."

" Naturally, as you were on the Continent, you couldn't be on Campden Hill at the same time ; you need not be absurd, Ella. But what I want to know is this—have you had a voice in the matter, or have you not ? "

"N—not much," confessed Ella, hanging her head.

" So I suspected, and I think George ought to be ashamed of himself. I never heard of such a thing, and

THE TALKING HORSE

I shall make a point of seeing the house and satisfying myself that it is fit for a daughter of mine to inhabit."

"Mother!" exclaimed Ella, springing up excitedly, "you don't understand. Why should you choose to suppose that the house is not pretty? It is not done as *you* would do it, because poor George hadn't much money to spend; but if I am satisfied, why should you come between us? And I *am* satisfied—quite, quite satisfied; he has done it beautifully, and I will not have a single thing altered! After all, it is *his* house—our house—and nobody else has any right to interfere—not even you, mother!"

Mrs. Hylton shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, my dear, if that is the way you think proper to speak to me, it is time to change the subject. Pray understand that I shall not dream of interfering. I am very glad that you are so satisfied." And by and by she left the room majestically.

When she had gone, Flossie, who had been listening open-eyed to all that had taken place, came and stood in front of Ella's chair.

"Ella, tell me," she said, "has George really furnished the house exactly as you like—*really* now?"

"Haven't I said so, Flossie? Why should you doubt it?"

"Oh, I don't know; I was wondering, that was all!"

"Really!" cried Ella angrily, "anyone would think poor George was a sort of barbarian, who couldn't be expected to know anything, or trusted to do anything!"

"I'm sure I never *said* so, Ella. But how clever of him to choose just the right things! And, Ella, do all the colours and things go well together? I always thought most men didn't notice much about all that. And are the new mantelpieces pretty? Oh, and where did he go for the papers and the carpets?"

"Flossie, I wish you wouldn't tease so. Can't you see I have a headache? I can't answer so many questions, and I won't! Once for all, everything is just what I like.

Do you understand, or shall I tell you again ?—just, *just* what I like ! "

" Oh, all right," returned Flossie, with exasperating good-humour; " then there's nothing to lose your temper about, darling, is there ? "

And this was all that Ella had gained by her loyalty to George so far.

It was the morning after the Chapmans' visit. Ella had seen her mother and Flossie preparing to go out, but, owing to the friction between them, they neither invited her to accompany them, nor did she venture to ask where they were going. At luncheon, however, the unhappy girl divined from the expression of their faces how they had employed the forenoon. They had been inspecting the Campden Hill house ! Her mother's handsome face wore a look of frozen contempt. Imagine a strict Quaker's feelings on seeing his son with a pair of black eyes—a Socialist's at finding a peerage under his daughter's pillow—a Positivist's whose children have all joined the Salvation Army, and even then but a faint idea will be reached of Mrs. Hylton's utter dismay and disgust.

Flossie, though angry, took a different view of Ella's share in the business ; she knew her better than her mother did, and consequently refused to believe that she was a Philistine at heart. It was her absurd infatuation for George that made her see with his eyes and bow down before the hideous household gods he had chosen to erect. On such weakness Flossie had no mercy.

" Well, Ella, dear," she began, " mother and I have seen your house. George has quite surpassed our wildest expectations. Accept my compliments ! "

" Flossie," said her mother severely, " will you kindly choose some other topic ? I really feel too seriously annoyed about all this to bear to hear it spoken of just yet. I think you shall come with me to the Amberleys' garden-party this afternoon, and not Ella, as we are dining out this evening. You had better stay at home and rest, Ella."

THE TALKING HORSE

In this, and countless other ways, was Ella made to feel that she was in disgrace.

Nor did Flossie spare her sister when they were alone. " Poor dear mother ! " she said, " I quite thought that house would have broken her heart—oh, I'm not saying a w^rord against it, Ella, I know *you* like it, and I'm sure it looks very comfortable—everything so sensible and useful, and the kitchen really charming ; mother and I liked it best of all the rooms. Such a horrid man let us in ; he was at work there, and he would follow us all about, and tell mother his entire history. I don't think he *could* have been quite sober, he would insist on turning all the taps on everywhere. I suppose, Ella, it's ever so much *cheaper* to furnish as you and George have done ; that's the worst of pretty things, they do cost such a lot ! I'd no idea you were so practical, though," and so on.

On Sunday George came to luncheon. He was delighted to hear from Flossie that they had been to the house, and gave a boisterously high-spirited account of his labours. " It was a grind," he informed them, " and, as for those painter-fellows, I began to think they'd stay out the entire lease."

" Art is long, George," observed Flossie, wickedly.

" Oh yes, I know ; but they promised faithfully to be out in ten days, and they were over three weeks ! "

" But look at the result ! George, how *did* you find out that Ella liked grained doors ? "

" Well, to tell you the truth, Flossie, that was a bit of a fluke. The man told me that graining was coming in again, and I said, ' Grain, 'em, then ' — *I didn't know !* "

In short, he was more provokingly dense than ever to-day, and Ella found herself growing more and more captious and irritable that afternoon ; he could not understand why she was so disinclined to talk ; even the dear little house of which she was soon to be the mistress failed to interest her.

" You have told me twice already that you got the drawing-room carpet a great bargain, and only paid four

pounds ten for the table in the dining-room," she broke out. " Can't we take that for granted in future ? "

" I forgot I'd told you ; I thought it was the mater," he said ; " and I say, Ella, how about pictures ? Jessie's promised to do us some water-colours—she's been taking lessons lately, you know—but we shall want one or two prints for the dining-room, shan't we ? You can pick them up second-hand very cheap."

" Oh, yes, yes ; anything you please, George ! . . . No, no ; I'm not cross, I'm only tired, especially of talking about the house. It is quite finished, you know, so what is there to discuss ? "

During the days that followed, Flossie devised an ingenious method of tormenting Ella ; she laid out her pocket money, of which she had a good deal, on the most preposterous ornaments—a pair of dangling cut-glass lustres, bead mats, a trophy of wax fruit under a glass shade, gaudy fire-screens and flower-pots, all of which she solemnly presented to her suffering sister. This was not pure mischief or unkindness on Flossie's side, but part of a treatment she had hit upon for curing Ella of her folly. And at last the worm turned. Flossie came in one day with a cheap plush and terra-cotta panel of appalling ugliness.

" For the drawing-room, dear," she observed blandly, and Ella suddenly burst into a flood of tears.

" You are very, very unkind to me, Flossie ! " she sobbed,

" I ! " exclaimed Flossie, in a tone of the most innocent surprise. " Why, Ella, I thought you would be charmed with it. I'm sure *George* will. And, you know, it will go beautifully with the rest of your things ! "

" You might understand . . . you might see——"

" I might see what ? "

" *How frightfully* miserable I am ! " said Ella, which was the very admission Miss Flossie had been seeking to provoke.

THE TALKING HORSE

" Suppose I *do* see," she said ; " suppose I've been trying to get you to act sensibly, Ella ? "

" Then it's cruel of you ! "

" No it's not. It's kind. How am I to help you unless you speak out ? I'm younger than you, Ella, but I know this—/ would never mope and make myself miserable when a word would put everything right ! "

" But it wouldn't, Flossie ; it is too late to speak now. I can't tell him how I really feel—I can't ! "

" Ah, then you own there is something to tell ? "

" What have I said ? Flossie, forget what I said ; it slipped out. I meant nothing."

" And you are perfectly happy and satisfied, are you ? Now I know how people look when they are perfectly happy and satisfied."

" It's no use ! " cried Ella, suddenly. " I've tried, and tried, and tried to bear it, but I can't. I *must* tell somebody . . . it is making me ill. I am getting cross and wicked, and unlike what I used to be. Flossie, I can't go and live there—I dread the thought of it ; I shrink from it more and more every day ! It is all odious, impossible—and yet I must, I must ! "

" No, you mustn't; and, what's more, you shan't ! "

" Flossie, you mean you will tell mother ! You must not, do you hear ? If you do, it will only make matters worse. Oh, why did I tell you ? " cried Ella, in shame at this lapse from all her heroism. " Promise me you will say nothing to mother—it is too late now—promise ! "

" Very well," said Flossie reluctantly; " then I promise. But, all the same, Ella, I think you're a great goose ! "

" I didn't promise I wouldn't say anything to *George*, though," she reflected ; and so, on the very next occasion that she caught him alone, she availed herself of an innocent allusion of his to Ella's low spirits to give him the benefit of her candid opinion, which was not tempered by any marked consideration for his feelings.

Ella was in the morning-room alone—she had taken

to sitting alone lately, brooding over her trials. She was no heroine, after all; her mind, it is to be feared, was far from superior. She was finding out that she had undertaken too heavy a task ; she could not console herself for her lost dream of a charmingly appointed house. She might endure to live in such a home as George had made for her ; but to be expected to admire it, to let it be understood that it was her handiwork, that she had chosen or approved of it—this was the burden that was crushing her.

Suddenly the door opened and George stood before her. His expression was so altered that she scarcely recognised him ; all the cheery buoyancy had vanished, and his stern, set face, had a dignity and character in it now that were wanting before.

" I have just had a talk with Flossie," he began ; " she has shown me what a—what a mistake I've been making."

Ella could not help feeling a certain relief, though she said, " It was very wrong of Flossie—she had no right to speak."

" She had every right," he said. " She might have done it more kindly, perhaps, but that's nothing. Why didn't you tell me yourself, Ella ? You might have trusted me ! "

" I couldn't—it seemed so cruel, so ungrateful, after all you had done. I hoped you would never know."

" It's well for you, and for me too, that I know this while there's still time. Ella, I've been a blind, blundering fool. I never had a suspicion of this till—till just now, or you don't think I should have gone on with it a single minute. I came to tell you that you need not make yourself miserable any longer. I will put an end to this—whatever it costs me."

" Oh, George, I am so ashamed. I know it is weak and cowardly of me, but I can't help it. And—and will it cost you so very much ? "

" Quite as much as I can bear."

THE TALKING HORSE

" No ; but tell me—about *how* much ? More than a hundred pounds ? "

" I haven't worked it out in pounds, shillings, and pence," he said grimly ; " but I should put it higher myself."

" Won't they take back some of the things ? They ought to," she suggested timidly.

" The things ? Oh, the furniture ! Good Heavens, Ella ! do you suppose I care a straw about that ? All I can think of is how I could have gone on deceiving myself like this, believing I knew your every thought ; and all the time—pah, what a fool I've been ! "

" I thought I should get used to it," she pleaded. " And oh, you don't know how hard I have tried to bear it, not to let anyone see what I felt—you don't know ! "

" And I would rather not know," he replied, " for it's not exactly flattering, you see, Ella. And at all events, it's over now. This is the last time I shall trouble you ; you will see no more of me after to-day."

Ella could only stare at him incredulously. Had he really taken the matter so seriously to heart as this ? Could he not forgive the wound to his vanity ? How^T hard, how utterly unworthy of him !

" Yes," he continued, " I see now we were quite unsuited to one another. I should never have made you happy, Ella ; it's best to find it out before it's too late. So let us shake hands and say good-bye, my dear."

She felt powerless to appeal to him, and yet it was not wholly pride that tied her tongue ; she was too shaken and stunned to make the least effort at remonstrance.

" Then, if it must be," she said at last, very low—" good-bye, George."

He crushed her hand in his strong grasp. " Don't mind about me," he said roughly. " You've nothing to blame yourself for. I dare say I shall get over it all right. It's rather sudden at first—that's all ! " And with that he was gone.

Flossie, coming in a little later, found her sister sitting by the window, smiling in a strange, vacant way. " Well? " said Flossie eagerly, for she had been anxiously waiting to hear the result of the interview.

" It's all over, Flossie ; he has broken it off."

" Oh, Ella, I'm so glad ! I *hoped* he would, but I wasn't sure. Well, you may thank me for delivering you, darling. If I hadn't spoken plainly——"

^{4t} Tell me what you said."

" Oh, let me see. Well, I told him anybody else would have seen long ago that your feelings were altered. I said you were perfectly miserable at having to marry him, only you thought it was too late to say so. I told him he didn't understand you in the least, and you hadn't a single thought or taste in common. I said if he cared about you at all, the best way he could prove it was by setting you free, and not spoiling your life and his own too. I put it as pleasantly as I could," said Flossie naively, " but he is very trying ! "

" You told him all that! What made you invent such wicked, cruel lies ? Flossie, it is you that have spoilt our lives, and I will never forgive you—never, as long as I live ! "

" Ella ! " cried the younger sister, utterly astonished by this outburst. " Why, didn't you tell me the other day how miserable you were, and how you dared not speak about it ? And now, when I——"

" Go away, Flossie ; you have done mischief enough ! "

" Oh, very well, I'm going—if this is all I get for helping you. Is it *my* fault if you don't know your own mind, and say what you don't mean ? And if you really want your dearly beloved George back again, there's time yet; he hasn't gone—he's in the drawing-room with mother."

How infinitely petty her past misery seemed now ! for what trifles she had thrown away George's honest heart ! If only there was a chance still ! at least false pride should not come between them any longer ; so

THE TALKING HORSE

thought Ella on her way to the drawing-room. George was still there ; as she turned the door-handle she heard her mother's clear resonant tones. " Not that that is any excuse for Ella," she was saying.

Ella burst precipitately into the room. She was only just in time, for George had risen and was evidently on the point of leaving. " George," she exclaimed, panting after her rapid flight, " I — I came to tell you——"

" My dear Ella," interrupted Mrs. Hylton, " the kindest thing you can do for George now is to let him go without any more explanations."

Ella stopped ; again her mind became a blank. What had she come for ; what was it she felt she must say ? While she hesitated, George was already at the other door ; he seemed anxious to avoid hearing her ; in another second he would be gone.

She cried to him piteously. " George, dear George, don't leave me ! . . . I can't bear it ! "

" This is too ridiculous ! " exclaimed her mother angrily. " What is it that you *do* want, Ella ? "

" I want George," she said simply. " It was all a mistake, George. Flossie mistook——Oh, you don't really think that I have left off caring for you ? I haven't, dear, indeed I haven't—won't you believe me ? "

" I had better leave you to come to an understanding together," said Mrs. Hylton, not in the best of tempers, for she had been more sorry for George than for the rupture he came to announce, and she swept out of the room with very perceptible annoyance.

" I thought it was all up with me, Ella ; I did indeed," said George, a minute or two later, his face still pale after all this emotion. " But tell me—what's wrong with the furniture I ordered ? "

" Nothing, dear, nothing," she answered, blushing. " Don't think about it any more."

" No ? But your mother was talking about it too." he insisted. " Come, Ella, dear, for heaven's sake let

us have no more misunderstandings ! I see now what an ass I was not to wait and let you choose for yourself; these aesthetic things are not in my line. But I'd no idea you'd care so much ! "

" But I don't now—a bit."

" Well, I do, then. And the house must be done all over again, and exactly as you would like it ; so there's no more to be said about it," said George, without a trace of pique or wounded vanity.

" George, you are too good to me ; I don't deserve it. And indeed you must not. Think of the expense ! "

His face lengthened slightly ; he knew well enough that the change would cost him dear.

" I'll manage it somehow," he declared stoutly.

Would her mother help them now ? thought Ella, and felt more than doubtful. No, in spite of her own wishes, she must not allow George to carry out his intentions.

" But you forget Carrie and Jessie," she said ; " we shall hurt their feelings so if we change now."

" By Jove ! I forgot that," he said. " Yes, they won't like it—they meant well, poor girls, and took a lot of trouble. Still, you're the first person to be considered, Ella. I'll try and smooth it over with them, and if they choose to be offended, why, they must—that's all. And I tell you what. Suppose we go and see the house now, and you shall tell me just what wants doing to make it right ? "

She would have liked to decline this rather invidious office, especially as she felt no compromise to be possible ; but he was so urgent that she finally agreed to go with him.

As they gained Campden Hill and the road in which their house stood, George stopped. " Hullo ! " he said, " that can't be the house—what's the matter with it ? "

Very soon it was pretty evident what had been the matter—the walls were scorched and streaming, the window sashes were empty, charred and wasted by fire, the door was blistered and blackened, a stalwart fireman

THE TALKING HORSE

in his undress cap, with his helmet slung at his back, was just opening the gate as they came up.

" Can't come in, sir," he said, civilly enough. " No one admitted."

" Hang it ! " exclaimed George, " it's my own fire—'m the tenant."

" Oh, I beg your pardon, sir—it's been got under some hours now. I was just going off duty."

" Much damage done ? " inquired George laconically.

" Well, you see, sir," said the man, evidently considering how to prepare George for the worst, " we didn't get the call till the house was well alight, and there^was three steamers and a manual a-playing on it, so—well, you must expect things to be a bit untidy-like inside. But the walls and the roof ain't much damaged."

" And how did it happen ?—the house isn't even occupied."

" Workmen," said the man. " Some one was in there early this morning and left the gas escaping somewhere, and as likely as not a light burning near—and there you are. Well, I'll be off, sir ; there's nothing more to be done 'ere. Good-day, sir, and thank ye, I'm sure."

" Oh, George ! " said Ella, half crying, " our poor, poor little house ! It seems like a judgment on me. How *can* you laugh ! Who will build it up for us now ? "

" Who ? Why, the insurance people, to be sure ! You see, the firm are agents for the * Curfew,' and as soon as I got all the furniture in I insured the whole concern and got a protection note, so we're all right. Don't worry, little girl. Why, don't you see this gets us out of our difficulty ? We can start afresh now without offending anybody. Look there ; there's that idiot of a plumber who's done all the mischief—a nice funk he'll be in when he sees us ! "

But Mr. Peagram was quite unperturbed ; if anything, his smudgy features wore a look of sombre complacency as he came towards them. " I'm sorry this should have occurred," he said, " but you'll bear me out

that I warned yer as something was bound to 'appen. In course I couldn't tell what form it might take, and fire I must say I did *not* expect. I 'adn't on'y been in the place not a quarter of a hour, watering the gaselier in the libery—the libery as *was*, I *should* say—when it struck me I'd forgot my screwdriver, so, fortunately, as things turned out, I went ome to my place to get it, and I come back to see the place all in a blaze. It's fate, that's what it is—fate's at the bottom o' this 'ere job ! "

" Much more likely to be a lighted candle," said George.

" I was not on the premises at the time, so I can't say ; but, be that 'ow it may, there's no denying it's a sing'ler thing the way my words have been fulfilled almost literal."

" Confound you ! " said George. " You take good care your prophecies come off. Why, man, you're not going to pretend you don't know that it's your own carelessness that's brought this about ! This isn't the only house you've brought bad luck into, Mr. What's-your-name, since you've started in business ! "

" You can't make me lose my temper," replied the plumber with dignity. " I put it down to ignorance."

" So do I , " said George. " And if I know anyone who's anxious for a little typhoid, or wants his house burnt down at a moderate charge, why, I shall know whom to recommend. Good-day."

He turned on his heel and walked off, but Ella lingered behind. " I only just wanted to tell you," she said, addressing the astonished plumber, " that you have done us a great service, and I, at least, am very much obliged to you." And she fluttered away after *her fiance*.

The plumber—that instrument of Destiny—looked after the retreating couple, and indulged in a mystified whistle.

" 'E comes a bullyragging of me," he observed to a lamp-post, " and she's ' very much obliged ' ! And I'm blowed if I know what for, either way ! Cracked, poor

THE TALKING HORSE

young things, cracked, the pair on 'em—and no wonder, with such a calamity so recent. Ah, well, I do 'ope as this is the end on it. I 'ope I shan't be the means of bringing no more trouble into that little 'ouse—that I kin truly say ! "

And—human gratitude having its limits—it is highly probable that this pious aspiration will not be disappointed, so long, at least, as Mr. and Mrs. Chapman's tenancy continues.

SALTED ALMONDS

i. Salted Almonds ; or, Playing the Game

SCENE I.—At the Dinner-table

SITUATION—MR. PLUMLEY DUFF, a middle-aged bachelor with a well-earned reputation for social tact and fluency combined with extreme polish, has been sent in to dinner with Miss IMOGEN PUREFOY, an obvious ingenue. Her youthful charm, however, has induced him to overlook any intellectual inferiority, and, even on the stairs, he has so far unbent as to impart some highly valuable information concerning the state of the weather for the last few days, besides confiding the intelligence that the Parliamentary Session is responsible for many more people being in Town than usual. Miss PUREFOY has received these utterances with a reverential assent which only confirms him in an impression originally favourable.

Miss PUREFOY {after declining fish—to MR. P. D.). Aren't those salted almonds over there ? Could you reach them for me ? . . . Thanks so much ! I absolutely *adore* salted almonds ! (She selects three.) I can't *think* what people did at dinner-parties before salted almonds were invented. Can you ?

MR. PLUMLEY DUFF (conscientiously applying his mind to the problem while adopting a tone of playful levity). You are inviting me to embark upon a—er—field of highly interesting speculation. But, on the whole, I should be inclined to hazard the opinion that in—er—that benighted period people probably—er—did *without* them.

Miss P. (humbly). I suppose it was a silly question. I ought to have *known* that when there *weren't* any salted

SALTED ALMONDS

almonds people simply *had* to do without, poor dears! Still, do you know, I can't help thinking dinner-parties must have been more *cheerful*, somehow, in—well, in Queen Anne's time, for instance.

MR. D. (*with a kindly but superior smile*). If we may draw any inference from contemporary records, such as the works of Swift, the table-talk of those days was neither remarkably brilliant, nor—er—particularly edifying.

Miss P. Oh, but I meant because of the *costumes*. Everybody was so picturesquely dressed then, even the men, *weren't* they? Wouldn't you *love* to wear nice coloured velvet and satin with ruffles and things, instead of just plain black and white, as you do now?

MR. D. NOW, my dear young lady, our sex is content to serve as useful foils to the magnificence of yours. But, by way of compensation, if our—er—habiliments are, as is doubtless the case, less becoming, they have at least the merit of being considerably more—er—economical.

Miss P. (*regarding him with the innocent brown eyes of a squirrel*). I never thought of *that*. It's quite a new idea to me! *Did* men's clothes cost so very much in those times?

MR. D. Let me give you a few facts. Oliver Goldsmith—with whose immortal *Vicar of Wakefield* you are possibly familiar?—(*Miss PUREFOY murmurs an intelligent, but vague, assent*)—is known to have paid as much as fifteen guineas—which at that time was probably equivalent to at least double the present value of the money—for a simple suit of "Tyrian bloom" coloured satin. Now, I don't suppose / pay——

[He discourses here at some length on the precise sum per annum his evening clothes cost him, while Miss PUREFOY listens with rapt attention.]

Miss P. Really! *How* interesting! And I suppose there were all sorts of *other* expensive things they had to wear, besides?

M R. D. (*pleased with her intelligence*). Why, if you merely take such indispensable items as a silver-hilted sword, a lace cravat, a snuff-box, shoe-buckles, and so forth, they would represent a serious outlay. Not to speak of Wigs, which frequently cost as much as thirty or forty guineas.

Miss P. (*as she absently pushes one of her salted almonds over the edge of the brocade^{il} table-centre* "). Not really ? How glad you must be that you can keep your money to spend on more *sensible* things ! Motor-cars, perhaps ? For I'm sure you go in for motoring ?

M R. D. (*flattered, but a little disconcerted by this abrupt change of subject, as he was about to give her an instructive catalogue of the various wigs that characterised the eighteenth century*). I confess I do *not*. Quite apart from all questions of a pecuniary nature, I should decline to give any countenance to a form of conveyance which, in *my* opinion, will soon render the horse as extinct an animal as the—er—dodo.

Miss P. Ah, the poor horse ! But perhaps he won't *mind* being extinct so *very* much ! I mean, I've often thought it rather unfair that *he* should be chosen to draw us about, and not some other animal.

M R. D. (*delighted by her ingenuousness*). Nature *has* her injustices, I am afraid. Possibly her excuse in this case would be that no other quadruped is so well adapted for the—er—particular purpose. But you are mistaken in assuming that the horse alone has been so employed.

Miss P. Why, of *course* ! How *idiotic* of me ! I was forgetting the *donkey* !

M R. D. Also the dog, the bullock, the reindeer, and—for heavy artillery, if for no other vehicle—the Indian elephant.

Miss P. (*with sparkling eyes*). You make me feel so ignorant ! Though of course I might have remembered *them*. But I can't think of any *other* animal that is used in that way. And I don't believe that even *you* can, either !

SALTED ALMONDS

MR. D. *{in quiet triumph}*. I think I can. Unless I am greatly misinformed, Zebras have been successfully trained to go in harness.

Miss P. Zebras ! Isn't it wonderful ! *(She deposits a second almond by the side of the first.)* Is there *anything* you *don't* know, Mr. Duff ?

MR. D. I dare say I could tell you a few further facts about Zebras which may be new to you.

Miss P. They're quite *certain* to be. You see, I've never learnt *any* facts. I've been so shockingly educated. Like *all* women !

MR. D. *(bowing with the courtly grace that he has found effective on former occasions)*. No woman can be badly educated when she has learnt to render herself an agreeable companion to Man.

Miss P. *(pouting)*. Ah, I see what it is ! You *despise* women. *(As MR. DUFF protests gallantly.)* Oh yes, you *do* ! You don't believe they can do *anything* as well as men can. You would prevent them even trying to—if you only could !

MR. D. I would prefer to put it in this form. While I allow that your—er—charming sex is capable of attaining a certain proficiency—I will go even farther, and say, *excellence*—in the Arts, I frankly own that I have far too high an admiration for Woman to endure to see her unsex herself by stepping into the arena to engage with Man in the sterner conflicts of what I may describe as the serious Business of Life.

Miss P. But don't women make rather good clerks ?

MR. D. I will grant you that th[^] superior suppleness of the feminine hand—*(with a glance at Miss PUREFOY'S, which is idly fingering a third almond)*—may give a woman some small advantage in manipulating purely mechanical instruments like—well—Typewriters—but, Great Heavens ! is such slavery as that a fitting career for—*(He enlarges on this theme with real eloquence, until he is brought up short by the discovery that her mind is elsewhere[^] and that she is frivolously attracting the notice of somebody whom*

he cannot see across the table to three salted almonds, with which she has amused herself by placing side by side). I fear I have failed to retain your entire attention !

Miss P. How can you think so ! Why, I've been most awfully interested ! You don't know how much you have helped me ! You've said exactly what I wished you to say ! But you must tell me the rest another time. Because, do you know, your other neighbour has been trying to get a word from you for ever so long—so I'm afraid I must be unselfish and give you up to her.

[She turns to the man on her right, who monopolises her] during the remaining courses.

MR. D. *(later, seizing his chance just before their hostess gives the signal)*, I observe, Miss Purefoy, that, notwithstanding your—er—professed adoration for salted almonds, you are leaving the few you took absolutely untouched.

Miss P. You are too frightfully observant, Mr. Duff ! I see I had better confess at once that I didn't take them to eat—only to play with.

MR. D. *(to himself, as the ladies rise)*. Rajther an attractive child—but immature at present. A mind that merely requires forming, though.

SCENE II.—*In the Drawing-room*

SITUATION—*The men have come upstairs ; MR. PLUMLEY DUFF, who was hoping for a further opportunity of sounding the depths of Miss PUREFOY's engaging ignorance, finds himself intercepted by his hostess, and presented to another young lady—a Miss PEGGY BLOUNT.*

MR. DUFF *(with heroic affability)*. The—er—gaities of the Season are beginning early this year. I dare say you are already up to your eyes, Miss—er—Blount, in what one may perhaps be permitted to term the Social Whirlpool—dances, dinners, and so forth—h'm ?

Miss BLOUNT. Oh, I don't know. Not any dances, so far. Another dinner-party though, only next week—
H.F.

SALTED ALMONDS

(*with a little grimace*)—worse luck ! Don't tell anybody—but I simply *loathe* dinners !

MR. D. At *your* age, my dear young lady, one has not yet commenced to *dine*. But I infer from your tone that you have not been entirely fortunate in your partner this evening. Or am I mistaken ?

Miss B. Well, he might have been worse. I wish he *had* been. Then I should have had a chance of winning.

MR. D. A chance of——? Pardon me, but I don't quite understand.

Miss B. How *could* you, when you don't know ! But I'll tell you, if you'll promise faithfully not to give me away. (MR. DUFF *promises*.) Well, a girl-friend and I have invented a game for getting through dull dinner-parties without being bored. We each try to get the man who takes us in to mention certain things, and the one who does it first wins. Now do you see ?

MR. D. (*amused*). Perfectly. And I must congratulate you on a most ingenious device for avoiding boredom.

Miss B. *Isn't* it ? But this evening Miss Purefoy (my friend's name, you know) won in a perfect canter. By two salted almonds !

MR. D. By two——?

Miss B. We use them to score with, you know. That is, when there *are* any. There generally are—but bread pills will do instead. And, as soon as each of the three things is mentioned, one of us puts an almond where it can catch the other's eye.

MR. D. And is it allowable to ask what those three things *were*, on this particular occasion ?

Miss B. Let me see. The first was " Wigs," the second " Zebras," and—what was the third ? Oh, / know, " Typewriters." And just imagine! Miss Purefoy managed to make *her* partner mention all three before dinner was half over. It's a record !

MR. D. (*acidly*). Miss Purefoy must be a young lady of quite exceptional ability.

AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE

MISS B. She did awfully well at Newnham in the History Tripos. Still, I expect whoever took her in this evening must have been—well, *rather* a duffer. I couldn't see who it was, because of the flowers between us. I wonder if *you* noticed, and could point him out to me?

MR. D. *{stiffly}*. I'm afraid it is not in my power to oblige you.

[He takes his leave as soon as he can, without making any further attempts to stimulate the intelligence of Miss IMOGEN PUREFOY.]

2. At a Moments Notice

|

NOTHING could have been more unexpected. If any fellow had met me as I was leaving my rooms, and told me what sort of day I was in for, my reply to him would have been "Liar!" But he'd have been right all the same.

I was due to lunch with Monty Blundell at his Club, and started to walk, but when I got into Piccadilly I found I was beastly late. It's funny, but, though I haven't anything in particular to do, I generally *am* beastly late for most things. So of course I had to call a hansom. It struck me, as I told the Johnny across the roof to drive like the very deuce to the Junior Beaufort Club, that he was a trifle glassy in the eye and white about the gills, and he was driving a chestnut that seemed to have got a bit out of hand. But I was in a hurry, and we were off at a canter before I had time to do more than tumble in anyhow and hope for the best. The canter quickened up into a gallop very soon, and, at the top of St. James's Street, the gallop became an unmistakable bolt. I saw the cabbies on the stand running to their horses' nosebags, and everybody skipping out of our road, and I sat as tight as I knew and prepared for

SALTED ALMONDS

trouble. The gate of St. James's Palace was open, and I rather expected to find myself put down there, where of course they weren't expecting me—but the cabman managed to slew round somehow into Pall Mall. There was a piano-organ just ahead with a monkey on top, and I made sure we should bowl over the entire show in another second. But there had been some rain, and the going was greasy, so, just before we overtook it, there was a slither, a tremendous crash, followed by fireworks . . . and the next thing I knew I was standing looking on from a distance, feeling rather muzzy, but otherwise quite all right.

The usual crowd had sprung up, as if through star-traps in the road. They got the chestnut on his legs, looking as if he was beginning to suspect he had made a fool of himself ; the driver, too, appeared to be none the worse, and was being questioned by a constable, who did not seem to show him all the sympathy he expected.

I was rather puzzled, though, when I saw them lifting a young fellow up and carrying him off to the nearest chemist's. He was evidently the fare, and, up to then, I had been under the impression that it was *my* accident. I saw now it couldn't have been, since there I was, looking on. But, from a glimpse I caught of him in passing, I had an idea I'd met him somewhere or other, and I wondered whether I oughtn't to go and see if there was anything I could do for him. I knew the chemist very well, having often looked in there for a pick-me-up.

Still, if I did, I should be later than ever for that appointment—whatever it was, for I couldn't recollect it for the moment. Besides, now I came to think, I couldn't really have recognised him, he was much too muddy ; it was only his overcoat, which happened to be of much the same pattern as the one I had on. I glanced at my coat-sleeve to make sure of this—and then I made a perfectly fearful discovery. It wasn't so much that I wasn't wearing any overcoat, because it was a mild spring morning, and I'd hesitated for some time whether

I hadn't better leave it at home. It was the suit I was in. I take a lot of pains over choosing my clothes, and I think I'm entitled to call myself a well-turned-out man. So it was a most awful shock to find that I had come out—in Pall Mall too—in a lounge suit of red and blue plaid with black braid round the cuffs ! I couldn't think what had induced me to order such things—or, for that matter, my tailor to make them. / should have thought he'd sooner have died.

While I was wondering, a tambourine was suddenly shoved under my nose. I never encourage street music at any time, and I was certainly not in the humour for it just then, so I pushed the tambourine away—not over civilly, I dare say—and it fell into the gutter. On this the person with the tambourine caught me a downright nasty clip on the side of my head.

I was just hesitating whether to call a constable and give the bounder in charge, or risk a row by knocking him down—he seemed rather below my height—when I happened to notice what queer gloves I'd got on instead of my ordinary white buckskins. I do occasionally wear grey reindeer—but these were so beastly hairy.

Feeling more upset than ever, I put my hand to my head, and found I was wearing, very much on one side, a small round cap fastened under the chin by elastic. This I took off and examined closely ; it had no hatter's name printed inside, and seemed to be of some regimental pattern, perhaps the latest War Office improvement. Now, except that I did once join a Volunteer corps for a short time (and might have stuck it, if they'd only let me take my poodle into camp with me), I never was what you might call a military man, and even if I had been I shouldn't parade Pall Mall in an undress cavalry cap. It was so utterly unlike me !

And then I suddenly remembered my engagement—and the thought of it made me feel prickly all over.

I was lunching with Monty Blundell at the Junior Beaufort Club, where he had promised to put me up for

SALTED ALMONDS

election—and I'd actually, for some reason or other which was beyond me, proposed to go there like this !

For all I knew, Monty might have asked some influential fellows on the Committee to meet me—and what on earth would they think of a candidate who was capable of turning up on such an occasion in dittoes of some beastly loud tartan ? I should be pilled to a dead certainty ! It wasn't fair on old Monty either, who's even more particular, if possible, about clothes than I am. Altogether the best thing to do was to slip quietly back to my rooms while I could, and pretend afterwards that the engagement had slipped my memory.

I'd have done it, too—but unfortunately it was just too late. I'd been moving slowly along Pall Mall all this while without noticing, and when I looked up, there was I, right under the Club windows, and there was Monty, evidently on the look-out for me ! I caught his eye, and I thought I saw him nod cheerily in return. After all, if *he* didn't see anything to object to in my get-up, why should / ? So long as a fellow looks a gentleman and all that, he can carry off the rummest sort of clothes. I'd forgotten that for the moment.

Anyhow, I couldn't get oat of it now. So I waved to him in an airy kind of manner, as much as to say : " Got here at last, dear old chap. Awfully sorry I'm so late. Explain everything when I get in." Though how the deuce I was going to explain, I'd no idea. And I admit I rather funk'd passing the hall-porter and the page-boys—not to mention the Club waiters in their black knee-breeches and silk stockings.

However, Blundell didn't answer my signal ; he simply stared at me as if he'd never seen me before in all his life, and then turned away. There couldn't be a neater cut. And really, now I come to think of it, I couldn't blame him. It is enough to put the best-tempered chap off when he asks a fellow to lunch at his Club (and an exclusive Club too, mind you—not a pot-

house !) and a fellow actually drives up to the door on top of a piano-organ !

For that was where I *was*—though somehow I hadn't given it a thought before. That explained why I felt taller than usual, and—just here my conveyance gave a lurch, and, as I steadied myself, I caught a glimpse between my legs of something long and greyish and hairy, like a lady's boa which had seen better days—and it flashed upon me suddenly that there could be only one explanation of my situation. . . .

I dare say I ought to have realised it long before, but when a fellow has just been shot out of a hansom like a clay pigeon out of a trap, it's generally some time before he's able to make out exactly *where* he is.

Now⁷ I understood. That young fellow I had seen being carried off to the chemist's round the corner was myself after all. But he was far beyond the aid of any pick-me-up. The vital principle, or intelligence, or whatever you choose to call it, which had inhabited the body of Reginald Baltimore, had already quitted it, and was now occupying this little beast of a monkey. Perhaps there was nowhere else for it to go to just then—and I remember noticing at the time that the monkey's mouth was ajar—perhaps it was even betting on the cab-horse. I don't know, and I must leave it to the scientific Johnnies to explain exactly how it happened. It *had* happened—and that was enough for me.

And really, you know, to come in at one end of Pali Mall in a hansom cab as a well-groomed young bachelor, and to come out at the other as a shockingly-dressed monkey on a piano-organ, is one of those blows which would knock most men out of their stride, for a time at all events.

II

As I said before, it must naturally be a nasty jar for any fellow to find himself suddenly reduced, through no fault of his own, to the position of a monkey on a

SALTED ALMONDS

piano-organ. And I don't mind admitting that, for a moment or two, I was what you might call in the cart. After that, oddly enough, I began to see that in some ways it was almost a relief. For one thing, I didn't feel nearly such a fool.

You see, for a man who prides himself on dressing correctly, it's impossible to feel at ease in Pall Mall with nothing on but a plaid tunic fastened up the back with mother-o'-pearl buttons, and a frill round the neck. But, for a monkey, it's quite correct kit—if it isn't actually classy. And I hadn't got to lunch at the Junior Beaufort in it either, which was a let-off.

Another thing: without being what you would call extravagant, I never have been able to live within my income. Consequently my affairs had got into a regular beastly mess. I was simply up to my neck in money worries of all kinds. Well, I was out of them all now. Nobody would dream of serving *me* with a writ.

Again, I'd every reason to suppose that the Reggie Ballimore of old must have pegged out—or else I shouldn't be where I was. But I was alive at all events—and that's something. Isn't there a proverb about a live monkey being better than a dead policeman? So altogether I bucked up sooner than might have been expected.

I didn't attempt to leave the organ. To tell you the truth, it wouldn't have been any good, as I was attached to the confounded instrument by a stoutish cord and a leather belt round my waist.

Nor yet, though, as we passed down Pall Mall, I met several men I knew, did I hail them and explain the fix I was in. What was the use? The right words wouldn't come; I didn't understand what I said myself, so how could I expect anyone else to? Besides, I'd a sort of feeling that it wouldn't be quite Cricket. I know / shouldn't have cared to be appealed to as an old pal by a monkey on an organ.

No, since that was what I had come down to, it seemed to me that the manly thing to do was to grin and bear it

—to play the monkey, in short, for all it was worth. People were always telling me I ought to make a fresh start, and do something for my living. Now perhaps they would be satisfied !

There was just one thing, though, that caused me a pang when I remembered it. This change in my mode of life would prevent me from dining at my Aunt Selina's that evening. She didn't often ask me, and when she did I seldom went—for her parties are, as a rule, devilish dull. But somehow I had been rather looking forward to this particular dinner. My cousin Phyllis would be there now—which made all the difference. She only came out last year, and, so I understand, with considerable success. I know I saw her described as " the lovely Miss Adeane " in the Society journals, and as being present at every smart party of the season. I only met her very occasionally, but she seemed to me no end improved since I remembered her in a pigtail—in fact, she'd grown into an absolute ripper—though perhaps a little bit above herself, inclined to be airified, if you know what I mean.

She hadn't taken much notice of me, so far—seemed indeed to consider I had become rather a piffler. But I'd been hoping that I might sit next to her, perhaps even take her in to dinner that evening. Then I could let her see that there was a more serious side to my character than I chose to show the world. Of course, all that was out of the question now.

No matter ! I might have been a failure as a man—but, hang it all ! with my education and intelligence, any monkey ought to have a fine career before it ! Pall Mall—as the couple of idiots with my piano-organ might have known—is a most unsuitable place for a street performance, but, as soon as we were permitted to halt without being moved on, I was determined to show the public that I was a cut above the ordinary professional.

I should have preferred Trafalgar Square as a pitch, but my two ruffians took me up a small lane near the

SALTED ALMONDS

National Gallery and across Coventry Street into Soho, and I didn't get a chance of displaying my abilities till we stopped in a slum off Wardour Street.

My idea was to surprise the audience by giving them a cake-walk, in which I hoped to make some sensation. But it didn't come off, somehow. It wasn't nervousness exactly—that would have been ridiculous when they were all so young. I fancy the cord hampered me, and my tail kept getting in the way, too—and then the tunes I was expected to dance to ! I've noticed that a monkey generally has rather poor luck in the music he's sent out with, and I'll defy anyone to cake-walk to "*Jerusalem* " or "*Killarney* " and put any kind of " go " into it.

So I gave it up, and just jumped about anyhow, accompanying myself on the tambourine. But the bally tambourine had two of the jingling thingummies missing and *wouldn't* keep time. I don't believe I got much more music out of it than an ordinary monkey would have, I really don't.

However, my chance came presently. One of the organ Johnnies handed me up a little wooden musket. " What-oh ! " I said to myself. " Now I'll open their eyes ! " For of course you can't be in a Volunteer corps, even for a short time, without knowing more about the manual exercise than your average monkey.

I had got rustier in the drill than I thought, and besides it was a rotten little rifle to handle when you're so long in the arms, and haven't learnt to control them completely. Still, it was a fairly creditable performance, and improved with practice, though quite thrown away on such audiences as I had.

Not that I was a failure—don't imagine that for a moment. I should think I took at least thirteen half-pence in the first ten minutes—more than I had ever earned before in all my life ! But it went rather against the grain to take the money—especially from some poor little beggar who obviously belonged to quite the lower orders. I should like to have said, " Don't you be a

young ass—run away and spend your halfpenny on sweets instead of squandering it on these lazy bounders ! " But whenever I did reject a copper I got a tug at the belt that nearly cut me in two.

I should say we gave a *matinee* that afternoon in every street in Soho. I was getting quite knocked up, for I had had no lunch. At least I don't call half a cracknel biscuit and the over-ripe end of a banana " lunch " myself. Monty would have done me to rights at the Junior Beaufort.

We stopped at last outside a small public just off Oxford Street, and my men went inside for refreshment. They might have thought of sending me out a whisky - and-soda—but not *they* ! So I sat on the top of the piano in the sunshine, keeping a wary eye on my tail, which some of the little brutes of children thought it funny to pull.

When we moved off again in the direction of the Marble Arch, I felt more cheerful. Thank Heaven ! we had got back into a civilised region again. There would be people there capable of appreciating real talent when they saw it. Suppose—only suppose—some music-hall manager happened to be in the crowd and offered me an engagement ? Why not ? I *ought* to be able to wear evening clothes, order a little dinner, and smoke a cigar on the stage better than a common Chimpanzee who'd never done the real thing in any kind of society !

Great Scot ! I might be earning my hundred quid a week before long—which I should never have done as Reggie Ballimore. And I'd always had a hankering after the stage, and should have gone on it long before, if it didn't cut into one's evenings so.

I was still indulging these golden dreams when I was brought up with a round turn. . . . There was a victoria standing outside a glove and fan shop we were coming to, and on the box I recognised Tumbridge, my aunt's coachman. And in the carriage, as I saw when

SALTED ALMONDS

our respective vehicles were alongside, sat my cousin Phyllis, looking simply ripping! Upon my word, I didn't quite know *what* to do. I knew she must have seen me, for she smiled in that perfectly fetching way she has. My hand flew to my hat instinctively, but the infernal elastic made it fly back and catch me on the ear. Then, recollecting myself, I gave what I am afraid was a rather sketchy rendering of a military salute, and at that same instant my aunt came out of the fan and glove shop, followed by an assistant with parcels. I felt most beastly awkward—I all but lost my head—and wished more than ever that the frill round my neck had been a trifle cleaner.

But *something* had to be done, and, as luck would have it, I was still carrying the little wooden musket. So, as my aunt was about to step into the carriage, I presented arms.

It was a jolly decent "present/" too—though I say it myself!

III

"O Mums!" cried my cousin Phyllis, with that impulsive enthusiasm of hers which some people—not myself—say is all put on, "do look at this *sweet* little monkey on the organ! *Isn't* he deevie?"

"Deevie" is, I believe, short for "divine" with certain sets. I wouldn't mind betting that Phyllis had never applied such a term to me before.

My aunt didn't seem impressed by my deeviness just then. She examined me through a pair of long-handled glasses, which always had the effect of making me feel rather a worm. On this occasion I dropped feebly on all-fours.

"Since you ask me, Phyllis," said my aunt, "I think he's a frightful little object!" Which was my poor dear aunt all over—never *could* make the slightest allowances for me!

"I call him perfectly twee!" persisted Phyllis.

AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE

(I don't know what " twee " stands for exactly—but something deuced complimentary.) " Only see how prettily he's scratching his ducky little ear." (This was a bad habit I had been trying all the afternoon to correct.) " He's quite too trotty for words. I wonder if those two nice men would part with him ? "

" My dear Phyllis ! " exclaimed my aunt, stepping into the victoria. " Are you *quite* mad ? Home, Charles."

" No, wait, Charles," said Phyllis, as he was about to touch his hat and mount the box by Tumbridge's side. " Darling Mums, I'm quite serious—I am, *really*. And you know we've no pet ever since poor *Cockie* died." (*Cockie* was a white cockatoo, and I could understand from what I remembered of him that they would be glad of a little peace.) " I *must* just see if they will sell him."

Even as a child Phyllis generally got her own way. Now she had come out, everybody—my aunt included—knocked under to her at once if she was at all keen on anything. It saved time.

Phyllis opened negotiations at once. Fortunately she had no difficulty in making herself understood, as the two sportsmen who ran my show happened to be British artisans of sorts who, being presumably thrown out of employment by foreign competition, had adopted this means of Retaliation.

But as a crowd had already collected, a constable promptly appeared, and, with a civility paid rather to my aunt's conveyance than my own, requested us to move on and not obstruct the traffic.

Aunt Selina would have driven off and left me to my fate, but Phyllis wouldn't hear of it, so the disgusted Tumbridge had to turn up a small and unfrequented street close by, followed by me and the piano-organ, and the crowd, which by this time was taking a deep interest in my future.

Phyllis is a most awfully charming girl, but a poor hand at monkey-buying—much too eager. Even those too utter outsiders spotted at once that she had set her

SALTED ALMONDS

heart on getting me, and piled it on accordingly. I'd no idea before how fond they were of me—it appeared I was the sunbeam of their cheerless-homes, the darling of Joe's missus, the playfellow of Bill's offspring.

" Really, Phyllis," said my downy aunt, " I think it would be too cruel to deprive the poor men of such a pet."

I *knew* the idiots would muff it! and, in my despair, I hit my tambourine a vicious bang.

" Yer see, lydy," explained Bill, " my kids and his missus 'd be on'y too thankful to 'ear as poor *Jocko* 'ad found a good 'ome where he'd be took proper care on. For, I tell yer strite, we can't feed 'im, not like the likes of 'im had orter be fed, bein' so dellikit."

" My mate means a dellikit *feeder* " put in Joe hastily, " and, bein' outer work, we can't git him luxuries and relishes like we did in 'appier times."

It's my belief that precious pair of humbugs had never seen me till that morning, when they had probably hired me for the day with the organ in Leather Lane or Saffron Hill. All this took time, and I could see that Aunt Selina was getting a bit restive ; even Phyllis seemed to find the publicity and notice she was attracting rather more than she had bargained for.

It isn't every day a London crowd has the excitement of seeing a sumptuously-attired young person in a victoria trying to buy a monkey at a fancy figure off an organ, so she was immensely popular. Several of her admirers urged my proprietors to " let the young lydy 'ave the monkey cheap as she'd took sech a fancy for it," though there were one or two soured socialists who cried " Shame ! " on the idle aristocracy which was trying to deprive two poor hard-working men of their only bread-winner.

As for me, I was powerless. I could only sit and look on from the top of my pedestal like some classical Johnny in a melodrama being put up to auction as a Greek slave. Except that whenever I thought Phyllis was beginning to

weaken, I tried to revive her enthusiasm by rattling the tambourine.

Perhaps that just turned the scale. Anyhow, she got me at last. What she actually paid for me I don't know—but I've no doubt it was a long way above the market value for a monkey, of whatever breed I belonged to. To be sure, I had talents and intelligence denied to any monkey—but then neither of the parties suspected that as yet.

There wasn't enough in the purse which Phyllis took out of her dainty wrist-bag to make up the purchase-money. She was obliged to borrow from my aunt, and even from the blushing Charles, before my ransom was finally paid in full.

My aunt declined to have me on the little *strapontin* seat in front. As a matter of fact I had been there before, more than once—and a jolly uncomfortable perch it was, too. Still, I'm bound to say I didn't altogether blame her just then.

So, when we drove off amidst loud cheers, which I do not think were intended altogether in chaff, I was on the box, sitting bodkin between Charles and Tumbridge, who were distinctly shirty at having to drive home through the Park with such a companion.

At least so I gathered from the subdued remarks they exchanged above my inoffensive head. Till then I had always thought Tumbridge and Charles such respectable men !

Much I cared for their opinions ! I had got a rise in the world already, and in a quarter I little expected. I wonder what they would have said if they had known who the quiet, unassuming-looking monkey that was sharing the box-seat with them really was, or guessed that if I blinked my eyes it was merely because I was dazzled by the brilliancy of the future that seemed within my grasp.

Naturally they couldn't know all that—and perhaps it was just as well they didn't.

IV

As we bowled swiftly along past Hyde Park Corner, Albert Gate, and the Cavalry Barracks, my brain was working busily on the problem of how to carry out my idea of going on the Variety Stage and knocking spots out of the ignorant apes which were being palmed off on a credulous Public as "educated."

Now I really was educated, having been at a well-known Public School—at two of them, for that matter ! And if an ordinary baboon can earn the screw of a Cabinet Minister or a Judge by simply appearing on the stage for a few minutes, and giving a clumsy imitation of some outsider's notion of a man-about-town, what mightn't / expect ?

Without being a positive Paderewski, I could pick out several tunes by ear on the piano ; I could play billiards, and bridge, too—I won't say well, but marvelously for a monkey !

The only rock ahead I saw was Phyllis. She mightn't like the notion of any monkey of hers performing nightly at the Palace or the Empire. She might consider it would deprive her of most of the advantage of my society. I decided not to spring the idea on her all at once, but accustom her to it by degrees.

First of all, she would naturally notice a sort of distinction about me ; she would realise that I possessed a tact and *savoirfaire*, an ease of manner which no piano-organ can impart. Then, when she had learnt to respect me, I could reveal my accomplishments gradually, one by one, and she would have to admit that such talents as mine ought not to be wasted in obscurity—they belonged not to her, but to the whole World !

It was a bit of a bunker that, as yet, I could not talk intelligibly—but I was sure to hit upon some method of conveying my ideas before long—and then I could inform Phyllis that I had quite made up my mind to go on the stage.

AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE

She was too sensible to stand in my way—especially if I offered her a commission on my salary—say ten per cent., which, even if I was making no more than two hundred a week, would be a welcome addition to her pocket-money.

Should I ever reveal to her the secret of my identity ? It would be a temptation some day to let her know that the brilliant and wealthy monkey who was the darling of Society and the idol of the Public had once been her rather shiftless and unsatisfactory cousin Reginald. Still, perhaps it was better she should never suspect the truth. It would put the family in a deuced awkward position. No, Reggie Baltimore was better dead. I would use his dead self, as some poet-Johnny (Milton, isn't it ? or Shakespeare ?) puts it, " as a step-ladder to something higher."

By the time I had come to this decision, the carriage stopped at my aunt's house in Cadogan Gardens—and I shall never forget Macrow the butler's face as Charles handed me to him by the scruff of my neck.

" It is Miss Phyllis's monkey, Macrow," explained my aunt, with an anxiety to disown all responsibility for me that was not flattering. " And, Phyllis, dearest, if you *insist* on having it in the drawing-room, hadn't you better——? "

I failed to catch the rest, but Phyllis replied, " Well, perhaps it *might* be as well. Macrow, will you take him to Friswell, please, and ask her to—to wash him for me and send him into the drawing-room ? "

Friswell, I fancy, was not altogether chummy with Macrow just then ; at all events she told him it was " no part of *her* work to bath a little beast of a monkey," and recommended him strongly to do it himself.

But he turned me over to the under scullery-maid instead—and even *she* was sniffy about it.

To be held under a tap in a sink, soused with cold water, and scrubbed with beastly yellow soap and a most infernal hard brush, is not exactly the kind of treat—
Si,"

SALTED ALMONDS

ment I was accustomed to, even under my aunt's roof—but I showed no resentment. I thought I probably required it.

It was over at last, and in a condition of almost offensive cleanliness [I loathe the smell of yellow soap myself—so depressing !] I was carried upstairs and deposited outside the drawing-room door, which Macrow opened for me.

My little plaid tunic had been burnt, so I had absolutely nothing on but the leather belt. One can't get rid of one's prejudices all at once, and though I knew that even this costume wouldn't be considered at all *outré* in my present case, I did feel just a little bit shy about going in. After all, though, I was one of the family, and I resolved to saunter in unconcernedly, as a person who had a right to feel at home.

Whether Nature was too strong for me, or whether I got a gentle push from Macrow's boot, I can't say, but I'm afraid that, as a matter of fact, I shambled in anyhow on all-fours.

" You *can't* say he isn't clean *now*, Mums ! " cried Phyllis. " Isn't he a perfect angel ? I think I must have some new clothes made for him—he'll look frightfully sweet in them ! "

I thought I should look all right if she would only let me go to my own tailor, who, though a trifle too given to press for immediate payment, *does* understand my figure—but how was I to give her his address ? She said a lot more about me, till at last, not being used to such open admiration—especially from her—I began to feel a bit embarrassed ; it was enough to turn most monkeys' heads. To cover my confusion, I wandered round the room, just as I should have done if I had remained my old self, looking at this and that, taking up an article here and there, fingering it, and putting it down again. Then I sat on the music-stool and struck a few careless chords on the piano. I had meant to play them as much as I could remember of the *Choristers' Waltz*, but my fingers

had all got so fumbly that I couldn't raise any tune in particular. But that would come back to me, with practice.

Phyllis was highly amused, at first, by my performance, but she did not appear to think it showed any marked musical ability. If she had, she would not have insisted on my leaving off so soon. Of course a hint from her was enough for me, and I got off the music-stool and retired to a sofa without, I hope, letting her see how deeply she had disappointed me. I took up the nearest Society journal and began to glance through it with a show of interest. Not that I really cared two straws how Lady Honor Hyndlegge's small dance had gone off, or who were letting their houses for Ascot week, or going to have a houseboat at Henley—I seemed now to have got so far beyond all that! But I was determined to make Phyllis understand that I had intellectual tastes.

However, it was a deuced tricky paper to manage—especially as my feet would keep on trying to turn over the pages instead of leaving it to my hands. So I am not sure that Phyllis quite took in the fact that I was actually reading, and, whatever it was I did read, I can't remember a single line of it now.

But all of a sudden, as I sat there, Macrow appeared and announced: "Mr. Blundell"—and sure enough, in walked old Monty, irreproachably got up as usual! I was a bit staggered at first, for I wasn't aware he knew my aunt—/ hadn't introduced him.

Then it struck me *why* he had come. He had heard of my decease, and volunteered to break the sad news to my family. It was pretty decent of him, really—though I would rather it had been anybody else. Because, between ourselves, I wouldn't have trusted dear old Monty to break the death of a bluebottle without managing to fizzle it somehow.

He couldn't see *me* behind the paper, and, as I couldn't be of much assistance to him, I lay doggo, being naturally curious to hear how he would prepare them for the shock,

SALTED ALMONDS

and how they—especially Phyllis—would bear up under it.

V

As it happened, my aunt and Phyllis *had* met Monty already, and evidently imagined he was merely making an ordinary afternoon call. Monty sat down, and asked Phyllis " if she had been in the Park that afternoon "—which struck me as rather a circuitous route to the information that I'd been cut off in the flower of my youth by being pitched out of a cab in Pall Mall. But he went on talking Society drivel for some minutes before my aunt inquired " if he had seen anything lately of her good-for-nothing nephew ? "—meaning *me*.

This of course was Monty's cue—and I poked my head out round the corner of my paper, and nodded hard at him, meaning, " NOW'S your time ! Out with it ! Don't keep 'em in suspense ! Tell 'em the worst ! " I suppose he hadn't noticed me before, and it rather upset him, for he dropped his eyeglass as if it had been red-hot. For the moment, I thought he must have recognised me, without remembering how improbable that was under the circumstances.

" Oddly enough," said Monty, looking everywhere but at me, " I was expecting him to lunch w^rith me at the Club to-day. But he—er—didn't turn up."

" He gets more erratic every day ! " lamented my dear aunt. " He ought to be dining here this evening, and I shall be seriously annoyed if he forgets *that*, as there will be nobody to take in poor Miss Yellowly."

So I was to have taken in Miss Yellowly ! If I had *wanted* anything to reconcile me to what I had become, that would have about done it !

" I suppose he sent you some sort of excuse ? " said Phyllis.

Again I tried to catch Monty's eye and buck him up to tell his news and get it over—but it was no good.

" What ? Reggie ! He's much too casual for that ! "

said Monty. " Likely as not he overslept himself or somethin'."

Now this was too bad of Monty—he knows perfectly well that I hardly ever sit down to breakfast later than half-past twelve ! But I began to see now that he couldn't have heard of my accident after all.

" Disgraceful ! " said my aunt. " At his age, he ought to be ashamed of such lazy, idle habits."

" There's *this* to be said," put in Monty. " Dear old Reggie hasn't anything particular to do when he is up."

" Then he *ought* to have ! " declared my aunt—and Monty agreed with her.

" I'm always tellin' him he doesn't take half enough exercise," he added.

He wouldn't have said that if he had seen me jumping about all the afternoon with that confounded tambourine ! And Monty, too ; who takes all *his* exercise in a motor !

" I didn't mean *exercise*," said Aunt Selina. " I meant *work*. Every young man ought to have some profession."

Monty agreed once more, and said that, for his part, he found being at the Bar had made all the difference to *him*. *What* difference—except knowing that his name was painted up outside some door in Lincoln's Inn which he never by any chance darkened—I fancy Master Monty wouldn't have found it easy to explain. But my aunt said she was glad to think that I had *one* friend who set me a good example, and begged him to look after me as much as possible. To which old Monty, trying to look as like the infant Samuel in plaster as he could at such short notice, replied that she could rely on him to do his best to keep me out of any serious mischief.

The notion of old Monty as my guardian angel was so rich that I couldn't resist grinning at him from behind the journal—and I saw him gasp. No doubt he thought that, for a monkey, I was a trifle over-familiar, but he

SALTED ALMONDS

took no further notice. And my aunt went on slanging me ; I had had every advantage, excellent opportunities of making my own way in the world, and I was so incorrigibly indolent that I had neglected them all—and so forth, all of which I had heard on several previous occasions.

Good old Monty stuck up for me—after a fashion. He didn't think it was *my* fault exactly ; I was a dear good chap—one of the best, in short. It was only that I was naturally too thick to learn anything thoroughly, and in fact, what he might call—if my aunt would forgive the expression—" a born rotter." Aunt Selina didn't object to the expression in the least—in fact, both she and Phyllis appeared to think it hit me off rather neatly. Then they asked if Monty considered I was likely to do better in the Colonies, but Monty thought (and it just shows how little he knows me) that roughing it was not precisely in *my* line of country.

By this time I was, as you may suppose, getting fairly sick of the subject. It wasn't pleasant to feel I was eavesdropping, as it were, and I knew, too, that when they *did* hear that I was scratched for all my engagements, they would be no end sorry they had been so down on me. For myself, of course, I didn't mind a rap. The worse they made Reggie Ballimore out, the more satisfied / felt at being no longer connected with such a waster.

Still, it struck me it was quite time to switch Monty on to some pleasanter topic, so I got quietly down from the sofa, and, stealing up behind his chair, I scratched him gently just above his coat-tail buttons.

He turned sharp round and saw me. I never saw anyone go quite so green before—but he *said* nothing.

" I'm afraid, Mr. Blundell," said my aunt, noticing how he was shifting about in his seat, " that you have chosen rather an uncomfortable chair ? "

Monty said, " Oh, not at all—*most* comfortable," and inquired if Phyllis " had done the Academy yet." Which, as it didn't open for some days, was a silly-ass

AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE

thing to say—even for Monty—but I don't believe he knew precisely what he *was* saying just then.

"Are you *quite* sure the monkey isn't bothering you?" asked Phyllis; "I thought he was on the sofa."

"Oh, then—then *you* noticed it too?" poor old Monty blurted out.

"Why, of course—it's mine," said Phyllis. "I only bought it this afternoon. I hope you've no antipathy to monkeys?"

"Oh, not a bit!" said Monty, beginning to turn a wholesomer colour. "Can't say I ever kept one myself—but awfully fond of them, assure you I am."

On which Phyllis gave the history of my purchase.

"Wish you'd told me you were on the look-out for a monkey, Miss Adeane," said that blundering ass Monty, "because I could have got you one from a man who has some clinkers; real well-bred ones, don't you know—the sort they don't send out with organs!"

Phyllis—bless her!—replied with a slight fall of temperature that she was ^u afraid she preferred to choose her pets for herself, and that I was the only monkey she had ever seen that she could imagine herself caring for in the least."

Which was one in the eye for old Monty! I could afford to despise him now; my position in the household was already secure. Before she was much older, Phyllis would be proud that she "alone had had the insight to detect my marvellous superiority! So, as I sat in one of the window-seats, cooling my tail among the marguerites that filled the flower-box, I allowed myself to dream of my coming glory—till Macrow came in with afternoon tea.

Here, I thought, was a good opportunity to show that I was perfectly familiar with the ordinary social amenities. I was in my aunt's house—almost in the position of host, so to speak—and anyway I wasn't going to let Monty attend to Phyllis's wants while I was there to look after her myself! So I made a bee-line for the tea-table,

SALTED ALMONDS

and got hold of a plate of hot tea-cakes and another of cucumber sandwiches.

Perhaps I was too impetuous ; my wrists were weaker than I had thought, and, as usual, I did not take my tail into consideration. The result was that I not only shot the cakes and cucumber sandwiches over my cousin's charming afternoon frock, but upset the cream-jug into Aunt Selina's lap.

It was awkward, of course—but it might have happened to any fellow without necessarily putting him out of countenance ; it was the kind of thing which a man of the world could pass off easily enough with a graceful apology or a witty remark, and perhaps make a friend for life into the bargain. Only, unfortunately, situated as I was, I could do nothing at all just then except gibber—and I realised that one of the undeniable drawbacks to monkey-existence is that one is so apt to get misunderstood over the merest trifles.

VI

I should say it would be about as much as Aunt Selina's place is worth to speak severely to Phyllis, and, to do her justice, she is far too well-bred a woman to make any visitor feel uncomfortable by ragging her in his presence.

Still, anyone could have seen she was annoyed ; and, while the cream was being spooned out of her lap into a slop-basin, she made remarks on the inconveniences of allowing monkeys to be about at afternoon tea which I, for one, considered most beastly offensive.

And even Phyllis could find no better excuse for me than that I was probably half-starved, and the sight of cucumber sandwiches had proved too much for my manners. Which was too sickening—considering my sole object had been to nip in ahead of Monty in handing the food to her ! And yet people talk rot about " feminine insight " !

But I kept my temper. I merely let them see that I

was hurt by turning my tail on them all, and stalking off to a corner—not, I flatter myself, without a certain dignity. I had had nothing since breakfast, except, as I fancy I mentioned before, a bit of biscuit and a rotten banana—but, after my aunt had called me "a greedy little horror," I could not bring myself to accept one of *her* sandwiches. Not to mention that my doctor has often told me never on any account to *touch* cucumber.

Presently I had what I thought (and still think) a flash of real inspiration. If I couldn't *speak*, by Jove ! I could *spell* ! Rather rockily, perhaps—in fact it was my spelling that *really* spun me in more than one exam.—but still, quite well enough to make myself understood by the meanest intelligence.

All I actually required was some sort of Alphabet. With that I could fix up a few simple sentences and lay them at Phyllis's feet. When she read, for instance, something like this : " Sorry. My mistake. Not Pig. Only Polite. Disguised, but still a Gentleman. Please let me go on the Stage," she would be astonished—but even more touched by my appeal. The problem was, how to get hold of an Alphabet.

Now, though few people give me credit for it, I *have* brains when I choose to exert them—and it didn't take me long to come across the identical thing for my purposes.

For, lying on a chair in the corner, I found a book in a thick leather binding—oldish, I imagined (I must tell you my aunt rather fancies herself as a *Connoisseur*, and of course gets taken in with all manner of worthless old rubbish). But what fetched *me* was the *inside* of the book. On nearly every page there was a big fat capital letter, gilded and painted in a rather gaudy style, much after that of the texts I used to illuminate when I was a good little boy in a holland blouse. If I'd searched for a month I couldn't have got hold of anything more topping !

So I went to work, and soon ferreted out an S, and an O, and then an R—but I couldn't discover another R,

SALTED ALMONDS

and the silly old Johnny who had painted the bally book didn't seem ever to have *heard* of a Y ! However, SORI was correct enough for a monkey, and I tore those letters out—pretty neatly on the whole, for the parchment was devilish tough—and then selected others I was likely to want, keeping as quiet as possible, so as to surprise Phyllis all the more later on.

But that interfering idiot of a Monty spotted me before I was half ready !

" Mischievous little beggars monkeys are," he remarked, " always up to somethin' or other ! "

" *Some* monkeys may be," said Phyllis ; " not *mine*. It wasn't mischief just now—only hunger, poor darling ! "

" Well, but I *say*" persisted Monty, " he's busy tearin' up some paper now, with pictures in it, too ! "

" Oh, I expect it's only *Punch*" said Phyllis, without looking round. " It doesn't matter, because we've *seen* that—at least we've looked at the pictures, you know."

Monty said he never saw *Punch* himself—it didn't amuse him, somehow—still, he might be mistaken, but he'd a sort of idea that it hadn't gone in yet for giving *coloured* illustrations. That fetched them all up to see what I was about, and then my aunt gave a kind of scream: " Good gracious, Phyllis ! " she cried, " the miserable little wretch has got hold of that book of ours " (or she may have said " *Hours*,"—*I don't know*) " which Professor Peagram kindly lent me to look at. And he's tearing it all to pieces ! "

AH Phyllis said to me was, " O Monkey !—*Monkey* ! " But even as I still frantically tried to deal her out an S and an O and an R, this gentle reproof cut me to the quick.

" What *shall* I say to the poor dear Professor ? " wailed my aunt. " A valuable MS. like that! And when he was hoping the British Museum might buy it, too ! "

" Afraid they won't give him much for it *now*" said Monty, inspecting the fragments through his glass. " Monkey's taken a lot off the value already i "

AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE

" Mums, *darling* ! " put in Phyllis. " It was only his *play* ! And really, it was a good deal *your* fault, you know ! You shouldn't leave such things about ! The poor monkey couldn't possibly know what he was doing ! "

" It's high time he was taught," said my aunt grimly. On which Monty volunteered the opinion that " a good licking would be a lesson to me."

" I won't *have* him whipped ! " declared Phyllis. " He knows already that he's done wrong. Only *look* at him ! " [I dare say I *did* look pretty abject—for I really was rather annoyed with myself.] " And *Til* pay for it, out of my allowance ! "

" As I believe the Professor gave some hundreds of pounds for it at Sotheby's, Phyllis," retorted Aunt Selina, " it may be some little time before you are able to make up the amount."

Of course I shouldn't allow her to do anything of the sort; I would take the entire responsibility on myself! After all, what would a few hundreds matter to *me*, as soon as I got that engagement at the Palace or the Hippodrome?

" Fact of the matter is, Miss Adeane," said dear Monty, " you'll never feel safe with a little beast like that about. I should advise you to get rid of it. If you're really *keen* on having a monkey, I can get you one with no nonsense about it—as quiet and well-behaved as any poodle. Only got to say the word, don't you know."

" I thought I told you before," said Phyllis, looking all the jollier in a bait, " that the word is ' No,' Mr. Blundell. Do you *quite* understand ? No—no—*no* ! And if you persist in pressing any more monkeys on me which I don't want, I shall be really vexed ! "

But old Monty wouldn't take a hint; he seemed bent on crabbing my chances if he could—and we'd always been such pals too !

" What I mean to say is," he went on, " if you *must* keep a monkey, why not a *healthy* one ? I don't set up

SALTED ALMONDS

for a judge of 'em myself, but even / can see the little beggar is about as rickety as he can be."

"He *isn't*!" said Phyllis indignantly. "And if he is, he can be cured. And he *shall*, too!"

"I should have said he was too far gone myself," said Monty. "Besides, I fancy he's got something worse the matter, if you ask *me*."

"I *don't* ask you," said Phyllis. "What else do you think he's got?"

"Oh, I may be wrong," said Monty. "Hope so, I'm sure. But those pink patches under the skin, eh? Look to me like—well—like the beginning of—er—*mange*, don't you know?"

"O Mr. Blundell! Not *really*?" cried Phyllis.

But I could see that her ideal of me had received its first serious shock.

"I could have told you better if he'd been a fox-terrier," said Monty. "Still, if I were you, I'd have in a vet. Nasty thing, *mange*!"

"Horrible!" said Phyllis, with a shudder. "But no. I *won't* believe it's anything so unpleasant!"

"I always abstain, on principle, my dear, as you know," observed my aunt, "from saying anything so *banal* as 'I told you so.' Otherwise I should be tempted to ask what else you could possibly *expect* from a piano-organ!"

The suddenness of the accusation had completely floored me. It was so beastly unjust too! What on earth did an unmitigated ass like Monty know about *mange*! I admit that I may have been a trifle flushed in places. What fellow *wouldn't* be, I'd like to know, after being scrubbed with such a confounded hard brush as I had been!

Still, I was determined to keep myself under control—to meet this terrible charge with the calm consciousness of innocence.

A hero in a melodrama, when accused by the villain of something he hasn't done, only has to stand in the lime-

AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE

light, with his right hand raised to the ceiling, and shout : " I call upon the Eternal Justice to decide between that Man and Me ! " (or some such remark). And that brings the curtain down.

But I had no speech and no limelight. There wasn't even a curtain that would come down. I can assure you that just then I jolly well wished there *had* been one, if it would only have put an end to my trying situation.

VII

I had put up with a good deal. I had heard Monty discuss the Reggie Baltimore that was, and give him away with a pound of tea, so to speak—and I hadn't turned a hair. The coming Variety Star, " the Unparalleled Phenomenon of Simian Intelligence " (as they would probably announce me in the advertisements), was infinitely above such paltry detractors.

But now, not content with running me down as the man I had ceased to be, he had done his best to disenchant Phyllis with me in my *present* shape ; he had made the one insinuation which no sensitive monkey with the spirit of a sick caterpillar could take lying down—he had charged me with showing symptoms of incipient—I can hardly bring myself to mention the beastly word, but I must—mange !

Yet, sorely as I was provoked, I still struggled to be calm. I recollected that I was a Gentleman first, a Monkey afterwards. I would not condescend to a vulgar brawl with Monty in the presence of my aunt and Phyllis.

I simply looked him straight in the face, my chest heaving with indignation, my eyes flashing (naturally I couldn't see them doing it, but I've no doubt whatever that they *did* flash), and my teeth chattering with righteous wrath.

And Monty was unable to meet my eyes.

" I say, Miss Adeane," he stammered, " I — I don't quite like the look of this monkey. Seems to me he's

SALTED ALMONDS

turnin' nasty. D'you think he's quite safe, loose like this ? "

" He was as quiet as possible only a minute or two ago," faltered Phyllis.

" He was busy tearing up the professor's manuscript *then*" said my aunt. " But of course, Phyllis, if you consider he should be given every facility for further mischief, / have nothing to say."

" Perhaps," Phyllis admitted reluctantly, " it *might* be better to—to keep him on a chain in future."

" He'd soon slip *that*" said Monty; " monkeys are so artful. If I might suggest, Miss Adeane, / should put him in a cage. Then, don't you see—supposing he's really got the ma——"

" Yes—yes," said Phyllis petulantly. " But you see, Mr. Blundell, we haven't *got* a cage ! "

" But, my dear," put in my aunt, " we *have*. He could have poor *Cookie's*—the very thing ! I'll ring for Macrow and tell him to find it and bring it here." Which she did, promptly.

Of course I saw^r at once that this would about biff me. What earthly chance should I have to exhibit all my accomplishments then ? Why, the Admirable Crichton himself couldn't have gained any reputation worth mentioning inside a cockatoo's cage ! I decided to " off " it while I could—but Monty was too smart for me. " Shut the windows, quick ! " he yelled—and they were shut before I could decide which one to make for !

" Perhaps I'd better catch hold of him," that officious ass next suggested. " Or he might bolt through your butler's legs, don't you know, the minute the door is opened."

" Oh, *do* be careful, dear Mr. Blundell," my aunt entreated ; " he might bite you."

" I'm not afraid of him," declared Monty, wishing to show off before Phyllis. " Still, I'll try coaxing first. Poo' little chappie then," he began, snapping his foolish thumb and finger at me, " come along, good little mannie ! " . . .

AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE

I came along. I shinned up Monty's lovely fawn-coloured waistcoat with a suddenness that took his wind ; I smacked his flabby cheeks ; I wrung his nose ; I boxed his ears ; I hung on behind and helped myself to his hair by the handful—I'm afraid I even *bit* him ! But, after all, what's the good of being a monkey unless you act up to it ?

For quite a couple of minutes I simply gave old Monty beans. And I don't think he could have cut a very heroic figure in Phyllis's eyes as he hopped about the room, howling, " Take the little devil off me, somebody, do ! " If she'd had just a shade more sense of humour she would have roared—but, so far as I was able to notice, she was more alarmed than amused just then.

At this stage of the proceedings, Macrow turned up with the parrot-cage. I tried to dodge past him—but he shut the door just in time. So I made a spring for the mantelpiece. Aunt Selina rather goes in for old china, and there were cups and plates and things up each side of the overmantel on brackets, which made a ripping ladder. I discovered I was a nailer at climbing, and the crockery came in useful to keep Monty and Macrow in check for a while.

They tell you monkeys *can't* shy—I only know / could. I doubled up Macrow with a bit of Old Staffordshire, which caught him just under his silver watch-chain, and I landed Monty in the jaw with a well-delivered lustre milkpot, and again with an Urbino plate on the shin—all three really pretty shots ! Even if Phyllis and my aunt had come within range (which they took jolly good care not to do), I shouldn't have hurt either of them—not even my aunt. I was not making war on women !

However, my ammunition ran short at last, and, when Macrow slipped out and returned with a long-handled broom, I saw I couldn't hold the position against such overwhelming odds, and should have to quit. So I made a flying leap for a *console-table* between the windows,

SALTED ALMONDS

where I found a fresh supply of projectiles—chiefly Dresden ware, if I remember right—till I was forced to retreat up the curtains and along the pole, Macrow jobbing at me with the beastly broom, and Monty buzzing books after me—any one of which would have done my business if they hadn't gone through the windows instead.

Then I took a daring dive off the pole, on to my aunt's back—I was sorry, but she shouldn't have got in my way—and leap-frogged over her head on to the piano, which I defended as long as I could with the flower-vases and photograph-frames.

Take it altogether, it was one of the very finest rags I ever had in my life, and under happier circumstances I should have thoroughly enjoyed it. But the top of the piano was too exposed to the enemy's fire, so I retired into entrenchments underneath, where they could only dislodge me by a frontal attack.

It made me realise once more that my volunteer training had not been entirely thrown away! Macrow advanced in force with the drawing-room tongs, while Monty directed operations from a distance. I knew Macrow, of course, and if only I'd had half a sovereign in my pocket, I believe I could have squared him, even then—but I hadn't so much as a pocket! A similar reason prevented me from hoisting a white handkerchief and proposing an honourable surrender. And I had fallen into the common military mistake of leaving my rear insufficiently protected. The consequence was that, with no warning whatever, a waste-paper basket was clapped down on me from behind by hands which I recognised only too well through the wicker-work—Phyllis has rather jolly hands. I don't say it wasn't plucky of her, for she couldn't *know* that nothing would ever induce me to bite *her* fingers. Still, it was not the act of a sportswoman. And that *she* should turn against me was a knock-out blow! After *that* there was nothing for it but to let myself be ignominiously hustled into

AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE

Cockle's confounded cage. How I wished I could recover my speech, for even a moment—and then somehow, all at once, back it came with a rush! "You're making a great mistake!" I managed to articulate, quite distinctly. "Telephone Manager Empire come immediately. Important business proposal!"

I dare say they were slightly astonished, but I can't say. Because just then my head began to swim, everything got dark—I suppose I must have gone off.

When I opened my eyes, a strange man—evidently the Empire Manager—was bending over me. "I want engagement," I said eagerly. "Cleverest Monkey in Universe. Tremendous draw. Will take a hundred a week to start with!"

"Coming round at last," he said to a young lady, who, I now saw, was not Phyllis, being in a nurse's uniform. "But still wandering."

I found I was lying in bed in the accident ward of St. George's Hospital, and the stranger was not a Variety Manager—merely the house-surgeon. Also I was no longer a monkey—which was beastly disappointing at first.

It seemed that that cab accident had given me severe concussion of the brain, but I had not lost my *life*—only my *consciousness* for several hours. And, as it is obvious that anything, even when lost, is bound to be *somewhere* or other all the time, my consciousness must have got mislaid for a while inside the monkey.

I have been moved to my own rooms, and am told I shall be as right as rain in another day or two. I am well enough already to dictate my adventures to the trained nurse who looks after me—and most awfully kind and attentive and all that she is, too, though she *will* go off into fits of giggles every now and then for no reason that I can see!

Old Monty has called once or twice—but, to tell you the truth, after what has passed between us, I haven't

SALTED ALMONDS

felt quite up to seeing him yet. As soon as I am fit enough and can raise the funds, I mean to go quite away and lead an entirely new life. *Where*, I haven't decided yet. Canada, most likely—or Monte Carlo.

I am not sure whether I shall have the courage to call and say good-bye to Phyllis and Aunt Selina before I start. That drawing-room in Cadogan Gardens would be rather too full of painful reminiscences—if you know what I mean.

And, for another thing, I own I shirk hearing what became of the monkey.

Now I look back on it, it seems curious that, with all my accomplishments and knowledge of the world and so on, I should only have managed to land that monkey in a worse hat than I found him in.

But I've always had the most rotten luck—*wherever* I've been—and so I suppose the poor little beggar got let in for some of it !

3. "*As the Twig is Bent . . .*" &c.

(*A Domestic Dialogue*)

CENE—*Library in the Town-house of* PETER SLACKSOLE, ESQ. (*of* SLACKSOLE & SCRYMGEOUR, *Drysalters, Bishopsgate Street*).

TIME—*About 7 P.M. towards the end of May.*

MR. SLACKSOLE (*alone to himself*). I must put my foot down ! I'm *determined* not to—— (*starts as door opens and Butler enters*). Oh, ah—yes, / rang, Trundler. . . . Er—Mr. Frederick not in yet, I suppose ?

TRUNDLER. Been in some time back, sir—from Lord's. (*With reflected pride*) We managed to beat Chalkshire, sir, after all !

MR. SLACK (*without elation*). Did we ? Tell Mr. Frederick I should be glad to see him here, at once. (*To himself, after Trundler has left*) Always at this confounded

" AS THE TWIG IS BENT . . ."

cricket! He's not been near the office for days! So long as he was at college, I never said a word. No one can say I've been a harsh father to my children! How many parents would have allowed themselves to be habitually addressed as " Poffles " ? But I've always gone on the principle of encouraging them to look upon me as a *friend*. Still, to be wasting his time like this now—when he ought to be devoting himself heart and soul to business—no, it's really more than I can put up with! A few quiet words—when his mother isn't in the room—will——

Enter FREDERICK exuberantly.

FRED. SO you've heard the result? Toppin', isn't it? I *knew* you'd be jolly pleased about it, Poffles! They only wanted 60 to win—and we got 'em all out for 56! " Collapse of Chalkshire. Siacksole's Brilliant Bowling " they've got on the posters. You know the sort of bally rot those Cricket Editions go in for. Still, I must say I was rather in form. I was no sooner put on to——

MR. SLACK (*interrupting nervously*). Yes, yes, I dare say. But I didn't send for you to talk about the *match*, precisely.

FRED, (*bewildered*). Not? But—Poffles—what on earth else is there to talk about?

MR. S. (*with growing embarrassment*). Something that is—er—more serious—for *both* of us, Frederick. The fact is, I—well, I'm beginning to see that I've made a mistake—a very great mistake.

FRED, (*reassuringly*). Well, we've all done that in our *time*, you know, Poffles. (*Sits down and crosses his legs.*) Don't you mind telling me. Better get it off your chest. Two heads are better than one, eh? Chances are I can put you up to a way out of it without its coming round to the Mater.

MR. S. (*on his dignity*). It is a very different matter from what you—er—seem to suppose, Frederick. And,

SALTED ALMONDS

before I go any further, I — I think for the future it would be better if you gave up calling me " Poffles."

FRED, (*generously*). I'm hanged if I do ! I've never called you anything else since I was a kid—and you'll always be " Poffles " to me—*whatever* you've done ! After all, it *can't* be anything downright——

MR. S. (*bounding in his chair*). You—you *persist* in misunderstanding me, Frederick ! I never—er—the only thing I have to reproach myself with is my indulgence to *you*. And I consider I have every right to complain of—of the kind of life you have chosen to lead.

FRED, (*staring*). The kind of——! Oh, *now* I see. (*Bursts out laughing.*) Some one's been pulling your innocent old leg, Poffles ! Why, I'm as steady as a church. Think it over, and ask yourself: *Is* it likely I should be such an ass as to risk lowering my cricket average by playing the goat ?

MR. S. I am not accusing you of—er—playing the goat. What I'm complaining of is the way you are playing cricket.

FRED, (*aggrieved*). Well, *really*, Poffles, I shouldn't have thought you could find much fault with *that* ! It's rather rough, when I've knocked up my sixth century already this season, and done the hat trick only this afternoon, to come home and be treated as if I'd made a brace of blobs and been slogged all over the field !

MR. S. (*at sea*). I'm not objecting to cricket in moderation—say, on Saturday afternoons.

FRED. In Regent's Park, I suppose ? Come, now, Poffles, you can't seriously believe that a first-class match can be played out in a half-holiday, however bad the pitch may be ? You know better than *that* !

MR. S. (*nettled*). Whatever I may *not* know, Frederick, at least I know *this*. All the money I've spent on having you equipped at school and college for the serious business of life seems to have been absolutely thrown away !

FRED. " Thrown away ! " I *do* like that ! Why, if I hadn't made the very best of my time at school, should

I have got my Cricket Blue while I was a Fresher ? You grumbled a bit at my having a professional to coach me in the holidays—but you see how it's got me on ! And I won the Hundred and the Quarter at the Sports last year ! Upon my word, Poffles, I don't quite see what it is you *do* want !

MR. S. What I want, Frederick, is to see you attending more regularly to your duties at the office, and—and, once for all, I must *insist* on your not addressing me as " Poffles " ; it is a familiarity I can no longer permit.

FRED. Of course if you're *determined* to keep me at arm's length, you must please yourself. But for me to chuck up cricket, with such a career as I've got before me—why, it would be perfect skittles !

MR. S. Believe me, my boy, you can never earn a living by *cricket* !

FRED. I could if I turned professional. But I suppose *even you* wouldn't care for me to do that !

MR. S. *I* ? I am trying to show you the folly of frittering away all your youth in idleness !

FRED. You'd find there's precious little " frittering " about playing forward in Rugger, and you don't get *much* chance to idle when you're bowling on a plumb wicket. It's jolly hard *work*, I can tell you !

MR. S. That may be so, Frederick. But *your* hard work should be at the office !

FRED. It's all very well—but you've no idea what it is for a fellow who's led the open-air life / have, to be boxed up all the week in a beastly office ! It knocks me up in no time. You ask the Mater if it doesn't !

MR. S. Young Scrymgeour doesn't seem to find it too much for *him* !

FRED. It may suit a smug like Bob Scrymgeour—a rotter who never made a run in his life, and don't know the difference between Rugger and Soccer ! All I know is, it don't suit *me* !

MR. S. And the consequence is, Frederick, that *he* will be taken into partnership instead of you.

SALTED ALMONDS

FRED, *{loftily}*. He's welcome to it, for all / care ! We should never pull together, you know. He's not my sort. *He* takes to business naturally. Now, I never shall—not my line at all !

MR. S. YOU had your choice of the Army or the Bar—and you wouldn't go in for either.

FRED. Because of the bally exams. You see, after a hard day's exercise, you *can't* sit down and grind away at stiff subjects—you're simply bound to go to sleep over 'em ! But, though I don't pretend to be keen about the office, I'm quite game to put in a day there—whenever I've got nothing else on.

MR. S. *(with bitterness)*. What earthly use do you imagine *that* would be—to us ?

FRED, *(with superiority)*. More use than you *fancy*, perhaps—even if I never did a stroke ! You mayn't know it, but you may take this from *me* : Athletics count for just as much in the City as they do everywhere else. Look at the way a Blue gets on in the House ! And I don't mind betting you that it's done you a lot of good already, being known as my Governor.

MR. S. *{exasperated}*. However it may be on the Stock Exchange, Frederick, *drysalting* is—er—not governed by such considerations. You are talking downright nonsense !

FRED, *(stiffly)*. I'm not accustomed to being told I talk nonsense, and I think it's jolly well time I went. I've had enough of being ragged like this, when I've done nothing to deserve it ! *[Rises, and moves towards door.]*

MR. S. *{climbing down}*. I — I didn't mean to " rag " you, my boy. I was merely—er—endeavouring to——

FRED, *(with severity)*. Whether you intend it or not, you seem to *me* to be doing your level best to destroy all confidence between us. Up to now, I've always looked upon you as a *pal* rather than a father. In future I shall know better ! *[He opens the door.]*

MR. S. *{overwhelmed with contrition}*. Fred ! Don't leave me like that. If—if I've spoken too harshly——!

" AS THE TWIG IS BENT . . ."

FRED. If! I can tell you *this* much. If I hadn't happened to be in a nailing good temper over winning that match, you and I might have had a downright row—and, even as it is—(*Sees M R . S.'s face, relents, comes back, and pats him affectionately on the shoulder.*) No, it's all *right*, Poffles, dear old boy! I'm not *really* angry. I know how it was. Something's gone wrong at the office, and you come home and let off steam at me! If you'd been at a Public School and 'Varsity yourself, you'd understand better what it *means* to have a reputation to keep up. There, there—I hope I know how to make allowances—don't let it occur again, that's all. And I say, Poffles, there's the dressing-gong! Better hurry up, hadn't you?—unless you want to keep the Mater waiting again!

M R . S. (*to himself, as he follows FRED upstairs*). After all, he's just the type of manly young Englishman that has made our country what it is! I ought to be *proud* of him, instead of—but he's forgiven all that—he called me " Poffles " *twice!* (*Aloud*) And so, Fred, you bowled Chalkshire out with—er—a brace of blobs, eh? Capital! capital!

[He disappears into dressing-room as curtain falls.]

4. *Caveat Emptor !*

(Being the remarkable experience of an Art Collector)

IT was the afternoon of my arrival at Domstadt—how many days ago, I really forget. I only intended to stay a night there, on my way to take the waters at Bad Schoppenegg—but I am still in Domstadt. Why, will appear later on. I was strolling through one of the narrow and winding thoroughfares of this ancient city, which (though I am beginning to know it fairly well by this time) I had never visited before, when I chanced to see a small antiquity-shop. I went in, of course. No *bric-a-brac* hunter ever can resist entering an antiquity-shop.

SALTED ALMONDS

It is not an expensive amusement: you go in, and potter about for a few minutes, asking the prices of various objects you have no intention of purchasing. Then you say " *Adieu* " or " *Guten Tag* " politely, and walk out. The proprietor is perfectly contented—he never expects any other result. After all, it is the way in which he makes his living.

So I walked in. It was quite the usual sort of shop, with the usual bald, bearded, and spectacled proprietor inside it. Simply to play the game, I asked the price of something which I should have been sorry to take as a gift. He said it was twenty marks, and, having satisfied my curiosity, I was preparing to go—when, rather to cover my retreat than with any genuine desire for information, I asked if he had any really old pieces of stained glass. He said he had one in the back shop, if I would care to see it, and I said I would.

He was so evidently shy about showing it that I felt convinced it would turn out to be some amusingly audacious " fake." I followed him into his back parlour, disregarding his entreaties that I should stay where I was, and then he reluctantly fished out a panel in a wooden frame, which he handed me with a grunt.

The first sight of it almost took away my breath. Old stained glass has a peculiar fascination for me, and this was absolutely as fine an example as I ever remember to have seen of sixteenth-century Swiss work—heraldic in character, bold in design, and rich in colouring. I examined it carefully. I happen to have some knowledge of glass, and I could discover no new pieces—it was in perfect condition, with scarcely a crack. " How much do you want for this ? " I said, with the sad foreknowledge that the lowest sum he was likely to ask would be far beyond my limited means. " He was silent for a moment, as if he were speculating how much I could stand, and then he said " *Twendy mark*."

Considering that this particular panel would easily fetch £150, if not more, in any saleroom, I did *not* think

a sovereign was at all out of the way for it. "I'll have that panel," I said, with all the calm I could command, and he said, "Very well," and seemed anxious to get me back into the front shop again.

But I had begun to look about me, and I speedily discovered that this back shop contained a variety of objects of sufficient beauty and rarity to delight the heart of any connoisseur. There was a Limoges enamel *plaque*, for instance, by the younger Penicaud, which was almost priceless ; a boxwood medallion, about the size of a draught, with a carved and painted relief of a female in a Holbein headdress, similar, though far superior, to one I had been offered at Frankfort for sixty pounds ; an engraved goblet of rock crystal ; a tiny fifteenth-century group (German, I think) of St. Hubert and the miraculous stag, exquisitely carved in pearwood ; a small ivory cabinet, inlaid with lapis-lazuli ; and a seventeenth-century portrait in coloured wax with miniature jewellery, which was equal to the best specimens of the kind in the Wallace Collection.

And not a single one of all these things could by any possibility be other than genuine ; no person with the slightest experience and judgment could have doubted that for a moment!

I inquired the price of each, and I invariably got the same answer—"Twenty mark." I bought them all. I felt it was a justifiable piece of extravagance under the circumstances. When one does come across a dealer whose prices are so extremely reasonable, he deserves to be encouraged. I scorned to haggle or beat him down—and yet, although in the short time I was there I must have laid out at least as much as forty pounds (which was considerably more than I anticipated when I first went in), if he felt any gratification at the briskness of the business he was doing, he certainly suppressed it.

And I must confess that, without pretending to any higher code of ethics than my brother collectors, I was not wholly free from misgivings. Why was he selling

SALTED ALMONDS

these things so much under ordinary trade prices ? He must know their value—and if he did not, it was not *my* business to teach him—I couldn't be buyer and seller, too ! But had he some pressing reason for wanting to get rid of them at any cost ? They hadn't the sinister look of objects to which a curse was attached—and even in that case I thought I would risk it. But suppose they were stolen goods—should I not be exposing myself to rather awkward consequences ? Might not my proceedings be capable of misconstruction ?

My expression must have betrayed something of my mental state, for this paragon of dealers hastened to reassure me.

" Don't be sorry," he said (meaning, I think, " Don't be uneasy "). " I haf not robbed dese tings. I led you haf dem so cheap, begause—ach, I gannot dell it to you in English "—and he proceeded to explain in his own tongue.

I did not follow him as perfectly as I could wish—but I gathered that, either as a penance for something he had done, or in gratitude for some danger he had escaped, he had made a solemn vow that, between sunrise and sunset on a certain anniversary, he would ask no more and no less than twenty marks for any article, no matter what its intrinsic value might be. I had happened to look in on that particular day—that was all.

I now began to understand his desire to keep me in the front shop, where the rubbish was.

While applauding his piety, I felt (for even a collector may have a conscience) that I oughtn't to take *too* great an advantage of it.

" Perhaps," I said, " I could manage to do without one or two of the things."

I felt it would be a hard matter to decide which. But he said a vow was a vow, and he must hold himself bound by it; though he considered it lucky that I had not looked in till the sun was so near setting.

I never interfere between a man and his conscience,

so I let him have his way. It only remained to pay, and it was a convenience to me when he said he w^rould take a cheque—for to part with forty pounds in hard cash would have obliged me to remain in Domstadt till I could obtain fresh supplies. That being settled, I left him to pack up my purchases, while, in a state of excitement and exultation that will perhaps be only comprehensible to a fellow-collector, I hurried back to my hotel to get out my cheque-book. I tore out a cheque without waiting to fill it in—indeed I did not yet know to whom to make it payable, but I should soon find *that* out from the man himself.

I had no difficulty in regaining the little street—but what rather puzzled me was that there didn't seem to be any antiquity-shop in it. The local trade was entirely restricted to boots, sausages, and pictorial postcards. Evidently, since antiquity-shops are not in the habit of disappearing in so abrupt a manner, I must have struck the wrong street—the right one could not be *very* far off.

And eventually, after a few failures, I found it, to my unspeakable relief. There was the board with "Antiquitaten" painted on it in red letters, and there was the stout, bald, bearded, and spectacled proprietor inside. I entered and told him, laughingly, that I had begun to fear he had vanished. He appeared puzzled. I produced my cheque; and he imagined (or affected to imagine) that I was asking him to cash it. I had such a wretched memory for faces that I could not be positive he was *my* man. If he *was*, he pretended to have no recollection whatever of any business transaction between us. He allowed me to look into his back-parlour, and I am bound to say it contained no treasures of any sort, packed or unpacked.

At last I staggered out, feeling that I must have made a mistake. The real shop must be farther from my hotel than I had fancied—but I was bound to come upon it sooner or later. The annoying thing was that I had absolutely nothing to identify it by. I had scarcely

SALTED ALMONDS

glanced at the window—and, if I had, I have never practised memorising the contents of shop-windows, as Houdin did. I only wish I had. It had the kind of articles in it that most antiquity-shops do exhibit—that was all / knew. I did not know the name of the street (does anyone ever look at the name of any street he is strolling through ?—/ don't)—it might be a " strasse," or a " gasse," or a " gasschen," or even " unter "-something, or " am "-something else, for anything I could tell. After a time I completely lost my bearings, and began to feel really worried. . . . Still I persevered. I went into one Antiquitäten shop after another—and every proprietor looked more like the man I wanted than the last—but I never could convince him that he was. Our interviews began by being ridiculous, and ended in scenes that almost approached violence.

Not till long past my dinner-hour, when every curiosity dealer on Domstadt had put his shutters up, did I crawl back to my hotel, more dead than alive. But I was not going to be beaten. I got a Domstadt directory, made out a complete list of every *Alterthilmerhandlung* in the city, and marked them down with red crosses on a big map, and early next morning I began all over again. I worked through most of those establishments, likely or not, more than once. Some of the dealers were unknown at their registered addresses, some of their addresses did not seem to exist at all—but, whether I found them in or not, it was all the same—they were unanimous in repudiating all knowledge of me and my purchases. In fact, they ended by threatening to have me taken off to the *Polizeiwache*, if I would not go away quietly. So I gave up calling on them at last. But I am still in Domstadt. I haven't abandoned all hope, even yet. There may still be a street somewhere in the city which I haven't searched—though I doubt it, I have also inserted guarded advertisements in the local papers, imploring my dealer to communicate with me. So far, he does not seem to have come across any of them,

LUNCH AMONG THE RUINS

and, I fear, it is hardly probable that he will read this statement. Still, if it *should* meet his eye, he can have his money the moment he delivers the goods to me at the Hotel Domhof, No. 707. I feel quite sure there has merely been some unfortunate misunderstanding. Meanwhile, I warn all rival collectors that if they should purchase any of the articles above described they will do so at their peril. Morally, if not legally, they are *mine*—and I intend to have them.

5. *Lunch Among the Ruins*

(A Sketch in a Baronial Stronghold)

CENE—*The Courtyard of Cromlingbury Castle. On the left is the Gateway Tower ; on the right what remains of the Banqueting Hall. The walls facijig us are neatly labelled : " Kitchen " and " Armoury." In the left corner is a stall where refreshments and pictorial postcards may be obtained. In the centre are three long tables, placed parallel to one another, with benches of an uninviting aspect. An elderly Female Custodian is discovered in a black bonnet, a blue print dress with white spots, a lilac apron, and low spirits.*

THE CUSTODIAN (*bitterly, to her small grandson*). Gettin' on for ar-pas one, Tommy, and not a livin' soul bin in yet—'cep' them two cyclissin' gents as couldn't stop fur no refreshermints ! The Publick is all fur *novel-ties* nowadays, simingly, an' Harchiology's quite hout o' date ! Them rock-cakes '11 be flints by to-morrer, and milk turnin' soon as look at it this 'ot weather ! . . . Was that wheels ? (*looking through window*). A long waginette, with a young ladies' school inside of it ! Orter git rid o' them rock-cakes *now*—young ladies gen'ally 'as good 'elthy happetites, bless their 'arts !

SALTED ALMONDS

(*a bell inside the archway jangles rustily*). They ain't got no call fur ter ring—the door's hopen wide enough !

[*The Pupils of Pelican House, Groyneborough-on-Sea, enter by twos and threes, followed by Mile. SIDONIE DUVAL, the resident French Governess, and Miss MALKIN, the Principal.*

Miss MALKIN (*with guide-book*) . . . precise date History is silent. On entering, the visitor cannot fail to be struck by the imposing——

CUST. Charge for hedjucation'l establishmints is three-pence per 'ed, Mem, please, hordinary persons bein' sixpence. (*As Miss MALKIN pays the sum demanded, and enters it as an item under the heading " Pleasure Excursion "*) If your young ladies was requiring hany refresher-mints, I've some lovely rock-cakes, fresh baked this mornin', likewise noo milk and hother teetotal drinks.

Miss M. Thank you—we have our own provisions. But we shall want a few plates and tumblers—oh, and a *clean* table-cloth, if you have such a thing. (*The Custodian departs with a sound between a sigh and a sniff.*) A majestic ruin, is it not, Mamzell ? Ah, if these grey old walls could but speak, what stories they might tell us !

MLLE. DUVAL (*presuming, like Becky Sharp, on her employer's imperfect familiarity with colloquial French*). Mon Dieu, Madame, je n'en sais trop—un tas de choses joliment embetantes, probablement !

Miss M. Vous avez raisong. Quel dommage, done, qu'ils sont—(*forgets the French for " dumb "*) qu'ils ne peuvent pas !

MLLE. D. Puisque vous etes ici, Madame, ce sera precisement la meme chose !

Miss M. Oh ! beaucoup moins interessante, je crains ! (*To herself*) French people certainly *have* a knack of putting things pleasantly ! (*To the Pupils*) I think, my dears, we had better lunch before we explore the ruins. Be careful not to leave your eggshells about, and reserve your jam-puffs until after you have eaten the sandwiches.

LUNCH AMONG THE RUINS

(*They take their seats at the table on the left.*) How wonderfully peaceful it is here—one feels so remote from all the whirl and stress of modern life !

[*A prolonged " toot " without, followed by a succession of snorts, pants, and clanks ; the bell jangles, and presently a Motorist enters, with the condescending air of a god from a machine, accompanied by two rather flamboyant females.*

MOTORIST (to Custodian). I—ah—s'pose we can lunch heah, what ?

CUST. (*cheering up*). Cert'nly, sir, arter payin' for hentrance—sixpence per 'ed is the charge, which it does not go ter *me*, but towards keepin' the ruings in repair. I've some nice 'ome-made rock-cakes, sir, also noo milk and hother temp'rence——

MOTORIST (*appalled*). Good Gad ! (*Calling to some one in gateway*). Just bring that basket in, will yah ?

[*A Chauffeur staggers in with a huge luncheon-basket, and unpacks a raised pie, cold chicken, champagne, &c, on the table farthest from the School.*

CUST. (*to herself, as she retires wounded*). My vittles may be 'umble—but they are 'olesome !

FIRST FLAMBOYANT FEMALE (*pettishly*). Why you should want to break the run *here* is beyond *me* ! I loathe taking my meals in this scrambly way, and being stared at like wild beasts, too, by a pack of saucer-eyed schoolgirls !

MOTORIST. Won't hurt you to rough it for once, my dear girl f (*To Chauffeur*) Alphonse, here's a packet of food for you, and a half-bottle of fizz—you'll feel more at home with them in the *tonneau*, I dare say.

[ALPHONSE *withdraws*.

SECOND F, F. Champagne for a chauffeur! You are lavish, I *must* say !

MOTORIST (*apologetically*). Well, look what a pace

SALTED ALMONDS

he's brought us along at! Must do the fellah decently. Besides, between ourselves, it's a different brand from this, what?

SECOND F. F. SO long as it doesn't *spoil* him! . . . I call it rather jolly, lunching out like this in the open—more romantic than having it in a restaurant, anyhow.

FIRST F. F. Don't see where the jollity comes in, myself—nor yet the romance. These mouldy old ruins give *me* the hump! What I like is a first-class hotel, with a band playing, and *serviettes*, and everything of the latest. That's *my* idea of comfort. Isn't there any jelly in that pie?—thanks—and a little more pigeon while you're about it.

Miss M. *{in an undertone to Mademoiselle}*. Nouveaux riches—tr&s-mauvais tong—un exemple detressant de la luxe moderne! (*To the Pupils*). In such surroundings, my dears, we should endeavour—*without*, Cecilia, allowing our attention to be distracted by what is no concern of *ours*!—to call up a mental picture of this place as it was in the days of old. Try to fancy these ancient walls all hung with costly arras (or tapestry), those gaping window-frames glowing with painted glass, this courtyard full of men-at-arms and pages in rich liveries—*{The Pupils stop munching, and allow their mouths to fall slightly apart under the mental strain; the bell jangles once more}*—while through the archway, returning, perhaps, from some raiding or hawking expedition, there enters a gay and rollicking party. *{Here a Tripper in gorgeous raiment makes an impressive entrance, attended by his "young lady," also in festal attire, an elderly couple in more sombre garb, and a sheepish youth with a billycock on the back of his head}*. I am wholly at a loss to imagine, Emmeline Tittensor, what I can have said to provoke such immoderate and unladylike mirth!

TRIPPER *{an inveterate farceur, to whom mediceval diction of the Wardour Street order seems to have suggested itself as the most appropriate medium for his facetiousness}*. A 'arty welcome, fair Uncle Josh, to thee and all thy kin!

LUNCH AMONG THE RUINS

Would that me ancestral 'alls were worthier to receive ye ! But the 'Ouse of 'Enery Urch 'as come down in the world, and so 'tis many a long year since we last 'ad the old place prop'ly done up ! *{His party endeavour to repress this exuberance by exhorting him to " bey ave and not go acting the goat with company present " ;* MR. HENRY URCH, however, observing an audience, is unable to resist playing up to it, and, on the Custodian's appearance, strikes an attitude of melodramatic recognition) But 'oom do I beyold ? Is it—kin it be the fythful retyner of me noble famuly—dear ole Dame Marj'ry, with 'oom, when I was but a che-ild and she still a sorcy centinarian, I used to ply at 'orses in the Harmry ? Dost thou reckonise thy young Master, Dame ? *(The Custodian, with an expression of patient disgust, applies for the entrance fees)* 'Ast thou the nerve to demand a tester from the last of 'is rice when 'e cometh to drop a tear on the 'ome of 'is boy'ood ? . . . Thou 'ast ? Well, well—ere is a broad 'alf bull ter pay thy charges. I bring distinguished guests—*(introducing his companions, whose resentment is only restrained by the fact that he is paying all expenses)*—Herl and Countess Odium, the Lady Louey Ekins—me intended bride—and 'er brother, the Lord 'Erb. We 'ave come from far and are a'nungered. 'Ast thou a cold boar's 'ed in cut, good Dame ?

CUST. Don't you go a-good-damin' me. If it's refreshermints you want, you must put up with rock-cakes.

MR. 'ENERY URCH. Nay, Mistress, thou art spoofin' us ! Kin I not beyold a party o' pilgrims partakin' yonder of a ven'sin parsty, also fair young gyurls engaged in samplin' 'ard-boiled eggs ? . . . Oh ! I see—my error ! Har well, 'twould ha' broke me proud ole parint's 'art, could he ha' seen his son, in 'alls that was once a byword for their perfuse 'orspitality, redooced to regale his guests on the lowly rock-kike ! No matter—we will e'en 'ave a few on appro. An' now to tyble ! *(He conducts the others with ceremony to the centre table.)* Lady Ekins will

SALTED ALMONDS

set on my right 'and, Countess Odium oppersite—me noble Herl, I prithee unbuckle yer 'arness fer a blow-out. Me Lord 'Erb, do not scruple ter remove your 'elmet.

[They seat themselves, with feeble protests against any further tomfoolery ; the motoring party affect a lofty unconsciousness ; Miss MALKIN glares at the unfortunate EMMELINE TITTENSOR, whose pocket-handkerchief is wholly insufficient to stifle her untimely sense of humour ; the other Pupils regard her over their jam-puffs with eyes of wondering disapproval.]

Miss MALKIN. II est evidentment un peu—er—e'leve, Mamzell—une triste faillite de nos ordres inferieures en vacances ! *(To the Pupils)* We will, I think, finish our lunches in the Banqueting Hall. Emmeline, I shall have a word to say to you later, when you are sufficiently composed to realise fully the impropriety of your behaviour.

MR. URCH *(endeavouring to divide a rock-cake)*, By me 'alidome, Dame, 'tis rightly termed ! Could you oblige us with the loan of a battle-axe ? But stay, we 'ave a noble thust on us. Whatto ! a stoup o' Marmsey or Kinairy wine withal ! What, *no* wines in the 'Ouse ? Send 'ither ole Simon the Cellarer, Dame Marj'ry, and, an 'e perdooce not lickers in less than 'alf a non, 'e shall be striteway 'oofed inter the oobiliette ! *(The Pupils disperse and purchase picture postcards ; EMMELINE, by this time on the verge of hysterics, seeks sanctuary in the ruined chapel.)* Well, never mind, if he's out, we'll 'ave a noggin o' sparklin' cider instead, sime as what the party at the next tyble are 'aving.

THE MOTORIST *(to his ladies, but speaking at MR. URCH)*. Fellah must be shockin' boundah not to know cidah from—ah—champagne, what ?

MR. URCH *(to UNCLE JOSH, in a stage whisper)*. Did you 'ear *that*, Mr. Odium ? Acshally drinkin' shempine—with their *lunch* ! I dessay, though, they don't know no

WHY I HAVE GIVEN UP WRITING NOVELS

better—'aven't 'eard yet that it ain't the classy thing to do, nowadays. {*To Custodian*) Fetch some flaggins of the rare ole gingerile as me noble Dad laid down to be broached the day I come of age !

[*Custodian departs mystified.*]

FIRST F. F. {*to the Motorist*). I wish to goodness we'd gone to a hotel—they don't let horrid vulgar people in *there* ! And they don't give you tough fowls to eat, either !

MR. URCH (*to Miss EKINS*). 'Ave another rock-cake, Loo—you needn't be *afride* of it—it ain't as if it was some old 'en we'd 'ad to buy, 'cause we'd run over it ! {*The Motorist and his ladies decide to go and see what ALPHONSE is up to.*) Why, blest if we ain't got the place all to ourselves, now !

MISS EKINS (*with some asperity*). Ah, that's the beauty of coming out for the day with *you*, 'Enery. We do get *privacy* !

6. Why I have given tip writing Novels

{*A Personal Explanation*}

IHAVE presented the world with but one work of fiction—and yet I have already come to the irrevocable resolution that my first novel shall be also my last ! Such a decision is so unusual that I feel the public is entitled to some explanation of the circumstances which have left me no other alternative.

First let me say that my reason was *not* that *Poisoned Porridge* (Bellows & Bohmer, 6s.) was a failure in any sense of the term. Far from it. It was referred to as " the Novel of the Week " by so high an authority on literary matters as " Toney Tosh " ; both the *Clacton Courier* and the *Peebles Post* gave it notices so flattering as to be almost fulsome, while the *Giggleswick Gazette* pronounced the opinion that " it would serve to while

SALTED ALMONDS

away an idle half-hour which could not be better employed. " I have preserved these and many similar press-cuttings in case I should be called upon to prove my assertions. Moreover, I know of several friends who inquired for the work at more than one circulating library and were informed that it was " out." This being so, I have every reason for anticipating that my publisher's statement of accounts, when furnished, will be found a highly satisfactory document.

But indeed I had never a doubt from the first that *Poisoned Porridge* would thrill the public as intensely to read as it thrilled me to write it. Each successive chapter, as it flowed like lava from my glowing pen, came as a further revelation of the wondrous creative force that had till then been latent and unsuspected within me. Athene is recorded in the *Classical Dictionary* to have sprung in complete armour from the head of Zeus, but one character after another came out of *my* brain, and all endowed with such superabundant vitality that I was quite incapable of controlling their sayings and doings, which I could only record with breathless admiration.

This, I am aware, is quite a common experience with all novelists who possess the priceless gift of imagination, but the sequel in my own case was, I venture to think, rather more exceptional.

I should explain that I am a person of studious and literary habits, with a fixed income, and that I occupy a semi-detached villa residence in a quarter that has acquired a considerable reputation for social exclusiveness—I allude to Upper Balham. It was here that *Poisoned Porridge* was composed (though the proofs, or at least the major part of them, were revised in temporary lodgings fronting the Marine Parade at Bognor, Sussex).

Well, on a certain evening shortly after the work was published, I was seated in my study at Helicon Lodge, Upper Balham, when I heard the front-door bell ring violently, and presently my housekeeper announced that a young gentleman, who declined to give his name, but

WHY I HAVE GIVEN UP WRITING NOVELS

declared that he was well known to me, requested an interview.

I decided to receive him—not without misgivings that he had already absconded with the coats and umbrellas ; but, when he was shown in, my first glance at his countenance told me the injustice of my suspicions. I could not be mistaken in that open brow, over which the chestnut hair fell in a crisp wave, that smooth-shaven face with the firmly chiselled lips and the square resolute chin—it was Cedric, the hero of *Poisoned Porridge* !

He was far too strong a character, as I realised at once, to be long confined within the covers of any book ; he had burst his bindings, and naturally he felt that his first visit was due to the author of his being.

I gave him a cordial welcome (for I could not help feeling proud of the boy), and soon he was in a chair opposite mine, enthusiastically pouring out all his youthful ambitions, dreams, and speculations into my sympathetic ear.

He continued to do so for several hours—until in fact the suspicion that he was a bit of an egotist (he never once mentioned *Poisoned Porridge* !) had crystallised into the conviction that he was no end of a bore. At last I had to hint that it was long past my usual hour for retiring and that I must not keep him any longer from his own home. It then appeared that he had no home of his own, and no resources, which was why he had come to me.

I wished then that I had provided him in the novel with some regular occupation, or at least a competence (which would have cost me practically nothing), but I had avoided such prosaic details from motives of artistic reticence which I now recognise were overstrained. The result was that I had to put him up in the spare bedroom and finance him till he could find employment of some sort—which he never did.

The very next day a dear old lady, with snowy side-curls and cheeks like a winter apple, drove up in a four-

SALTED ALMONDS

wheeler, which she left me to pay. She was Cedric's mother—and I might have known that she never could endure her son to be out of her sight for long, because I had made rather a point of this maternal devotion in the book. Obviously the only thing to be done was to resign my own sleeping-apartment, and put up with a folding-bedstead in the dressing-room. Even this, though, I never actually occupied—for that afternoon there was a fresh arrival : an attached old family domestic named Martha, who would not hear of parting from her mistress, wages or no wages. And, as the old lady liked her to be within call, Martha had to have the dressing-room, and I slept, fitfully, in the bath. In the novel, Martha had been one of my favourite characters, rough and uncouth, but with a heart of gold. She spoke a racy dialect which I had vaguely described as " Clodshire," a sort of blend of Dorset and Lincolnshire, with just a dash of Suffolk. I cannot say I always understood her meaning myself. She had a characteristic exclamation—" My tender kitties !"—which had struck me as quaintly humorous, in print. In actual life it soon grew slightly tiresome—but then I *do* think she overdid it.

Cedric's mother, too, was addicted to smoothing his rebellious locks as he sat at her knee, with a hand that Time had left as smooth and dimpled as ever. It was pretty and touching at first, but the mannerism ended by getting on my nerves. So did Cedric's habit of addressing her as " Mother mine !"—which was quite the correct expression, I know, and one I had, I believe, invented for him myself, but I didn't like the way he said it.

However, I was getting fairly accustomed to them—when Yolande turned up, quite unexpectedly. Yolande, it will be remembered, was the heroine in *Poisoned Porridge*. The poor child was homeless ; I was responsible for her existence, so I could not well refuse to take her in—especially when Cedric's mother generously offered to share my bedroom with her. So there we all were—quite a happy family, so to speak. That is, we *might*

WHY I HAVE GIVEN UP WRITING NOVELS

have been, if Yolande had only shown a particle of common sense. She was all that was adorable and enchanting, or she would have been no heroine of *mine*—she had a trick of raising a slim forefinger in arch rebuke which (for a while) was extremely engaging. But, with all her sweetness and amiability, she was a trifle trying at times. She had a positive genius for misunderstanding the simplest statements, and acting in consequence with an impulsiveness that was little less than idiotic.

For instance, she loved Cedric fondly, and he was passionately devoted to her. Yet, as often as he sought to declare himself, she would perversely conclude that he was announcing his engagement to another, and that it was her bounden duty to suppress her feelings under a mask of indifference or disdain. In the book this was all right, because otherwise I could not have kept the lovers estranged and apart through the necessary number of chapters. But in real life I had never expected that she would write a blotted note of formal farewell and leave the house for ever about every other day ! It cost me a small fortune simply in rewards to the police for her recovery.

Though, mind you, I blame Cedric almost as much. He invariably expressed himself with such ambiguity as absolutely to court misunderstanding, and his excessive modesty rendered it impossible for him to believe that Yolande could ever regard him with any sentiment but loathing. He would lament the fact to me, night after night, till I was nearly dead for want of sleep—but nothing / could say would convince him that his despair was wholly unnecessary. As if, forsooth, I didn't know the state of my own heroine's feelings !

But I am sorry to say that Cedric—in spite of his lofty brow and his strong jaw, and of the fact that in the novel I had invested him with an intellect far above the average—was, not to mince matters, a most particularly exasperating young ass. And this, although I had expressly stated in the book that he had received a liberal Public

SALTED ALMONDS

School and University education—blessings I myself had never enjoyed ! Then he was so totally wanting in backbone, too, as to be utterly incapable of supporting himself in any walk of life.

I thought our little party was about complete, but it was soon reinforced by yet another addition in the person of old Mr. Deedes, the highly respectable family solicitor of *Poisoned Porridge*, with a peculiarity of wiping his spectacles and blowing his nose vigorously to conceal his emotion before pronouncing any legal opinion. He did not know much Law—which is hardly surprising, as I knew none myself—and I had, again from a mistaken regard for artistic reticence, purposely refrained from assigning him an office in any specified quarter.

Consequently he came to *me*, and I could hardly object to allow him to use the breakfast-room for professional purposes, though the japanned tin boxes full of musty precedents and parchments that formed his stock-in-trade, so to speak, seemed a little incongruous in such surroundings. Have I mentioned that the heroine always called him " Daddy " Deedes ? She did.

Still, I confess that I could not repress a certain elation. So unique an experience as mine could not be other than gratifying to the self-esteem of any author. For—without intending, without even being conscious of it at the time—I had created a set of fictitious characters who were so real and actual that they were literally living !

The one drawback I could see to such phenomenal mental fecundity was that they should all be literally living on *me* !

The hour was at hand when this would seem but a trivial worry indeed, in comparison with what I was next called upon to undergo.

Indeed, a period was approaching prior to which the troubles caused by my too fertile imagination can scarcely be said to have commenced. Personally, I should date this period from the ill-omened hour in which Desmond M'Avelly first crossed my threshold. M'Avelly, it is

WHY I HAVE GIVEN UP WRITING NOVELS

perhaps unnecessary to remind the reader, was the villain in *Poisoned Porridge*, and even the modesty of an author cannot blind me to the fact that he was a devilish good villain, as villains go.

He arrived in the powerful automobile with which for the purposes of the plot I had provided him in the novel, and, when he threw off his goggled mask and fur coat, he revealed himself in irreproachable evening-dress, which seemed to indicate the drawing-room as the most appropriate place for him. It was accordingly placed at his disposal, and there he sat all day, consuming innumerable cigarettes, as he thought out his intricate and infernal schemes.

At meal-times, however, he joined the other residents at my board—for I was practically running a boarding-house, except that, as they none of them possessed any visible means of support, I made no profits worth mentioning.

I was pained to observe that he completely got round the hero's mother, who persisted in believing that M'Avelly was a cruelly misunderstood person, with excellent moral principles—indeed, the only time the dear old lady and I ever differed at all seriously was once when I ventured to warn her that he might possibly be other than he seemed. Considering that I could not give her my grounds for distrusting him, it would perhaps have been wiser to hold my peace. As for the hero (who really was more of a noodle than I ever could have anticipated), he fell at once under the spell of JVTavelly's baleful glamour, and was absurdly flattered by his slightest notice.

Not so Yolande, who, I am proud to record, was true to my conception of her as the embodiment of guileless British girlhood, and shrank instinctively from his insidious advances. He took his revenge by poisoning her lover's mind against her, as of course such a villain would. How he managed it exactly I do not know, as I was not present, but the consequence was that Cedric

SALTED ALMONDS

soon began to treat her with marked coldness, if not actual aversion. She quitted our roof, determined to end her despair by suicide, rather frequently about this time.

Honest Martha could not, as she frankly stated, "thole" M'Avelly, who invariably adopted towards her a politely ironical tone that no respectable elderly domestic could be expected to stand. I should have felt easier in my mind if I could have known precisely what he was plotting during the long hours he spent alone in my drawing-room, because, in the novel, I had thrown out a vague suggestion (merely for effect, as the plot did not turn upon it) that, when not otherwise engaged, he was rather by way of being an anarchist of sorts. It was by no means pleasant to think that, in his spare moments, he might be busy compounding bombs on the chiffonier!

So that, when a middle-aged stranger in blue spectacles presented himself, and, after explaining that he was a chronic invalid with a pet cobra (quite harmless) and a passion for playing the concertina and eating hashish, begged me to receive him into my household as a paying guest, I consented with unspeakable relief.

For of course I knew at once that he could be no other than my great but eccentric amateur detective, Rumsey Prole. Some critics have professed to see certain resemblances between this character of mine and one of Sir Conan Doyle's. I can only say that, if any similarity exists at all, it is purely accidental. Rumsey Prole is an entirely original creation evolved from my own unassisted imagination. Besides, his methods are so absolutely different from those of the rival specialist. But I hope I can afford to ignore these pettifogging criticisms.

With Prole on the spot, I felt safer. I fitted up a box-room in the attics for him as a sort of snuggery, where he could play with the cobra, or on the concertina, and chew hashish to his heart's content. I frequently went up to consult him, and generally found him absorbed in reading *Euclid*, which he maintained was more amusing and better illustrated than most of the popular magazines,

WHY I HAVE GIVEN UP WRITING NOVELS

I regret to say, however, that he seemed to attach but little importance to my suspicions of M'Avelly, and, in short, behaved with a *brusquerie* which—had I known him less well—I might have mistaken for offensive rudeness. But it was a great comfort to have him about. That massive mind of his was, I knew, working all—or most of—the time, and the ease with which he had unravelled the rather complicated mystery of *Poisoned Porridge* seemed a guarantee that he would be fully equal to checkmating any fresh devilries M'Avelly might attempt.

HOW^T it happened I can't explain—perhaps Prole took a little too much hashish—but M'Avelly contrived to pull off his crime—whatever it was, for I never ascertained its precise character. I gathered, however, from Inspector Chugg (another creation of mine whom, for reasons of my own, I had not thought fit to invest with any excessive brilliancy) that it was something in the nature of Common Barratry—and a hanging matter. With truly diabolical cunning M'Avelly had contrived to throw suspicion on the innocent and unfortunate Cedric, who, believing, though on insufficient grounds, that Yolande was the culprit, nobly took the blame on himself—which was only what I should have anticipated from him. He had done much the same thing before in the book. Naturally Yolande misunderstood his motive, and, being a thoroughly nice-minded girl, recoiled from a lover who had openly confessed himself a Common Barrator. But I was rather surprised when Inspector Chugg arrested them both, and, after subjecting them to a searching cross-examination, warned them that whatever they had said would be taken down and used in evidence against them at their trial.

In fact, I was about to make an indignant protest, when, to my unfeigned delight, Rumsey Prole, having emptied his box of hashish, finished the first book of *Euclid*, and charmed the cobra into a state of coma by playing all the tunes he knew on the concertina, came down to the rescue.

SALTED ALMONDS

This marvellous man, by a series of ingenious deductions from cigarette-ashes, tea-leaves, a disused tram-car ticket, a marked farthing, and samples of fluff, all of which his trained eye had detected on the carpet, demonstrated beyond all possibility of doubt that the actual culprit was no other than myself !

I was positively thunderstruck ; for, up to that juncture, I could have sworn that I was innocent, and it was a bitter moment when my own Cedric and Yolande, their faith in one another now completely restored, avowed their conviction of my guilt, adjuring me in moving terms not to suffer this dark stain to blight their young lives, but to confess all, and hope for the mercy of heaven ! I adjured *them* not to be a couple of young idiots. Still, I could not help recognising that, unless the world at large were more amenable to reason, I was in rather a tight place. In fact, I saw the gallows plainly looming before me !

Fortunately, at the eleventh hour, a deliverer came forward in the homely person of good old Martha, who remembered by the merest chance that there were certain documents in a brass-bound desk belonging to her mistress which might possibly throw some light on the subject. These were produced and submitted to Mr. Deedes, the family solicitor, who perused them anxiously, spectacles on nose, during a prolonged and most dramatic silence. At last he wiped his spectacles, blew his nose with more than usual resonance, and, in accents husky with emotion, pronounced that, so far as he had been able to interpret the papers, they not only proved my entire innocence and incriminated M'avelly (whom I had suspected from the first), but also established Cedric's claim to a dormant peerage, and identified Yolande as the long-sought heiress of a South African millionaire, who had lately died intestate after bequeathing her ten thousand a year and a palatial mansion in Park Lane !

Altogether dear old Deedes trumpeted to some purpose on that occasion ! Even I should never have thought of

WHY I HAVE GIVEN UP WRITING NOVELS

such a way out of the labyrinth in which we were all so inextricably entangled. But it only shows how marvellously an author's characters may be capable of developing if they are only started with a strong enough individuality !

There is little more to relate. M'Avelly, humming a careless snatch and muttering horrible imprecations under his breath, had already evaded the strong arm of the law by sauntering out of the house—and out of our lives, for ever ! Rumsey Prole wrung my hand warmly, with the remark that the result was in exact accordance with all his calculations—after which he packed up his cobra and concertina, and left to lay in a fresh supply of hashish before proceeding to investigate another case that demanded his assistance.

Cedric and his mother, with Yolande and the faithful Martha, departed to claim the dormant peerage and occupy the palace in Park Lane. I made no attempt to detain them. Only good old Mr. Deedes was left on my hands, and, as I could not stand his practising as a solicitor any longer in my breakfast-room, I took an office for him in Bedford Row, where he can wipe his spectacles and blow his nose unseen and unheard—for I can hardly believe that any sane client will ever consult him professionally. I know / shan't.

I think I have now said enough to enable the gentle reader to understand how and why it is that, in spite, or perhaps I should say *because*, of the unprecedented success that has attended my first humble effort in fiction, I am resolved that it must never be repeated.

Indeed, what I have gone through already has upset me so severely that my doctor has ordered me to take a complete rest, and I am just now staying (though only temporarily) at a sanatorium.

The medical superintendent here is inclined—as I can see plainly, however he may endeavour to disguise it—to regard my strange experiences as more or less imaginary.

However, when he sees them in print, I think that even he will be convinced that so plain and unexaggerated a

statement could hardly proceed from a disordered fancy. But if he isn't, it will make no difference to me.

7. *Mrs. Br assington-Claypott's Children's Party*

IF I had had my way we should not have had a children's party at all this year. As I said to Marmaduke, "Modern children, especially in such social circles as we move in, expect more and more nowadays, and I really can't undertake to do things on the same scale as the Guldenschweins, or the McMammons, or the Splosheimers. And when you're always saying things haven't gone so well in the City lately ! "

Marmaduke said he didn't like the idea of our children accepting their young friends' hospitalities without making any return, but, as I told him, our Torquil and Ermyngarde are such popular children people are only too delighted to have them. As for the disappointment to our dhicks, they had both expressed their perfect willingness to accept five shillings apiece instead of having a party—which of course would come incalculably cheaper.

But he said things hadn't come to such a pass that he couldn't afford to give a children's party, and do the thing in style, too. He hinted that this was good policy from a business point of view. I represented that it was utterly out of the question for me to do the thing as it should be done on my housekeeping allowance, and he gave me an extra cheque, which he said ought to cover not only a first-class sit-down tea and supper, but a really refined and expensive entertainment from Harrod's or Whiteley's into the bargain,

I might have managed to make it do, I dare say, if only I hadn't had such frightfully bad luck at bridge about that time that I was positively compelled to economise wherever possible.

So, when my maid Melanie happened to mention a

MRS. BRASSINGTON-CLAYPOTT'S PARTY

young man of her acquaintance who was anxious to obtain engagements at parties as a conjurer, and who (according to her) was quite extraordinarily talented, I told her to see if she could arrange with him to come to me and give an hour and a half's performance for a guinea, this sum to include his cab-fares. I was careful to add this, because most entertainers make an extra charge for cab-fares, and they all seem to live a long way outside the radius. Melanie was to point out that as at my house he would have an opportunity of exhibiting before highly influential and wealthy people like the McMammons, the Sploscheimers, and Guldenschweins, and others, he might find it to his advantage to make a considerable reduction in his usual terms.

Later Melanie reported that she had so strongly impressed this upon him that he had declared his willingness to perform for me gratis, just for the sake of the introduction, and Melanie added that he had offered to conclude by distributing a few small gifts* provided I saw no objection. I said if he liked to go to the expense he was of course at perfect liberty to do so, so long as he remembered that such presents should be of a certain value if they were to give pleasure to children in such a set as ours.

Melanie assured me he quite understood, and that it would be all right, so I left it entirely to her—rather against my own instincts, for she was a girl I never could take to, somehow—it was always *most* unpleasant to meet her eyes in the looking-glass while she was brushing my hair of an evening. Still she was clever and useful in many ways, and I quite thought I could depend on her in a matter of this sort.

We had next to no refusals, and Marmaduke not only came home early from the City himself that evening, but actually persuaded such busy people as Mr. Sploscheimer, Mr. McMammon, and Mr. Guldenschwein to look in while their respective offspring were still seated at the tea-table.

SALTED ALMONDS

It was a thrilling thought, as one of our grown-up guests remarked to me at the time, that every one of those tiny tots was a potential little fifty-thousand-pounder at the very least, always, supposing, of course, that their dear parents met with no serious financial reverses before they reached maturity.

The little Guldenschweins are not what I call prettily-behaved children at table, and I am sure they had enough to eat of one sort and another, even if I did not think fit to provide quite enough hot tea-cake and crumpets to please them.

The other children made no complaints—except that the young Sploscheimers declared the crackers were swindles and not worth pulling, as they contained no jewellery ; but when, on Ermyngarde's announcing proudly that there was going to be a conjurer upstairs after tea, one of the little McMammons declared he was sick of conjurers, and at *their* party they were going to have a Magic Kettle and a Ballet from the Empire, I confess I began to have misgivings about the entertainment I had provided.

For I really knew nothing about the man—not even his name. I had only Melanie's word for his being able to conjure at all, and I shuddered when I reflected that he might actually be capable of coming without a dress suit on.

It is not surprising that when at length every child admitted having reached the stage of repletion, and the butler announced that the conjurer had arrived and was awaiting us in the drawing-room, I led the way upstairs with a sinking heart, and a fervent wish that I had not gone out of my way to do a kindness to the obscure *protege* of Melanie's.

Many a time did I repeat that wish before that awful evening was over !

When we got upstairs, there was the conjurer, waiting for us under the arch between the two drawing-rooms. He had put on a dress suit, and was, for a person in that position, quite gentlemanly-looking, though pale. He

MRS. BRASSINGTON-CLAYPOTT'S PARTY

commenced his performance with a few simple card-tricks—but either it was too soon after tea, or the children were not impressed by an entertainer who was not in fancy costume and had none of the usual gilded apparatus—for the poor little things made no attempt to conceal their boredom.

And my Ermyngarde, who is rather a proud child, was naturally offended by his taking such a liberty as to extract eggs and billiard-balls from her hair before all her young friends. Though I must say our Torquil, who is his dear father's own boy for smartness, made the conjurer look supremely ridiculous by not only denying that he was really producing the yards and yards of coloured paper which were apparently being reeled out of his little inside, but by informing everybody (and correctly, too !) how the trick was done.

Altogether the entertainment seemed to be falling so flat that I felt obliged to tell Mrs. Gildingham that I could not understand it, as the man had been very highly recommended to me, and that I hoped he would show us something *really* clever and amusing by-and-by. He must have overheard (as I certainly intended him to do), and it seemed to put him on his mettle, for he said that for his next experiment he should require the assistance of a grown-up, and singled out Mr. Gildingham, who, with a condescension remarkable indeed in a company promoter of his experience, consented to oblige him.

I could see Mr. G.'s dignity was a little ruffled at the mere suggestion that he might be a confederate, and he was as startled as anybody when something alive and kicking was taken out of his double-breasted waistcoat.

The conjurer called it a rabbit—but it was unlike any breed of rabbits that I am acquainted with, having a much longer tail for one thing, besides being a bright scarlet, and covered all over with little scales. He rubbed the beast into two—a red and a green one—before our eyes, and they shot up the curtains and disappeared behind the gilt cornice.

SALTED ALMONDS

Nobody made any comment, though I could see several people were considerably impressed. As for Mr. Gildingham, he slipped quietly downstairs, and, so I afterwards heard, asked the butler for a whisky-and-soda before leaving the house. Then the conjurer suddenly called out little Moritz Rosenstern, and asked him if he had a headache, which the child denied. But we could all hear his little head ticking away like a tape machine, and presently we saw a stream of tape actually flowing from his left ear. His father, from sheer force of habit, I suppose, rushed to read off the message. What it was I cannot say, as we could not find the tape afterwards, but Mr. Rosenstern with a smothered exclamation, which I only trust the children did not catch, rushed from the room, and presently we heard a hansom clattering off in a frantic hurry. Moritz told Torquil next day that, when he got home that evening, he was severely spanked by his papa, which seems rather unreasonable.

I really forget what trick came next, but I *think* it was the production of an immense glass bowl of water from Mr. Sploscheimer's coat-tail pocket. When this trick is done with goldfish it is quite pretty, but there was hardly time to notice what was in the water in this case, as Mr. Sploscheimer in his nervousness upset the bowl, and the thing inside got away. Mrs. McMammon declared that it bit her on the ankle, which I do *not* believe. She was always a fanciful, hysterical woman, and if it was a snake at *all* I am convinced it was a perfectly harmless one.

Still, though the man was certainly a cleverer conjurer than had at first appeared, and the juveniles began to look with more approval on his efforts to amuse them, none of the older people seemed to be really enjoying themselves. However, we all applauded, to avoid hurting his feelings, and, even when he gave a ventriloquial exhibition with an excessively rude little wooden puppet out of a bag, which made remarks on every grown-up present that were so personal as to be almost libellous, they managed to laugh

MRS. BRASSINGTON-CLAYPOTT'S PARTY

good-humouredly, though I could see that I and Marmaduke were suspected of having furnished the particulars.

There is no doubt that, in persuading Mr. Guldenschwein, much against his wishes, to be hidden for a second or so under an embroidered piano-cover, and then revealing him as a large and very pink pig, the conjurer went *much* too far—though I am bound to admit that the children, and especially the little Guldenschweins, were delighted. For myself, I was most distressed that such a thing should have happened in my house, and to Mr. Guldenschwein of all people !

At the same time, I *do* think he might have shown a little more of what I call *bonhomie* about it, especially as the effects of the illusion (or transformation, or whatever it was) wore off very soon, and indeed were hardly noticeable by supper-time. But some people are born without the sense of humour !

I should have been thankful myself, as I know a good many people were, when the tiresome man announced the last item on his programme, if only it hadn't been a Distribution of Gifts to all the children from what he called " the Inexhaustible Electrolier." For one thing, I was anxious about the chandelier (which is coloured Venetian glass and fragile), and, for another, I had the gravest doubts as to what he might choose to consider suitable presents for those innocent mites.

How he contrived that a series of white-paper parcels neatly tied up in ribbon—blue for boys, and pink for girls—should appear to drop, one by one, into a hat from the centre of the chandelier is more than I can explain—but it was a relief to find that the contents gave satisfaction not only to the children but to their parents also.

At least, it was a relief till I discovered that each of the pink packets contained one of the trinkets which only left my jewel-case on very special occasions, while every boy received an Oriental curio in carved jade or ivory or crystal, from a collection which Marmaduke had picked up privately for a mere trifle and hoped to dispose of at

SALTED ALMONDS

Christie's some day at an immense profit. And, as the little wretches were quite aware of the value of the objects, it would have been useless to try to reclaim them. Under all the circumstances, the only thing to do was to encourage the parents in their impression that our little surprise had been carefully thought out beforehand. So it really was hard to bear when I found out afterwards, from indirect sources, that it was considered to be a piece of vulgar ostentation on our part.

I managed to persuade Torquil and Ermyngarde to leave their own parcels with me unopened—hoping to get back *something* at all events—but there was absolutely nothing inside either packet, though I am afraid both the children still suspect their mother of being a story-teller.

If I had had an opportunity I should certainly have told that conjuring person in very plain terms what I thought of his performance, but by the time I was sufficiently composed to do so the man had gone. I sent for Melanie, fully intending to discharge her on the spot, but was informed that she had discharged herself some time previously—which shows that she was every bit as bad as the man.

Who *he* was, or why he should have chosen to play such pointless and ungentlemanly pranks on *us* is a perfect mystery to me, but I cannot for a moment admit that there was anything in the least *supernatural* about the affair. We are hardly, I should hope, the kind of people for a visitation of *that* description. Whatever we saw (or rather *imagined* we saw) that evening, I am positive we can quite satisfactorily put down to hypnotism, or something of that sort.

All the same the consequences have been *most* unfortunate. Marmaduke is not nearly so intimate with Mr. Guldenschwein, Mr. Sploscheimer, and Mr. McMammon, or indeed any of his rich City friends, as he used to be,—and of course he puts all the blame on *me* ! And for some days after the party there were troubles in the nursery too, owing to nurse's finding such quanti-

A MEETING OF THE SOCIETY OF PENGUINS

ties of ivory billiard-balls and breakfast eggs in darling Ermyngarde's hair, while poor little Torquil would spout streams of coloured shavings by the hour together, which was very troublesome for everybody, though I am thankful to say the doctor prescribed some medicine which effectually prevented any return of the symptoms.

I think I am a little run down myself, and I have had to give up my "At Home" day. I should be sorry to miss Mrs. McMammon, Mrs. Sploscheimer, or Mrs. Guldenschwein, and all my other friends, if they *should* happen to call—but sitting alone in the drawing-room waiting for them was more than I could endure. It was nothing but nerves, I know—but I simply could *not* keep my eyes off the cornices.

8. *A Business Meeting of the Society of Penguins*

(A Study of Elderly Children)

CENE—*The Garden of a picturesque old Country Inn within easy distance from London. Around the Bowling Green are rustic arbours and sheds. In the largest of these a party of ten or eleven middle-aged gentlemen of intensely serious aspect are seated at a long table, smoking cigars and drinking spirits and water. It is somewhat late in the afternoon. Suddenly the oldest and most solemn of the party rises and raps the table with an air of authority natural to one who occupies the position of a Grand Prime Penguin.*

THE GRAND PRIME PENGUIN. I rise, brother Penguins—order, please. I must ask Penguin Gogarty to reserve the conclusion of the anecdote, or whatever it is he is relating to Penguin Titterton, until the business before us has been disposed of. (PENGUINS GOGARTY and TITTERTON *instantly assume a portentous gravity.*) I will first read one or two communications received from brother Penguins who have been unavoidably prevented

SALTED ALMONDS

from being present at our proceedings this afternoon. Penguin Shuffery writes : " My dear Grand Prime, your brother Penguin is awfully sick at being unable to support his Prime on such an occasion—but he knows how it is." (*Here the other Penguins sympathetically murmur, " Squawk, squawk ! " which is apparently the prescribed form of approval.*) I have also a wire from Penguin Tootell : " Regret impossible attend. Just starting for honeymoon. Needless say am with you in spirit. May Heaven guide your counsels ! Yours in links of Penguinship, TOOTELL." (*Renewed squawks*) Other Penguins have been communicated with, but have not written to explain their non-appearance. (*Here several Penguins exclaim, " Quonk-quonk-quonk ! "—which seems to be Penguinese for " Shame ! "*) Before, as your retiring Grand Prime, I vacate the rock, I will call on Recorder Penguin Mincoff to read the agenda. . . . (*They are read by a nervous Penguin in a straw hat, and appear to consist in electing a new " Grand Prime " and " Vice-Penguin " for the coming year*) Voting-papers will be handed round. There are three candidates for the rock—viz. Penguins Stickney, Ikin, and Cronkeyshaw. I need not remind you of the fact that Penguin Stickney is one of our oldest and most respected Penguins, and has already discharged the duties of Vice-Penguin with singular tact and ability.

PENGUIN CRONKEYSHAW. I should just like to ask this. If we're all asked to pledge ourselves beforehand, what becomes of the secrecy of the ballot ?

THE GRAND PRIME (*with dignity*). I can only answer that if Penguin Cronkeyshaw insists on impugning my conduct on this rock, I shall treat it as a matter of confidence and offer myself for re-election.

PENGUIN CRONKEYSHAW. In *that* case, Mr. Grand Prime, I beg to withdraw my question, and merely remark that I shall hold myself personally free to vote for any candidate I please, be he the youngest Penguin on the list!

[The Penguins fill up their papers in solemn silence, fold them, and deposit them in RECORDER-

A MEETING OF THE SOCIETY OF PENGUINS

PENGUIN MINCOFF'S *straw hat, which is then handed to the Grand Prime.*

THE GRAND PRIME (*counting the votes*). Penguin Stickney, 4 ; Penguin Ikin, 4 ; Penguin Cronkeyshaw, 1. Owing to the chivalry of Penguins Stickney and Ikin in each voting for the other—(*commendatory squawks from all but PENGUIN CRONKEYSHAW*)—the election has resulted in a tie. I shall therefore avail myself of the privilege of this rock, and give a casting vote to Penguin Stickney, whom I declare to be duly elected.

[*Squawks—and a solitary quonk from PENGUIN CRONKEYSHAW ; PENGUIN STICKNEY then takes the rock as the new Grand Prime.*

GRAND PRIME PENGUIN STICKNEY. Brother Penguins, my heart is too full adequately to thank you for the very great honour you have just conferred upon me by electing me as your Grand Prime. I can only say that I will do my best to prove myself worthy of your confidence during my occupation of this rock, though I fear I can never hope to fill it as ably and—er—energetically as the distinguished and highly popular Penguin who has preceded me. (*Squawks ; a new Vice-Penguin is next elected with similar formalities.*) I will now call upon any Penguin who has a motion to bring forward to do so as briefly as possible, since our time is getting short.

A PENGUIN IN A HOMBURG HAT. I—ah—beg to propose that, for all future meetings, every Penguin should adopt a uniform head-covering. I would suggest a straw, with a distinctive ribbon of salmon, purple, and green, in alternate layers. By this means, Penguins would be more easily enabled to recognise one another on a railway platform than is the case under present conditions. (*Squawks.*)

PENGUIN CRONKEYSHAW (*whose temper has distinctly not improved during the proceedings*). I object to Penguin Jeffcock's proposal *in toto*. Are Penguins in a free country like England to submit to be curtailed and ham-

SALTED ALMONDS

pered in their choice of hats ? Why, I ask, why should I be compelled to wear a hat that I consider eminently unsuitable to myself personally ? I no longer—as some here to-day have considered it humorous to remind me more than once—possess a head of hair like some Penguins. If Penguin Jeffcock is determined to force a form of head-gear upon me, which, viewed from behind, would infallibly render my appearance more or less ridiculous, I shall have no alternative but to send in my resignation and cease henceforth to be a Penguin. I will not make a public exhibition of myself in an infernal straw hat with a tomfool ribbon to please any Penguin alive !

PENGUIN JEFFCOCK (*diplomatically*). I am sure that I voice the general sentiment when I say that I should be sorry indeed to press any motion which would tend to deprive us of Penguin Cronkeyshaw's genial presence. For the moment I had forgotten the—ah—peculiarity to which he has so feelingly referred. I now beg to amend my original proposal by substituting for the straw hat and ribbon a distinctive badge which each Penguin will wear in his buttonhole on occasions like the present. It might be in enamel, and represent a Penguin rampant, which could be executed in artistic colours for a comparative trifle. (*Squawks*)

PENGUIN CRONKEYSHAW. I object to the badge as, if possible, even more preposterous than the straw ! It may be all very well for Penguin Jeffcock to talk of the expense as a trifle. Some Penguins may not have managed to feather their nest as he has. I know / haven't. And speaking as a Penguin, I do not see why I should be called on to put my hand in my pocket for a mere superfluity. I maintain that paying my railway fare and my share of the bill—which, considering it was a cold lunch, I must say was nothing less than downright extortion—is as much as can reasonably be expected from a Penguin in my position.

GRAND PRIME PENGUIN STICKNEY. I will now put Penguin Jeffcock's amended motion to a show of pinions.

A MEETING OF THE SOCIETY OF PENGUINS

(Every Penguin raises his right hand, except PENGUIN CRONKEYSHAW, who strenuously uplifts his left.) The proposal is carried by eight pinions to one. (*Loud squawks.*) I therefore authorise Penguin Jeff cock to obtain estimates for executing the badges and to report accordingly. Has any other Penguin a motion to bring ?

PENGUIN CRONKEYSHAW (*quivering with wrath*). I have, Mr. Grand Prime ! I beg to move that this Honourable Society of Penguins be immediately dissolved and re-constituted without any titles of office, rules, regulations, or formalities whatsoever !

[Sensation, and loud cries of " Quonk-quonk-quonk ! "

THE GRAND PRIME PENGUIN. I consider that I should be untrue to the traditions of this rock if I were to put such a revolutionary proposal as that before an assembly of Penguins—and I therefore decline to do so. (*Squawks from all, except PENGUIN CRONKEYSHAW, who rises and retires into an adjoining arbour, where he sits glowering and blaspheming furiously under his breath.*) Brother Penguins, we must all regret that the harmony of our meeting should have been marred by this little contretemps—however, we all know Penguin Cronkeyshaw—he has threatened to resign on many previous occasions, but has always come round during the return journey. In conclusion, I will call upon you to drink the usual toast. " The Penguins—and may they long flap together ! " (*The toast is drunk with enthusiastic squawks.*) And now I think we had better be making a move for the station.

[The company break up and stroll off together in twos and threes; PENGUIN CRONKEYSHAW sulks in his arbour until the last member of the Society has left the garden, when he hurries after them—to convey, we are permitted to hope, the comforting intelligence that, in spite of all that has occurred, he has decided to remain a Penguin till further notice.

9. *The Gull*

{*A Story of the Super-normal*}

PARMENAS FILMER awoke in the bedroom of his seaside lodgings at Weymouth.

From the bed in which he lay the sea was usually visible, but on this particular August morning it was shrouded by a dense white veil.

All through the night his sleep had been disturbed by the prolonged wail of distant sirens ; there must have been a heavy fog out at sea, and instinctively his thoughts flew to Isolde Le Vazon, who was probably at that very moment preparing to land on her native Guernsey, where—unless the unexpected happened—she would be henceforth as far removed from him as if she were on some Pacific isle.

How fascinating she had been, with her strange spiritual loveliness, her air of dreamy melancholy ! He recalled their first meeting—only a brief fortnight ago—in a glazed shelter on the Esplanade ; he traced back each stage of their progress towards the sweetest intimacy.

Never till then, although he was in his twenty-sixth year, had he met the woman who answered to his ideal, but in Isolde Le Vazon he had found her once for all. Her beauty was of the mystic and *morbidezza* type that had always most appealed to him ; she was high-strung, romantic, her literary taste was exquisite. No one before had ever shown such perfect appreciation of his poetry—for he wrote verses when he was not engaged in the uncongenial duties of the Inland Revenue Department, *in which*, on leaving Oxford* he had obtained a superior clerkship.

Short as their acquaintance had been* and limited as were their opportunities of meeting—for she had come to Weymouth to attend an invalid aunt by whose sick-bed most of her day was necessarily passed—he had allowed

himself to declare his passion, and Isolde had confessed that in happier circumstances she might have returned it.

LThappily she was already engaged to a certain Mr. Taudevin whom, if she could not love, she respected as one of the largest tomato-growers in all Guernsey.

Isolde had more rigid views than many of her sex upon the binding nature of an engagement, holding that to withdraw from it, unless expressly released by the other party to the contract, was as culpable for a girl as for a man.

But she had promised to lay the case before Mr. Taudevin as soon after her return to Guernsey as possible, and should he consent to set her free, which she warned Parmenas was in the highest degree improbable, all obstacles between them would be removed. On the other hand, should her *fiance* insist on holding her to her word, she was resolved to sacrifice herself at the call of duty.

All she asked in that event was that she might have the consolation of feeling that Parmenas would be ever constant to her memory, and that no other would ever replace her in his heart, which he found it easy to promise, feeling that she was and would always be the one love of his life.

He was by nature rather a dreamer than a man of action, and the idea of a lifelong and hopeless passion was not without a certain attraction for his peculiar temperament.

Then the end had come. Isolde had been suddenly summoned back to Guernsey, and he had seen her off the night before. Never could he forget that last parting on the deck of the *Chamois*. She had been more sadly, sweetly emotional than ever—oppressed by a presentiment she could not shake off that they were destined never to meet again on earth, pitying him for the loneliness he would have to endure when she was taken from him.

SALTED ALMONDS

" But I will come back to you, Parmenas—if I am permitted," she had said, with an inspired look in her uplifted eyes. " You shall not be quite desolate. Some day, perhaps, you will find a little white dove tapping ever so gently at your window. Don't drive it away, for it will be your poor Isolde, trying to tell you that she is dead, and that her last thought was of you ! "

She had been almost overcome by her own pathos, and he himself had been deeply affected. " But the dove will fly away again," he had said, " and I shall be lonelier than ever ! "

" Who knows ? Perhaps I shall be allowed to stay and comfort you," she had whispered : " at least, till the time comes when you learn to care for—for somebody else, Parmenas, and then—then you will see a poor little white bird lying in a corner, quite, quite dead. You might write one of your little poems on that, mightn't you ? But I mustn't be sentimental. After all, I mayn't die first; Mr. Taudevin may release me, and we may be happy together all our lives. Only somehow, to-night, I can't help feeling as if something were going to happen. Promise that, whatever happens, you will be constant, Parmenas ! "

If he thought her fears fantastic, her project of returning to him in the form of a bird slightly unpractical, he merely loved her the better for them ; so he had sworn undying fidelity, and, as she declined to go below, he had wrapped her up in rugs and shawls in a covered bench on deck and returned sadly to his lodgings. He lay still, thinking of all this, trying to summon up her looks and the least things she had said and done, until his eyes closed and he fell asleep once more.

When he awoke again he became aware that something was in his room. He could not see it, but he heard a curious fluttering noise which seemed to proceed from the floor. Raising himself on his elbow, he looked, and was startled for the moment to see a large greyish bird perched on the edge of his bath, and gazing at him with

fearless brown eyes. It was a remarkably fine specimen of the common gull (*Lanes canus*).

He had slept, according to his custom, with the window open, and the bird had evidently lost its bearings in the fog and flown in. He went towards it, but it did not budge; it allowed him to take it up and put it on the window-sill, without attempting to fly away. One of its wings drooped slightly, as if it had struck against something in the darkness and bruised itself.

It was still there when he had finished dressing, and humanity forbade him to drive it away in its crippled condition, so he consulted his landlady, who undertook to borrow a wicker cage from a neighbour who had recently lost a pet jackdaw.

The cage was brought, and the gull was easily persuaded to enter it, upon which Filmer sat down to breakfast and soon forgot the incident. After a merely perfunctory meal he Wandered along the Esplanade, feeding his melancholy by the sight of the shelter in which he had so often sat with Isolde. She had been reading a library novel that first morning, he remembered : it was *Ardath*, by Miss Marie Corelli, of whose genius she was an ardent admirer. Now a fat woman sat there, knitting a woollen stocking.

But as the morning passed, Filmer, even in his abstracted state, was conscious of an unusual stir and excitement in the passing crowd ; presently he caught scraps of talk that filled him with vague uneasiness, until he could not refrain from asking if anything had happened.

Something had indeed happened. News had just come that the *Chamois* had run upon the Casket rocks in the fog, and gone to the bottom—it was rumoured, with all on board.

What Filmer felt at this crushing blow need not be set down here ; his reason tottered under it, and might have left him altogether, had not more reassuring tidings arrived later in the day. The passengers were safe after all—at least, all the ship's boats but one had reached land,

SALTED ALMONDS

and, as the sea was perfectly calm, no fears were entertained for the remaining boat, which was known to have been successfully launched, and had probably steered for the French coast.

To Filmer the relief was considerable, even though he could not help remembering Isolde's presentiment the night before. But presentiments are not infallible, and the chances were immensely in favour of her having been in one of the boats that had turned up.

However, the list of names was published, and Isolde Le Vazon's was not among them, and nothing more had been heard of the missing boat.

Even then he clung to hope, for the general opinion was that it had been picked up by some outward-bound vessel. And yet there was one thing which, whenever his eye fell upon it, struck a chill of superstitious dread into his inmost soul—it was the gull in its wicker cage.

Try as he might, he could not conquer a suspicion that it might be connected in a manner that he had little imagined at first with the fate of his beloved Isolde. Had she not promised to return to him if permitted, in the shape of a bird? Had not this creature flown into his window at the very hour the disaster must have happened?

But Isolde had mentioned a white dove—and this was a grey gull: he would not despair yet, especially as the lost boat might still prove to have been rescued.

And soon this hope was justified by news of it from Malta. A liner had arrived there with some sailors and a lady and a gentleman passenger belonging to the ill-fated *Chamois*; and Filmer breathed more freely, for he never doubted, though the names were not given, that the lady was Isolde.

Alas! this certainty of his was only too speedily shattered. The two passengers were a newly wedded couple of the name of Goldingham, who had been intending to make a short tour in the Channel Islands before returning to their home in South Africa.

Doubt was no longer possible. Isolde's prediction had been tragically fulfilled ; she had perished in the confusion, probably whilst sleeping soundly in the covered seat which she had insisted on occupying.

And the gull ? . . . He reproached himself now for his blindness and want of faith. What though it were not precisely the bird she would have chosen as the tenement of her spirit ? Gulls are more frequent at sea than white doves, and in her urgent desire to come to him she would naturally avail herself of the first means that offered themselves.

" Isolde ! " he cried, as he knelt by the wicker cage, " is it indeed you ? Have you come back to me as you promised ? Tell me it is true ! "

A sort of ripple passed through the gull's plumage, but she made no other answer.

" You are mine now ! " he said with exultation—" mine for ever ! " So long as you are with me, I need no other companion. None shall come between you and me. Only give me some sign, to tell me you understand."

The gull gave a little shrug, so startlingly like a gesture of Isolde's when she had affected to doubt his protestations, that even a sceptic must have been convinced.

Henceforth he resolved to cherish this bird for the sake of the spirit that in-formed it—just as the Duchess of Kendal, we are told, cherished the great raven that flew into her window at Twickenham after the demise of King George I. He did not conceal from himself that the situation had its difficulties ; the most ordinary prudence required that his strange secret should be concealed from all the world ; and yet, even in public, he could not bring himself to treat his transformed divinity as the mere sea-fowl whose semblance she had adopted.

It was impossible, for instance, when he took her up to town, to allow her to be put in the luggage-van ; and, as it is not every first-class passenger who appreciates a sea-gull as a fellow-traveller the journey was scarcely an agreeable experience. He felt some natural embarrass-

SALTED ALMONDS

ment, too, on presenting himself to the astonished house-keeper in his rooms at Spring Gardens carrying his adored Isolde in a large wicker cage; and he shuddered when the good woman protested against being expected to undertake the care of what she was pleased to describe as "poultry,"

However, as soon as Isolde was safely established in his rooms, he set himself to render her new existence as tolerable as possible. He procured for her a spacious and handsome cage, a portion of which he curtained off, so as to ensure the privacy essential to a delicate-minded female ; and from the satisfied air with which she pecked the hangings he could see that she was grateful for his forethought.

He also altered the furniture and decoration of his bachelor's den, until it was more in harmony with what he conceived to be her taste, though he failed to detect any indication in her manner that she was gratified by, or even observed, his efforts to please her. But she appeared to appreciate her food-dish, a tray of genuine old Canton enamel, and her antique Venice drinking-glass, which, remembering that at Weymouth she had once expressed a passion for *bric-a-brac*, he had picked up at a curiosity dealer's in Wardour Street.

With such a new and absorbing interest in his life, Filmer could not fairly be called unhappy; he did his work at the office with his customary intelligence, even though longing inwardly for the hour to strike which set him free to return to the cage which contained his Isolde.

He had never been fond of society ; now he went nowhere ; he was quite content to pass all his evenings at home, reading Shelley aloud to her, for her fine sensitiveness to what was best and highest in literature had not deserted her, and she seldom failed to greet the most inspired passages with a low croak of rapturous approval. When, on the other hand, he ventured to read her some little composition of his own she was more

critical, and it was a proud moment for him when she was so carried away by a stanza of his as to spread her wings and utter a squawk of unmistakable enthusiasm.

Yes, on the whole these evenings were characterised by tranquil yet real happiness.

He had come home early from the office one Saturday afternoon, and was reading "Epipsychidion" to the gull, which was listening voluptuously with closed eyes, when he was unceremoniously interrupted by a visitor. The intruder was a fellow-clerk of his—a certain Frank Challis, who had been up at Oxford with him, and with whom, before his eventful holiday at Weymouth, he had been on terms of some intimacy. Filmer had frequently dined with Challis's family at their house in Craven Hill Gardens, and had always been glad when Frank looked him up for a smoke and a confidential chat of an evening.

But of late he had rather avoided him, from a feeling that his boisterous high spirits and reckless talk would grate upon Isolde's refined ear.

"What-ho! old chap," began Challis. "So you're all alone, eh? Thought I heard you jawing to somebody."

"I was reading aloud—to myself," explained Filmer, a little awkwardly, for he could not very well admit that he had been reading poetry to a gull.

"What the deuce have you done to your *digs'?—they look more like a woman's boudoir than a fellow's rooms. I say—I don't want to be inquisitive—but you aren't *married* by any chance?"

"No," said Filmer with a sad smile, "I shall never be that—now." And he glanced at the gull.

"Oh, it's too soon to chuck up yet!" said Frank. "So you've started an aviary. Going in for keeping canaries? . . . Why, you've got a *gull* in it—a common gull, by gad!"

"Excuse me," said Filmer stiffly; "it is by no means a common gull."

SALTED ALMONDS

" Well, it's evident you think so, or you wouldn't give it enamel and coloured glass to eat and drink out of—and a Japanese bronze to tub in—and frilled curtains to go to bed behind. Great Scot ! you'll provide it with a toilet-table next ! "

" I fail to see what business it would be of yours if I did," said Filmer irritably.

" My dear old chap, you needn't get shirty about it. Can you give me a cigar ? I've come out without mine."

" I'm sorry," said Filmer, " but I've quite given up smoking." Which was true, for Isolde had once told him that she could not endure the smell of tobacco.

" Oh, it doesn't matter—I've got a pipe." And Challis was proceeding to light up, when Filmer felt obliged, in Isolde's interests, to beg him to forbear. Then, to his horror, Frank began to tell him a good story he had just heard which had originated on the Stock Exchange, and which Filmer instinctively felt would prove unsuited to Isolde's delicate sense of propriety, so he hastened to say that anecdotes of that kind did not appeal to his sense of humour.

" I never knew you had one," said Frank. " And you might tell this story to a maiden aunt—a *frisky* maiden aunt. However, it's too good to be wasted on *you* ! "

The gull had cocked her head on one side with an air of expectation, and, if Filmer had not known Isolde so well, he would almost have imagined she was disappointed. But then, of course, she could not know what she had been spared !

" Do you know, old man," said Frank presently, with concern in his honest face, " it strikes me you want rousing. Can't be healthy for you, shutting yourself up like this. Why not come and dine quietly with us ? Doriel's back from Dresden now—you remember Doriel ? "

Filmer did remember Doriel as a rather engaging tomboy with a cloud of tawny hair, who had made him play tennis and cycle and skate with her, and had chaffed

him unmercifully for his want of proficiency in all these exercises. He did not feel inclined to meet her just then.

"She's grown up now," Frank went on—"come out, and all that. And though I *am* her brother, I will say she's turned out a 'ripper.' She's simply Ai at hockey!"

But Filmer pleaded an engagement for that evening, and just then the servant entered with a tray on which were some scalloped oysters daintily served in a silver shell. "Mrs. Trotman is very sorry, sir," said the girl, "but she couldn't send up the gull's lunch any earlier."

"The gull's lunch!" exclaimed Challis, after the servant had departed. "You do that bird devilish well! Never heard of giving a gull scalloped oysters before. It don't seem to take very kindly to 'em, though."

The bird was, indeed, merely toying with the bread-crumbed morsels—for, as Isolde had frequently informed Filmer, she regarded all food with indifference and even repugnance.

"They have kept her waiting for her lunch till nearly tea-time," he said: "no wonder she has no appetite. And she is a delicate feeder at the best of times."

"Rats!" said Frank, with distressing coarseness. "You try her with a fat slug or two!"

It need hardly be said that Filmer repudiated this profane suggestion with indignant horror.

"I tell you I *know*" persisted Frank; "I kept a tame gull myself when I was a kid. It's no use giving 'em kickshaws. Slugs and snails and worms are the grub they like!"

"I suppose," said Filmer with dignity, "you'll allow *me* to be the best judge of what food my gull prefers."

"Oh, you can take her to dine at Prince's or the Carlton, for all / care!" retorted Challis, as he rose to go. "But I bet you anything I'm right."

As soon as he had gone Filmer hastened to apologise to Isolde for the outrageous insults which she had been forced to endure, and he resumed his reading of "Epipsy-chidion"—only to be a second time interrupted by the

SALTED ALMONDS

irrepressible Frank, who was so bent on proving to him that his views upon what constituted a gull's favourite diet were mistaken that he had actually taken the trouble to go all the way to a naturalist's shop in Drury Lane and procure an assortment of slugs and worms in a tin box for experimental purposes.

Worse still, he insisted, despite Filmer's protests, on emptying the box into Isolde's cage.

Instead of going into violent hysterics, as Filmer had fully expected, she sidled delicately up to a worm of particularly unprepossessing exterior, and absorbed it with unaffected gusto.

" Bravo, old girl ! " cried Frank. " Now let's see if you can put away a slug ! "

And, after a little coquettish hesitation, Isolde *did* put away a slug—several slugs, in fact.

" Didn't I *tell* you ! " said Challis triumphantly. " Perhaps you'll believe me now ? "

" I do," said Filmer heavily, as he saw him to the door, " I do. And," he added awkwardly in a lower tone, " if you'll let me change my mind, I *will* come and dine with you this evening. It may cheer me up."

" Right-oh ! " said Frank heartily. " We shall all be delighted to see you—especially Doriel. I won't tell her about the gull, old chap, or she might rot you." And Filmer felt grateful to him for this forbearance.

Calmer reflection convinced him of the injustice of blaming his Isolde for tastes which were probably inseparable from the nature of the bird she had chosen to inhabit, and he took care that in future she should be provided with the kind of sustenance she evidently preferred.

But he read her no more Shelley.

He spent a pleasanter evening at Craven Hill Gardens than he had anticipated. Doriel was no longer the pretty romp he remembered. She had become an extremely charming young woman, and the frank friendliness with

which she received him was soothing to his overstrung nerves.

It was late when he returned to his rooms. Isolde was sleeping peacefully on her perch, her beak pointing towards her tail, and the sight of her filled him with compunction. Would she slumber so serenely if she knew where he had been and how completely he had forgotten her ?

He resolved to see no more of Doriel in future—and, for a time, he kept his resolution.

Unfortunately, Isolde either could not or would not make any effort to be an intellectual companion to him. She seemed fond of him, in her way, but gradually all her former sprightliness deserted her, and there were times when he feared that she had found him a bore.

Nothing, it is well known, is so calculated to estrange affection as the mere suspicion that we bore our beloved, and Filmer was not long in realising that the boredom was, to say the least, reciprocal.

What wonder, then, that he should sometimes seek solace and recreation in the sight of Doriel's winsome face, in the sound of her gay chatter ? He did not mention this to the gull, because she would not have understood it ; but when with Doriel he endeavoured to convey that some hidden sorrow had set him apart from all other men, and that his heart was dead to all earthly love.

He honestly believed this himself, and hoped that she realised it also, until an evening came which revealed to him the peril to which they were both unconsciously drifting. He was dining at Craven Hill Gardens, and, as usual, his place was next to Doriel. On her other side sat a young man of the name of Mowbray, a good-looking, athletic, if somewhat unintellectual youth, who was obviously attracted by Miss Doriel, and in whom she might have been expected to take at least a passing interest.

Filmer had honestly sought to efface himself by directing his conversation to his other neighbour, and replying to Doriel's overtures with a brevity that only just escaped

SALTED ALMONDS

brusqueness ; but she declined to be repulsed, and exerted all her very considerable powers of witchery to subdue him, entirely neglecting the unfortunate Mowbray.

To his consternation, Filmer found that his heart was very much alive after all ; and for the remainder of the dinner, and even upstairs in the drawing-room afterwards, he surrendered himself entirely to Doriel's charm, and was rather stimulated than otherwise by observing the increasing gloom on young Mowbray's ingenuous countenance.

But on his way home the inevitable reaction followed.

He saw, in a flash, that he was fast falling in love with Doriel ; that, should she continue this encouragement, nothing would save him from proposing to her—and he was pledged, solemnly pledged, to lifelong constancy to Isolde !

Isolde was awake that evening ; she had evidently been sitting up for him, and he could scarcely bring himself to meet her bright, reproachful eye. " I know what you would say if you could," he faltered apologetically ; " and I deserve it. I *have* neglected you shamefully of late. I will do so no more. In future, Isolde, *all* my evenings shall be passed with you ! "

Isolde explored the region under her wing with her beak—it was a mannerism of hers which had often distressed him—before she raised her head and gazed intently at him for an instant. Then her glittering eye slowly disappeared in the soft down that surrounded it—and he felt that she was appeased, and that he was forgiven.

Doubtless a more prosaic and practical mind than Filmer's would have rebelled against the fate which required him to abandon all hope of married felicity, and be (Aitent to remain platonically bound for life to a mere bird. But to his exalted and mystical nature such abnegation seemed an obvious duty. After all, Isolde had made the greater sacrifice in voluntarily projecting

herself into the body of a bird so grossly unromantic in its captive state as a sea-gull. She must be suffering at least as much as himself for her generous impetuosity, and he was determined never again to vex her gentle spirit by ingratitude or unfaithfulness.

Accordingly—much as it cost him—he kept away from the Challises, hoping that in time they would understand that he preferred to be left in solitude.

And his renunciation did not go altogether unrewarded, for it really seemed as if the gull were trying to do her best to fill the blank in his life. She grew gentler, more subdued, every day ; the brisk perkiness that had once repelled him disappeared ; she even overcame her voracious appetite, as though in deference to his prejudices—he was touched to observe that she could scarcely be prevailed upon now to dally with the most tempting slug.

The year drew to its close, and he had almost succeeded in putting Doriel out of his thoughts, when one Sunday afternoon the maid-servant suddenly opened the door and announced : " Mr, and Miss Challis "—and Filmer sprang to his feet with a wild joy, which he could only hope escaped the gull's observant eye.

" We've just been to service at the Abbey," explained Doriel, looking more bewitching than ever in a highly becoming black hat and sables, " and I insisted on Frank bringing me on here to ask you what you mean by neglect*ing us for weeks and weeks." I

" I *told* her you had one of your unsociable fits on, and didn't want to be bothered," said Frank, " but she *would* come. She will have it that you're offended with us."

Filmer stammered something incoherent as he offered them tea. He did not think the gull could object to his doing that.

" You *know* you're glad to see us !" said ENnel : " confess you were feeling horribly lonely up here *m*

" Not he !" laughed Frank. " He's got his bgoved gull to keep him company."

SALTED ALMONDS

" A gull ? " cried Doriel. " So *that's* what you keep in that cage there. What a queer sort of pet ! Is it amusing ? Can it do any tricks ? "

Her light tone jarred on Filmer just then. He replied, somewhat shortly, that a gull was hardly on the same footing as a performing canary.

" How dull ! " said Doriel, going up to the cage. " I should have thought a cockatoo would be more cheerful for you than a mopy creature like this. I'd no idea gulls were such ugly things. What makes it flap its wings at me like that ? "

" She is not accustomed to hearing such extremely personal remarks," said Filmer coldly.

" You say that as if you thought she understood what I said ! " exclaimed Doriel, raising her pretty eyebrows.

" And if I do, Miss Challis," he replied, " perhaps I have my reasons."

" I'm sorry," said Doriel with provoking good-humour. " I apologise.. Do you hear, gull ?—I apologise. And just to show there's no ill-feeling, you may come and perch on my finger."

She had already stripped off her glove, and, before Filmer could interfere, she had thrust her slim white hand into the gull's cage. . . . The temptation was too much for Isolde : she struck viciously at her rival's forefinger with her sharp yellow beak, and Doriel drew back her hand with a little cry of pain. " See what your horrid bird has done to me ! " she said, exhibiting the wound to him with a childishly pathetic *moue* ; and he longed to seize the injured hand and cover it with kisses, but loyalty to Isolde forbade. It was not Doriel, standing there in her fresh young beauty, that most deserved his pity, but rather the homely grey bird fluttering in a paroxysm of impotent jealousy.

" Any bird would be frightened," he said, clumsily enquiring, " when you put your hand in like that."

" Suppose I ought to have known," said Doriel, with a distinct change of manner ; " but you see I'd no idea

my poor hand was quite such a hideous object. Frank, will you lend me your handkerchief and bind it up—as Mr. Filmer doesn't seem to think it worth troubling himself about ? "

" I say ! it's bleeding like blazes ! " cried her brother, binding up the finger, as the unhappy Filmer stood there, too paralysed to offer his services. " You poor little girl ! Upon my soul, Filmer," he added indignantly, " it would serve that brute right if you were to wring its beastly neck for it. I'd do it myself for twopence ! "

" Touch her if you dare ! " cried Filmer, exasperated beyond all self-control. " It was not *her* fault ; she was provoked—deliberately, wantonly provoked ! You—you don'r know what she *is* to me ! "

" Apparently not," said Doriel. " I think we won't wait for tea, Frank. Mr. Filmer doesn't seem to be quite himself this afternoon."

Filmer made no attempt to detain them—he felt it would be useless. As soon as they were gone he turned to Isolde, who had quieted down again. " Are you satisfied *now* ? " he cried fiercely. " I *loved* that girl—do you hear ? I own it ; and I have let her go,—for your sake. You need not fear that she will ever come between us in future ; that accursed beak of yours has alienated her for ever. But oh, Isolde, think—is it fair to demand this from me ? Must you *always* remain a bird ? Can you not comfort me in some less incongruous shape ? I implore you at least to make an effort ! "

As he said this he heard a sound behind him, and turned, to see Doriel Challis standing in the doorway.

" I — I fancy I must have dropped my glove here," she said, and he noticed that she was deadly pale.

" Did you hear,"—he asked her,—"*did* you hear anything ? "

" Everything," she admitted. " I — I came back, really, to tell you—but that doesn't matter now. Parmenas, you mustn't give way to these morbid ideas—I can't *bear* it ! Get rid of that wretched bird—to please me ! "

SALTED ALMONDS

She was tempting him—Doriel was tempting him—to some unspeakable infamy ; but he felt just then that he was proof against all her wiles. " I will not ! " he cried. " I have sworn to be constant, and I will be ! Nothing on earth shall make me part from my Isolde, so long as she chooses to remain with me."

" You will never be happy till you do," entreated Doriel. " Dear, dear Parmenas, *don't* make me miserable ! Come to me to-morrow and tell me that it is over—that you are your own self again. Then I shall have something to tell *you*"

And so she left him ; but her spell over him was broken by the callous selfishness of her request. She knew all now, and yet she could urge him to destroy (for what else could her words mean ?) this bird which stood in her way.

" No, Isolde," he murmured, " I may be weak—but I am not so weak as that. She has made me yours once more. I love her no longer. *This* time my heart will never waver from you again ! "

But the gull made no response ; she was strangely still, he thought. It was growing dark, and he lit a candle and peered into the cage. . . . There she lay at the bottom, her wings spread, her eyes dull and filmy, her yellow beak partly open, her crumpled feet already stiffening.

She was quite dead. Isolde's spirit had, as she had once predicted, been unable to bear the revelation of his inconstancy.

In the first ecstasy of his remorse Filmer had no sense of recovered freedom. On the contrary, he felt more irrevocably bound than ever. Wherever Isolde's spirit had betaken itself, he vowed that it should never again be grieved by the least inconstancy on his part. Perhaps, he thought, when she realised the sincerity of his repentance, she would return to him in some form more worthy of her.

And that he might always have a safeguard at hand against further backsliding, he took the gull himself to

be prepared and set up by one of the leading naturalists in London.

But the naturdist kept it a long time—and insensibly Filmer's thoughts began to recur to Doriel Challis. Had she really been so heartless as she seemed ? She had only begged him to " get rid of " the gull : might she not merely have meant that he should part with it ? If so, how unjust he had been to her ! And what if Isolde had vacated the bird in pity for them both ? In that case he was simply frustrating her generous intention.

His relations with Frank had, ever since that memorable Sunday afternoon, been of the most distant character ; they never spoke to one another, except when the work of their department brought them in contact ; but he saw no reason why he should not write to Doriel, and one evening in February, on his way home from the office, he made up his mind to do so.

But no sooner had he carried his reading-lamp to his bureau and sat down to write, than he fell back in his chair in stupefied dismay.

On the blank surface of his blotting-pad a sentence was traced in large irregular letters which turned his heart sick and cold as he read. "*Could stay no longer. Will come back if possible.*—ISOLDE," ran the message.

She was coming back ! In what form ? Hardly the gull's, since that was in the hands of the stuffer. One thing only was clear—she had not intended to release him after all, and with that spirit-message staring him in the face it was impossible to write that letter to Doriel.

As he sat there trying to collect his scattered senses, there came three low raps at his door, which he knew were given by no maid-servant ; he tried to say " Come in," but his dry tongue refused to obey him. And the door opened slowly, and on the threshold stood a figure which, even in the comparative darkness, he knew could only be that of Isolde. At least, he thought, she had come in human shape this time.

" Have you no welcome for me, Parmenas ? " she said,

SALTED ALMONDS

in the voice he so well remembered. " Or are you too utterly disgusted by the way I behaved ? "

" If you refer to—to the slugs, Isolde," he replied, " forget them—as / do. I could not hold you responsible for the appetites of the form you assumed ! "

" I'm afraid I don't understand," she said ; and he perceived that she either did not remember, or did not choose to be reminded of, this incident in her recent *avatar*.

" You are thinking of how you pecked Doriel's—Miss Challis's hand ? " he said. " It was a not unnatural outburst of jealousy—you had much provocation."

" I've no recollection of pecking any person's hand," she said. " And who is Miss Challis ? "

" You cannot really have forgotten the girl who made uncomplimentary remarks on you when you were in that cage ? " he replied. " *That* was Miss Challis."

" When I was in that cage ! " she repeated slowly. " Parmenas ! what *are* you talking about ? "

" It will all come back to you," he said. " Think, Isolde ! That last day, at Weymouth, when you solemnly promised that, if you should die before me, you would come to me in the form of a white dove—*now* don't you remember ? "

ⁱ " Did I ever really say anything so ridiculously sentimental ? " she asked.

" Ah, don't scoff, Isolde ! Because you kept your word. Yes, on that fatal night when the *Chamois* went down, a bird—not a white dove precisely, but a grey gull—flew in at my open window. I knew you at once—at least, *almost* at once. And I brought you here, and kept you in that very cage—till you could remain in the gull no longer. . . . So you *have* forgotten ? No matter, since you have come back to me once more."

She threw herself rather suddenly in the nearest arm-chair (he would have offered it to her before but for an impression that spirits never sat down), and then—to his utter astonishment, for in life she had seldom relaxed even

into a smile—she went into peal after peal of half-hysterical laughter.

At first he imagined that she was sobbing convulsively, but he soon recognised that he was mistaken.

" How could you have been so absurd ? " she gasped, as soon as she could speak. " It's horrid of me to laugh—for it's really rather touching of you—but a *gull*! . . . Me ! . . . Oh, it's quite too killing ! "

" But it's true ! " he assured her : " I could show you the gull, only it's being stuffed ! "

This only set her off again. " But / wasn't in the thing ! " she cried. " How *could* I be ? Why, I do believe you've been taking me for a *ghost* all this time ! "

" My poor Isolde," he said, endeavouring to break the truth to her as gently and considerately as he could, " can you really be unaware of—of your present state ? "

" Don't be so silly ! " she replied petulantly. " How can I be a ghost when I'm not dead ? There, take that green shade off the lamp, and look at me well. . . . Now do you see anything spectral about me ? "

As she sat there in the white glare of the unshaded lamp, Filmer had to admit that she was indeed a creature of solid flesh and blood—almost too solid, in fact—for in her robust physique there were few traces of the fragile and almost diaphanous form of the Isolde of the previous August—there were even indications of an approaching double chin !

" Yes," he said slowly, " I see now. You are no ghost, Isolde ! "

" Perhaps you would have preferred that I *hadbctn* ? " she said.

He could not help feeling that he was pledged to her, and that she was here to claim him ; but all he said was : " *Isolde* ! When I have been faithful to your memory all these weary months ! "

" Are you quite sure that you *have* been faithful ? " she asked. " *Honestly* now, Parmenas ? "

" There may have been moments," he confessed,

SALTED ALMONDS

" when the gull failed to fill the aching void in my life."

" And then you fitted that Miss—what is her name ? Challis, isn't it ?—into the vacancy ? I'm rather glad she got her hand pecked ! "

I am still yours," he said, " if you care to claim me."

" But supposing I don't—you would use your liberty to propose to this Challis girl ? Well, you may do so, Parmenas—you are free."

" This is too generous ! "he cried in a burst of Quixotism. " No, Isolde, I cannot accept this sacrifice ! "

" It's no sacrifice at all, because, as it happens, I am already another's."

" What ? " he cried, with unspeakable relief. " You have married Mr. Taudevin, then ? "

It was Isolde's turn to look embarrassed. " No, not him," she replied—" somebody else. Somebody who was on board the *Chamois* that night. I was in a covered seat on deck—he came and shared it with me. We discovered that we had much in common. When the crash came, he got me into one of the boats with a few sailors, and we drifted for days. He did not propose to me until we were reduced to the last Osborne biscuit ; and, under the impression that, in any case, we had but a short time to live, I accepted him. The people on the liner that picked us up took us for a newly wedded couple, and, not wishing to be identified, I did not undeceive them. The fraud was a very innocent one, for as soon as we reached Malta I became Mrs. Goldingham."

" You might have let me know all this earlier," he said : " it would have spared me considerable inconvenience."

" I could not bear to shatter your ideal of me," she explained. " I felt that you would rather think of me as dead than know the truth. And there was Mr. Taudevin to be considered, too. But *he* has married since. Then I thought that, as I was about to return for the last time to South Africa, it was fairer perhaps to come and tell **you that you** needn't grieve for me any longer. So I

came—only to find that you are faithless too. Ah, there is no such thing as constancy in men ! "

" You would not say so," he remonstrated, " if you knew how I cherished the gull for your sake, Isolde ! "

She began to laugh again. " I think there were—intervals/" she said ; and I utterly decline to be responsible for the gull. But now neither of us will stand in your way any longer. I must run away now—or my husband will be asking inconvenient questions. . . . Good-bye, Parmenas—accept my best wishes ! "

She was gone—and he was free, really free at last—to write to Doriel. Stay : why should he write, when he might go to her and plead his cause in person ? In ten minutes he was on his way to Craven Hill Gardens in a hansom. It was dark by the time he reached the house, but not so dark that he failed to notice a temporary awning over the front door. So the Challises were giving a dance, or an evening party. He had forfeited all right to an invitation, he knew, but he felt sure that he would have one, when once Doriel had realised that he was in his right mind at last, cured for ever of his fantastic delusion.

He asked for " Mr. Frank," meaning first to set himself right with Challis, who, he remembered now with some anxiety, had not been at the office that day. He could not be seriously ill, however, for the man-servant showed him into the billiard-room, where Frank was engaged in idly knocking the balls about.

He was clearly surprised to see Filmer, though he tried not to betray it. " Sit down, old chap," he said, as heartily as though there had been no coolness between them. " Sorry you couldn't turn up before—but better late than never ! "

" I — I wasn't free to come before," said Filmer, and added, with a gulp, " I can't help being afraid that you and—and Doriel thought I behaved rather oddly—about that wretched gull, you know."

SALTED ALMONDS

" Oh, that's all right ! " said Frank hurriedly. " Have you got rid of it at last, eh ? "

" It died," said Filmer simply. " I made a fearful ass of myself over it. I see that now ! "

" Then don't say any more about it. We understand how it was," declared Frank, who seemed unaccountably anxious to avoid the subject.

" But I must tell Doriel that—that I've come to my senses."

" You take my advice and leave things as they are," counselled Frank. " And anyway, you can't tell Doriel anything at present—she's half-way to Dover by this time ! "

" To Dover ! what has she gone to Dover for ? " asked Filmer, rendered inquisitive by disappointment.

" Well, they only stay the night there," said Frank, " on their way to the Italian Lakes."

" They ? " said Filmer. " Has your mother gone too, then ? "

" Not exactly ! " said Frank, with a laugh : " Doriel and Cecil Mowbray—for their honeymoon. Didn't you know ? I made sure you'd had an invitation. Doriel *meant* to send you one, I know. "

For a moment the billiard-table and lamps seemed to spin round giddily, and then Filmer heard himself saying, quite quietly and naturally, " No, I never got it. Did you say—Cecil Mowbray ? "

" Yes ; clinking good chap he is, too. You met him here the last time you dined with us—don't you remember ? It was just beginning then. We dropped in to tell you the news that Sunday just before Christmas—only—well, we came away without doing it for some reason. Care to come up and have a look at the presents ? They won't have put 'em away yet, and she's had some rather jolly ones."

But Filmer thought he had hardly time for it that evening.

" Well, I won't ask you to stay and dine to-night,

because it would be rather poor fun for you—we shan't be over-cheery, now Doriel's gone. You must come and meet them both when they're back from the honeymoon."

" Thanks," said Filmer, " I — I will, if I can. And when you're writing, will you tell—Mrs. Mowbray that I wish her every happiness ? "

Some hours later he got back to Spring Gardens, after consuming a dismal dinner at an Italian restaurant, surprised to find that he could eat at all, and that he felt no particular emotion. But the truth was that he was still numbed by the shock he had undergone.

When he reached his sitting-room he found a large wooden box on his table, which he opened with no very clear notion of what might be inside.

It contained a glass case, in which, on a rock covered with dried seaweed and with a background imperfectly suggesting the boundless ocean, the gull was perched in a lifelike attitude.

She had been admirably stuffed, and in the glass eyes which challenged his he seemed to see a gleam of cynical mockery, as though the bird were exulting in the thought of the long and successful imposture by which she had obtained food and shelter, and the most reverent and unremitting attention—all under false pretences !

He felt a sudden impulse to destroy it then and there, and with it every vestige of his infatuation—he had already seized the poker for the purpose—and then his hand relaxed.

After all, it was childish as well as brutal to wreak vengeance on the dead. Besides, this poor effigy had not deceived him—it was he who had deceived himself. And then he remembered how much she—if the bird was a female, for he had taken her sex for granted—had done to sustain him at the beginning of his imaginary bereavement ; he thought of the patience with which she, a wild sea-bird, had endured captivity, of her fearless trust in him, and her dumb efforts to be a companion to him ; and his heart softened.

SALTED ALMONDS

Gull though she was, she was the one creature that had been constant to him to the end.

And so the glass case was suffered to remain intact—but not in Filmer's sitting-room : he felt he could not stand the ironical inquiry of those artificial eyes—and the stuffed gull now forms the most cherished ornament in his housekeeper's parlour.

In fact, the good woman appreciates it far more in its present condition than ever she did in the flesh, when, as she remarks—with more accuracy than she is aware of—" It couldn't have made more mess and trouble if it had been a Christian ! "

10. *The Game of Adverbs*

(A Country-house Tragi-comedy, in Two Parts)

PART I

CENE—*The Drawing-room at Dripstone Manor, a stately Jacobean mansion recently acquired by MR. JOSEPH SHUTTLEWORTH {of SHUTTLEWORTH & CLACK, Carpet Manufacturers, Yarnminster). It is towards dusk in early October. MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH, a plump, good-humoured-looking matron of about fifty, is discovered with her children, viz. GRACE, a rather prim and precise young woman of twenty-three ; FLOSSIE, a pretty and lively girl of eighteen ; CONNIE, twelve, and COLIN, ten. With them are GILLIAN PINCENEY, a High School friend of GRACE'S ; IVY GORING, a Boarding-school chum of FLOSSIE'S, who are staying at the Manor ; and the younger children's governess, Miss MARKHAM. MR. SHUTTLEWORTH, fifty-five, florid, and prosperous-looking, enters with his son BOB, twenty-one, of Eton and Cambridge. Both are in shooting things.*

MR&. SHUTTLEWORTH {to them). So you're back at last ! I've just sent away the tea. But if you'd like some, I could easily——

THE GAME OF ADVERBS

MR. SHUTT. Not for me, Louisa, thanks. Bob and I had something as we came through the dining-room. That Jack-o'-dandy friend of Bob's, Dormer, may like a cup, though, for all I can say.

MRS. SHUTT. But what's become of Mr. Dormer ?

MR. SHUTT. Gone upstairs to titivate, I expect. Bless you, you wouldn't catch *him* coming in here in his shooting toggery !

BOB. Fact is, Mater, the Governor's rather riled with Dormer for saying on the way home that, on the whole, he thought the safest thing to be was a pheasant. Dormer didn't mean anything by it, sir.

MR. SHUTT. It's my belief he did. And considering how confoundedly bad the light's been this afternoon, and that I never took to shooting at all till late in life, I don't call myself a *particularly* poor shot.

BOB (*sotto voce*, to Miss GORING). Never knew anyone who *did*. But the poor old Governor is rather apt to draw his bow at a venture.

MRS. SHUTT. I can't say I quite take to your friend Mr. Dormer, Bob. He has such a nasty sneering way with him.

GRACE. He's atrociously conceited. If he's a type of the Oxford undergraduate, I prefer Cambridge.

FLOSSIE. I'm certain he's looking down on us secretly all the time.

BOB. What bosh ! You don't understand old Dormer, that's all. He's a nailing good fellow. Capital company !

MRS. SHUTT. YOU said he would keep us all amused if he could only be got to come. But so far, I can't say—

BOB. Well, Mater, after being at the same house at Eton with him, I *ought* to know. And all I can tell you is, that he was far and away the best mimic I ever heard. He could imitate everybody and everything.

FLOSSIE. Up to now he has only favoured us with an imitation of a disagreeable stuck-up pig. It's life-like—but still it is beginning to pall. (*She starts as DORMER*

SALTED ALMONDS

lounges in ; he has dressed for dinner, except that he is wearing a black smoking-coat.) Oh, Mr. Dormer, you did startle me so ! You look exactly like a curate.

DORMER. And are curates such alarming objects ? But you're all in the dark, here.

FLOSSIE. Yes. We thought you would come in and be brilliant.

DORMER. I'm afraid I can't compete with the ordinary methods of illumination. *(To himself)* Wish this girl would see that I'm not in the humour for this sort of thing.

MR. SHUTT. *(to himself)*. Can't do with this young fellow ! *(Aloud, to his wife)* I'm off to my study, Louisa. Got some letters to write. *[He goes out.]*

DORMER *(to himself)*. On the sofa—with his eyes shut ! Only wish I could slip out, too—but they might think it rather casual. *(Aloud, to FLOSSIE)* YOU haven't told me why you charged me with looking clerical ? Can't say I feel complimented.

FLOSSIE. Oh, it doesn't go any deeper than a buttoned-up coat and white tie. And you might have a worse compliment than being compared to a clergyman !

MRS. SHUTT. Talking of clergymen, my dear, that reminds me the Rector has never called yet. Considering we have been here six weeks, and attended church regularly every Sunday morning, I do think he *might* have found time to return the civility before this !

DORMER. If it was the Rector I had the privilege to hear last Sunday, impressing upon us the duty of cheerfulness in sepulchral tones that were calculated to draw howls from a china poodle, I should be inclined to think myself that the gaiety of the party has not suffered appreciably from his delay.

MRS. SHUTT. Mr. Polyblank's pulpit manner is a little melancholy, certainly—he's a bachelor, poor man. But they tell me he's very much looked up to ; comes of a very good family, and intimate with all the county folk, so perhaps he doesn't consider *us* good enough for him.

THE GAME OF ADVERBS

GRACE. Really, mamma, you talk as if we were pariahs ! Most of the county people round here have called on us. What *does* it matter if Mr. Polyblank chooses to stay away ?

MRS. SHUTT. All the same, my dear, there's a sort of natural tie between the Rectory and the Manor which—not that I'm one to force my acquaintance on anybody. Still he might give us credit for not being downright savages, if we *do* come from Yarnminster !

FLOSSIE. There, mother dear, that's enough of the Reverend Poly. I vote we have a game at something. Are you fond of games, Mr. Dormer ?

DORMER. Indoor games ? Er—not immoderately. The mere fact of being supplied with a slip of paper and a stumpy pencil, and required to compile a list of animals beginning with A, paralyses my faculties. I assure you I never can produce a single animal beginning with A.

FLOSSIE [*with intention*]. Not even *one* ? But it's too dark to see to write. We might have a guessing game—where somebody has to go out of the room, you know.

DORMER. Ah, I think I could play at that.

FLOSSIE. And when you come back, you have to guess from our questions what celebrated historical person you're supposed to be.

DORMER. I should never get within a mile of it. I've forgotten my *Little Henry's History of England* ages ago.

Miss MARKHAM [*in a small thin voice*]. There's a most amusing guessing game called " Adverbs."

DORMER. It sounds perfectly delightful. Only I'm afraid that I've only the sketchiest idea of what sort of thing an adverb is.

Miss MARKHAM. Surely you know *that* ! It's a part of speech, formed by adding the termination " ly " to an adjective. For instance : bad—badly——

DORMER. Good—goodly. I see now, Miss Markham. Tremendous fun, I've no doubt.

Miss MARKHAM [*annoyed*]. I was about to explain how it's played. One of the party goes out, and the rest

SALTED ALMONDS

agree in what manner they are all to receive him when he returns—"admiringly," "affectionately," and so on.

DORMER. And he comes in pretending he's somebody else?

Miss MARKHAM. He can if he chooses, of course. But all he need do is to ask questions all round, and from the way in which they are answered he guesses what the adverb is. Now do you see, Mr. Dormer?

DORMER. I think I have grasped the idea. I don't mind volunteering to go out of the room, at all events.

GRACE. Very well. You go out, Mr. Dormer, and just wait about in the hall till we call you in.

DORMER. Delighted. *{To himself, as he goes out}* It's just possible I may be a little hard of hearing.

FLOSSIE *{after he has closed the door}*. Now, what adverb shall it be? Do let's make it something *difficult*!

Miss PINCENEY. Why not something which would let us show him what we think of him—"Candidly"? "Contemptuously"?

BOB. That would be rather rough on him, Miss Pinceney. I asked him down here, you know, and really——

MRS. SHUTT. Yes, my dear, it wouldn't be kind to make any visitor of ours uncomfortable, *would* it?

FLOSSIE. He makes *us* uncomfortable. He's as rude as ever he can be!

GRACE *{thoughtfully}*. Why not make the adverb "rudely"? We could be rude without being *personal*.

MRS. SHUTT. If you're sure he won't misunderstand——

BOB. Oh, *he'll* understand all right. After all, it's only a game. "Rudely" will do first-rate. I'll call him in.

IN THE ENTRANCE-HALL

THE REV. PEREGRINE POLYBLANK *{at the glazed doors}*. I wonder if they heard me ring. *{He descries DORMER in the gloom.}* Ah, at last! He doesn't seem to see me——

THE GAME OF ADVERBS

Perhaps I'd better——(He goes in.) Er—I am the Rector—Mr. Polyblank. Is Mrs. Shuttleworth at home ?

DORMER (*stiffly*). I Ve no doubt Mrs. Shuttleworth will be pleased to see you, sir, if you wait a moment. (*To himself, as he passes on to the library*) Confounded cheek, taking me for the butler ! But this will put that adverb foolery out of their heads, thank goodness. I shall get a nap in peace, now !

THE RECTOR (*alone, to himself*). Painful to enter the old place again. I miss those poor dear Hardupps at every turn. To find strangers in the familiar rooms—it will be an ordeal, but I could not put it off any longer. . . . Why doesn't the butler return ? Does this good lady mean to keep me here awaiting her pleasure ? If these are manufacturing manners——But I must beware of prejudice. No doubt there is some good reason for her delay. After all, people may have made a fortune out of carpets without being necessarily lacking in the refinements and courtesies of well-bred society.

BOB (*opening the drawing-room door*). We're ready for you now, old chap. You can come in as soon as you like !

THE RECTOR (*to himself*). "Old chap!" I " can come in ! " . . . Well, well, I suppose this is the Yarn-minster idea of cordiality. A little crude, perhaps—but well-meant.

[*He enters the drawing-room.*]

PART II

SCENE—*The Drawing-room at Dripstone.* THE RECTOR *has just entered, and stands helplessly endeavouring to identify the Mistress of the House in the deepening dusk.*

BOB (*cheerily*). Make yourself at home, old fellow. Take a pew !

THE RECTOR (*to himself*). " Take a pew !" The heartiness of manufacturing circles is really rather trying ! (*Aloud*) But excuse me, I don't yet see——

BOB (*taking him by the shoulders and thrusting him down*

SALTED ALMONDS

on a couch in the centre of the circle). Squat there, and fire away.

THE RECTOR. I—ah—don't know whether you are aware that my—um—ah—name is Polyblank, and that I am the Rector of Dripstone ?

[A general ripple of genuine, if reluctant, amusement.

BOB. The Reverend Poly, eh ? by Jove ! capital ! All right, now begin asking questions—any rot will do, you know. Start with the Mater.

THE RECTOR *(to himself)*. Are they *all* like this in Yarnminster ? *(Aloud)* I confess that in this—ah—semi-darkness I find considerable difficulty in ascertaining the precise whereabouts of my—um—ah—hostess.

[An outburst of irrepressible laughter.

MRS. SHUTT. *(giggling helplessly)*. Oh, dear, dear, I *oughtn't* to laugh—but he is so ridiculous ! This is me, over here in the corner.

THE RECTOR *(pitching his voice in that direction)*. I trust, my dear Mrs. Shuttleworth, that I have not seemed reprehensibly—ah—tardy in coming here to make your acquaintance ?

MRS. SHUTT. *(in a whisper)*. I don't know what to answer. *(Aloud)* Tardy ? Oh dear, no. I shouldn't have cared if you'd stayed away altogether. *(In a whisper, to GRACE)* DO you think that was *too* rude, dear ?

GRACE. Oh, not at all, Mother. *(Aloud to THE RECTOR)* There, you've had Mother's answer. Now it's my turn.

THE RECTOR *(to himself, in mild surprise)*. These people are really *too* impossible ! *(Addressing himself to GRACE)* May I plead in excuse that my delay is due (firstly) to the preparations for our Harvest Festival, and (secondly) the entire parish work being thrown upon my shoulders by my curate's having unexpectedly extended his holiday.

[A universal rd&r of delight.

BOB. *Just* his pulpit manner, isn't it ? *(Sotto ft&ce, to*

THE GAME OF ADVERBS

FLOSSIE) NOW perhaps you'll own I was *right* about Dormer.

FLOSSIE (*in the same tone, to him*). I must say he can be awfully clever and amusing—when he chooses.

GRACE (*replying to THE RECTOR*). YOU can plead *no* excuse for trying to be clever at the expense of a clergyman who, with all his peculiarities, has fifty times *your* brains.

THE RECTOR (*to himself*). I should *not* have said that Barlam's brains were———But why should I let myself be annoyed by such a trifle ? (*Aloud*) My dear young lady, need I protest that I had not the slightest ideah———?

BOB. Leave this to me, Grace. (*To THE RECTOR*) Not the slightest idea ? No, old chap, nobody here ever supposed you *had* ! [*Applause.*]

THE RECTOR (*to himself*). I *trust* I am not unduly puffed up with the pride of intellect—but *really* ! (*Aloud*) I came here in the hope that the natural—ah—bond between the Rectory and the Manor———(*Shouts of laughter.*) Don't you think—(*with pathos*)—don't you *think* you are making this *rather* difficult for me ?

FLOSSIE. It would be easy enough for anyone who wasn't a hopeless idiot.

THE RECTOR (*to himself*). Can there be insanity in this family ? Merely ill-manners, I suspect. I won't give up *just* yet. Perhaps, by patience and sweetness, I shall win them over in the end. (*A loud, with laboured urbanity*) I am indeed in the Palace of Truth ! But there—we must no more look for reverence from the young than for—er—figs from a—um—ah—thistle. *Must* we ?

IVY GORING. I should have thought myself you would *prefer* the um—ah—thistles. [*Uproarious applause.*]

THE RECTOR (*gasping*). You compel me to remind you of a certain passage in the beautiful Catechism of our Church which——

GILLIAN PINCENEY. Please don't. There are some things which should be respected—even by a professional buffoon !

SALTED ALMONDS

THE RECTOR (*thunderstruck*). A professional buff——! (*Allowing his voice to boom*) Is there *nobody* here capable of answering the most ordinary remark without some monstrous insult ?

COLIN. Not *your* remarks.

THE RECTOR (*to himself*). I was never in such a household in all my *life*——never ! [*Aloud*] As far as I can distinguish in this dusk, there is a little girl sitting over there. I'm sure she——(*To* CONNIE) Are you fond of animals, little girl ?

CONNIE. I'm not fond of animals like you.

[*A felicitous repartee, which is received with the wildest enthusiasm.*]

THE RECTOR (*to himself*). I will make just *one* more effort. (*To* MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH) You must find a great pleasure, Mrs.—ah—Shuttleworth, in occupying such a picturesque, and, I may say, historic house as this ?

MRS. SHUTT. (*wiping her eyes*). Oh, dear, is it me again? . . . Yes, it is a pleasant house—except when one has to entertain tiresome visitors who *will* ask foolish questions.

THE RECTOR. YOU may rely upon being secure from such inflictions for the future, madam. (*With warmth*) Why, *why* is it that I can count upon a kindly welcome in the humblest cottage, whereas here——? [*He chokes.*]

Miss MARKHAM (*demurely*). I really can't say; perhaps cottagers are not very *particular*.

THE RECTOR (*passing his hand over his brow*). I confess I am utterly at a loss to understand what all this *means* !

COLIN. Keep on asking questions. Ask Grace how she'd like to be the Reverend Mrs. Poly, and see what she says. Mummy said only the other day how nice it would be if——

THE RECTOR (*rising*). Silence, boy ! I have heard enough ! I have stayed too long. I will go, before I am tempted to disgrace my calling by some unclerical outburst !

A L L (*in fits of laughter*). No, no, you mustn't go yet. You haven't said how we've received you !

THE GAME OF ADVERBS

THE RECTOR (*in a white rage*). How ? *How ! ! . . .*
Why, outrageously ! Abominably ! ! [*General hissing.*

A L L . Wrong, wrong ! You haven't got it yet. Don't give up ! Try again !

THE RECTOR (*stiffly*). Pardon me—but a necessarily restricted vocabulary———[*Howls of laughter.*

FLOSSIE (*as they calm down*). Well, the *right* adverb was " rudely."

THE RECTOR. I am not prepared to dispute it. Though there are others which perhaps are even more——

FLOSSIE. I thought you saw it long ago. We might have been a little *runder* perhaps.

THE RECTOR. I should be sorry to question your capabilities—but still, I can hardly conceive that possible.

MRS. SHUTT. Well, I don't know *when* I've had such a good laugh. It certainly is a *most* amusing game. Or at least *you* made it so. How wonderfully you did take the poor dear Rector off, to be sure ! When you first came in, I said to myself, " That *can't* be Mr. Dormer ! " But of course, directly you began to be so ridiculous, I remembered Bob had told us what a mimic you were. You really *ought* to go on the stage. You'd make your fortune as an actor, you would indeed !

THE RECTOR (*dropping feebly into a chair*). I—ah—you do me too much honour, my dear Mrs. Shuttleworth. (*To himself*) These poor dear deluded people ! I see now. . . . It was *a game*. . . . They didn't know me in the dark—they don't know me *now* ! . . . What a position—for them and me. What a horrible position !

MRS. SHUTT. Grace, my dear, will you ring for the lights ?

THE RECTOR (*to himself*). The lights ! If they're brought in, I shall never be able to look this family in the face again ! (*Aloud*) Er—ah—so pleased to have afforded you so much—um—ah—innocent amusement—but I'm a little fatigued, and, if you'll allow me, I—I think I'll slip away.

[*He makes his exit, amidst hearty rounds of applause.*

SALTED ALMONDS

IN THE LIBRARY—A LITTLE LATER

BOB (*to DORMER, whom he discovers asleep on a sofa*). What, lying down, old chap? Well, I must say you *deserve* a rest after your labours.

DORMER (*apologetically*). Tramping over those beastly wet roots does take it out of a fellow. But hasn't somebody called—the Rector, wasn't it?

BOB. What a chap you are! I should jolly well think it *was* the Rector! Joking apart, old man, you were simply ripping! How on earth you got old Poly's voice and manner so perfectly, after only hearing him once, beats *me*. What with the room being dark, and that, I swear that once or twice, when we were all rotting you, and being as beastly rude as we knew, I half thought you really *were* the Rector.

DORMER (*to himself*). The Rector must have had the deuce's own time of it! (*Aloud*) I—I hope your mother isn't—er—doesn't——?

BOB. The Mater? Not *she*! She was in fits. And as for the girls, why, they're all raving about you!

DORMER. Are they, though? Very nice of them. (*To himself*) I'm like Thingummy—I've awoke to find myself famous!

BOB. The way you kept it up to the very end!

DORMER. I'm glad you think I kept it up to the very end.

BOB. Your exit was a stroke of genius. I'm not flattering you, old chap, it was downright *genius*. I say, you'll do old Poly for us again after dinner, eh?

DORMER. My dear fellow, I couldn't if you paid me. Besides, I—I'd rather, if you don't mind, it didn't get talked about; it—well, it might be *awkward*, don't you know.

BOB (*nodding his head sapiently*). I see. You mean, it might get round to the Rector, eh?

DORMER. Exactly. It might—er—get round to the Rector.

I I . *The Magic H's**(A Society Story of Up-to-date Diablerie)*

[IT" DID not invent this story myself—I should not have ii dared. Nor will I pledge myself—even in a political -^sense—for it as being true in every particular. There is much in it that I can only accept under considerable reserve ; there are even certain things that strike me as frankly incredible. However, I tell it as it was related to me by a communicative and rather seedy stranger, in the Tube between Shepherd's Bush and Tottenham Court Road Stations, on Saturday the 1st of April last. I am able to fix the precise date, because it was the day I lost my pocket-book. The stranger began abruptly with a remark on the singular value of the letter " h " as a passport to polite society. " I happen," he said, " to know a rather striking instance in point, if you would care to hear it." Whereupon he told me the following narrative, for the somewhat inflated diction of which I must decline to be responsible :—]

" Harold Hipperholme seemed, at the time when I first knew him, a young man on whom Fortune had showered her choicest gifts. Of respectable, though not distinguished, origin, he possessed exceptional good looks, a commanding intelligence, considerable accomplishments, and wealth that was absolutely phenomenal. But alas ! there was a dash of bitter irony in the cup of his happiness—he had everything—everything he could possibly require—except 'h's' The unhappy young man had never yet succeeded in aspiring even his own name !

" For a while he could scarcely be said to suffer acutely from this infirmity. Indeed, he was scarcely conscious of it. Not till he became acquainted with the beautiful Lady Icilia Chilwell, daughter of the Earl of Stonistairs, was his deficiency brought home to him

SALTED ALMONDS

in all its full horror. He met her first at a Charity Bazaar, where she was assisting at a stall of fancy goods, and he fell hopelessly in love with her at first sight. After purchasing a 'toilet-tidy' worked, as she assured him, by her own hands, for the sum of ten guineas, he had ventured to remark that "the 'eat was simply 'orrible.' It struck him afterwards that she had shivered—but he thought nothing of it at the moment; and at their next meeting (which took place at a Flower Show in the Botanical Gardens) he addressed her more boldly with an inquiry whether she was 'going to 'Urlingham that Saturday.' Once more he observed her shiver, but, gathering courage as he went on, he ended by making her a formal offer of his hand and heart. No doubt his handsome appearance and faultless attire, together with the fact (which he did not try to conceal) that he was a person of unbounded affluence, prevented Lady Icilia's refusal from being as harsh as might otherwise have been expected. But she made it abundantly clear that it was a refusal. Even should she herself have been able to overlook such an insuperable barrier as utter 'h'—lessness in a suitor, she gave him distinctly to understand that her haughty father, the Earl, would never permit her union with one to whom the very existence of an eighth letter of the alphabet seemed so entirely problematical. . . ."

[Here I could not help remarking that I should hardly have thought that an aristocratic parent in these days would reject an aspirant as wealthy as Harold Hipperholme for so trifling a reason. For, though I cannot boast an acquaintanceship, at first hand, with any members of the nobility, I have read the diatribes of "Rita" and Miss Corelli, and have also frequently seen impecunious peers in society comedies welcome proposals from the most impossible outsiders, when sufficiently wealthy, with positive effusion. So that I felt pretty sure of my ground. The stranger, however, replied that my objection merely showed that I must temporarily have for-

gotten the extreme fastidiousness that notoriously characterises the House of Stonistairs. I admitted that I had, and he resumed his story :—]

" Needless to say that Harold endeavoured to overcome her decision by all the eloquence at his command. He urged that a true heart could beat as faithfully without its ' h ' as with it. He reminded her that the very letter on which she laid such unnecessary stress modestly ignored its own existence, since it was universally pronounced ' aitch '—*not* ' haitch.' All was in vain. Unless, or until, she told him, he could acquire a complete mastery of the elusive aspirate, he must never hope to call her his ! He left her with the fixed resolve to win her, whatever it might cost him.

" He put himself under several profesvdllae* elocution. They taught him to elocute, it is true—but no one of them could instil a solitary ' h ' into him, and elocution without aspirates is as incapable of soaring to the sublime as a cherub with its wings clipped ! There came an hour when he realised that he had exhausted all human aid, and that henceforth his sole hope lay in seeking assistance from the Powers of Evil !

" By the merest chance he saw on a railway bookstall a volume of one of the admirable ' A B C series, entitled ' *The ABC of the Black Art*. By a Black Artist. With an appendix containing fifteen different *formulæ* for invoking fiends.' He purchased the book—for, to one of his vast means, a shilling net was the merest trifle—took it home, and, locking himself into his study, traced a pentagram on the floor, as directed, and set to work to raise some unemployed fiend who should help him to attain his ends.

" For whole days and nights he laboured without conspicuous success. Occasionally some evil spirit with nothing worse to do would obey his summons, but no sooner did they hear the purpose for which they had been invoked, than (whether in disgust at its utter triviality, or to conceal their own incompetence) they indulged in demonstrations of fury so violent as almost

SALTED ALMONDS

to frighten him out of his wits. But the fifteenth and last formula produced a more satisfactory result. This time the fiend who answered his call was both less appalling of appearance and more obliging in disposition. In comparison with his predecessors he was almost undersized and, though inky, he was sympathetic and even resourceful.

" I suppress his name for obvious reasons—but he seemed to see no difficulty whatever in the affair. According to him, all Harold had to do was to procure certain articles, of which he gave him a list, and be at a given spot by the following midnight. There the fiend undertook to meet him with a magic type-foundry, and together they wormal offen out as many ' h's ' as possible before cockcrow, nnean conceivable that the fiend may have been inspired w reminiscences of the opera of *Der Freischutz*. Or it may have been his own idea entirely. That we shall never know now !

" After ascertaining that he would not be in any way prejudicing his future prospects by compliance, Harold made a note of the appointment, and the demon left. The next day was spent in collecting the necessary skulls and braziers, etc., and, shortly after n p.m., Hipperholme chartered a four-wheeler to convey himself and his occult paraphernalia to the midnight *rendezvous*.

" The precise spot I prefer not to indicate further than by mentioning that it was where four cross-roads met and just outside the radius. You may readily believe that on that journey Harold's heart was not altogether free from apprehensions. He could not but be aware that proceedings which might well escape remark in the seclusion of a German forest would inevitably attract attention in a London suburb. Suppose he and the fiend were brought up before a London magistrate for disturbing the traffic ? What an opportunity for, say, Mr. Plowden ! However, after arriving at the cross-roads and dismissing the cab with an extra sixpence, he found the fiend punctually awaiting him with a curious con-

trivance, somewhat between a cauldron and a type-casting machine on the Linotype principle. They set out a circle with the skulls and lamps and sundries, and then the weird labour commenced. But not, as Harold had anticipated, without annoying interruptions—from motor-cars, market-waggons, nocturnal hansoms, and the like. Fortunately, the fiend had a short and summary method of dealing with *them*. Once, at a critical stage in the proceedings, a constable on night duty came up with a request to know 'what they were up to'—but the fiend explained that they were only relaying the gas-pipes under instructions from the Local Borough Council, and the policeman departed quite satisfied, after wishing them a not uncordial good-night.

" And at last, well before the earliest village cock had shaken off his slumber, the dread task was accomplished. I am unable to furnish the exact figures of their output, but it may be safely estimated at several millions—a sufficient supply of h's to set up the most inveterate and conversational Cockney for eighteen months at the very least !

" I must not forget to mention that the fiend, before taking his leave, remarked, with a diabolical giggle to which Harold at the time was too elated to attach any importance, ' By the way, my friend, I had better warn you that six of those h's are " wrong 'uns " ! ' With which he sank through the soil, and Hipperholme never saw him again.

" But his spirits were high as he hastened home with his ill-gotten acquisitions. I hear you ask " — [I had not opened my lips, but the question had certainly occurred to me]—" by what possible process a supply of typed aspirates, even from an infernal matrix, could be introduced into any mortal's system ? I can only reply that I have not the smallest idea—but that the assimilation undoubtedly took place. For no sooner had Harold reached his quarters than he hastened to put his new powers to the test. It so happened that he had accepted

SALTED ALMONDS

a generous offer from *The Times* to lend him their new *Century Dictionary* for a week, *gratis*, on approval, and he now went all through the h's in one of the volumes without a single mishap. He was just exulting over the fact when his Guardian Fairy unexpectedly appeared. . . ." [I suppose the fairy, coming so soon after the fiend, must have caused me to exhibit an involuntary surprise, for he immediately explained :] " You may or may not be aware of it—but certain individuals *do* possess a Guardian Fairy, whose business it is, according to so distinguished an authority on the subject as Sir W. S. Gilbert, to see that they do not get into scrapes, or to pull them through when they have done so. Hipperholme was one of these favoured persons, and his Guardian Fairy, on hearing his account of the lurid scene that had transpired at the cross-roads, naturally expressed strong disapproval of his proceedings. She considered he had acted most imprudently in having any dealings whatever with a fiend, who was almost certain to do him in the long run. Harold replied that this one seemed a decent sort enough, and had made no attempt to bind him by any obligation whatever, and that, anyhow, he was several millions of h's to the good by the transaction.

" ' But I understand said the fairy, that six of those h's are—to use your new friend's slightly common expression—" wrong 'uns " ? ' "

" ' So they are said Harold ; but what are half a dozen out of all those millions ? ' "

" Still,' she said, ' if but a single one of the six were to slip out in the hearing of Lady Icilia or her father before she has become your bride, it would suffice to undo you ! ' "

" Harold said that, according to the theory of probabilities, it was uncommonly long odds against a wrong 'un turning up at all.

" The fairy retorted that, probabilities or no probabilities, he might take it from her that it *would*.

" In that case,' he said, ' I think you might have

warned me before, instead of after, I had embarked upon such an enterprise as this.'

" She said that it was his fault, not hers—for, if his previous conduct had not been so invariably discreet that her office was practically a sinecure, she would never have felt free to take a brief holiday, during which all the mischief was done. ' Fortunately, however/ she added, ' it is not too late to repair it—even yet. Take this talisman,'—and here she handed him a small crystal locket, containing a model of a ladybird coloured after Nature, but lacking in finish—in fact, just such a trinket as you may see in almost any jeweller's window, marked as low occasionally as eighteenpence, though the price will vary according to size. Take this she said, ' and should any vowel escape you at some unguarded moment unattended by its rightful aspirate, you have merely to touch your locket and all will be well ! ' "

" Immediately after her departure Hipperholme attached the charm to his watch-chain, though he did not, even then, expect that he would ever be reduced to put its powers to the test. That same afternoon he repaired in rich apparel to the Earl's portals, and, giving his full name to the butler without the slightest effort, was ushered into Lady Icilia's presence.

" At first she could scarcely credit him when he gave her the joyful intelligence that the sole obstacle to their union was now removed—but when she had the unspeakable happiness of hearing him triumphantly reel off a long string of words beginning with h, and including such compounds as hedge-hog ' heart-whole and even hen-house her last doubt vanished, and she acknowledged that he could now speak to her parent with no apprehension that the peppery old peer would summon his menials to eject him from the premises.

" If Hipperholme behaved with some lack of candour in encouraging Lady Icilia to believe that his proficiency was the result of the lessons he had taken in elocution, we should not condemn him too harshly on this account.

SALTED ALMONDS

How few of us in his situation would have had the moral courage to admit the dubious means by which such h's had been actually obtained ! Rightly or wrongly, he preserved his sinister secret to the end.

" Lord Stonistairs, when Harold applied to him for his daughter's hand, consented, though without enthusiasm, to a trial engagement, which, as you will no doubt remember, was duly announced in the *Morning Post*.

" But a formidable ordeal was still to be faced. He had to undergo inspection by Icilia's high-born and extremely critical relatives. For this purpose the Earl had invited the family to partake of a sumptuous and *recherche* high tea at his town residence in Belgrave Square.

" The gathering was small but select, comprising as it did Icilia's aunt, the Duchess of Marsaye, and her daughter, Lady Fresia Dedcott ; the Earl and Countess of Northpole ; Lord Norman Beaucoe (another cousin) ; Sir Basil Iske ; the Hon. Medusa Glayre ; Mrs. ' Jack ' Frost, and one or two others—all names that will be familiar to you, and some of whose owners you have probably met in society on more than one occasion."

[I could not remember ever having even heard of any one of them—but does there breathe an Englishman with a soul so dead as to confess to ignorance of his own peerage ? I murmured an assent from which almost any inference might be drawn, and the stranger proceeded :]

" Hipperholme was a trifle nervous at starting ; he found them rather difficult to get on with—in fact, they literally paralysed him. But Love put him, so to speak, on his mettle. He exerted all his considerable social powers to break the glacial spell, and he succeeded beyond his hopes. Gradually there came a general thaw, until even the proud old Earl unbent so far as to recommend him strongly to have a second helping of ham and eggs, and to rally him, in an affable, good-humoured way, upon betraying some indecision on the subject.

" This set Harold completely at his ease : ' Since,' he replied, with a graceful deference that sat well upon him,

' since your lordship is so pressing, I *will* take another poached egg—*without* any more 'am.' . . . The word had slipped out before he could prevent it. He had felt so absolutely sure of that h—and it had turned out a * wrong un ' !

" Already the haughty aristocrats around the board were perceptibly stiffening ; Lady Icilia had turned deadly pale ; her noble father rose, bristling, with the obvious intention of declaring the engagement ' off '—when Hipperholme suddenly bethought him of the lady-bird in his pocket. He touched it with frantic haste, and, as he did so, heard himself serenely finishing his sentence with—' biguity.' He was saved ! He regained his former control of aspirates, and by the time the powdered lackeys appeared to clear the table he was now fully recognised as one of the family. All the same, it had been an unpleasant shock for the moment, though the effect soon passed from his memory. He told himself that it was over, and most unlikely to occur again.

" Nor did it, for several delirious weeks—and then, once more, he found himself on the verge of a similar abyss. He had been invited, together with his *fiancee* and her father, to join certain members of the Smart Set in an excursion to Epping Forest, and the distinguished party was driving in a brake drawn by four spanking steeds along an avenue of magnificent beeches. The sense of intimacy with such a company, the charm of Lady Icilia's society, the azure sky, the glorious sunshine, the surroundings generally, all contributed to render him intoxicated with sheer happiness. He became almost lyrical in his ecstasies.

" ' Oh the relief he exclaimed, ' the unspeakable refreshment, for jaded worldlings like ourselves, to escape—if only for the day—from the fevered social round to such rural scenes as these ! To revel in the scent of bracken, the song of birds, and the 'urn——" He broke off in horror ; he had intended to say the ' hum of insects '—for the flies were unusually persistent that

SALTED ALMONDS

summer—but another spurious 'h' had perfidiously betrayed him !

" ' Yes ? ' said the grim old Earl, who sat opposite, in a tone of sardonic encouragement. ' Pray proceed. You were remarking, " the um——" ' "

" ' Brageous foliage ! ' Harold just managed to gasp as he clutched his talisman—and, as before, the danger was averted.

" Another interval succeeded of such absolute immunity that the possibility of ever again omitting anything so obvious as an aspirate seemed unthinkable. . . . And then, like a bolt from the blue, out came a most unmistakable wrong 'un ! He had arranged to escort his betrothed to a Gala Fete, which was one of the principal functions of that season, and which Royalty was expected to attend. It was at Rosherville Gardens, and Lady Icilia, having in a moment of caprice insisted that the party should go down by an ordinary penny steamer, Hipperholme, after arraying himself in a faultless frock-coat, had, very naturally, thought it more prudent to put on a billycock hat as being less likely to blow off. When he joined the others on the landing-stage at Charing Cross, Lord Norman Beaucoe, who, as usual, was in a blue striped lounge suit and a tall white chimney-pot, permitted himself to pass some remark on Harold's choice of headgear. It was not precisely a sneer, but sufficiently so to nettle Hipperholme's high spirit.

" ' I would have you to know, my lord,' he retorted, ' that a gentleman can look the gentleman in *any* kind of 'at ! . . . As the fatal word left his lips he caught the Earl's eye and his talisman at the same moment. ' Tire,' he concluded calmly, and the ill-concealed discomfiture of Lord Norman, the milder expression of his uncle, and the proud glow that suffused the face of Lady Icilia, told him not only that his *faux pas* had been successfully obliterated, but that he had actually risen a step higher in their esteem !

" What wonder then if, when the date of their nuptials

was fixed and the invitations issued for the ceremony, he ceased to have any further misgivings ? And yet, little as he suspected it, beneath the roses which strewed his path to the altar there lurked still another pitfall, and the moment was fast approaching when he would see it yawning in front of him—and *this time*——!"

"Was, I should imagine," I put in, suppressing a tendency to imitate the pitfall, "exactly like the other three. If not, what on earth was the good of giving him a talisman at all ?"

"Don't be in such a hurry !" said the stranger, patting me significantly on the chest (he had a most unpleasant habit of pawing me about in the course of his narrative). "Wait till you have heard the sequel."

We had by this time arrived at Bond Street, and I *did* wait for the sequel. As I was getting out at the British Museum, I could not very well help myself.]

"You implied just now," said the voluble stranger, as the train glided out of Bond Street Station, "that, even should any further disaster overtake Hipperholme, the talisman given to him by his Guardian Fairy could safely be depended upon to extricate him. That was a very natural assumption on your part, and in the main a perfectly correct one. Under ordinary circumstances, it is a matter of common knowledge that a fairy is fully a match for the average fiend. But such calculations are always liable to be upset by some trivial accident which it is totally impossible to foresee. As Harold was soon to discover :

"He was at a brilliant evening party given by a certain peeress, who shall be nameless, at her magnificent mansion in Park Lane. The society craze last season, as I dare say you recollect, took the form of parlour games—an intellectual pastime for which Harold had a natural aptitude, and in which he easily held his own against the very smartest of the Smart Set. That night he outshone even himself, and Lady Icilia (who with her father, the Earl, was of course among those invited) was the

SALTED ALMONDS

pleased recipient of many congratulations on the gentlemanly deportment and ready wit displayed by the object of her choice. At last, after repeated triumphs, he was required to submit himself to a test compared with which all previous ones were child's play. He had to leave the room while the rest of the company settled among themselves what celebrated historical character on what particular occasion he was to represent, and it was for him to guess, if he could, from the cryptic remarks addressed to him by each of the players in turn, whom they supposed him to be. Very possibly you have played this game yourself ? " . . .

[I had—and had not found it particularly exhilarating, though I did not consider it necessary to say so.]

" Well, Hipperholme came in, and brought all the powers of his mind to bear on the problem—but for once he found himself completely baffled. Nothing they said afforded him the faintest clue.

" ' I must admit, my lords, ladies, and gentlemen,' he owned at length with a genial frankness, ' that I'm rather up the stick this time. I'm really afraid I must ask you to assist me a little by giving me just the slightest 'int ! ' . . .

" He knew what he had done, but he was not seriously perturbed—the talisman would get him out of it as usual, and instinctively his fingers sought his watch-chain. Judge of his horror when he found that the crystal locket was no longer there ! He searched his waistcoat pockets in vain—it was not in either of them ; he had lost it somehow !

" ' Just the slightest 'int the wretched man repeated mechanically, amidst a silence so intense that, had any patrician present possessed such a thing as a pin and allowed it to drop, it would assuredly have fallen with a sickening thud. Fortunately, this was not the case.

" Hipperholme gazed round the semicircle in wild despair, as he wiped the perspiration from his clammy brow—and then he caught sight of a glittering object

lying just underneath a gilded sofa. He dived for it frantically ; with inexpressible relief he recognised his lost ladybird, and, as he resumed the perpendicular with the talisman in his clutch, the conclusion—* erval for reflection '—fell from his lips, and the intolerable strain was instantly relaxed.

" Immediately afterwards it flashed upon him that he could be no other personage but King Harold on the occasion of being hit in the eye by an arrow at the Battle of Hastings—which proved to be perfectly correct.

" But, even amidst the general applause that greeted this display of penetration, Hipperholme shivered at the recollection of the narrow squeak he had just experienced.

" He had the fastening of the talisman repaired—while he waited—at the earliest opportunity, after which he felt himself once more invulnerable. To be sure> there were two more 'wrong 'uns ' to be expected—but, even if they did slip out before his marriage with Lady Icilia, it would not signify so long as he had the charm at hand—and he would take uncommonly good care not to lose sight of it in future.

" When she was once his bride, he would be safer still. It would take more than a couple of defective aspirates to sever them then !

" As it happened, during the weeks that remained he was never once under the necessity of employing the talisman, a circumstance which so increased his sense of security that, while arraying himself on his wedding morn for the ceremony, it occurred to him that he might safely leave the locket on his dressing-table.

" He had always thought it a rather cheap and tawdry ornament for a man of his means to wear ; it would be an unsightly blot on the magnificence of his attire on this momentous occasion ; it would not be required, since he could hold no conversation with either Lady Icilia or her parent until after the conclusion of the nuptials.

" Still, he would have to say a few words in the vestry afterwards—and then there was the drive with his bride

SALTED ALMONDS

from the church, and the wedding breakfast. Perhaps it would be wisest to avoid all risks. So, for the present, at all events, he decided to allow the locket to remain on his watch-chain.

" The wedding was at St. George's, Hanover Square, which was crowded to suffocation by persons of rank, commoners finding it hopeless to obtain admittance, and the vergers being compelled to turn even Countesses away !

" Harold, with Lord Norman Beaucoe as his best man, stood by the altar, awaiting the arrival of the bridal *cortege*, and, as he heard the society small talk behind him drowning even the pealing notes of the organ, his bosom swelled with a satisfaction that made him entirely oblivious of the fact that he owed the proud position in which he stood to a fiend of the most plebeian order.

" And then—preceded by the choir, and followed by eight bridesmaids, all ladies of title, and wearing costly diamond brooches in the form of two interlaced h's, the gift of the bridegroom—Lady Icilia Chilwell came slowly up the centre aisle, leaning on the arm of her father, the Earl of Stonistairs, and the ceremony commenced.

" It was conducted by the Bishop of Mumbleborough, assisted by several of the minor clergy, and, as the venerable prelate, in accents almost inaudible with emotion, dictated the responses, the happy bridegroom repeated them in tones as full as was his heart. ' To have and to hold/ quavered the good old Bishop—and through the sacred edifice Harold's resonant voice rang out like a clarion call : ' To 'ave and to 'old ! ' "

" I can only qualify the result as electrical. Never before, perhaps, had that aristocratic fane heard the aspirate treated with such appalling irreverence ; the walls seemed to rock, strong men grew pale, the very choristers were visibly concerned, the Bishop was struck dumb, while Lady Icilia, withdrawing her hand from

Harold, shrank from him with a movement of uncontrollable repulsion.

" Hipperholme alone preserved his composure. He felt that he could hardly have dropped two h's at a more unpropitious moment—but fortunately the matter could easily be set right. How lucky that he had not followed his first impulse and left his ladybird at home ! He fingered the talisman with confidence.

" To his indescribable dismay it failed him for the first time ! He could not believe it at first, could not understand how such a thing could have happened. And then the terrible truth dawned upon him. It was useless to expect the talisman to aid him *there*. Not even a fairy could venture to introduce any additions to the marriage service. What he had said he had said !

" Lady Icilia had already collapsed—a mere heap of white satin, Brussels lace, and orange blossom—into the arms of her principal bridesmaid, the Earl had stepped forward and held a whispered colloquy with the Bishop, who seemed to agree with him that the ceremony could not proceed, as Harold rushed madly from the building, bareheaded, for he had resigned his hat to Lord Norman Beaucoe. And, at the moment he gained the portico, and was descending the steps into George Street, he heard a malicious snigger, which seemed to come from the telephone w^Tires overhead, and a voice he remembered but too well cried out with shrill derision : " What did I tell you ? Six of 'em wrong 'uns ! "

" The fairy knew more about fiends than he did, after all. They were *not* to be trusted ! "

" But surely," I said, as we ran into the next station, " that isn't the *end* of the story ? The fairy couldn't possibly leave him in such a fix as that. Or why have a Guardian Fairy at all ? "

" You are right," he said impressively, patting me with approval on the chest ; " absolutely right ! That is *not* the end. The *finale* is singular, but satisfactory, as you are about to hear. . . . But bless me, this is Tottenham

SALTED ALMONDS

Court Road ! I'm afraid I must bid you farewell, with many thanks for your courteous attention. I get out here."

And he did—so I missed the *finale*. It was not till I reached the British Museum that I missed my pocket-book.

12. *After Rehearsal*

(An Object-lesson for would-be Playwrights)

CENE—*The interior of the Vacuity Theatre, which is to open shortly under the management of that enterprising and popular young actor, MR. SIDNEY SANGWIN. TIME—The fag-end of a November afternoon. On the stage—which is lit by a few electric lights in the flies, and is bare, except for sundry pieces of furniture placed to mark the entrances—the rehearsal of "A House of Cards," the comedy by a hitherto unacted dramatist with which MR. S. S. has decided to tempt Fortune, is slowly dragging to a close.*

MR. AIKENHEAD, the author, is seated in an unshrouded section of the stalls, dreadingly wondering how he could ever have deluded himself into a belief that his dialogue was humorous. Next to him is Miss ARDLEIGH, who, not being on in the final act, is kindly endeavouring to relieve his obvious depression.

Miss ARDLEIGH (referring to her part—a baronet's wife who has been on the music-hall stage). The on'y thing /'m afraid of is that I shall be too refined in it—that's reely how I feel! (MR. A. hastens to reassure her on this score.) Oh, it's very sweet of you to say so, I'm sure—and of course it's wonderful what one can do with technique—still, vulgarity doesn't seem to come easy to me, somehow. I should love to play *Lady Cynthia*. Now, Miss Daintrey—well, I don't know what you think—but to me, her style isn't distangay enough,—

AFTER REHEARSAL

she seems to fall just short of the real lady, if you understand my meaning !

MR. AIKENHEAD (*for whom Miss PHYLLIS DAINTREY is the one bright star in his clouded horizon*). Afraid I can't agree with you—Miss Daintrey is everything I could wish.

MISS A. Well, if you're satisfied, that's *everything*, isn't it ? But I'm understudying her, as p'raps you know, so, if anything *should* occur to prevent her playing——

MR. A. (*watching Miss DAINTREY, as she looks on with a charmingly amused smile during a protracted wrangle over a "cross" which is not down in the prompter's book, and inwardly congratulating himself upon her evidently perfect health*). Miss Daintrey doesn't look as if she was going to break down just yet.

MISS A. It was on'y something she said to me this morning. But, as I told her, " My dear *girl*" I said, " when you've been ten years longer in the profession you can begin to pick and choose. You don't hear *me* grumbling," I said, " and yet, look at *my* part compared to yours ! " And such lovely frocks as she'll have, too ! I don't know what *more* she wants, I'm sure !

[The rehearsal comes to an end.]

MR. SANG WIN (*on stage*). We'll take the first act to-morrow at eleven sharp, please, and I do hope some of you will be better up in your words by then. At present the only person who rehearses without the script in her hand is Miss Daintrey. You really *must* buck up a bit !

MR. STILTNEY BELLAIRS. Dear old boy, what is the use of studying till we get our scenery ? Only means beginning all over again when it comes. Thought it was promised for last week—and here we are, still messin' about !

[Sympathetic murmurs from the Company.]

MR. S. S. We'll get it in time, old chap. They're all rather elaborate sets, but old Dawbler thinks he can get the first act up by next Friday. (*To Miss DAINTREY*) Eh ?

SALTED ALMONDS

Certainly, dear—just step up into my room—I'll be there in half a jiff. (*To MR. A. as Miss D. departs*) Just a word with you, Aikenhead, my boy. (*MR. A. finds his way through the proscenium door on to the stage.*) Well, it's beginning to shape a bit better, eh? The only thing it wants now is—but I'll talk to you about that presently, when I've settled things with Miss Daintrey—it's about time she signed her contract.

MR. A. (*aghast*). Why, hasn't she done that yet?

MR. S. S. NO, asked for time to think over it—several of 'em did, you know. But I'm not going to stand any more shilly-shallying. I'll run up and make sure of her—don't go away till I see you. [*He bustles off.*]

Miss NUROSA RECKITT (*intercepting MR. A.*). Mr. Aikenhead, I must speak to you, I simply must! I'm absolutely in *despair* about my part! I feel I can do nothing with it—nothing! I'm merely a "feeder" to Miss Nasmyth. She crushes me whenever we're on the stage together—I'm nowhere!

MR. A. But I assure you, Miss Reckitt, you're quite admirable. I'm perfectly satisfied—perfectly!

Miss R. (*with dignity*). I hope, Mr. Aikenhead, I am capable of satisfying any author. I ought to be with all my experience. But (*becoming agitated again*) I can't make bricks without straw. If I might speak my lines with a *stutter*—anything—anything in the world to put a little *colour* into them! If not, I shall have to consider very seriously whether—

[*She goes off with a gulp of repressed emotion.*]

MR. RAVENSNELL. Another rocky rehearsal, Mr. Aikenhead! Ton my soul, I think things get worse instead of better. Most of 'em as fluffy as feather beds! Though *your* lines, if you'll pardon my frankness, sir, are difficult to get round the tongue—writing for the stage has to be learnt, like anything else. But it's the slackness everywhere that / complain of. A dear good fellow, old Sidney, but no disciplinarian. Lets 'em do whatever

AFTER REHEARSAL

they please. I don't know if you remarked it, but the tag was actually spoken to-day at rehearsal ! That's always supposed, as you are probably aware, to bring bad luck. All superstition, of course. Though I'm bound to say that, in *my* experience, I've never known it fail. By-the-bye, do you think the " Dumb-Grambo " scene in the second act will *go* ? Don't see your way to cutting it out, I suppose ?

MR. A. NO, I think it will be all right when it's worked up. And it's never been done on the stage.

MR. R. There you're mistaken, sir. It was done two years ago at the Nullity, in a piece called *A Flash in the Pan*. I remember it ran just a week. I happen to know because I was in the cast. I thought it was well to mention it.

[He shuffles away as MR. STILTNEY BELLAIRS approaches.]

MR. S. B. I say, Mr. Aikenhead, I wish you'd let me leave out a line in the last act. It's no use to *me* and it strikes me as a bit dangerous. I mean where I say, " Well, I call this thunderin' rot ! " Gives the gallery such a chance, don't you know !

[On reflection, MR. A. consents to this omission.]

MR. PETTIPHER (*who is on for about five minutes in the first act*). One moment, Mr. Aikenhead. How would you wish me to make up for *Captain Guestling*, now ? For instance, what is the precise shade of wig you have in your mind's eye ?

MR. A. (*conscious of utter vacancy in that organ*). Well, I hardly—need you wear a wig at all ?

MR. P. Played in my own hair, sir, the character would never come out. I was thinking that a chestnut wig, not *too* light—and what would you say,, now, to a chintuft ?

MR. A. (*with a forlorn attempt at jocularity*). Wouldn't that rather depend on what the chintuft said to *me* ?

MR. P. (*with solemnity*). I beg you will not treat this

SALTED ALMONDS

matter in a spirit of flippancy, sir. My one anxiety is to realise my author's conception,—and there's really nothing in the lines themselves for me to build up a character upon or I wouldn't trouble you. I see him myself as a sort of man-about-town, with a chintuft, and, I think, spats would complete the costume ? Then I may take it you agree to spats ? Now, regarding the colour. Should they be white, or drab ? I possess both. Perhaps drab *would* be more in keeping ? Would you have a white edging to his waistcoat ? Well, we can discuss that question to-morrow.

[He makes way for MR. NEWGASS.]

MR. NEWGASS. Oh, I've thought out rather a good bit of business for my entrance in the second act. How would it be if I took the butler for the old Earl and shook hands, and asked him to present me to *Lady Cynthia*, eh ?

[He chuckles.]

MR. A. Afraid it would be rather forced. You see, the butler has just shown you in, and, besides, you've met *Lord Limpsfield* already.

MR. N. But I might be short-sighted—eyeglass worked down the back of my neck—frantic search for it, and all that. . . . Well, of course your wishes are paramount—but it would be a big laugh—and if you don't mind my saying so, that's what the piece *wants* ! However, since you don't accept my suggestion, I say no more.

[He goes off in a huff.]

MR. ION SELFE. We're pulling it together, Mr. Aikenhead, pulling it together—by degrees. But you'll have to cut a good half-hour out of it yet !

MR. A. *(thinking he has cut several out of it already)*. I might shorten the scene between you and *Limpsfield*, perhaps, and your soliloquy after reading the letter. I don't see what *else* I can do.

MR. L S. *(with a falling jaw)*. Mark my words, sir. If you touch a word of my part in the way of compression—you ruin your play. I should say just the same if I was

AFTER REHEARSAL

playing any other part. Where the piece drags, where it's let down, is precisely in those scenes where I'm *not* on. Shorten those, give me a little more to do in the last act, let me go off just before the curtain, instead of ten minutes earlier, and it's a dead cert ! Otherwise, it's my deliberate opinion, sir, that we're in for a record frost. Now I've got *that* off my chest I feel happier !

[He stalks away with the air of a Sibyl.]

IN THE VESTIBULE—A LITTLE LATER

MR. SIDNEY SANGWIN. Oh, *there* you are, Aikenhead ! . . . Miss Daintrey ? What, haven't you seen her ? She wanted to speak to you before she went, I know. . . . Well, no, she hasn't signed her contract—not exactly. In fact, she's rather thrown us over. . . . Yes, it *is* a nuisance, of course—but it can't be helped. . . . I did my *best*, old chap ! . . . No, only that, on consideration, she didn't think it quite worth her while. Pretty little part enough—if she'd only see it ! . . . Oh, that Ardleigh girl won't be half bad as *Lady Cynthia* ! . . . I don't say she *is*—but she'll look quite young enough at night, and Phyllis's frocks can be altered to fit her. . . . My dear fellow, there's no *time* to get anybody else in now—and she's up in the part. . . . Well, we may have to alter the cast a bit, but they're getting used to that by now. . . . Don't you worry—we're going to come out on top all right—and let me see, there was *something* I wanted to say to you. Ah yes, look here, I wish you'd take this script home with you and just run through the dialogue again. . . . No, no, capital, A i, old boy. I only thought that, if you *could* see your way to working in a smart line here and there, don't you know—well, it wouldn't do any *harm*, eh ?

[MR. A. *goes home to give these finishing touches with all the verve and freshness that can reasonably be anticipated.*]

13. *The Lights of Spencer Primmetts Eyes*

A WORTHIER and more estimable young man than Spencer Primmett it would have been difficult to find in the whole of London. He was in one of the Government Departments, in which he occupied an exceptionally good position for one of his years, while he was also in enjoyment of a very comfortable private income.

His principal ambition was to eschew any conduct which might possibly have the effect of rendering him conspicuous, in which laudable object he had so far succeeded admirably.

There was nothing whatever remarkable about his countenance, which was mild and rather round ; or his demeanour, which was correct without assumption ; or his opinions, which were those of all well-regulated persons.

Wherefore mothers and *chaperons* generally regarded him with favour as a highly eligible *parti*—a fact of which he was modestly but fully aware.

He had indeed but one defect, and that of so gradual a growth that he was pardonable for being the last to perceive it. He was excessively near-sighted. For some time it had struck him more and more forcibly that the British climate was becoming mistier than at any previous period in his recollection, and he was surprised that none of his friends and acquaintances were observant enough to notice so obvious an atmospherical deterioration.

But there came an afternoon when Spencer Primmett was compelled to admit that his own observation was less acute than he had imagined. For while paying a call—a social duty which he was ever punctilious in discharging—on the Bellinghams in Cornwall Gardens, he was not a little mortified by the discovery that he had been wasting much time and many blandishments in a futile endeavour to induce a footstool to sit up and beg for a biscuit.

THE LIGHTS OF SPENCER PRIMMETT'S EYES

This led him to infer that there might be some slight imperfection in his eyesight, which, to avoid all chance of some really ludicrous blunder, he would do well to rectify by purchasing an eyeglass.

He had another and even stronger motive for taking such a step. Hilda and Rhoda Bellingham were both extremely attractive girls, and of late his thoughts and begun to dwell, not unpleasingly, upon the possibility of his falling in love with one of them. But which? For the life of him he could not determine, being by no means sure, now that he came to consider, whether he had ever seen either at all distinctly.

Ordinary prudence suggested that it would be advisable to be better acquainted with the features of each before committing himself by any definite advances to either. It would be a pity to find out, when it was too late to retract, that he had pledged himself to the plainer of the two.

So he tried several opticians in turn, but none of them had an eyeglass, or even a *pince-nez*, in stock that could do anything more than increase the dimness of his natural sight, and at last he took the course which he should have taken at first, and consulted a leading oculist.

After a prolonged examination, the oculist informed him that he was "abnormally astigmatic," which seems a harsh thing for any man to say of a fellow-creature.

However, he wrote him out a prescription for a pair of special glasses of differing powers, and this Spencer took to be made up by the firm to whom he was recommended.

A few days afterwards, on returning from Whitehall to his rooms, he found awaiting him a neat little parcel containing a pair of spectacles, and accompanied by the account, which came to more than he had anticipated. He would have preferred, too, a pair of *pince-nez* to spectacles, which he knew have a tendency to add years without the corresponding experience, and it was not without anxiety that he fitted them on and inspected himself in a hand-glass which lay on his dressing-table.

SALTED ALMONDS

It was a considerable relief to him to find that they were not by any means unbecoming. Indeed, his eyes, now that they were framed and glazed, as it were, looked larger and more brilliant ; the glasses gave him an air of higher intelligence and deeper thoughtfulness than he had previously discerned in his expression, while they were so light and so easily adjusted that he was scarcely aware of having them on.

But it was less from vanity than an uncontrollable impatience to see what the Miss Bellinghams were really like that he called a hansom and gave the address of Cornwall Gardens.

As he drove westward, facing the sunset sky, he was delightfully conscious of the extraordinary degree to which his powers of vision had improved. No longer was the sun a mere scarlet blur for him, but a clear golden disc surrounded by mauve and crimson clouds, while more immediate objects had become defined with a sharpness that revealed much that hitherto would have altogether escaped him.

For instance, he remarked for the first time the singular incompetency of London cabmen, evidenced by the fact that the drivers of almost all the hansoms he met seemed to have the greatest difficulty in controlling their horses. It impressed him as an additional proof of the decadence in our national character.

Fortunately his own cabman was an exception to the general rule, and brought him to his destination without mishap.

Spencer learnt on inquiry that Mrs. Bellingham was at home, and he followed the butler upstairs to the drawing-room with a thrill of excitement. For he might find the daughters of the house there as well, and then he would know at last whether it was Hilda or Rhoda who would prove to be his actual enchantress.

They were at home, as it happened, and greeted him with a cordiality sufficiently charming to remove all doubt, had he felt any, which he did not, of the gratification he

THE LIGHTS OF SPENCER PRIMMETT'S EYES

was affording them. He accepted a cup of tea and a seat by the fire, and, as often and intently as he could without infringing the ordinary rules of good breeding, he studied the features of the two graceful girls who sat opposite to him in the lamplight. Thanks to his recent acquisition, he could now see them perfectly, and was delighted to find that they surpassed all his previous conceptions.

Even then he had as much difficulty as ever in making up his mind which of the two was the more irresistibly engaging, they were both so adorably pretty in their different styles ; but at least he saw now that there was a difference.

So he sat there talking—rather pleasantly, he thought—to all three ladies, with the sense that he was making an increasingly favourable impression. Indeed, before long he began to fear that he was inspiring a deeper sentiment in both the Miss Bellinghams than he had any right or intention to do at that stage of their acquaintance.

Without being unduly conceited, he could not help observing that, whenever he turned to address Miss Bellingham, she regarded him with a kind of spellbound subjection closely resembling fascination ; whereas Miss Rhoda, on the other hand, seemed powerless to meet his eye at all.

These were trifles, no doubt,—but not without significance. He was wondering whether he had not better go, when the dog, which had been previously snoring soundly in its basket, created a diversion by waking up and coming out for its usual saucer of weak and milky tea.

This time Spencer made no mistake ; he knew it was not a footstool, or even a door-mat, but a Maltese terrier a trifle out of condition. So he beamed upon it with affable recognition, and called it by its name, which was " Lulu."* But instead of responding to his advances, the animal uttered a sharp howl and fled into the back drawing-room with every sign of abject terror.

Spencer said he could not understand it, as he generally

SALTED ALMONDS

got on so well with dogs, and the Bellinghams agreed that it was most unaccountable, and began to talk of something else.

But somehow the incident caused a certain constraint. Hilda and Rhoda chattered on, it was true, but in rather a random and desultory manner, while their mother's silence was marked by a want of repose which was unusual in one so essentially a woman of the world.

So he cut short his visit, after staying little more than an hour, heartily wishing that the dog had not chosen to make such a fool of itself, just when things were going so well.

On thinking over it afterwards, he recalled sundry symptoms which almost led him to the distressing conclusion that the Bellingham family was inclined to be slightly hysterical.

Spencer had forgotten that he had to dine out that evening at a house in Lancaster Gate, and did not get back to his rooms until just before eight, which obliged him to dress in frantic haste. Even then he arrived quite a quarter of an hour after everybody else, so that he could hardly expect anything but the chilling reception which he certainly got.

He was consoled, however, by the discovery that the Bellinghams were among the guests, and that it would be his privilege to take Miss Bellingham in to dinner. He would have been equally pleased had she been her sister, for both were looking more bewitching than ever in those brilliantly-lighted rooms.

Still, as he advanced eagerly to claim her, he felt at once that something had come between them ; he distinctly noticed her flinch, as though with repressed aversion, as he offered her his arm with a playful allusion to his good fortune.

And when they were seated at the dinner-table, on which innumerable electric lamps, artistically disposed around the walls, shed a soft but still dazzling radiance, he could not feast his eyes on her face so constantly as he

THE LIGHTS OF SPENCER PRIMMETT'S EYES

desired and expected, for the reason that she seldom looked at him in speaking, and then only by an obvious effort. Was it merely his disordered fancy, or did she invariably turn away her head on such occasions with something suspiciously like a shudder ?

At the first opportunity she turned away from him altogether to enter into an animated conversation with her right-hand neighbour, leaving him with nothing of her to contemplate except her left shoulder till dessert.

He tried his other neighbour, but she was anything but forthcoming, and after one or two perfunctory replies, evidently preferred to be entertained by her allotted partner.

So, in his utter isolation, Spencer was free to let his thoughts dwell on Miss Rhoda, who was seated exactly opposite. He wished now that it had been she who had fallen to his lot ; she would not have treated him, he was sure, with this inexcusable caprice, she was much too kind-hearted, and, besides, she was quite as pretty as Hilda, if not actually prettier.

He directed a glance of half-humorous, half-melancholy appeal for sympathy across the table at her, which he intended should establish a secret bond of intelligence between them, but he found an unexpected difficulty in catching her eye. Even when he succeeded in doing so, he only knew it because he saw her start and bite her lower lip hard, as if to control some rising emotion which too obviously was not maidenly confusion, since she neither blushed nor accorded him the discreetest smile of recognition.

What in the world was the matter with them both ? It was impossible that he could have done anything since that afternoon to account for the change in their conduct. Surely they could not be influenced by the fact that that little overfed beast of a terrier of theirs had exhibited a perfectly unreasonable antipathy to him ! He had thought modern young women possessed more common sense.

And presently it was apparent to him, as he allowed

SALTED ALMONDS

his eyes to wander idly round the table, that he must be generally unpopular—or how was it that every face on which his gaze casually lighted seemed to freeze instantly into petrification ? He had arrived a little late, he knew, but, hang it all ! he could not think he had spoilt the dinner so much as all *that* ! And even if he had, it was most unchristian of them to carry unforgiveness further than the fish ! It was horrible to sit there, feeling like an apologetic skeleton. He had never felt less at home at a dinner-party in all his life.

Even on rising, Rhoda had no look nor word for him, and, as soon as the ladies had departed, Mr. Bellingham began to tell a story that gave every promise of lasting for a considerable time.

Spencer had never met him before, and, had he been the parent of anybody but Hilda and Rhoda, might have been tempted to regard him as an insufferable old bore. As it was, in his anxiety to propitiate at least one member of the family, he leaned forward, drinking in every detail of the narrative with an air of absorbed and eager interest which was perhaps a little overdone.

At all events, he did not propitiate the old gentleman—he merely put him out. For Mr. Bellingham grew more and more uneasy under Spencer's ardent attention, until at length he brought his monologue to a lame and evidently premature conclusion.

Primmitt made really heroic efforts during the awkward silences that ensued to put the company at their ease by throwing out intelligent remarks from time to time on some topic of the day. But, although he was confident that he said nothing that was not perfectly safe in any gathering, somehow his blameless platitudes seemed to burst on his hearers like bombshells. Everyone appeared to have a positive dread of being drawn into conversation with him. He noticed those he addressed directly blinking nervously as they returned some monosyllabic reply, while others evaded his advances by studiously looking in any other direction but his own.

THE LIGHTS OF SPENCER PRIMMETT'S EYES

He affected the nerves of the very servants, for, as he turned towards a footman who was offering him coffee, the man suddenly let the tray fall with a crash.

Spencer was glad when the host proposed that they should go upstairs, though, even when he reached the drawing-room, he was no happier. Before he could obtain the explanation for which he was hoping from Rhoda or Hilda, he was introduced to two or three older ladies, all of whom responded to his agreeable nothings with absent minds and roving eyes, and before he could escape from these compulsory amenities, he had the misery of seeing the Bellinghams take their leave.

He left himself as soon afterwards as he was able, and it struck him that his hostess was almost indecently glad to get rid of him.

Spencer walked back to his rooms in a pitiable frame of mind. He was conscious of having shed a kind of blight on the whole dinner-party—but how or why he was at a loss to imagine.

Was there, unknown to him, some discreditable rumour in circulation with regard to his private character? But that was impossible, for his conscience assured him that he had done nothing that could have given occasion for the slightest scandal.

Then why—*why* did the Bellinghams and everybody else shrink from him as though he were some accursed thing? Was he to go through life henceforth as an object of universal repugnance—he, who by nature was so eminently sociable and desirous of winning esteem? Would he never find anyone to look him in the face again with the old friendliness and approval? If so, it seemed hard that he should not even know why this fate had befallen him!

Still gloomily pondering over his probable future, he regained his sitting-room, where, resting his elbow upon the mantelpiece, he stood staring hopelessly down at the cheerily burning fire!

Suddenly, on looking up, he beheld his own reflection

SALTED ALMONDS

in the bevelled mirror of the overmantel, and recoiled in positive terror.

For the eyes that met his own were no human eyes—they were two glowing caverns in which flickered lurid flames, as though his brain were being slowly consumed by an infernal fire !

The effect was simply appalling. He realised at once that no man with such eyes as those could ever hope to inspire the object of his affection with any feelings but instinctive distrust, and even horror. Gaze at her as tenderly and pleadingly as he might, it was impossible to prevent his ardour from impressing her as unpleasantly volcanic.

And yet, how could he have been thus transformed into a fiend of peculiarly repulsive aspect without being even aware of the process ?

Then all at once he remembered his spectacles. They fitted him so comfortably that after he had once grown accustomed to the improvement in his sight, he had ungratefully forgotten their very existence. However, he found that he was still wearing them.

Was it just barely possible that *they*——He removed them hurriedly, and, on closely approaching the mirror, discovered with inexpressible relief that his eyes were no longer illuminated by their former baleful glare.

He put them on once more, and, placing a lamp between himself and the mirror, observed the result at some distance. The right lens was slightly concave, and threw rays as blinding as those of a search-light, while the left, which was convex, blazed like some illuminated globe of distilled water in a chemist's window !

After repeated experiments, he ascertained that—to himself at least—this disquieting phenomenon was apparent in the mirror only when a strong artificial light struck his spectacles at particular angles of refraction, which accounted for his failure to notice it by daylight, or even while dressing for dinner.

But he had no difficulty in understanding *now* why the

THE LIGHTS OF SPENCER PRIMMETT'S EYES

cab-horses had shied that afternoon as his spectacles reflected all the glories of the sunset; why the Bellinghams' dog had fled in dismay from the unearthly radiance of his eyes, and the Bellinghams themselves had been so susceptible to their mesmeric influence ; or why, in short, throughout that fearful evening he had been innocently producing the effect of a human basilisk or a Medusa head !

He felt he could not go about doing that any more—it made him altogether too remarkable.

And so, in another instant he had torn those costly but perfidious spectacles from his ears, and ground the glasses to splinters under his heel. . . .

Since that day he has not had the courage to try any others—but he is rewarded for his sacrifice by the knowledge that he can now permit his eyes to rest on both the Miss Bellinghams without reducing them to a cataleptic condition. The only drawback is that he is as unable as ever to distinguish one from the other.

Which is possibly the reason why there has been no intimation, as yet, of his engagement to either.

14. A " First Night " Supper

SCENE—A Corridor in the Hotel Magnifique. TIME—About 11.30 p.m. SYDNEY SHELCASTLE, a diffident young Dramatist whose first Comedy, " Facing the Music " has been produced that evening at the Jollity Theatre, is discovered in the act of giving hat and coat to an attendant,

SYDNEY SHELCASTLE. Er—Mr. Berkeley Carlton expects me. I believe he has a supper-party here ?

ATTENDANT. Quite correct, sir. Straight down the corridor and third door on the left.

SYD. SHEL. (*to himself*). Almost wish Fd gone to the Jollity first. (*As he reaches door of private supper-room*) However, I shall soon know now !

SALTED ALMONDS

[He pulls himself together and enters ; the only persons in the room as yet are his host, BERKELEY CARLTON, the popular Actor-Manager ; HORSLEY COLLARD, who plays the chief character-part in his piece ; and SPRATT-WHALEY, the lessee of the Jollity. The first two greet his arrival with a heartiness which strikes him as overdone.

SYD. SHEL. Well ? Did it—did it go off all right ?

BERKELEY CARLTON (*raising his eyebrows*). " Did it go off all right ? " Why—weren't you in front ?

SYD. SHEL. (*embarrassed*). Well—a—no. I didn't feel quite equal to it. (*Watching their faces*) I hope it wasn't——?

HORSLEY COLLARD (*with a glance at CARLTON which does not escape the Dramatist*). Haven't you heard anything ?

SYD. SHEL. Not a word. I—I haven't met anybody who could tell me. I came straight here.

BERK. CARLT. Been strollin' up and down the Embankment to pass the time, eh ?

SYD. SHEL. No,—as a matter of fact I went to the Hippodrome.

BERK. CARLT. Did you, though ? What did you think of the show ?

SYD. SHEL. Capital ! That is, I didn't pay much attention to it—wondering all the time how *Facing the Music* was getting on.

BERK. CARLT. Ah ? Glad you gave us a thought now and then. I say, Horsley, know whether Angela Daven-try means to turn up ?

HORS. COLL. Can't say. She may be feeling too upset. Perhaps I'd better go and see where the others are. (*To BERKELEY CARLTON, in a too audible undertone*) I'll leave you to break it to the poor chap while I'm gone.

[He goes out.

BERK. CARLT. Well, Shelcastle, you seem to have spent a pleasant evenin' anyhow. Always amusin' beggars, elephants. And these plunge, don't they ? By the way,

A " FIRST NIGHT " SUPPER

you don't know Spratt-Whaley. (*He introduces them.*) He's just been tellin' us all about his new car.

[The unhappy Playwright strives to affect an interest in automobiles, while wishing that CARLTON would not be so confoundedly tactful—until HORSLEY COLLARD returns with the other invited members of the Company, who are obviously putting considerable restraint on themselves.

Miss ANGELA DAVENTRY (*the extremely charming and sympathetic actress who impersonates S.'s heroine.*) Good evening, Mr. Shelcastle. I hear you didn't patronise our poor little efforts to-night. Oh, we *quite* understood. And we *all* think it so wise of you. (*She approaches the fireplace.*) Br-r-r ! Isn't it cold ! I'm sure there's a frost to-night !

Miss DAISY ARCHIBUTT (*engaged for the light comedy part.*) Oh, my dear ! For goodness' sake don't mention frosts ! Before poor dear Mr. Shelcastle, too !

HAWLEY BRAY (*whose forte is Society idiots.*) I say, you know. Now you *have* done it ! If you hadn't said that, Mr. Shelcastle wouldn't have been any the wiser—he wasn't *there*.

MRS. CHESTERFIELD MANNERS (*the Dowager in S.'s play.*) I'm afraid it must have been an effort for you to give us the pleasure of seeing you at *all* this evening, Mr. Shelcastle—under the circumstances !

SYD. SHEL. Well, you see, Mrs. Manners, when I came here I hadn't heard—in fact, I don't know anything definite even *now*—though I — I gather——

HORS. COLL. (*compassionately.*) Now, my dear old chap, do take a tip from me. Don't you spoil your supper by trying to gather any more. Be jolly while you may !

ANGELA DAV. But you *will* spoil his supper. It isn't fair to keep him in suspense like this !

BERK. CARLT. Don't fuss, dear. You leave it to us. He'll find out quite soon enough—and now let's have supper. *[They sit down.*

SALTED ALMONDS

SYD. SHEL. (*who is seated next to DAISY ARCHBUTT*). You might just tell me *this*. Miss Archbutt—was there—was there *much* of a row ?

DAISY (*with a giggle*), I—I really shouldn't like to say, Mr. Shelcastle. But in the last act you might have fancied you were in church—so much *coughing*, you know !

[HAWLEY BRAY *guffaws suddenly*.

SYD. SHEL. I was always afraid of that last act. But—it didn't *all* drag, eh ?

HORS. COLL. Not while / was on, old man. I took care of that. I hate gagging as a general rule—inartistic, / call it. But I simply *had* to bring in a wheeze now and then—just to keep the gallery quiet.

SYD. SHEL. (*with a pale smile*), I can quite imagine it—a—would have that effect. Still, if you don't mind, Collard, I must ask you to stick to the original lines, for the future.

HORS. COLL. Certainly, dear boy. It will be quite a relief not to have to be funny !

ANGELA (*indignantly*), Horsley ! How *can* you ?

BERK. CARLT. Ah, well—there's this to be said : a first-night house isn't like any other.

HORS. COLL. Fuller, for one thing !

BERK. CARLT. YOU can always paper. And I don't despair of seeing the piece catch on yet, Shelcastle, if we can only see our way between us to cutting, say, about a third of each act.

[*Another guff aw from HAWLEY BRAY.*

SYD. SHEL. YOU may do what you like with it, Carlton—but I'm hanged if / touch the beastly thing again !

ANGELA (*aside*), Berkeley ! Do stop it ! Only look at his face, poor little thing !

BERK. CARLT. (*aside to her*). Nonsense, dear, *he's* all right ! (*Aloud*) Well, it must take its chance as it is, then. After all, it might have had a worse reception. If they *did* boo a bit, they didn't mean it ill-naturedly. Anythin' amusin' you, Hawley ?

A " FIRST NIGHT " SUPPER

HAWLEY BRAY (*who has guffawed again*). No—nothing particular. I—I was only thinking of that chap in the gallery.

BERK. CARLT. Oh, ah, the beggar in the brown bowler. He was rather nasty at times. I'd have had him chucked, only the gallery all seemed to be with him. Still, I distinctly saw some of the stalls applaudin' when it was all over.

SPRATT-WHALEY. What will the critics say to-morrow, my boy, that's the question !

BERK. CARLT. We shall know before we're much older. Old Bill Burleigh can't say much, anyhow, for he bolted in the middle of the second act. But Jack Hall came round afterwards and said there could only be one opinion about the piece. Didn't like to ask him *what*.

Miss DAV. (*impulsively*). Haven't you rubbed it in quite enough ? Mr. Shelcastle, you mustn't mind them——!

BERK. CARLT. My dear child, he *don't*. It's nothing to him. Why, he didn't even care enough to come and see us. Preferred the performin' elephants !

MRS. CHEST. MAN. And I've no doubt he found them far more graceful and accomplished comedians.

SYD. SHEL. I—I assure you you're mistaken. I *wasn't* indifferent. I knew I couldn't have a better cast and that you'd all do your very best for me. It was the *piece* that was all wrong. I saw that at the last dress rehearsal. And—well, I'm afraid I funk'd the first night. I'm awfully sorry it's come to grief—for your sakes as well as my own. I suppose I ought to have known I couldn't write a play. (*He rises.*) And now I must ask you to excuse me. I—I've got to go home and pack. . . . I'm going away early to-morrow, for—for a little holiday. I may be away some years.

[*Reaction, followed by general applause.*]

ANGELA. NOW, I will speak ! Dear Mr. Shelcastle, don't you see ? We've been taking you in all this time. Oh, I know it was perfectly piggish of us. Only we *did* think you might have *been* there, you know !

SALTED ALMONDS

SYD SHEL. I—don't understand. You don't mean that the piece wasn't such an absolute failure after all ?

BERK. CARLT. Considerin' we were all called five times after every act, and I had to make a speech and explain that the author was not in the house at the end, I shouldn't describe it myself as a howling frost precisely.

DAISY. Why, they simply roared all through ! I was only chipping you about the coughing.

HAWLEY BRAY. And that Johnnie in the brown bowler—all spoof, you know. Jove, I nearly gave the show away by smiling like a silly ass once or twice !

HORS. COLL. I'd no need to *gag*, my boy. Got my laughs all right without *that* !

BERK. CARLT. And I don't think there'll be much to alter to-morrow. Every scene seemed to *go*.

SPRATT-WHALEY. The box offices have come forward in style. We shall want three extra rows of stalls.

SYD. SHEL. (*sitting down heavily*). Look here—you—you're not pulling my leg *again*, are you ?

ANGELA. Indeed we're not ! And you must try to forgive us for doing it at all. Say you do !

SYD. SHEL. (*recovering*). But there's nothing to forgive. I knew all along that it couldn't really have gone wrong.

BERK. CARLT. Of course you did, old boy. Pity you've got to go home and pack, though. *How* many years did you say you would be away ?

SYD. SHEL. (*rising and going towards him*). You didn't think I *meant* it, did you ? When I've got an idea for a new comedy which would—I say, I should like most awfully to tell you about it.

BERK. CARLT. (*pressing him back into his chair*). Now just you try and manage a little food first, old fellow. You haven't had a mouthful yet. You've lots of time to write me a new comedy—we shan't be wanting it for another eight months at least !

[SYDNEY SHELCASTLE *sits dozen and makes the discovery that he was hungrier than he imagined.*

15. *The Adventure of the Snowing Globe*

BEFORE beginning to relate an experience which, I am fully aware, will seem to many so singular as to be almost, if not quite, incredible, it is perhaps as well to state that I am a solicitor of several years' standing, and that I do not regard myself—nor, to the best of my knowledge and belief, have I ever been regarded—as a person in whom the imaginative faculty is at all unduly prominent.

It was in Christmas week of last year. I was walking home from my office in New Square, Lincoln's Inn, as my habit is—except on occasions when the state of the weather renders such open-air exercise too imprudent—and on my way I went into a toy-shop, with a view to purchasing some seasonable present for a small godchild of mine.

As was only to be expected at that time of year, the shop was crowded with customers, and I had to wait until one of the assistants should be at liberty. While waiting, my attention was attracted to a toy on the counter before me.

It was a glass globe, about the size of a moderately large orange. Inside it was a representation of what appeared to be the facade of a castle, before which stood a figure holding by a thread a small pear-shaped airball striped red and blue. The globe was full of water containing a white sediment in solution, which, when agitated, produced the effect of a miniature snowstorm.

I cannot account for such a childish proceeding, except by the circumstance that I had nothing better to occupy me at the moment, but I employed myself in shaking the globe and watching the tiny snowflakes circulating in the fluid, till I became so engrossed as to be altogether oblivious of my surroundings. So that I was not particularly surprised when I found, as I presently did, that the flakes were falling and melting on my coat-sleeve.

SALTED ALMONDS

Before me was a heavy gateway belonging to a grim, castellated edifice, which I thought at first must be Holloway Gaol, though how I could have wandered so far out of my way was more than I could understand.

But on looking round I saw no signs of any suburban residences, and recognised that I had somehow strayed into a locality with which I was totally unacquainted, but which was evidently considerably beyond the Metropolitan radius. It seemed to me that my best plan would be to knock at the gate and ask the lodge-keeper where I was and my way to the nearest railway-station ; but before I could carry out my intention a wicket in one of the gates was cautiously opened by a person of ancient and venerable appearance. He did not look like an ordinary porter, but was in a peculiar livery, which I took to be a seneschal's—not that I have ever seen a seneschal, but that was my impression of him. Whoever he was, he appeared distinctly pleased to see me. " You are right welcome, fair sir ! " he said, in a high, cracked voice. " Well knew I that my hapless lady would not lack a protector in her sad plight, though she had well-nigh abandoned all hope of your coming ! "

I explained that I had not called by appointment, but was simply a stranger who found himself in the neighbourhood by the merest chance.

" 'Tis no matter," he replied, in his old-fashioned diction, " seeing that you have come, for truly, sir, she is in sore need of anyone who is ready to undertake her cause ! "

I said that I happened to be a member of the legal profession, and that if, as I gathered, his mistress was in any difficulty in which she desired my assistance, I was quite prepared to advise her to the best of my ability, and to act for her, should her case be one which, in my opinion, required it.

" That does it, indeed ! " he said ; " but I pray you stand no longer parleying without, which, since I perceive you are but ill-protected at present/" he added

THE ADVENTURE OF THE SNOWING GLOBE

fussily, " may be fraught with unnecessary danger. Come within without further delay ! "

I did not think there was any real risk of catching cold, but I did wonder why it had not occurred to me to put up my umbrella, until I discovered that my right hand was already engaged in holding a cord to which was attached a gaudily-coloured balloon that floated above my head.

This was so unsuitable an appendage to any solicitor, especially to one about to offer his services in an affair which was apparently serious, that I was somewhat disconcerted for the moment. But I soon recollected having gone into a toy-shop some time previously, and concluded that I must have purchased this air-ball as a present for my godchild.

I was about to explain this to the old man, when he pulled me suddenly through the wicket-gate, shutting the door so sharply that it snapped the string of the balloon. I saw it soaring up on the other side of the wall till a whirl of snow hid it from my sight.

" Trouble not for its loss," said the seneschal ; " it has fulfilled its purpose in bringing you to our gates."

If he really supposed that anybody was at all likely to adopt so eccentric a means of conveyance, he must, I thought, be in his dotage, and I began to have a misgiving that, by accepting his invitation to step in, I might have placed myself in a false position.

However, I had gone too far to retract now, so I allowed him to conduct me to his mistress. He took me across a vast courtyard to a side entrance, and then up a winding stair, along deserted corridors, and through empty ante-chambers, until we came into a great hall, poorly lighted from above, and hung with dim tapestries. There he left me, saying that he would inform his mistress of my arrival.

I had not long to wait before she entered by an opposite archway.

I regret my inability—owing partly to the indifferent manner in which the apartment was lit—to describe her

SALTED ALMONDS

with anything like precision. She was quite young—not much, I should be inclined to say, over eighteen ; she was richly but fantastically dressed in some shimmering kind of robe, and her long hair was let down and flowing loose about her shoulders, which (although I am bound to say that the effect, in her case, was not unbecoming) always has, to my mind at least, a certain air of untidiness in a grown-up person, and almost made me doubt for a moment whether she was quite in her right senses.

But, while she was evidently in a highly emotional state, I could detect nothing in her manner of speech that indicated any actual mental aberration. Her personal appearance, too, was distinctly pleasing, and altogether I cannot remember ever to have felt so interested at first sight in any female client.

" Tell me," she cried, " is it really true ? Have you indeed come to my deliverance ? "

" My dear young lady," I said, perceiving that any apology for what I had feared must seem a highly irregular intrusion was unnecessary, " I have been given to understand that you have some occasion for my services, and if that is correct I can only say that they are entirely at your disposal. Just try to compose yourself and tell me, as clearly and concisely as you can, the material facts of your case."

" Alas ! sir," she said, wringing her hands, which I remember noticing were of quite remarkable beauty, " I am the unhappiest Princess in the whole world."

I trust I am as free from snobbishness as most people, but I admit to feeling some gratification in the fact that I was honoured by the confidence of a lady of so exalted a rank.

" I am extremely sorry to hear it, ma'am," I said, recollecting that that was the proper way to address a Princess. " But I am afraid," I added, as I prepared to take her instructions, " that I can be but of little assistance to you unless you can bring yourself to furnish me with somewhat fuller particulars."

THE ADVENTURE OF THE SNOWING GLOBE

" Surely," she said, " you cannot be ignorant that I am in the power of a wicked and tyrannous uncle ? "

I might have explained that I was far too busy a man to have leisure to keep up with the latest Court scandals, but I refrained.

" I may take it, then," I said, " that you are an orphan, and that the relative you refer to is your sole guardian ? "

She implied by a gesture that both these inferences were correct. " He has shut me up a close prisoner in this gloomy place," she declared, " and deprived me of all my attendants one by one, save the aged but faithful retainer whom you have beheld."

I replied, of course, that this was an unwarrantable abuse of his authority, and inquired whether she could assign any motive for such a proceeding on his part.

" He is determined that I shall marry his son," she explained, " whom I detest with an unutterable loathing! "

" Possibly," I ventured to hint, " there is some one else who——"

" There is none," she said, " since I have never been permitted to look upon any other suitor, and here I am held in durance until I consent to this hated union—and I will die sooner ! But you will save me from so terrible a fate ! For what else are you here ? "

" I should be incompetent indeed, ma'am," I assured her, " if I could not see a way out of what is really a very ordinary predicament. By attempting to force you into a marriage against your will your guardian has obviously shown himself a totally unfit person to have you in his custody. You have the law entirely on your side."

" Unfit is he, truly ! " she agreed. " But I care not who else is on my side, so long as you will be my champion. Only, how will you achieve my rescue ? "

" Under all the circumstances," I told her, " I think our best course would be to apply for a *habeas corpus*. You will then be brought up to the Courts of Justice, and the judge could make any order he thought advisable.

SALTED ALMONDS

In all probability he would remove your uncle from his position and have you made a ward of court."

There is always a difficulty in getting ladies to understand even the simplest details of legal procedure, and my Princess was no exception to the rule. She did not seem in the least to realise the power which every court possesses of enforcing its own decrees.

"Sir, you forget," she said, "that my uncle, who has great renown in these parts as a sorcerer and magician, will assuredly laugh any such order to scorn."

"In that case, ma'am," said I, "he will render himself liable for contempt of court. Besides, should his local reputation answer your description, we have *another* hold on him. If we can only prove that he has been using any subtle craft, means, or device to impose on any of his Majesty's subjects, he could be prosecuted under the Vagrancy Act of 1824 as a rogue and a vagabond. He might get as much as six months for it!"

"Ah, sir," she cried—rather peevishly, I thought—"we do but waste precious time in idle talk such as this, of which I comprehend scarce a word! And the hour is nigh when I must meet my uncle face to face, and should I still refuse to obey his will, his w'rath will be dire indeed!"

"All you have to do is to refer him to *me*" I said. "I think I shall be able, in the course of a personal interview, to bring him to take a more reasonable view of his position. If you are expecting him shortly, perhaps I had better remain here till he arrives?"

"Happily for us both," she replied, "he is still many leagues distant from here! Can you not see that, if my rescue is to be accomplished at all, it must be ere his return, or else am I all undone? Is it possible that, after coming thus far, you can tarry here doing naught?"

I took a little time for reflection before answering. "After careful consideration," I said at last, "I have come to the conclusion that, as you are evidently under grave apprehension of some personal violence from your

THE ADVENTURE OF THE SNOWING GLOBE

uncle in the event of his finding you on the premises, I should be fully justified in dispensing with the usual formalities and removing you from his custody at once. At all events, I will take that responsibility on myself—whatever risk I may incur."

" I crave your pardon for my seeming petulance," she said, with a pretty humility. " I should have known right well that I might safely rely on the protection of so gallant and fearless a knight ! "

" You will understand, I am sure, ma'am," I said, " that I cannot, as a bachelor, offer you shelter under my own roof. What I propose (subject, of course, to your approval) is that I should place you under the care of an old aunt of mine at Croydon until some other arrangement can be made. I presume it will not take you long to make your preparations for the journey ? "

" What need of preparation ? " she cried. " Let us delay no longer, but fly this instant ! "

" I should recommend you to take at least a dressing-bag," I said ; " you will have time to pack all you may require while your retainer is fetching us a fly. Then I know of nothing to hinder us from leaving at once."

" Nothing ? " she exclaimed. " Do you dread a dragon so little, then, that you can speak thus lightly ? "

I could not help smiling ; it was so surprising to find a Princess of her age who still retained a belief in fairy-tales. " I think, ma'am," I said, " that at this time of day a dragon is not an obstacle which we need take into serious consideration. You have evidently not been informed that such a monster has long since ceased to exist. In other words, it is undoubtedly extinct."

" And you have slain it ! " she cried, and her eyes blazed with admiration. " I might have guessed as much ! It is slain—and now even my uncle has no longer power to detain me here ! For many a long month I have not dared to look from out my casements, but now I may behold the light of day once more without shrinking ! " She drew back some hangings as she spoke,

SALTED ALMONDS

disclosing a large oriel window, and the next moment she cowered away with a cry of abject terror.

" Why have you deceived me ? " she demanded, with indignant reproach. " It is *not* extinct. It is still there. Look for yourself ! "

I did look ; the window commanded the rear of the castle, which I had not hitherto seen, and now I saw something else so utterly unexpected that I could hardly trust the evidence of my own eyesight.

Towering above the battlemented outer wall I saw a huge horny head, poised upon a long and flexible neck, and oscillating slowly from side to side with a sinister vigilance. Although the rest of the brute was hidden by the wall, I saw quite enough to convince me that it could not well be anything else than a dragon—and a formidable one at that. I thought I understood now why the seneschal had been so anxious to get me inside, though I wished he had been rather more explicit.

I stood there staring at it—but I made no remark. To tell the truth, I did not feel equal to one just then.

The Princess spoke first. " You seem astonished, sir," she said, " yet you can hardly have been in ignorance that my uncle has set this ferocious monster to guard these walls, and devour me should I strive to make my escape."

" I can only say, ma'am," I replied, " that this is the first intimation I have had of the fact."

" Still, you are wise and strong," she said. " You will surely devise some means whereby to rid me of this baleful thing ! "

" If you will permit me to draw the curtain again," I said, " I will endeavour to think of something. . . . Am I right in assuming that the brute is the property of your uncle ? "

She replied that that was so.

" Then I think I see a way," I said. " Your uncle could be summoned for allowing such a dangerous animal to be at large, since it is clearly not under proper control. And if an application were made to a magistrate, under

THE ADVENTURE OF THE SNOWING GLOBE

the Act of 1871, he might be ordered to destroy it at once."

" You little know my uncle," she said, with a touch of scorn, " if you deem that he would destroy his sole remaining dragon at the bidding of any person whatever ! "

" He will incur a penalty of twenty shillings a day till he *does*," I replied. " In any case, I can promise you that, if I can only manage to get out of this place, you shall not be exposed to this annoyance very much longer."

" You will ? " she cried. " Are you quite sure that you will succeed ? "

" Practically I am," I said. " I shall apply—always supposing I can get home safely—the first thing to-morrow morning, and, if I can only convince the Bench that the terms of the Act are wide enough to include not only dogs, but any other unmanageable quadrupeds, why, the thing is as good as done ! "

" To-morrow ! to-morrow ! " she repeated impatiently. " Must I tell you once more that this is no time to delay ? Indeed, sir, if I am to be rescued at all, your hand alone can deliver me from this loathly worm ! "

I confess I considered she was taking an altogether extravagant view of the relations between solicitor and client.

" If," I said, " it could be described with any accuracy as a worm, I should not feel the slightest hesitation about attacking it."

" Then you will ? " she said, entirely missing my point, as usual. " Tell me you will—for *my* sake ! "

She looked so engaging whilst making this appeal that I really had not the heart to pain her by a direct refusal.

" There is nothing," I said, " that is, nothing in reason, that I would not do cheerfully for your sake. But if you will only reflect, you will see at once that, in a tall hat and overcoat, and with absolutely no weapon but an umbrella, I should not stand the ghost of a chance against a dragon. I should be too hopelessly overmatched."

SALTED ALMONDS

" You say truth," she replied, much to my satisfaction. " I could not desire any champion of mine to engage in so unequal a contest. So have no uneasiness on that score."

On this she clapped her hands as a summons to the seneschal, who appeared so promptly that I fancy he could not have been very far from the keyhole. " This gallant gentleman," she explained to him, " has undertaken to go forth and encounter the dragon without our walls, provided that he is fitly furnished for so deadly a fray."

I tried to protest that she had placed a construction on my remarks which they were not intended to bear—but the old man was so voluble in thanks and blessings that I could not get in a single word.

" You will conduct him to the armoury," the Princess continued, " and see him arrayed in harness meet for so knightly an endeavour. Sir," she added to me, " words fail me at such an hour as this. I cannot even thank you as I would. But I know you will do your utmost on my behalf. Should you fall——"

She broke off here, being evidently unable to complete her sentence, but that was unnecessary. I knew what would happen if I fell.

" But fall you will not," she resumed. " Something tells me that you will return to me victorious ; and then—and then—should you demand any guerdon of me—yea " (and here she blushed divinely) " even to this hand of mine, it shall not be denied you."

Never in the whole course of my professional career had I been placed in a position of greater difficulty. My common sense told me that it was perfectly preposterous on her part to expect such services as these from one who was merely acting as her legal adviser. Even if I performed them successfully—which was, to say the least of it, doubtful—my practice would probably be injuriously affected should my connection with such an affair become known. As for the special fee she had so

THE ADVENTURE OF THE SNOWING GLOBE

generously suggested, that, of course, was out of the question. At my time of life marriage with a flighty young woman of eighteen—and a Princess into the bargain—would be rather too hazardous an experiment.

And yet, whether it is that, middle-aged bachelor as I am, I have still a strain of unsuspected romance and chivalry in my nature, or for some other cause that I cannot explain, somehow I found myself kissing the little hand she extended to me, and going forth without another word to make as good a fight of it as I could for her against such an infernal beast as a dragon. I cannot say that I felt cheerful over it, but, anyhow, I went.

I followed the seneschal, who led me down by a different staircase from that I had come up, and through an enormous vaulted kitchen, untenanted by all but black-beetles, which were swarming. Merely for the sake of conversation, I made some remark on their numbers and pertinacity, and inquired why no steps had apparently been taken to abate so obvious a nuisance. "Alas ! noble sir," he replied, as he sadly shook his old white head, "'twas the scullions' office to clear the place of these pests, and the last minion has long since vanished from our halls !"

I felt inclined to ask him where they had vanished to—but I did not. I thought the answer might prove discouraging. Even as it was, I would have given something for a whisky-and-soda just then—but he did not offer it, and I did not like to suggest it for fear of being misunderstood. And presently we entered the armoury.

Only a limited number of suits were hanging on the walls, and all of them were in a deplorably rusty and decayed condition, but the seneschal took them down one by one, and made fumbling attempts to buckle and hook me into them. Most unfortunately, not a single suit proved what I should call workmanlike, for I defy any man to fight a dragon in armour which is too tight even to move about in with any approach to comfort.

"I'm afraid it's no use," I told the seneschal, as I reluctantly resumed my ordinary garments. "You can

SALTED ALMONDS

see for yourself that there's nothing here that comes near my size ! "

" But you cannot engage in combat with the dragon in your present habiliments ! " he remonstrated. " That were stark madness ! "

I was glad that the old man had sufficient sense to see *that*. " I am quite of your opinion," I replied ; " and believe me, my good old friend, nothing is farther from my thoughts. My idea is that if—I do not ask you to expose yourself to any unnecessary risk—but if you *could* contrive to divert the dragon's attention by a demonstration of some sort on one side of the castle, I might manage to slip quietly out of some door on the other."

" Are you but a caitiff, then, after all," he exclaimed, " that you can abandon so lovely a lady to a certain doom ? "

" There is no occasion for addressing me in offensive terms," I replied. " I have no intention whatever of abandoning your mistress. You will be good enough to inform her that I shall return to-morrow without fail with a weapon that will settle this dragon's business more effectually than any of your obsolete lances and battle-axes ! "

For I had already decided on this as the only course that was now open to me. I had a friend who spent most of the year abroad in the pursuit of big game, but who chanced by good luck to be in town just then. He would, I knew, willingly lend me an express rifle and some expansive bullets, and, as an ex-volunteer and marksman, I felt that the odds would then be slightly in my favour, even if I could not, as I hoped I could, persuade my friend to join me in the expedition.

But the seneschal took a less sanguine view of my prospects.

" You forget, sir," he remarked lugubriously, " that, in order to return hither, you must first quit the shelter of these walls—which, all unarmed as you are, would be but to court instant death ! "

THE ADVENTURE OF THE SNOWING GLOBE

" I don't quite see that," I argued. " After all, as the dragon made no effort to prevent me from coming in, it is at least possible that it may not object to my going out."

" For aught I can say," he replied, " it may have no orders to hinder any from entrance. As to that I know naught. But of this I am very sure—it suffers no one to depart hence undevoured."

" But could I not contrive to get out of its reach before it was aware that I had even started ? " I suggested.

" I fear me, sir," he said despondently, " that the creature would not fail to follow up your tracks ere the snow could cover them."

" That had not occurred to me," I said. " But now you mention it,*it does not seem altogether unlikely. In your opinion, then, I should do better in remaining where I am ? "

" Only until the enchanter return," was his reply, " as, if I mistake not, he may do at any moment, after which your stay here will assuredly be but brief."

" You can't mean," I said, " that he would have the inhumanity to turn me out to be devoured by this beastly dragon ? For that is what it would *come* to."

" Unless, perchance, by dint of strength or cunning you were to overcome the monster," he said. " And methought you had come hither with that very intent."

" My good man," I replied, " I've no idea why or how I came here, but it was certainly with no desire or expectation of meeting a dragon. However, I begin to see very clearly that if I can't find some way of putting an end to the brute—and promptly, too—he will make an end of *me*. The question is, how the deuce am I to set about it ? "

And then, all at once, I had an inspiration. I recollected the black-beetles, and something the seneschal had said about its being the scullions' duty to keep them down. I asked him what methods they had employed for this purpose, but, such humble details being naturally

SALTED ALMONDS

outside his province, he was unable to inform me. So I returned to the kitchen, where I began a careful search, not without some hope of success.

For awhile I searched in vain, but at last, just when I had begun to despair, I found on a dusty shelf in the buttery the identical thing I had been looking for. It was an earthen vessel containing a paste, which, in spite of the fungoid growth that had collected on its surface, I instantly recognised as a composition warranted to prove fatal to every description of vermin.

I called to the seneschal and asked if he could oblige me with a loaf of white bread, which he brought in evident bewilderment. I cut a slice from the middle and was proceeding to spread the paste thickly upon it when he grasped my arm. " Hold ! " he cried. " Would you rashly seek your death ere it is due ? "

" You need not be alarmed/" I told him ; " this is not for myself. And now will you kindly show me a way out to some part of the roof where I can have access to the dragon ? "

Trembling from head to foot he indicated a turret-stair, up which, however, he did not offer to accompany me ; it brought me out on the leads of what appeared to be a kind of bastion. I crept cautiously to the parapet and peeped over it, and then for the first time I had a full view of the brute, which was crouching immediately below me. I know how prone the most accurate are to exaggeration in matters of this kind, but, after making every allowance for my excited condition at the time, I do not think I am far out in estimating that the dimensions of the beast could not have been much, if at all, less than those of the " *Diplodocus Carnegii*," a model of which is exhibited at the Natural History Museum, while its appearance was infinitely more terrific.

I do not mind admitting frankly that the sight so unmanned me for the moment that I was seized with an almost irresistible impulse to retire by the way I had come before the creature had observed me. And yet it

THE ADVENTURE OF THE SNOWING GLOBE

was not without a certain beauty of its own ; I should say, indeed, that it was rather an unusually handsome specimen of its class, and I was especially struck by the magnificent colouring of its scales, which surpassed that of even the largest pythons. Still, to an unaccustomed eye there must always be something about a dragon that inspires more horror than admiration, and I was in no mood just then to enjoy the spectacle. It was hunched up together, with its head laid back, like a fowl's, between its wings, and seemed to be enjoying a short nap. I suppose I must unconsciously have given some sign of my presence, for suddenly I saw the horny films roll back like shutters from its lidless eyes, which it fixed on me with a cold glare of curiosity.

And then it shambled on to its feet, and slowly elongated its neck till it brought its horrible head on a level with the battlements. I need not say that on this I promptly retreated to a spot where I judged I should be out of immediate danger. But I had sufficient presence of mind to remember the purpose for which I was there, and, fixing the prepared slice on the ferrule of my umbrella, I extended it as far as my arm would reach in the creature's direction.

I fancy it had not been fed very lately. The head made a lightning dart across the parapet, and a voracious snap—and the next moment both bread and umbrella had disappeared down its great red gullets.

The head was then withdrawn. I could hear a hideous champing sound, as of the ribs of the umbrella being slowly crunched. After that came silence.

Again I crawled to the parapet and looked down. The huge brute was licking its plated jaws with apparent gusto, as though—which was likely enough—an umbrella came as an unaccustomed snack to its jaded palate. It was peacefully engaged now in digesting this *hors cPœuvre*.

But my heart only sank the lower at the sight. For if an alpaca umbrella with an ebony handle could be so easily assimilated, what possible chance was there that

SALTED ALMONDS

beetle-paste would produce any deleterious effect ? I had been a fool to place the faintest hope on so desperate a hazard. Presently he would be coming for more—and I had nothing for him !

But by-and-by, as I gazed in a sort of fascinated repulsion, I fancied I detected some slight symptoms of uneasiness in the reptile's demeanour.

It was almost nothing at first—a restless twitch at times, and a squint in its stony eyes that I had not previously noticed—but it gave me a gleam of hope. Presently I saw the great crest along its spine slowly begin to erect itself, and the filaments that fringed its jaws bristling, as it proceeded to deal a succession of vicious pecks at its distended olive-green paunch, which it evidently regarded as responsible for the disturbance.

Little as I knew about dragons, a child could have seen that this one was feeling somewhat seriously indisposed. Only—was it due to the umbrella or the vermin-killer ? As to that I could only attempt to speculate, and my fate—and the Princess's, too—hung upon which was the correct diagnosis !

However, I was not kept long in suspense. Suddenly the beast uttered a kind of bellowing roar—the most appalling sound I think I ever heard—and after that I scarcely know what happened exactly.

I fancy it had some kind of fit. It writhed and rolled over and over, thrashing the air with its big leathery wings, and tangling itself up to a degree that, unless I had seen it, I should have thought impossible, even for a dragon.

After this had gone on for some time, it untied itself and seemed calmer again, till all at once it curved into an immense arch, and remained perfectly rigid with wings outspread for nearly half a minute. Then it suddenly collapsed on its side, panting, snorting, and quivering like some monstrous automobile, after which it stretched itself out to its full length once or twice, and then lay stiff and still. Its gorgeous hues gradually faded

THE ADVENTURE OF THE SNOWING GLOBE

into a dull, leaden-grey tint. . . . All was over—the vermin-destroyer had done its work after all.

I cannot say that I was much elated. I am not sure that I did not even feel a pang of self-reproach. I had slain the dragon, it was true, but by a method which I could not think would have commended itself to St. George as entirely sportsmanlike, even though the circumstances left me no other alternative.

However, I had saved the Princess, which, after all, was the main point, and there was no actual necessity for her to know more than the bare fact that the dragon was dead.

I was just about to go down and inform her that she was now free to leave the castle, when I heard a whirring noise in the air, and, glancing back, I saw, flying towards me through the still falling snow, an elderly gentleman of forbidding aspect, who was evidently in a highly exasperated state. It was the Princess's uncle.

I don't know how it was, but till that moment I had never realised the extremely unprofessional proceeding into which I had been betrayed by my own impulsiveness. But I saw now, though too late, that, in taking the law into my own hands and administering a poisonous drug to an animal which, however furious it might be, was still the property of another, I had been guilty of conduct unworthy of any respectable solicitor. It was undoubtedly an actionable tort, if not a trespass—while he might even treat it as a criminal offence.

So, as the magician landed on the roof, his face distorted with fury, I felt that nothing would meet the case but the most ample apology. But, feeling that it was better to allow the first remark to come from him, I merely raised my hat and waited to hear what he had to say. . . .

" *Are you being attended to, sir ?* " was the remark that actually came—and both words and tone were so different from what I had expected that I could not repress a start.

" And then, to my utter astonishment, I discovered that battlements and magician had all disappeared. I was

SALTED ALMONDS

back again in the toy-shop, staring into the glass globe, in which the snow was still languidly circling.

" Like to take one of these shilling snowstorms, sir ? " continued the assistant, who seemed to be addressing me ; " we're selling a great quantity of them just now. Very suitable and acceptable present for a child, sir, and only a shilling in that size, though we have them larger in stock."

I bought the globe I had first taken up—but I have not given it to my godchild. I preferred to keep it myself.

Of course, my adventure may have been merely a kind of day-dream ; though, if so, it is rather odd that it should have taken that form, when, even at night, my dreams—on the rare occasions when I *do* dream—never turn upon such subjects as castles, princesses, or dragons.

A scientific friend, to whom I related the experience, pronounces it to be an ordinary case of auto-hypnotism, induced by staring into a crystal globe for a prolonged period.

But I don't know. I cannot help thinking that there is something more in it than that.

I still gaze into the globe at times, when I am alone of an evening ; but while I have occasionally found myself back in the snowstorm again, I have never, so far, succeeded in getting into the castle.

Perhaps it is as well ; for, although I should not at all object to see something more of the Princess, she has most probably, thanks to my instrumentality, long since left the premises—and I cannot say that I have any particular desire to meet the magician.

THE BRASS BOTTLE

i. *Horace Ventimore receives a Commission*

a |r || THIS day six weeks—just six weeks ago ! " Horace

I Ventimore said, half aloud, to himself, and pulled
- out his watch. " Half-past twelve—what was I
doing at half-past twelve ? "

As he sat at the window of his office in Great Cloister Street, Westminster, he made his thoughts travel back to a certain glorious morning in August which now seemed so remote and irrecoverable. At this precise time he was waiting on the balcony of the Hotel de la Plage—the sole hostelry of St. Luc-en-Port, the tiny Normandy watering-place upon which, by some happy inspiration, he had lighted during a solitary cycling tour—waiting until She should appear.

He could see the whole scene : the tiny cove, with the violet shadow of the cliff sleeping on the green water ; the swell of the waves lazily lapping against the diving-board from which he had plunged half an hour before ; he remembered the long swim out to the buoy ; the exhilarated anticipation with which he had dressed and climbed the steep path to the hotel terrace.

For was he not to pass the whole remainder of that blissful day in Sylvia's Futvoye's society ? Were they not to cycle together (there were, of course, others of the party—but they did not count), to cycle over to Veulettes, to picnic there under the cliff, and ride back—always together—in the sweet-scented dusk, over the slopes, between the poplars or the cornfields glowing golden against a sky of warm purple ?

Now he saw himself going round to the gravelled courtyard in front of the hotel with a sudden dread of

THE BRASS BOTTLE

missing her. There was nothing there but the little low cart, with its canvas tilt, which was to convey Professor Futvoye and his wife to the place of *rendezvous*.

There was Sylvia at last, distractingly fair and fresh in her cool pink blouse and cream-coloured skirt; how gracious and friendly and generally delightful she had been throughout that unforgettable day, which was supreme amongst others only a little less perfect, and all now fled for ever !

They had had drawbacks, it was true. Old Futvoye was perhaps the least bit of a bore at times, with his interminable disquisitions on Egyptian art and ancient Oriental character-writing, in which he seemed convinced that Horace must feel a perfervid interest, as, indeed, he thought it politic to affect. The Professor was a most learned archaeologist, and positively bulged with information on his favourite subjects ; but it is just possible that Horace might have been less curious concerning the distinction between Cuneiform and Aramaean or Kufic and Arabic inscriptions if his informant had happened to be the father of anybody else. However, such insincerities as these are but so many evidences of sincerity.

So with self-tormenting ingenuity Horace conjured up various pictures from that Norman holiday of his : the little half-timbered cottages with their faded blue shutters and the rushes growing out of their thatch roofs; the spires of village churches gleaming above the bronze-green beeches ; the bold headlands, their ochre and yellow cliffs contrasting grimly with the soft ridges of the turf above them ; the tethered black-and-white cattle grazing peacefully against a background of lapis lazuli and malachite sea, and in every scene the sensation of Sylvia's near presence, the sound of her voice in his ears. And now ? . He looked up from the papers and tracing-cloth on his desk, and round the small panelled room which served him as an office, at the framed plans and photographs, the set squares and T squares on the walls,

HORACE VENTIMORE RECEIVES A COMMISSION

and felt a dull resentment against his surroundings. From his window he commanded a cheerful view of a tall, mouldering wall, once part of the Abbey boundaries, surmounted by *chevaux-de-frise*, above whose rust-attenuated spikes some plane trees stretched their yellowing branches.

"She would have come to care for me," Horace's thoughts ran on, disjointedly. "I could have sworn that that last day of all—and her people didn't seem to object to me. Her mother asked me cordially enough to call on them when they were back in town. When I did——"

When he had called, there had been a difference—not an unusual sequel to an acquaintanceship begun in a Continental watering-place. It was difficult to define, but unmistakable—a certain formality and constraint on Mrs. Futvoye's part, and even on Sylvia's, which seemed intended to warn him that it is not every friendship that survives the Channel passage. So he had gone away sore at heart, but fully recognising that any advances in future must come from their side. They might ask him to dinner, or at least to call again; but more than a month had passed, and they had made no sign. No, it was all over; he must consider himself dropped.

"After all," he told himself, with a short and anything but mirthful laugh, "it's natural enough. Mrs. Futvoye has probably been making inquiries about my professional prospects. It's better as it is. What earthly chance have I got of marrying unless I can get work of my own? It's all I can do to keep myself decently. I've no right to dream of asking anyone—to say nothing of Sylvia—to marry me. I should only be rushing into temptation if I saw any more of her. She's not for a poor beggar like me, who was born unlucky. Well, whining won't do any good—let's have a look at Beevor's latest performance."

He spread out a large coloured plan, in a corner of which appeared the name of "William Beevor, Architect," and began to study it in a spirit of anything but appreciation.

THE BRASS BOTTLE

"Beevor gets on," he said to himself. "Heaven knows I don't grudge him his success. He's a good fellow—though he *does* build architectural atrocities, and seems to like 'em. Who am I to give myself airs? He's successful—I'm not. Yet if I only had his opportunities, what wouldn't I make of them!"

Let it be said here that this was not the ordinary self-delusion of an incompetent. Ventimore really had talent above the average, with ideals and ambitions which might under better conditions have attained recognition and fulfilment before this.

But he was not quite energetic enough, besides being too proud, to push himself into notice, and hitherto he had met with persistent ill-luck.

So Horace had no other occupation now but to give Beevor, whose offices and clerk he shared, such slight assistance as he might require, and it was by no means cheering to feel that every year of this enforced semi-idleness left him further handicapped in the race for wealth and fame, for he had already passed his twenty-eighth birthday.

If Miss Sylvia Futvoye had indeed felt attracted towards him at one time it was not altogether incomprehensible. Horace Ventimore was not a model of manly beauty—models of manly beauty are rare out of novels, and seldom interesting in them; but his clear-cut, clean-shaven face possessed a certain distinction, and if there were faint satirical lines about the mouth, they were redeemed by the expression of the grey-blue eyes, which were remarkably frank and pleasant. He was well made, and tall enough to escape all danger of being described as short; fair-haired and pale, without being unhealthily pallid, in complexion, and he gave the impression of being a man who took life as it came, and whose sense of humour would serve as a lining for most clouds that might darken his horizon.

There was a rap at the door which communicated with Beevor's office, and Beevor himself, a florid, thick-set man, with small side-whiskers, burst in.

HORACE VENTIMORE RECEIVES A COMMISSION

" I say, Ventimore, you didn't run off with the plans for that house I'm building at Larchmere, did you ? Because—ah, I see you're looking over them. Sorry to deprive you, but——"

" Thanks, old fellow, take them, by all means. I've seen all I wanted to see."

" Well, I'm just off to Larchmere now. Want to be there to check the quantities, and there's my other house at Fittlesdon. I must go on afterwards and set it out, so I shall probably be away some days. I'm taking Harrison down, too. You won't be wanting him, eh ? "

Ventimore laughed. " I can manage to do nothing without a clerk to help me. Your necessity is greater than mine. Here are the plans."

" F'm rather pleased with 'em myself, you know," said Beevor ; " that roof ought to look well, eh ? Good idea of mine lightening the slate with that ornamental tile-work along the top. You saw I put in one of your windows with just a trifling addition. I was almost inclined to keep both gables alike, as you suggested, but it struck me a little variety—one red brick and the other ' parged '—would be more out-of-the-way."

" Oh, much," agreed Ventimore, knowing that to disagree was useless.

" Not, mind you," continued Beevor, " that I believe in going in for too much originality in domestic architecture. The average client no more wants an original house than he wants an original hat; he wants something he won't feel a fool in. I've often thought, old man, that perhaps the reason why you haven't got on—you don't mind my speaking candidly, do you ? "

" Not a bit," said Ventimore, cheerfully. " Candour's the cement of friendship. Dab it on."

" Well, I was only going to say that you do yourself no good by all those confoundedly unconventional ideas of yours. If you had your chance to-morrow, it's my belief you'd throw it away by insisting on some fantastic fad or other."

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" These speculations are a trifle premature, considering that there doesn't seem the remotest prospect of my ever getting a chance at all."

" I got mine before I'd set up six months," said Beevor. " The great thing, however," he went on, with a flavour of personal application, " is to know how to use it when it *does* come. Well, I must be off if I mean to catch that one o'clock from Waterloo. You'll see to anything that may come in for me while I'm away, won't you, and let me know ? Oh, by the way, the quantity surveyor has just sent in the quantities for that schoolroom at Woodford—do you mind running through them and seeing they're right ? And there's the specification for the new wing at Tusculum Lodge—you might draft that some time when you've nothing else to do. You'll find all the papers on my desk. Thanks awfully, old chap."

And Beevor hurried back to his own room, where for the next few minutes he could be heard bustling Harrison, the clerk, to make haste ; then a hansom was whistled for, there were footsteps down the old stairs, the sounds of a departing vehicle on the uneven stones, and after that silence and solitude.

It was not in nature to avoid feeling a little envious. Beevor had work to do in the world : even if it chiefly consisted in profaning sylvan retreats by smug or pre-tentious villas, it was still work which entitled him to consideration and respect in the eyes of all right-minded persons.

And nobody believed in Horace ; as yet he had never known the satisfaction of seeing the work of his brain realised in stone and brick and mortar ; no building stood anywhere to bear testimony to his existence and capability long after he himself should have passed away .

It was not a profitable train of thought, and, to escape from it, he went into Beevor's room and fetched the documents he had mentioned—at least they would keep him occupied until it was time to go to his club and lunch. He had no sooner settled down to his calcula-

HORACE VENTIMORE RECEIVES A COMMISSION

tions, however, when he heard a shuffling step on the landing, followed by a knock at Beevor's office-door. " More work for Beevor," he thought; " what luck the fellow has ! I'd better go in and explain that he's just left town on business."

But on entering the adjoining room he heard the knocking repeated—this time at his own door ; and hastening back to put an end to this somewhat undignified form of hide-and-seek, he discovered that this visitor at least was legitimately his, and was, in fact, no other than Professor Anthony Futvoye himself.

The Professor was standing in the doorway peering short-sightedly through his convex glasses, his head protruded from his loosely-fitting great-coat with an irresistible suggestion of an inquiring tortoise. To Horace his appearance was more welcome than that of the wealthiest client—for why should Sylvia's father take the trouble to pay him this visit unless he still wished to continue the acquaintanceship ? It might even be that he was the bearer of some message or invitation.

So, although to an impartial eye the Professor might not seem the kind of elderly gentleman whose society would produce any wild degree of exhilaration, Horace was unfeignedly delighted to see him.

" Extremely kind of you to come and see me like this, sir," he said warmly, after establishing him in the solitary arm-chair reserved for hypothetical clients.

" Not at all. I'm afraid your visit to Cottesmore Gardens some time ago was somewhat of a disappointment."

" A disappointment ? " echoed Horace, at a loss to know what was coming next.

" I refer to the fact—which possibly, however, escaped your notice"—explained the Professor, scratching his scanty patch of grizzled whisker with a touch of irascibility, " that I myself was not at home on that occasion."

" Indeed, I was greatly disappointed," said Horace,

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" though of course I know how much you are engaged. It's all the more good of you to spare time to drop in for a chat just now."

" I've not come to chat, Mr. Ventimore. I never chat. I wanted to see you about a matter which I thought you might be so obliging as to——But I observe you are busy—probably too busy to attend to such a small affair."

It was clear enough now ; the Professor was going to build, and had decided—could it be at Sylvia's suggestion ?—to intrust the work to him ! But he contrived to subdue any self-betraying eagerness, and reply (as he could with perfect truth) that he had nothing on hand just then which he could not lay aside, and that if the Professor would let him know what he required, he could take it up at once.

" So much the better," said the Professor ; " so much the better. Both my wife and daughter declared that it was making far too great a demand upon your good nature ; but, as I told them, ' I am much mistaken,' I said, if Mr. Ventimore's practice is so extensive that he cannot leave it for one afternoon——' "

Evidently it was not a house. Could he be needed to escort them somewhere that afternoon ? Even that was more than he had hoped for a few minutes since. He hastened to repeat that he was perfectly free that afternoon.

" In that case," said the Professor, beginning to fumble in all his pockets—was he searching for a note in Sylvia's handwriting ?—" in that case, you will be conferring a real favour on me if you can make it convenient to attend a sale at Hammond's Auction Rooms in Covent Garden, and just bid for one or two articles on my behalf."

Whatever disappointment Ventimore felt, it may be said to his credit that he allowed no sign of it to appear. " Of course I'll go, with pleasure," he said, " if I can be of any use."

HORACE VENTIMORE RECEIVES A COMMISSION

" I knew I shouldn't come to you in vain," said the Professor. " I remembered your wonderful good nature, sir, in accompanying my wife and daughter on all sorts of expeditions in the blazing hot weather we had at St. Luc—when you might have remained quietly at the hotel with me. Not that I should trouble you now, only I have to lunch at the Oriental Club, and I've an appointment afterwards to examine and report on a recently-discovered inscribed cylinder for the Museum, which will fully occupy the rest of the afternoon, so that it's physically impossible for me to go to Hammond's myself, and I strongly object to employing a broker when I can avoid it. Where did I put that catalogue ? . . . Ah, here it is. This was sent to me by the executors of my old friend, General Collingham, who died the other day. I met him at Nakada when I was out excavating some years ago. He was something of a collector in his way, though he knew very little about it, and, of course, was taken in right and left. Most of his things are downright rubbish, but there are just a few lots that are worth securing, at a reasonable figure, by some one who knew what he was about."

" But, my dear Professor," remonstrated Horace, not relishing this responsibility, " I'm afraid I'm as likely as not to pick up some of the rubbish. I've no special knowledge of Oriental curios."

" At St. Luc," said the Professor, " you impressed me as having, for an amateur, an exceptionally accurate and comprehensive acquaintance with Egyptian and Arabian art from the earliest period." (If this were so, Horace could only feel with shame what a fearful humbug he must have been.) " However, I've no wish to lay too heavy a burden on you, and, as you will see from this catalogue, I have ticked off the lots in which I am chiefly interested, and made a note of the limit to which I am prepared to bid, so you'll have no difficulty."

" Very well," said Horace ; " I'll go straight to Co vent Garden, and slip out and get some lunch later on."

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" Well, perhaps, if you don't mind. The lots I have marked seem to come on at rather frequent intervals, but don't let that consideration deter you from getting your lunch, and if you *should* miss anything by not being on the spot, why, it's of no consequence, though I don't say it mightn't be a pity. In any case, you won't forget to mark what each lot fetches, and perhaps you wouldn't mind dropping me a line when you return the catalogue—or stay, could you look in some time after dinner this evening, and let me know how you got on ?—that would be better."

Horace thought it would be decidedly better, and undertook to call and render an account of his stewardship that evening. There remained the question of a deposit, should one or more of the lots be knocked down to him ; and, as he was obliged to own that he had not so much as ten pounds about him at that particular moment, the Professor extracted a note for that amount from his case, and handed it to him with the air of a benevolent person relieving a deserving object. " Don't exceed my limits," he said, " for I can't afford more just now ; and mind you give Hammond your own name, not mine. If the dealers get to know I'm after the things, they'll run you up. And now, I don't think I need detain you any longer, especially as time is running on. I'm sure I can trust you to do the best you can for me. Till this evening, then."

A few minutes later Horace was driving up to Covent Garden behind the best-looking horse he could pick out.

The Professor might have required from him rather more than was strictly justified by their acquaintance-ship, and taken his acquiescence too much as a matter of course—but what of that ? After all, he was Sylvia's parent.

" Even with *my* luck," he was thinking, " I ought to succeed in getting at least one or two of the lots he's marked ; and if I can only please him, something may come of it."

And in this sanguine mood Horace entered Messrs. Hammond's well-known auction rooms.

2. *A Cheap Lot*

IN spite of the fact that it was the luncheon hour when Ventimore reached Hammond's Auction Rooms, he found the big, skylighted gallery where the sale of the furniture and effects of the late General Collingham was proceeding crowded to a degree which showed that the deceased officer had some reputation as a *connoisseur*.

The narrow green baize tables below the auctioneer's rostrum were occupied by professional dealers, one or two of them women, who sat, paper and pencil in hand, with much the same air of apparent apathy and real vigilance that may be noticed in the Casino at Monte Carlo. Around them stood a decorous and businesslike crowd, mostly dealers, of various types. On a magisterial-looking bench sat the auctioneer, conducting the sale with a judicial impartiality and dignity which forbade him, even in his most laudatory comments, the faintest accent of enthusiasm.

The October sunshine, striking through the glazed roof, re-gilded the tarnished gas-stars, and suffused the dusty atmosphere with palest gold. But somehow the utter absence of excitement in the crowd, the calm, methodical tone of the auctioneer, and the occasional mournful cry of " Lot here, gentlemen ! " from the porter when any article was too large to move, all served to depress Ventimore's usually mercurial spirits.

For all Horace knew, the collection as a whole might be of little value, but it very soon became clear that others besides Professor Futvoye had singled out such gems as there were, also that the Professor had considerably under-rated the prices they were likely to fetch.

Ventimore made his bids with all possible discretion, but time after time he found the competition for some

THE BRASS BOTTLE

perforated mosque lantern, engraved ewer, or ancient porcelain tile so great that his limit was soon reached, and his sole consolation was that the article eventually changed hands for sums which were very nearly double the Professor's estimate.

Several dealers and brokers, despairing of a bargain that day, left, murmuring profanities ; most of those who remained ceased to take a serious interest in the proceedings, and consoled themselves with cheap witticisms at every favourable occasion.

The sale dragged slowly on, and, what with continual disappointment and want of food, Horace began to feel so weary that he was glad, as the crowd thinned, to get a seat at one of the green baize tables, by which time the skylights had already changed from livid grey to slate colour in the deepening dusk.

A couple of meek Burmese Buddhas had just been put up, and bore the indignity of being knocked down for nine-and-sixpence the pair with dreamy, inscrutable simpers ; Horace only waited for the final lot marked by the Professor—an old Persian copper bowl, inlaid with silver and engraved round the rim with an inscription from Hafiz.

The limit to which he was authorised to go was two pounds ten ; but, so desperately anxious was Ventimore not to return empty-handed, that he had made up his mind to bid an extra sovereign if necessary, and say nothing about it.

However, the bowl was put up, and the bidding soon rose to three pounds ten, four pounds, four pounds ten, five pounds, five guineas, for which last sum it was acquired by a bearded man on Horace's right, who immediately began to regard his purchase with a more indulgent eye.

Ventimore had done his best, and failed ; there was no reason now why he should stay a moment longer—and yet he sat on, from sheer fatigue and disinclination to move.

" Now we come to Lot 254, gentlemen," he heard the auctioneer saying, mechanically : "a capital Egyptian mummy-case in fine con——. No, I beg pardon, I'm wrong. This is an article which by some mistake has been omitted from the catalogue, though it ought to have been in it. Everything on sale to-day, gentlemen, belonged to the late General Collingham. We'll call this No. 253a. Antique brass bottle. Very curious."

One of the porters carried the bottle in between the tables, and set it down before the dealers at the farther end with a tired nonchalance.

It was an old, squat, pot-bellied vessel about two feet high, with a long thick neck, the mouth of which was closed by a sort of metal stopper or cap ; there was no visible decoration on its sides, which were rough and pitted by some incrustation that had formed on them, and been partially scraped off. As a piece of *bric-a-brac* it certainly possessed few attractions, and there was a marked tendency to " guy " it among the more frivolous brethren.

" What do you call this, sir ? " inquired one of the auctioneer, with the manner of a cheeky boy trying to get a rise out of his form-master. " Is it as ' unique ' as the others ? "

" You're as well able to judge as I am," was the guarded reply. " Anyone can see for himself it's not modern rubbish."

" Make a pretty little ornament for the mantelpiece ! " remarked a wag.

" Is the top made to unscrew, or what, sir ? " asked a third. " Seems fixed on pretty tight."

" I can't say. Probably it has not been removed for some time."

" It's a goodish weight," said the chief humorist, after handling it. " What's inside of it, sir—sardines ? "

" I don't represent it as having anything inside it," said the auctioneer. " If you want to know my opinion, I think there's money in it."

" 'Ow much ? "

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" Don't misunderstand me, gentlemen. When I say I consider there's money in it, I'm not alluding to its contents. I've no reason to believe that it contains anything. I'm merely suggesting the thing itself may be worth more than it looks."

" Ah, it might be *that* without 'urting itself! "

" Well, well, don't let us waste time. Look upon it as a pure speculation, and make me an offer for it, some of you. Come."

" Tuppence-'ap'ny ! " cried the comic man, affecting to brace himself for a mighty effort.

" Pray be serious, gentlemen. We want to get on, you know. Anything to make a start. Five shillings ? It's not the value of the metal, but I'll take the bid. Six. Look at it well. It's not an article you come across every day of your lives."

The bottle was still being passed round with disrespectful raps and slaps, and it had now come to Ventimore's right-hand neighbour, who scrutinised it carefully, but made no bid.

" That's all *right*, you know," he whispered in Horace's ear. " That's good stuff, that is. If I was you, I'd I'dave that."

" Seven shillings—eight—nine bid for it over there in the corner," said the auctioneer.

" If you think it's so good, why don't you have it yourself ? " Horace asked his neighbour.

" Me ? Oh, well, it ain't exactly in my line, and getting this last lot pretty near cleaned me out. I've done for to-day, I 'ave. All the same, it is a curiosity ; dunno as I've seen a brass vawse just that shape before, and it's genuine old, though all these fellers are too ignorant to know the value of it. So I don't mind giving you the tip."

Horace rose, the better to examine the top. As far as he could make out in the flickering light of one of the gas-stars, which the auctioneer had just ordered to be lit, there were half-erased scratches and triangular marks

on the cap that might possibly be an inscription. If so, might there not be the means here of regaining the Professor's favour, which he felt that, as it was, he should probably forfeit, justly or not, by his ill-success ?

He could hardly spend the Professor's money on it, since it was not in the catalogue, and he had no authority to bid for it, but he had a few shillings of his own to spare. Why not bid for it on his own account as long as he could afford to do so ? If he were outbid, as usual, it would not particularly matter.

"Thirteen shillings," the auctioneer was saying, in his dispassionate tones. Horace caught his eye, and slightly raised his catalogue, while another man nodded at the same time. "Fourteen in two places." Horace raised his catalogue again. "I won't go beyond fifteen," he thought.

"Fifteen. It's *against* you, sir. Any advance on fifteen ? Sixteen—this very quaint old Oriental bottle going for only sixteen shillings."

"After all," thought Horace, "I don't mind anything under a pound for it." And he bid seventeen shillings. "Eighteen," cried his rival, a short, cheery, cherub-faced little dealer, whose neighbours adjured him to "sit quiet like a good little boy and not waste his pocket-money."

"Nineteen !" said Horace. "Pound !" answered the cherubic man.

"A pound only bid for this grand brass vessel," said the auctioneer, indifferently. "All done at a pound ?"

Horace thought another shilling or two would not ruin him, and nodded.

"A guinea. For the last time. You'll lose it, sir," said the auctioneer to the little man.

"Go on, Tommy. Don't you be beat. Spring another bob on it, Tommy," his friends advised him ironically; but Tommy shook his head, with the air of a man who knows when to draw the line. "One guinea—and that's not half its value ! Gentleman on

THE BRASS BOTTLE

my left," said the auctioneer, more in sorrow than in anger—and the brass bottle became Ventimore's property.

He paid for it, and, since he could hardly walk home nursing a large metal bottle without attracting an inconvenient amount of attention, directed that it should be sent to his lodgings at Vincent Square.

But when he was out in the fresh air, walking westward to his club, he found himself wondering more and more what could have possessed him to throw away a guinea—when he had few enough for legitimate expenses—on an article of such exceedingly problematical value.

3, *An Unexpected Opening*

VENTIMORE made his way to Cottesmore Gardens that evening in a highly inconsistent, not to say chaotic, state of mind. The thought that he would presently see Sylvia again made his blood course quicker, while he was fully determined to say no more to her than civility demanded.

At one moment he was blessing Professor Futvoye for his happy thought in making use of him ; at another he was bitterly recognising that it would have been better for his peace of mind if he had been left alone. Sylvia and her mother had no desire to see more of him ; if they had, they would have asked him to come before this. No doubt they would tolerate him now for the Professor's sake ; but who would not rather be ignored than tolerated ?

The more often he saw Sylvia the more she would make his heart ache with vain longing—whereas he was getting almost reconciled to her indifference ; he would very soon be cured if he didn't see her.

Why *should* he see her ? He need not go in at all. He had merely to leave the catalogue with his compliments, and the Professor would learn all he wanted to know.

On second thoughts he must go in—if only to return

the bank-note. But he would ask to see the Professor in private. Most probably he would not be invited to join his wife and daughter, but if he were, he could make some excuse. They might think it a little odd—a little discourteous, perhaps ; but they would be too relieved to care much about that.

When he got to Cottesmore Gardens, and was actually at the door of the Futvoyes' house, one of the neatest and demurest in that retired and irreproachable quarter, he began to feel a craven hope that the Professor might be out, in which case he need only leave the catalogue and write a letter when he got home, reporting his non-success at the sale, and returning the note.

And, as it happened, the Professor *was* out, and Horace was not so glad as he thought he should be. The maid told him that the ladies were in the drawing-room, and seemed to take it for granted that he was coming in, so he had himself announced. He would not stay long—just long enough to explain his business there, and make it clear that he had no wish to force his acquaintance upon them. He found Mrs. Futvoye in the farther part of the pretty double drawing-room, writing letters, and Sylvia, more dazzlingly fair than ever in some sort of gauzy black frock with a heliotrope sash and a bunch of Parma violets on her breast, was comfortably established with a book in the front room, and seemed surprised, if not resentful, at having to disturb herself.

" I must apologise," he began, with an involuntary stiffness, " for calling at this very unceremonious time ; but the fact is, the Professor——"

" I know all about it," interrupted Mrs. Futvoye, brusquely, while her shrewd, light-grey eyes took him in with a cool stare that was humorously observant without being aggressive. " We heard how shamefully my husband abused your good-nature. Really, it was too bad of him to ask a busy man like you to put aside his work and go and spend a whole day at that stupid auction ! "

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" Oh, I'd nothing particular to do. I can't call myself a busy man—unfortunately/' said Horace, with that frankness which scorns to conceal what other people know perfectly well already.

" Ah, well, it's very nice of you to make light of it; but he ought not to have done it—after so short an acquaintance, too. And to make it worse, he has had to go out unexpectedly this evening, but he'll be back before very long, if you don't mind waiting."

" There's really no need to wait," said Horace, " because this catalogue will tell him everything, and, as the particular things he wanted went for much more than he thought, I wasn't able to get any of them."

" I'm sure I'm very glad of it," said Mrs. Futvoye, " for his study is crammed with odds and ends as it is, and I don't want the whole house to look like a museum or an antiquity shop. I'd all the trouble in the world to persuade him that a great gaudy gilded mummy-case was not quite the thing for a drawing-room. But, please sit down, Mr. Ventimore."

" Thanks," stammered Horace, " but—but I mustn't stay. If you will tell the Professor how sorry I was to miss him, and—and give him back this note which he left with me to cover any deposit, I — I won't interrupt you any longer."

He was, as a rule, imperturbable in most social emergencies, but just now he was seized with a wild desire to escape, which, to his infinite mortification, made him behave like a shy schoolboy.

" Nonsense ! " said Mrs. Futvoye ; " I am sure my husband would be most annoyed if we didn't keep you till he came."

" I really ought to go," he declared, wistfully enough.

" We mustn't tease Mr. Ventimore to stay, mother, when he so evidently wants to go," said Sylvia, cruelly.

" Well, I won't detain you—at least, not long. I wonder if you would mind posting a letter for me as you pass the pillar-box ? I've almost finished it, and it ought

AN UNEXPECTED OPENING

to go to-night, and my maid Jessie has such a bad cold I really don't like sending her out with it."

It would have been impossible to refuse to stay after that—even if he had wished. It would only be for a few minutes. Sylvia might spare him that much of her time. He should not trouble her again. So Mrs. Futvoye went back to her bureau, and Sylvia and he were practically alone.

She had taken a seat not far from his, and made a few constrained remarks, obviously out of sheer civility. He returned mechanical replies, with a dreary wonder whether this could really be the girl who had talked to him with such charming friendliness and confidence only a few weeks ago in Normandy.

And the worst of it was, she was looking more bewitching than ever ; her slim arms gleaming through the black lace of her sleeves, and the gold threads in her soft masses of chestnut hair sparkling in the light of the shaded lamp behind her. The slight contraction of her eyebrows and the mutinous downward curve of her mouth seemed expressive of boredom.

"What a dreadfully long time mamma is over that letter !" she said at last. "I think I'd better go and hurry her up."

"Please don't—unless you are particularly anxious to get rid of me."

"I thought you seemed particularly anxious to escape," she said coldly. "And, as a family, we have certainly taken up quite enough of your time for one day."

"That is not the way you used to talk at St. Luc !" he said.

"At St. Luc ? Perhaps not. But in London everything is so different, you see."

"Very different."

"When one meets people abroad who—who seem at all inclined to be sociable," she continued, "one is so apt to think them pleasanter than they really are. Then one meets them again, and—and wonders what

THE BRASS BOTTLE

one ever saw to like in them. And it's no use pretending one feels the same, because they generally understand sooner or later. Don't you find that ? "

" I do, indeed," he said, wincing, " though I don't know what I've done to deserve that you should tell me so ! "

" Oh, I was not blaming you. You have been most angelic. I can't think how father could have expected you to take all that trouble for him—still, you did, though you must have simply hated it. "

" But, good heavens ! don't you know I should be only too delighted to be of the least service to him—or to any of you ? "

" You looked anything but delighted when you came in just now ; you looked as if your one idea was to get it over as soon as you could. You know perfectly well you're longing now for mother to finish her letter and set you free. Do you really think I can't see that ? "

" If all that is true, or partly true," said Horace, " can't you guess why ? "

" I guessed how it was when you called here first that afternoon. Mother had asked you to, and you thought you might as well be civil ; perhaps you really did think it would be pleasant to see us again—but it wasn't the same thing. Oh, I saw it in your face directly—you became conventional and distant and horrid, and it made me horrid too ; and you went away determined that you wouldn't see any more of us than you could help. That's why I was so furious when I heard that papa had been to see you, and with such an object."

All this was so near the truth, and yet missed it with such perverse ingenuity, that Horace felt bound to put himself right.

" Perhaps I ought to leave things as they are," he said, " but I can't. It's no earthly use, I know ; but may I tell you why it really was painful to me to meet you again ? I thought *you* were changed, that you wished to forget, and wished me to forget—only I can't—that we had been

AN UNEXPECTED OPENING

friends for a short time. And though I never blamed you—it was natural enough—it hit me pretty hard—so hard that I didn't feel anxious to repeat the experience."

" Did it hit you hard ? " said Sylvia, softly. " Perhaps I minded too, just a little. However," she added, with a sudden smile, that made two enchanting dimples in her cheeks, " it only shows how much more sensible it is to have things out. Now perhaps you won't persist in keeping away from us ? "

" I believe," said Horace, gloomily, still determined not to let any direct avowal pass his lips, " it would be best that I *should* keep away."

Her half-closed eyes shone through their long lashes ; the violets on her breast rose and fell. " I don't think I understand," she said, in a tone that was both hurt and offended.

There is a pleasure in yielding to some temptations that more than compensates for the pain of any previous resistance. Come what might, he was not going to be misunderstood any longer.

" If I must tell you," he said, " I've fallen desperately, hopelessly, in love with you. Now you know the reason."

" It doesn't seem a very good reason for wanting to go away and never see me again. Does it ? "

" Not when I've no right to speak to you of love ? "

" But you've done that! "

" I know," he said penitently ; "I couldn't help it. But I never meant to. It slipped out. I quite understand how hopeless it is."

" Of course, if you are so sure as all that, you are quite right not to try."

" Sylvia ! You can't mean that—that you do care, after all ? "

" Didn't you really see ? " she said, with a low, happy laugh. " How stupid of you ! And how dear ! "

He caught her hand, which she allowed to rest contentedly in his. " Oh, Sylvia ! Then you do—you do ! But, my God, what a selfish brute I am ! For we can't

THE BRASS BOTTLE

marry. It may be years before I can ask you to come to me. Your father and mother wouldn't hear of your being engaged to me."

"Need they hear of it just yet, Horace ?"

"Yes, they must. I should feel a cur if I didn't tell your mother, at all events."

"Then you shan't feel a cur, for we'll *go* and tell her together." And Sylvia rose and went into the farther room, and put her arms round her mother's neck. "Mother, darling," she said, in a half whisper, "it's really all your fault for writing such very long letters, but—but—we don't exactly know how we came to do it—but Horace and I have got engaged somehow. You aren't very angry, are you ?"

"I think you're both extremely foolish," said Mrs. Futvoye, as she extricated herself from Sylvia's arms and turned to face Horace. "From all I hear, Mr. Ventimore, you're not in a position to marry at present."

"Unfortunately, no," said Horace ; "I'm making nothing as yet. But my chance must come some day. I don't ask you to give me Sylvia till then."

"And you know you like Horace, mother !" pleaded Sylvia. "And I'm ready to wait for him, any time. Nothing will induce me to give him up, and I shall never, never care for anybody else. So you see you may just as well give us your consent !"

"I'm afraid I've been to blame," said Mrs. Futvoye. "I ought to have foreseen this at St. Luc. Sylvia is our only child, Mr. Ventimore, and I would far rather see her happily married than making what is called a * grand match.' Still, this really does seem *rather* hopeless. I am quite sure her father would never approve of it. Indeed, it must not be mentioned to him—he would only be irritated."

"So long as you are not against us," said Horace, "you won't forbid me to see her ?"

"I believe I ought to," said Mrs. Futvoye ; "but I don't object to your coming here occasionally, as an

AN UNEXPECTED OPENING

ordinary visitor. Only understand this—until you can prove to my husband's satisfaction that you are able to support Sylvia in the manner she has been accustomed to, there must be no formal engagement. I think I am entitled to ask *that* of you."

She was so clearly within her rights, and so much more indulgent than Horace had expected—for he had always considered her an unsentimental and rather worldly woman—that he accepted her conditions almost gratefully. After all, it was enough for him that Sylvia returned his love, and that he should be allowed to see her from time to time.

"It's rather a pity," said Sylvia, meditatively, a little later, when her mother had gone back to her letter-writing, and she and Horace were discussing the future; "it's rather a pity that you didn't manage to get *something* at that sale. It might have helped you with papa."

"Well, I did get something, on my own account," he said, "though I don't know whether it is likely to do me any good with your father." And he told her how he had come to acquire the brass bottle.

"And you actually gave a guinea for it?" said Sylvia, "when you could probably get exactly the same thing, only better, at Liberty's for about seven-and-sixpence! Nothing of that sort has any charms for father, unless it's dirty and dingy and centuries old."

"This looks all that. I only bought it because, though it wasn't down on the catalogue, I had a fancy that it might interest the Professor."

"Oh!" cried Sylvia, clasping her pretty hands, "if only it does, Horace! If it turns out to be tremendously rare and valuable! I do believe dad would be so delighted that he'd consent to anything. Ah, that's his step outside . . . he's letting himself in. Now, mind you don't forget to tell him about that bottle."

The Professor did not seem in the sweetest of humours as he entered the drawing-room. "Sorry I was obliged to be from home, and there was nobody but my wife and

THE BRASS BOTTLE

daughter here to entertain you. But I am glad you stayed—yes, I'm rather glad you stayed."

" So am I, sir," said Horace, and proceeded to give his account of the sale, which did not serve to improve the Professor's temper. He thrust out his under lip at certain items in the catalogue. " I wish I'd gone myself," he said ; " that bowl, a really fine example of sixteenth-century Persian work, going for only five guineas ! I'd willingly have given ten for it. Then, there, I thought I could have depended on you to use your judgment better than that."

" If you remember, sir, you strictly limited me to the sums you marked."

" Nothing of the sort," said the Professor, testily ; " my marginal notes were merely intended as indications, no more. You might have known that if you had secured one of the things at any price I should have approved."

Horace had no grounds for knowing anything of the kind, and much reason for believing the contrary, but he saw no use in arguing the matter further, and merely said he was sorry to have misunderstood.

" No doubt the fault was mine," said the Professor, in a tone that implied the opposite. " Still, making every allowance for inexperience in these matters, I should have thought it impossible for anyone to spend a whole day bidding at a place like Hammond's without even securing a single article."

" But, dad," put in Sylvia, " Mr. Ventimore did get *one* thing—on his own account. It's a brass bottle, not down in the catalogue, but he thinks it may be worth something perhaps. And he'd very much like to have your opinion."

" Tchah ! " said the Professor. " Some modern bazaar work, most probably. He'd better have kept his money. What was this bottle of yours like, now, eh ? "

Horace described it.

" H'm, Seems to be what the Arabs call a ' kum-kum,' probably used as a sprinkler, or to hold rosewater.

AN UNEXPECTED OPENING

Hundreds of 'em about," commented the Professor, crustily.

" It had a lid, riveted or soldered on," said Horace ; " the general shape was something like this. . . ." And he made a rapid sketch from memory, which the Professor took reluctantly, and then adjusted his glasses with some increase of interest.

" Ha—the form is antique, certainly. And the top hermetically fastened, eh ? That looks as if it might contain something."

" You don't think it has a genie inside, like the sealed jar the fisherman found in the *Arabian Nights* ? " cried Sylvia. " What fun if it had ! "

" By genie, I presume you mean a *Jinnie*, which is the more correct and scholarly term," said the Professor. " Female, *Jinneeyeh*, and plural, *Jinn*. No, I do *not* contemplate that as a probable contingency. But it is not quite impossible that a vessel closed as Mr. Ventimore describes may have been designed as a receptacle for papyri or other records of archaeological interest, which may be still in preservation. I should recommend you, sir, to use the greatest precaution in removing the lid—don't expose the documents, if any, too suddenly to the outer air, and it would be better if you did not handle them yourself. I shall be rather curious to hear whether it really does contain anything, and if so, what."

" I will open it as carefully as possible," said Horace, " and whatever it may contain, you may rely upon my letting you know at once."

He left shortly afterwards, encouraged by the radiant trust in Sylvia's eyes, and thrilled by the secret pressure of her hand at parting.

He had been amply repaid for all the hours he had spent in the close sale-room. His luck had turned at last: he was going to succeed ; he felt it in the air, as if he were already fanned by Fortune's pinions.

Still thinking of Sylvia, he let himself into the semi-detached, old-fashioned house on the north side of Vincent

THE BRASS BOTTLE

Square, where he had lodged for some years. It was nearly twelve o'clock, and his landlady, Mrs. Rapkin, and her husband had already gone to bed.

Ventimore went up to his sitting-room, a comfortable apartment with two long windows opening on to a trellised verandah and balcony—a room which, as he had furnished and decorated it himself to suit his own tastes, had none of the depressing ugliness of typical lodgings.

It was quite dark, for the season was too mild for a fire, and he had to grope for the matches before he could light his lamp. After he had done so and turned up the wicks, the first object he saw was the bulbous, long-necked jar which he had bought that afternoon, and which now stood on the stained boards near the mantelpiece. It had been delivered with unusual promptitude.

Somehow he felt a sort of repulsion at the sight of it.

"It's a beastlier-looking object than I thought," he said to himself, disgustedly. "A chimney-pot would be about as decorative and appropriate in my room. What a thundering ass I was to waste a guinea on it! I wonder if there really *is* anything inside it. It is so infernally ugly that it *ought* to be useful. The Professor seemed to fancy it might hold documents, and he ought to know. Anyway, I'll find out before I turn in."

He grasped it by its long, thick neck, and tried to twist the cap off; but it remained firm, which was not surprising, seeing that it was thickly coated with a lava-like crust.

"I must get some of that off first, and then try again," he decided; and after foraging downstairs, he returned with a hammer and chisel, with which he chipped away the crust till the line of the cap was revealed, and an uncouth metal knob that seemed to be a catch.

This he tapped sharply for some time, and again attempted to wrench off the lid. Then he gripped the vessel between his knees and put forth all his strength, while the bottle seemed to rock and heave under him in

AN UNEXPECTED OPENING

sympathy. The cap was beginning to give way, very slightly ; one last wrench—and it came off in his hand with such suddenness that he was flung violently backwards, and hit the back of his head smartly against an angle of the wainscot.

He had a vague impression of the bottle lying on its side, with dense volumes of hissing, black smoke pouring out of its mouth and towering up in a gigantic column to the ceiling ; he was conscious, too, of a pungent and peculiar overpowering perfume. " I've got hold of some sort of infernal machine," he thought, " and I shall be all over the square in less than a second ! " And, just as he arrived at this cheerful conclusion, he lost consciousness altogether.

He could not have been unconscious for more than a few seconds, for when he opened his eyes the room was still thick with smoke, through which he dimly discerned the figure of a stranger, who seemed of abnormal and almost colossal height. But this must have been an optical illusion caused by the magnifying effects of the smoke ; for, as it cleared, his visitor proved to be of no more than ordinary stature. He was elderly, and, indeed, venerable of appearance, and wore an Eastern robe and head-dress of a dark-green hue. He stood there with uplifted hands, uttering something in a loud tone and a language unknown to Horace.

Ventimore, being still somewhat dazed, felt no surprise at seeing him. Mrs. Rapkin must have let her second floor at last—to some Oriental. He would have preferred an Englishman as a fellow-lodger, but this foreigner must have noticed the smoke and rushed in to offer assistance, which was both neighbourly and plucky of him.

" Awfully good of you to come in, sir," he said, as he scrambled to his feet. " I don't know what's happened exactly, but there's no harm done. I'm only a trifle shaken, that's all. By the way, I suppose you can speak English ? "

" Assuredly I can speak so as to be understood by all

THE BRASS BOTTLE

whom I address," answered the stranger. " Dost thou not understand my speech ? "

" Perfectly, now," said Horace. " But you made a remark just now which I didn't follow—would you mind repeating it ? "

" I said : ' Repentance, O Prophet of God ! I will not return to the like conduct ever.' "

" Ah," said Horace. " I dare say you *were* rather startled. So was I when I opened that bottle."

" Tell me—was it indeed thy hand that removed the seal, O young man of kindness and good works ? "

" I certainly did open it," said Ventimore, " though I don't know where the kindness comes in—for I've no notion what was inside the thing."

" I was inside it," said the stranger, calmly.

4. *At Large*

"S O *you* were inside that bottle, were you ? " said Horace, blandly. " How singular ! " He began to realise that he had to deal with an Oriental lunatic, and must humour him to some extent. Fortunately he did not seem at all dangerous, though undeniably eccentric-looking. His hair fell in disorderly profusion from under his high turban about his cheeks, which were of a uniform pale rhubarb tint; his grey beard streamed out in three thin strands, and his long, narrow* eyes, opal in hue, and set rather wide apart and at a slight angle, had a curious expression, part slyness and part childlike simplicity.

" Dost thou doubt that I speak truth ? I tell thee that I have been confined in that accursed vessel for countless centuries—how long, I know not, for it is beyond calculation."

" I should hardly have thought from your appearance, sir, that you had been so many years in bottle as all that," said Horace, politely, " but it's certainly time you had a

change. May I, if it isn't indiscreet, ask how you came into such a very uncomfortable position ? But probably you have forgotten by this time."

" Forgotten ! " said the other, with a sombre red glow in his opal eyes. " Wisely was it written : ' Let him that desireth oblivion confer benefits—but the memory of an injury endureth for ever.' / forget neither benefits nor injuries."

" An old gentleman with a grievance/' thought Ventimore. " And mad into the bargain. Nice person to have staying in the same house with one ! "

" Know, O best of mankind," continued the stranger, " that he who now addresses thee is Fakrash-el-Aamash, one of the Green Jinn. And I dwelt in the Palace of the Mountain of the Clouds above the City of Babel in the Garden of Irem, which thou doubtless knowest by repute ? "

" I fancy I *have* heard of it," said Horace, as if it were an address in the Court Directory. " Delightful neighbourhood."

" I had a kinswoman, Bedeea-el-Jemal, who possessed incomparable beauty and manifold accomplishments. And seeing that, though a Jinneeyeh, she was of the believing Jinn, I despatched messengers to Suleyman the Great, the son of Daood, offering him her hand in marriage. But a certain Jarjarees, the son of Rejmoos, the son of Iblees—may he be for ever accursed !—looked with favour upon the maiden, and, going secretly unto Suleyman, persuaded him that I was preparing a crafty snare for the King's undoing."

" And, of course, *you* never thought of such a thing ? " said Ventimore.

" By a venomous tongue the fairest motives may be rendered foul," was the somewhat evasive reply. " Thus it came to pass that Suleyman—on whom be peace !—listened unto the voice of Jarjarees and refused to receive the maiden. Moreover, he commanded that I should be seized and imprisoned in a bottle of brass and

THE BRASS BOTTLE

cast into the Sea of El-Karkar, there to abide the Day of Doom."

" Too bad—really too bad ! " murmured Horace, in a tone that he could only hope was sufficiently sympathetic.

" But now, by thy means, O thou of noble ancestors and gentle disposition, my deliverance hath been accomplished ; and if I were to serve thee for a thousand years, regarding nothing else, even thus could I not requite thee, and my so doing would be a small thing according to thy deserts ! "

" Pray don't mention it," said Horace ; " only too pleased if I've been of any use to you."

" In the sky it is written upon the pages of the air : ' He who doth kind actions shall experience the like.' Am I not an Efreet of the Jinn ? Demand, therefore, and thou shalt receive."

" Poor old chap ! " thought Horace, " he's very cracked indeed. He'll be wanting to give me a present of some sort soon—and of course I can't have that. . . . My dear Mr. Fakrash," he said aloud, " I've done nothing—nothing at all—and if I had, I couldn't possibly accept any reward for it."

" What are thy names, and what calling dost thou follow ? "

" I ought to have introduced myself before—let me give you my card " ; and Ventimore gave him one, which the other took and placed in his girdle. " That's my business address. I'm an architect, if you know what that is—a man who builds houses and churches—mosques, you know—in fact, anything, when he can get it to build."

" A useful calling indeed—and one to be rewarded with fine gold."

" In my case," Horace confessed, " the reward has been too fine to be perceived. In other words, I've never *been* rewarded, because I've never yet had the luck to get a client."

" And what is this client of whom thou speakest ? "

" Oh, well, some well-to-do merchant who wants a house built for him and doesn't care how much he spends on it. There must be lots of them about—but they never seem to come in *my* direction."

" Grant me a period of delay, and, if it be possible, I will procure thee such a client."

Horace could not help thinking that any recommendation from such a quarter would hardly carry much weight; but, as the poor old man evidently imagined himself under an obligation, which he was anxious to discharge, it would have been unkind to throw cold water on his good intentions.

" My dear sir," he said lightly, " if you *should* come across that particular type of client, and can contrive to impress him with the belief that I'm just the architect he's looking out for—which, between ourselves, I am, though nobody's discovered it yet—if you can get him to come to me, you will do me the very greatest service I could ever hope for. But don't give yourself any trouble over it."

" It will be one of the easiest things that can be," said his visitor, " that is " (and here a shade of rather pathetic doubt crossed his face) " provided that anything of my former power yet remains unto me."

" Well, never mind, sir," said Horace ; " if you can't, I shall take the will for the deed."

" First of all, it will be prudent to learn where Suleyman is, that I may humble myself before him and make my peace."

" Yes," said Horace, gently, " I would. I should make a point of that, sir. Not *now*, you know. He might be in bed. To-morrow morning."

" This is a strange place that I am in, and I know not yet in what direction I should seek him. But till I have found him, and justified myself in his sight, and had my revenge upon Jarjarees, mine enemy, I shall know no rest."

" Well, but go to bed now, like a sensible old chap," said Horace, soothingly, anxious to prevent this poor

THE BRASS BOTTLE

demented Asiatic from falling into the hands of the police.
" Plenty of time to go and call on Suleyman to-morrow."

" I will search for him, even unto the uttermost ends of the earth ! "

" That's right—you're sure to find him in one of them. Only, don't you see, it's no USE starting to-night—the last trains have gone long ago." As he spoke, the night wind bore across the square the sound of Big Ben striking the quarters in Westminster Clock Tower, and then, after a pause, the solemn boom that announced the first of the small hours. " To-morrow," thought Ventimore, " I'll speak to Mrs. Rapkin, and get her to send for a doctor and have him put under proper care—the poor old boy really isn't fit to go about alone ! "

" I will start now—at once," insisted the stranger, " for there is no time to be lost."

" Oh, come ! " said Horace, " after so many thousand years, a few hours more or less won't make any serious difference. And you *can't* go out now—they've shut up the house. Do let me take you upstairs to your room, sir ? "

" Not so, for I must leave thee for a season, O young man of kind conduct. But may thy days be fortunate, and thy gate never cease to be repaired, and the nose of him that envieth thee be rubbed in the dust, for love for thee hath entered into my heart, and if it be permitted unto me, I will cover thee with the veils of my protection!"

As he finished this harangue the speaker seemed, to Ventimore's speechless amazement, to slip through the wall behind him. At all events, he had left the room somehow—and Horace found himself alone.

He rubbed the back of his head, which began to be painful. " He can't really have vanished through the wall," he said to himself. " That's too absurd. The fact is, I'm over-excited this evening—and no wonder, after all that's happened. The best thing I can do is to go to bed at once ! "

Which he accordingly proceeded to do.

5. *Carte Blanche*

WHEN Ventimore woke next morning his headache had gone, and with it the recollection of everything but the wondrous and delightful fact that Sylvia loved him and had promised to be his some day. Her mother, too, was on his side ; why should he despair of anything after that ? There was the Professor, to be sure—but even he might be brought to consent to an engagement, especially if it turned out that the brass bottle . . . and here Horace began to recall an extraordinary dream in connection with that extremely speculative purchase of his. He had dreamed that he had forced the bottle open, and that it proved to contain, not manuscripts, but an elderly Jinnee who alleged that he had been imprisoned there by the order of King Solomon !

What, he wondered, could have put so grotesque a fancy into his head ? and then he smiled as he traced it to Sylvia's playful suggestion that the bottle might contain a " genie," as did the famous jar in the *Arabian Nights*, and to her father's pedantic correction of the word to " Jinnee." Upon that slight foundation his sleeping brain had built up all that elaborate fabric—a scene so vivid and a story so circumstantial and plausible that, in spite of its extravagance, he could hardly even now persuade himself that it was entirely imaginary. The psychology of dreams is a subject which has a fascinating mystery, even for the least serious student.

As he entered the sitting-room, where his breakfast awaited him, he looked round, half expecting to find the bottle lying with its lid off in the corner, as he had last seen it in his dream.

Of course, it was not there, and he felt an odd relief. The auction-room people had not delivered it yet, and so much the better, for he had still to ascertain if it had anything inside it ; and who knew that it might not con-

THE BRASS BOTTLE

tain something more to his advantage than a maundering old Jinnee with a grievance several thousands of years old ?

Breakfast over, he rang for his landlady, who presently appeared. Mrs. Rapkin was a superior type of her much-abused class. She was scrupulously clean and neat in her person ; her sandy hair was so smooth and tightly knotted that it gave her head the colour and shape of a Barcelona nut ; she had sharp beady eyes, nostrils that seemed to smell battle afar off, a wide, thin mouth that apparently closed with a snap, and a dry, whitish-brown complexion suggestive of bran.

But, if somewhat grim of aspect, she was a good soul and devoted to Horace, in whom she took almost a maternal interest, while regretting that he was not what she called " serious-minded enough " to get on in the world. Rapkin had wooed and married her when they were both in service, and he still took occasional jobs as an outdoor butler, though Horace suspected that his more staple form of industry was the consumption of gin-and-water and remarkably full-flavoured cigars in the basement parlour.

" Shall you be dining in this evening, sir ? " inquired Mrs. Rapkin.

" I don't know. Don't get anything in for me ; I shall most probably dine at the club," said Horace ; and Mrs. Rapkin, who had a confirmed belief that all clubs were hotbeds of vice and extravagance, sniffed disapproval. " By the way," he added, " if a kind of brass pot is sent here, it's all right. I bought it at a sale yesterday. Be careful how you handle it—it's rather old."

" There was a vawse come late last night, sir ; I don't know if it's that, it's old-fashioned enough."

" Then will you bring it up at once, please ? I want to see it."

Mrs. Rapkin retired, to reappear presently with the brass bottle. " I thought you'd have noticed it when you come in last night, sir," she explained, " for I stood it in the corner, and when I see it this morning it was layin' o'

one side and looking that dirty and disrespectful I took it down to give it a good clean, which it wanted it."

It certainly looked rather the better for it, and the marks or scratches on the cap were more distinguishable, but Horace was somewhat disconcerted to find that part of his dream was true—the bottle had been there.

"I hope I've done nothing wrong," said Mrs. Rapkin, observing his expression; "I only used a little warm ale to it, which is a capital thing for brass-work, and gave it a scrub with 'Vitrolia' soap—but it would take more than that to get all the muck off of it."

"It is all right, so long as you didn't try to get the top off," said Horace.

"Why, the top was off it, sir. I thought you'd done it with the 'ammer and chisel when you got 'ome," said his landlady, staring. "I found them 'ere on the carpet."

Horace started. Then *that* part was true, too! "Oh, ah," he said, "I believe I did. I'd forgotten. That reminds me. Haven't you let the room above to—to an Oriental gentleman—a native, you know—wears a green turban?"

"That I most certainly 'ave *not*, Mr. Ventimore," said Mrs. Rapkin, with emphasis, "nor wouldn't. Not if his turbin was all the colours of the rainbow—for I don't 'old with such. Why, there was Rapkin's own sister-in-law let her parlour floor to a Horiental—a Parsee *he* was, or *one* o' them Haffrican tribes—and reason she 'ad to repent of it, for all his gold spectacles! Whatever made you fancy I should let to a blackamoor?"

"Oh, I thought I saw somebody about—er—answering that description, and I wondered if——"

"Never in *this* 'ouse, sir. Mrs. Steggars, next door but one, might let to such, for all I can say to the contrary, not being what you might call particular, and her rooms more suitable to savage notions—but I've enough on *my* hands, Mr. Ventimore, attending to you—not keeping a girl to do the waiting, as why should I while I'm well able to do it better myself?"

THE BRASS BOTTLE

As soon as she relieved him of her presence, he examined the bottle : there was nothing whatever inside it, which disposed of all the hopes he had entertained from that quarter.

It was not difficult to account for the visionary Oriental as an hallucination probably inspired by the heavy fumes (for he now believed in the fumes) which had doubtless resulted from the rapid decomposition of some long-buried spices or similar substances suddenly exposed to the air.

If any further explanation were needed, the accidental blow to the back of his head, together with the latent suggestion from the *Arabian Nights* would amply provide it.

So, having settled these points to his entire satisfaction, he went to his office in Great Cloister Street, which he now had entirely to himself, and was soon engaged in drafting the specification for Beevor on which he had been working when so fortunately interrupted the day before by the Professor.

The work was more or less mechanical, and could bring him no credit and little thanks, but Horace had the happy faculty of doing thoroughly whatever he undertook, and as he sat there by his wide-open window he soon became entirely oblivious of all but the task before him.

So much so that, even when the light became obscured for a moment, as if by some large and opaque body in passing, he did not look up immediately, and, when he did, was surprised to find the only arm-chair occupied by a portly person, who seemed to be trying to recover his breath.

" I beg your pardon," said Ventimore ; " I never heard you come in."

His visitor could only wave his hand in courteous deprecation, under which there seemed a suspicion of bewildered embarrassment. He was a rosy-gilled, spotlessly-clean, elderly gentleman, with white whiskers ; his eyes, just then slightly protuberant, were shrewd, but

genial; he had a wide, jolly mouth and a double chin. He was dressed like a man who is above disguising his prosperity ; he wore a large, pear-shaped pearl in his crimson scarf, and had probably only lately discarded his summer white hat and white waistcoat.

" My dear sir," he began, in a rich, throaty voice, as soon as he could speak ; " my dear sir, you must think this is a most unceremonious way of—ah !—dropping in on you—of invading your privacy."

" Not at all," said Horace, wondering whether he could possibly intend him to understand that he had come in by the window. " I 'm afraid there was no one to show you in—my clerk is away just now."

" No matter, sir, no matter. I found my way up, as you perceive. The important, I may say the essential, fact is that I *am* here."

" Quite so," said Horace ; " and may I ask what brought you ? "

" What brought——" The stranger's eyes grew fish-like for the moment. " Allow me, I — I shall come to that—in good time. I am still a little—as you can see." He glanced round the room. " You are, I think, an architect, Mr. ah—Mr. um——?"

" Ventimore is my name," said Horace, " and I *am* an architect."

" Ventimore, to be sure ! " he put his hand in his pocket and produced a card : " Yes, it's all quite correct: I see I have the name here. And an architect, Mr. Ventimore, so I — I am given to understand, of immense ability."

" I'm afraid I can't claim to be that," said Horace, " but I may call myself fairly competent."

" Competent ? Why, of *course* you're competent. Do you suppose, sir, that I, a practical business man, should come to anyone who was *not* competent ? " he said, with exactly the air of a man trying to convince himself—against his own judgment—that he was acting with the utmost prudence.

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" Am I to understand that some one has been good enough to recommend me to you ? " inquired Horace.

" Certainly not, sir, certainly not. / need no recommendation but my own judgment. I—ah—have a tolerable acquaintance with all that is going on in the art world, and I have come to the conclusion, Mr.—eh—ah—Ventimore, I repeat, the deliberate and unassisted conclusion, that you are the one man living who can do what I want."

" Delighted to hear it," said Horace, genuinely gratified. " When did you see any of my designs ? "

" Never mind, sir. I don't decide without very good grounds. It doesn't take me long to make up my mind, and when my mind is made up, I act, sir, I act. And, to come to the point, I have a small commission—unworthy, I am quite aware, of your—ah—distinguished talent—which I should like to put in your hands."

" Is *he* going to ask me to attend a sale for him ? " thought Horace. " I'm hanged if I do."

" I'm rather busy at present," he said dubiously, " as you may see. I'm not sure whether——"

" I'll put the matter in a nutshell, sir—in a nutshell. My name is Wackerbath, Samuel Wackerbath—tolerably well known, if I may say so, in City circles." Horace, of course, concealed the fact that his visitor's name and fame were unfamiliar to him. " I've lately bought a few acres on the Hampshire border, near the house I'm living in just now ; and I've been thinking—as I was saying to a friend only just now, as we were crossing Westminster Bridge—I've been thinking of building myself a little place there, just a humble, unpretentious home, where I could run down for the week-end and entertain a friend or two in a quiet way, and perhaps live some part of the year. Hitherto I've rented places as I wanted 'em—old family seats and ancestral mansions and so forth : very nice in their way, but I want to feel under a roof of my own. I want to surround myself with the simple comforts, the—ah—unassuming elegance of tfn English

country home. And you're the man—I feel more convinced of it with every word you say—you're the man to do the job in style—ah—to execute the work as it should be done."

Here was the long-wished-for client at last! And it was satisfactory to feel that he had arrived in the most ordinary and commonplace course, for no one could look at Mr. Samuel Wackerbath and believe for a moment that he was capable of floating through an upper window ; he was not in the least that kind of person.

" I shall be happy to do my best," said Horace, with a calmness that surprised himself. " Could you give me some idea of the amount you are prepared to spend ? "

" Well, I'm no Croesus—though I won't say I'm a pauper precisely—and, as I remarked before, I prefer comfort to splendour. I don't think I should be justified in going beyond—well, say sixty thousand."

" Sixty thousand ! " exclaimed Horace, who had expected about a tenth of that sum. " Oh, not *more* than sixty thousand ? I see."

" I mean, on the house itself," explained Mr. Wackerbath ; " there will be outbuildings, lodges, cottages, and so forth, and then some of the rooms I should want specially decorated. Altogether, before we are finished, it may work out at about a hundred thousand. I take it that, with such a margin, you could—ah—run me up something that in a modest way would take the shine out of—I mean to say eclipse—anything in the adjoining counties ? "

" I certainly think," said Horace, " that for such a sum as that I can undertake that you shall have a home which will satisfy you." And he proceeded to put the usual questions as to site, soil, available building materials, the accommodation that would be required, and so on.

" You're young, sir," said Mr. Wackerbath, at the end of the interview, " but I perceive you are up to all the tricks of the—I *should* say, versed in the *minutia* of your profession. You would like to run down and look at the

THE BRASS BOTTLE

ground, eh ? Well, that's only reasonable ; and my wife and daughters will want to have *their* say in the matter—no getting on without pleasing the ladies, hey ? Now, let me see. To-morrow's Sunday. Why not come down by the 8.45 a.m. to Lipsfield ? I'll have a trap, or a brougham and pair, or something, waiting for you—take you over the ground myself, bring you back to lunch with us at Oriel Court, and talk the whole thing thoroughly over. Then we'll send you up to town in the evening, and you can start work the first thing on Monday. That suit you ? Very well, then. We'll expect you to-morrow."

With this Mr. Wackerbath departed, leaving Horace, as may be imagined, absolutely overwhelmed by the suddenness and completeness of his good fortune. He was no longer one of the unemployed : he had work to do, and, better still, work that would interest him, give him all the scope and opportunity he could wish for. With a client who seemed tractable, and to whom money was clearly no object, he might carry out some of his most ambitious ideas.

Moreover, he would now be in a position to speak to Sylvia's father without fear of a repulse. His commission on £60,000 would be £3,000, and that on the decorations and other work at least as much again—probably more. In a year he could marry without imprudence ; in two or three years he might be making a handsome income, for he felt confident that, with such a start, he would soon have as much work as he could undertake.

He was ashamed of himself for ever having lost heart. What were the last few years of weary waiting but probation and preparation for this splendid chance, which had come just when he really needed it, and in the most simple and natural manner ?

He loyally completed the work he had promised to do for Beever, who would have to dispense with his assistance in future, and then he felt too excited and restless to stay in the office, and, after lunching at his club as usual, he

promised himself the pleasure of going to Cottesmore Gardens and telling Sylvia his good news.

It was still early, and he walked the whole way, as some vent for his high spirits, enjoying everything with a new zest—the dappled grey and salmon sky before him, the amber, russet, and yellow of the scanty foliage in Kensington Gardens, the pungent scent of fallen chestnuts and acorns and burning leaves, the blue-grey mist stealing between the distant tree-trunks, and then the cheery bustle and brilliancy of the High Street. Finally came the joy of finding Sylvia all alone, and witnessing her frank delight at what he had come to tell her, of feeling her hands on his shoulders, and holding her in his arms, as their lips met for the first time. If on that Saturday afternoon there was a happier man than Horace Ventimore, he would have done well to dissemble his felicity, for fear of incurring the jealousy of the high gods.

When Mrs. Futvoye returned, as she did only too soon, to find her daughter and Horace seated on the same sofa, she did not pretend to be gratified. " This is taking a most unfair advantage of what I was weak enough to say last night, Mr. Ventimore " she began. " I thought I could have trusted you ! "

" I shouldn't have come so soon," he said, " if my position were what it was only yesterday. But it's changed since then, and I venture to hope that even the Professor won't object now to our being regularly engaged." And he told her of the sudden alteration in his prospects.

" Well," said Mrs. Futvoye, " you had better speak to my husband about it. "

The Professor came in shortly afterwards, and Horace immediately requested a few minutes' conversation with him in the study, which was readily granted.

The study to which the Professor led the way was built out at the back of the house, and crowded with Oriental curios of every age and kind ; the furniture had been made by Cairene cabinet-makers, and along the cornices

THE BRASS BOTTLE

of the book-cases were texts from the Koran, while every chair bore the Arabic for " Welcome " in a gilded fire-work on its leather back ; the lamp was a perforated mosque lantern with long pendent glass tubes like hyacinth glasses ; a mummy-case smiled from a corner with laboured *bonhomie*.

" Well," began the Professor, as soon as they were seated, " so I was not mistaken—there was something in the brass bottle after all, then ? Let's have a look at it, whatever it is."

For the moment Horace had almost forgotten the bottle. " Oh ! " he said, " I — I got it open ; but there was nothing in it."

" Just as I anticipated, sir," said the Professor. " I told you there couldn't be anything in a bottle of that description ; it was simply throwing money away to buy it."

" I dare say it was, but I wished to speak to you on a much more important matter " ; and Horace briefly explained his object.

' Dear me," said the Professor, rubbing up his hair irritably, " dear me ! I'd no idea of this—no idea at all. I was under the impression that you volunteered to act as escort to my wife and daughter at St. Luc purely out of good nature to relieve me from what—to a man of my habits in that extreme heat—would have been an arduous and distasteful duty."

" I was not wholly unselfish, I admit," said Horace. " I fell in love with your daughter, sir, the first day I met her—only I felt I had no right, as a poor man with no prospects, to speak to her or you at that time."

" A very creditable feeling—but I've yet to learn why you should have overcome it."

So, for the third time, Ventimore told the story of the sudden turn in his fortunes.

" I know this Mr. Samuel Wackerbath by name," said the Professor ; " one of the chief partners in the firm of Akers and Coverdale, the great estate agents—a most

influential man, if you can only succeed in satisfying him."

" Oh, I don't feel any misgivings about that, sir," said Horace. " I mean to build him a house that will be beyond his wildest expectations, and you see that in a year I shall have earned several thousands, and I need not say that I will make any settlement you think proper when I marry——"

" When you are in possession of those thousands," remarked the Professor, dryly, " it will be time enough to talk of marrying and making settlements. Meanwhile, if you and Sylvia choose to consider yourselves engaged, I won't object—only I must insist on having your promise that you won't persuade her to marry you without her mother's and my consent."

Ventimore gave this undertaking willingly enough, and they returned to the drawing-room. Mrs. Futvoye could hardly avoid asking Horace, in his new character of *fiance*, to stay and dine, which it need not be said he was only too delighted to do.

" There is one thing, my dear—er—Horace," said the Professor, solemnly, after dinner, when the neat parlour-maid had left them at dessert, " one thing on which I think it my duty to caution you. If you are to justify the confidence we have shown in sanctioning your engagement to Sylvia, you must curb this propensity of yours to needless extravagance."

" Papa ! " cried Sylvia. " What *could* have made you think Horace extravagant ? "

" Really," said Horace, " I shouldn't have called myself particularly so."

" Nobody ever *does* call himself particularly extravagant," retorted the Professor ; " but I observed at St. Luc that you habitually gave fifty centimes as a *pourbotre* when twopence, or even a penny, would have been handsome. And no one with any regard for the value of money would have given a guinea for a worthless brass vessel on the bare chance that it might contain

THE BRASS BOTTLE

manuscripts, which (as anyone could have foreseen) it did not."

" But it's not a bad sort of bottle, sir," pleaded Horace. " If you remember, you said yourself the shape was unusual. Why shouldn't it be worth all the money, and more ? "

" To a collector, perhaps," said the Professor, with his wonted amiability, " which you are not. No, I can only call it a senseless and reprehensible waste of money."

" Well, the truth is," said Horace, " I bought it with some idea that it might interest *you*."

" Then you were mistaken, sir. It does *not* interest me. Why should I be interested in a metal jar, which for anything that appears to the contrary, may have been cast the other day at Birmingham ? "

" But there *is* something," said Horace ; " a seal or inscription of some sort engraved on the cap. Didn't I mention it ? "

" You said nothing about an inscription before," replied the Professor, with rather more interest. " What is the character—Arabic ? Persian ? Kufic ? "

" I really couldn't say—it's almost rubbed out—queer little triangular marks, something like birds' footprints."

" That sounds like Cuneiform," said the Professor, " which would seem to point to a Phoenician origin. And, as I am acquainted with no Oriental brass earlier than the ninth century of our era, I should regard your description as, *a priori*, distinctly unlikely. However, I should certainly like to have an opportunity of examining the bottle for myself some day."

" Whenever you please, Professor. When can you come ? "

" Why, I'm so much occupied all day that I can't say for certain when I can get up to your office again."

" My own days will be fairly full now," said Horace ; " and the thing's not at the office, but in my rooms at Vincent Square. Why shouldn't you all come and dine quietly there some evening next week, and then you

could examine the inscription comfortably afterwards, you know, Professor, and find out what it really is? Do say you will." He was eager to have the privilege of entertaining Sylvia in his own rooms for the first time.

"No, no," said the Professor; "I see no reason why you should be troubled with the entire family. I may drop in alone some evening and take the luck of the pot, sir."

"Thank you, father," put in Sylvia; "but I should like to come too, please, and hear what you think of Horace's bottle. And I'm dying to see his rooms. I believe they're fearfully luxurious."

"I trust," observed her father, "that they are far indeed from answering that description. If they did, I should consider it a most unsatisfactory indication of Horace's character."

"There's nothing magnificent about them, I assure you," said Horace. "Though it's true I've had them done up, and all that sort of thing, at my own expense—but quite simply. I couldn't afford to spend much on them. But do come and see them. I must have a little dinner, to celebrate my good fortune—it will be so jolly if you'll all three come."

"If we do come," stipulated the Professor, "it must be on the distinct understanding that you don't provide an elaborate banquet. Plain, simple, wholesome food, well cooked, such as we have had this evening, is all that is necessary. More would be ostentatious."

"My dear dad!" protested Sylvia, in distress at this somewhat dictatorial speech. "Surely you can leave all that to Horace!"

"Horace, my dear, understands that, in speaking as I did, I was simply treating him as a potential member of my family." Here Sylvia made a private little grimace. "No young man who contemplates marrying should allow himself to launch into extravagance on the strength of prospects which, for all he can tell," said the Professor, genially, "may prove fallacious. On the contrary, if his

THE BRASS BOTTLE

affection is sincere, he will incur as little expense as possible, put by every penny he can save, rather than subject the girl he professes to love to the ordeal of a long engagement. In other words, the truest lover is the best economist."

"I quite understand, sir," said Horace, good-temperedly; "it would be foolish of me to attempt any ambitious form of entertainment—especially as my landlady, though an excellent plain cook, is not exactly a *cordon bleu*. So you can come to my modest board without misgivings."

Before he left, a provisional date for the dinner was fixed for an evening towards the end of the next week, and Horace walked home, treading on air rather than hard paving-stones, and "striking the stars with his uplifted head."

The next day he went down to Lipsfield and made the acquaintance of the whole Wackerbath family, who were all enthusiastic about the proposed country house. The site was everything that the most exacting architect could desire, and he came back to town the same evening, having spent a pleasant day and learnt enough of his client's requirements, and—what was even more important—those of his client's wife and daughters, to enable him to begin work upon the sketch-plans the next morning.

He had not been long in his rooms at Vincent Square, and was still agreeably engaged in recalling the docility and ready appreciation with which the Wackerbaths had received his suggestions and rough sketches, their compliments and absolute confidence in his skill, when he had a shock which was as disagreeable as it was certainly unexpected.

For the wall before him parted like a film, and through it stepped, smiling benigantly, the green-robed figure of Fakrash-el-Aamash, the Jinnee.

6. *Embarras de Richesses*

VENTIMORE had so thoroughly convinced himself that the released Jinnee was purely a creature of his own imagination, that he rubbed his eyes with a start, hoping that they had deceived him.

"Stroke thy head, O merciful and meritorious one," said his visitor, "and recover thy faculties to receive good tidings. For it is indeed I—Fakrash-el-Aamash—whom thou beholdest."

"I—I'm delighted to see you," said Horace, as cordially as he could. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Nay, for hast thou not done me the greatest of all services by setting me free? To escape out of a bottle is pleasant. And to thee I owe my deliverance."

It was all true, then: he had really let an imprisoned Genius, or Jinnee, or whatever it was, out of that bottle! He knew he could not be dreaming now—he only wished he were. However, since it was done, his best course seemed to be to put a good face on it, and persuade this uncanny being somehow to go away and leave him in peace for the future.

"Oh, that's all right, my dear sir," he said, "don't think any more about it. I—I rather understood you to say that you were starting on a journey in search of Solomon?"

"I have been, and returned. For I visited sundry cities in his dominions, hoping that by chance I might hear news of him, but I refrained from asking directly lest thereby I should engender suspicion, and so Suleyman should learn of my escape before I could obtain an audience of him and implore justice."

"Oh, I shouldn't think that was likely," said Horace. "If I were you, I should go straight back and go on travelling till I *did* find Suleyman."

"Well was it said: 'Pass not any door without knocking, lest haply that which thou seekest should be behind it.'"

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" Exactly," said Horace. " Do each city thoroughly, house by house, and don't neglect the smallest clue. * If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again ! ' as one of our own poets teaches."

" ' Try, try, try again,' " echoed the Jinnee, with an admiration that was almost fatuous. " Divinely gifted truly was he who composed such a verse ! "

" He has a great reputation as a sage," said Horace, " and the maxim is considered one of his happiest efforts. Don't you think that, as the East is rather thickly populated, the less time you lose in following the poet's recommendation the better ? "

" It may be as thou sayest. But know this, O my son, that wheresoever I may wander, I shall never cease to study how I may most fitly reward thee for thy kindness towards me. For nobly was it said : ' If I be possessed of wealth and be not liberal, may my head never be extended ! ' "

" My good sir," said Horace, " do please understand that if you were to offer me any reward for—for a very ordinary act of courtesy, I should be obliged to decline it."

" But didst thou not say that thou wast sorely in need of a client ? "

" That was so at the time," said Horace ; " but since I last had the pleasure of seeing you, I have met with one who is all I could possibly wish for."

" I am indeed rejoiced to hear it," returned the Jinnee, " for thou showest me that I have succeeded in performing the first service which thou hast demanded of me."

Horace staggered under this severe blow to his pride ; for the moment he could only gasp : " You—you sent him to me ! "

" I , and no other," said the Jinnee, beaming with satisfaction ; " for while, unseen of men, I was circling in air, resolved to attend to thy affair before beginning my search for Suleyman (on whom be peace !), it chanced that I overheard a human being of prosperous appearance say aloud upon a bridge that he desired to erect for him-

EMBARRAS DE RICHESSES

self a palace if he could but find an architect. So, perceiving thee afar off seated at an open casement, I immediately transported him to the place and delivered him into thy hands."

" But he knew my name—he had my card in his pocket," said Horace.

" I furnished him with the paper containing thy names and abode, lest he should be ignorant of them."

" Well, look here, Mr. Fakrash," said the unfortunate Horace, " I know you meant well—but *never* do a thing like that again ! If my brother-architects came to know of it I should be accused of most unprofessional behaviour. I'd no idea you would take that way of introducing a client to me, or I should have stopped it at once ! "

" It was an error/" said Fakrash. " No matter. I will undo this affair, and devise some other and better means of serving thee."

Horace groaned. Undo it ? How could it be undone now without some open scandal ?

" No,-no," he said, " for Heaven's sake, leave things alone—you'll only make them worse. Forgive me, my dear Mr. Fakrash, I'm afraid I must seem most ungrateful ; but—but I was so taken by surprise. And, really, I am extremely obliged to you. For, though the means you took were—were a little irregular, you have done me a very great service."

" It is naught," said the Jinnee, " compared to those I hope to render so great a benefactor."

" But, indeed, you mustn't think of trying to do any more for me," urged Horace, who felt the absolute necessity of expelling any scheme of further benevolence from the Jinnee's head once and for all. " You have done enough. Why, thanks to you, I am engaged to build a palace that will keep me hard at work and happy for ever so long."

" Are human beings, then, so enamoured of hard labour ? " asked Fakrash, in wonder. " It is not thus with the Jinn."

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" I love my work for its own sake," said Horace, " and then, when I have finished it, I shall have earned a very fair amount of money—which is particularly important to me must now."

" And why, my son, art thou so desirous of obtaining riches ? "

" Because," said Horace, " unless a man is tolerably well off in these days he cannot hope to marry."

Fakrash smiled with indulgent compassion. " How excellent is the saying of one of old : ' He that adventureth upon matrimony is like unto one who thrusteth his hand into a sack containing many thousands of serpents and one eel. Yet, if Fate so decree, he *may* draw forth the eel.' And thou art comely, and of an age when it is natural to desire the love of a maiden. Therefore, be of, good heart and a cheerful eye, and it may be that, when I am more at leisure, I shall find thee a helpmate who shall rejoice thy soul."

" Please don't trouble to find me anything of the sort! " said Horace, hastily, with a mental vision of some helpless and scandalised stranger being shot into his dwelling like coals. " I assure you I would much rather win a wife for myself in the ordinary way—as, thanks to your kindness, I have every hope of doing before long."

" Is there already some damsel for whom thy heart pineth ? If so, fear not to tell me her names and dwelling-place, and I will assuredly obtain her for thee."

But Ventimore had seen enough of the Jinnee's Oriental methods to doubt his tact and discretion where Sylvia was concerned. " No, no ; of course not. I spoke generally," he said. " It's exceedingly kind of you—but I *do* wish I could make you understand that I am overpaid as it is. You have put me in the way to make a name and fortune for myself. If I fail, it will be my own fault. And, at all events, I want nothing more from you. If you mean to find Suleyman (on whom be peace !) you must go and live in the East altogether—for he certainly isn't over here ; you must give up your

EMBARRAS DE RICHESSES

whole time to it, keep as quiet as possible, and don't be discouraged by any reports you may hear. Above all, never trouble your head about me or my affairs again ! "

" O thou of wisdom and eloquence," said Fakrash, " this is most excellent advice. I will go, then ; but may I drink the cup of perdition if I become unmindful of thy benevolence ! "

And, raising his joined hands above his head as he spoke, he sank, feet foremost, through the carpet and was gone.

" Thank Heaven," thought Ventimore, " he's taken the hint at last. I don't think I'm likely to see any more of him. I feel an ungrateful brute for saying so, but I can't help it. I can *not* stand being under any obligation to a Jinnee who's been shut up in a beastly brass bottle ever since the days of Solomon, who probably had very good reasons for putting him there."

Horace next asked himself whether he was bound in honour to disclose the facts to Mr. Wackerbath, and give him the opportunity of withdrawing from the agreement if he thought fit.

On the whole, he saw no necessity for telling him anything ; the only possible result would be to make his client suspect his sanity ; and who would care to employ an insane architect ? Then, if he retired from the undertaking without any explanations, what could he say to Sylvia ? What would Sylvia's father say to *him* ? There would certainly be an end to his engagement.

After all, he had not been to blame ; the Wackerbaths were quite satisfied. He felt perfectly sure that he could justify their selection of him ; he would wrong nobody by accepting the commission, while he would only offend them, injure himself irretrievably, and lose all hope of gaining Sylvia if he made any attempt to undeceive them.

And Fakrash was gone, never to return. So, on all these considerations, Horace decided that silence was his only possible policy, and, though some moralists may condemn his conduct as disingenuous and wanting in true moral courage, I venture to doubt whether any reader,

THE BRASS BOTTLE

however independent, straightforward, and indifferent to notoriety and ridicule, would have behaved otherwise in Ventimore's extremely delicate and difficult position.

Some days passed, every working hour of which was spent by Horace in the rapture of creation. To every man with the soul of an artist in him there comes at times—only too seldom in most cases—a revelation of latent power that he had not dared to hope for. And now with Ventimore years of study and theorising which he had often been tempted to think wasted began to bear golden fruit. He designed and drew with a rapidity and originality, a sense of perfect mastery of the various problems to be dealt with, and a delight in the working out of mass and detail, so intoxicating that he almost dreaded lest he should be the victim of some self-delusion.

His evenings were of course spent with the Futvoyes, in discovering Sylvia in some new and yet more adorable aspect. Altogether, he was very much in love, very happy, and very busy—three states not invariably found in combination.

And, as he had foreseen, he had effectually got rid of Fakrash, who was evidently too engrossed in the pursuit of Solomon to think of anything else. And there seemed no reason why he should abandon his search for a generation or two, for it would probably take all that time to convince him that that mighty monarch was no longer on the throne.

"It would have been too brutal to tell him myself," thought Horace, "when he was so keen on having his case reheard. And it gives him an object, poor old buffer, and keeps him from interfering in my affairs, so it's best for both of us."

Horace's little dinner-party had been twice postponed, till he had begun to have a superstitious fear that it would never come off; but at length the Professor had been induced to give an absolute promise for a certain evening.

On the day before, after breakfast, Horace had sum-

moned his landlady to a consultation on the *menu*. " Nothing elaborate, you know, Mrs. Rapkin," said Horace, who, though he would have liked to provide a feast of all procurable delicacies for Sylvia's refection, was obliged to respect her father's prejudices. " Just a simple dinner, thoroughly well cooked, and nicely served—as you know so well how to do it. "

" I suppose, sir, you would require Rapkin to wait ? "

As the ex-butler was liable to trances on these occasions, during which he could do nothing but smile and bow with speechless politeness as he dropped sauce-boats and plates, Horace replied that he thought of having some one in to avoid troubling Mr. Rapkin ; but his wife expressed such confidence in her husband's proving equal to all emergencies, that Ventimore waived the point, and left it to her to hire extra help if she thought fit.

. " Now, what soup can you give us ? " he inquired, as Mrs. Rapkin stood at attention and quite unmodified.

After protracted mental conflict, she grudgingly suggested gravy soup—which Horace thought too unenterprising, and rejected in favour of mock turtle. " Well, then, fish ? " he continued ; " how about fish ? "

Mrs. Rapkin dragged the depths of her culinary resources for several seconds, and finally brought to the surface what she called " a nice fried sole." Horace would not hear of it, and urged her to aspire to salmon ; she substituted smelts, which he opposed by a happy inspiration of turbot and lobster sauce. The sauce, however, presented insuperable difficulties to her mind, and she offered a compromise in the form of cod—which he finally accepted as a fish which the Professor could hardly censure for ostentation.

Next came the no less difficult questions of *entree* or no *entrde*, of joint and bird. " What's in season just now ? " said Horace ; " let me see "—and glanced out of window as he spoke, as though in search of some outside suggestion. . . . " Camels, by Jove ! " he suddenly exclaimed.

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" *Camels*, Mr. Ventimore, sir ? " repeated Mrs. Rapkin, in some bewilderment; and then, remembering that he was given to untimely flippancy, she gave a tolerant little cough.

" I'll be shot if they *aren't* camels ! " said Horace. " What do *you* make of 'em, Mrs. Rapkin ? "

Out of the faint mist which hung over the farther end of the square advanced a procession of tall, dust-coloured animals, with long, delicately poised necks and a mincing gait. Even Mrs. Rapkin could not succeed in making anything of them except camels.

" What the deuce does a caravan of camels want in Vincent Square ? " said Horace, with a sudden qualm for which he could not account.

" Most likely they belong to the Barnum Show, sir," suggested his landlady. " I did hear they were coming to Olympia again this year."

" Why, of course," cried Horace, intensely relieved. " It's on their way from the Docks—at least, it isn't *out* of their way. Or probably the main road's up for repairs. That's it—they'll turn off to the left at the corner. See, they've got Arab drivers with them. Wonderful how the fellows manage them."

" It seems to me, sir," said Mrs. Rapkin, " that they're coming *our* way—they seem to be stopping outside."

" Don't talk such infernal——I beg your pardon, Mrs. Rapkin ; but why on earth should Barnum and Bailey's camels come out of their way to call on *me* ? It's ridiculous, you know ! " said Horace, irritably.

" Ridicklous it *may* be, sir," she retorted, " but they're all layin' down on the road opposite our door, as you can see—and them niggers is making signs to you to come out and speak to 'em."

It was true enough. One by one the camels, which were apparently of the purest breed, folded themselves up in a row like campstools at a sign from their attendants, who were now making profound salaams towards the window where Ventimore was standing.

EMBARRAS DE RICHESSES

" I suppose I'd better go down and see what they want," he said, with a rather sickly smile. " They may have lost the way to Olympia. . . . I only hope Fakrash isn't at the bottom of this," he thought, as he went downstairs. " But he'd come himself—at all events, he wouldn't send me a message on such a lot of camels ! " As he appeared on the doorstep, all the drivers flopped down and rubbed their flat, black noses on the curbstone.

" For Heaven's sake get up ! " said Horace, angrily. " This isn't Hammersmith. Turn to the left, into the Vauxhall Bridge Road, and ask a policeman the nearest way to Olympia."

" Be not angry with thy slaves ! " said the head driver, in excellent English. " We are here by command of Fakrash-el-Aamash, our lord, whom we are bound to obey. And we have brought thee these as gifts."

" My compliments to your master," said Horace, between his teeth, " and tell him that a London architect has no sort of occasion for camels. Say that I am extremely obliged—but am compelled to decline them."

" O highly born one," explained the driver, " the camels are not a gift—but the loads which are upon the camels. Suffer us, therefore, since we dare not disobey our lord's commands, to carry these trifling tokens of his goodwill into thy dwelling and depart in peace."

Horace had not noticed till then that every camel bore a heavy burden, which the attendants were now unloading. " Oh, if you *must* ! " he said, not too graciously ; " only do look sharp about it—there's a crowd collecting already, and I don't want to have a constable here."

He returned to his rooms, where he found Mrs. Rapkin paralysed with amazement. " It—it's all right," he said ; " I'd forgotten—it's only a few Oriental things from the place where that brass bottle came from, you know. They've left them here—on approval."

" Seems funny their sending their goods 'ome on camels, sir, doesn't it ? " said Mrs. Rapkin.

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" Not at all funny ! " said Horace ; " they—they're an enterprising firm—their way of advertising/'

One after another, a train of dusky attendants entered, each of whom deposited his load on the floor with a guttural grunt and retired backward, until the sitting-room was blocked with piles of sacks, and bales, and chests, whereupon the head driver appeared and intimated that the tale of gifts was complete.

" I wonder what sort of tip this fellow expects," thought Horace ; "a sovereign seems shabby—but it's all I can run to. I'll try him with that."

But the overseer repudiated all idea of a gratuity with stately dignity, and as Horace saw him to the gate, he found a stolid constable by the railings.

" This won't *do*, you know," said the constable ; " these 'ere camels must move on—or I shall 'ave to interfere."

" It's all right, constable," said Horace, pressing into his hand the sovereign the head driver had rejected ; " they're going to move on now. They've brought me a few presents from—from a friend of mine in the East."

By this time the attendants had mounted the kneeling camels, which rose with them, and swung off round the square in a long, swaying trot that soon left the crowd far behind, staring blankly after the caravan as camel after camel disappeared into the haze.

" I shouldn't mind knowin' that friend o' yours, sir," said the constable ; " open-'anded sort 'o gentleman, I should think ? "

" Very ! " said Horace, savagely, and returned to his room, which Mrs. Rapkin had now left.

His hands shook, though not with joy, as he untied some of the sacks and bales and forced open the outlandish-looking chests, the contents of which almost took away his breath.

For in the bales were carpets and tissues which he saw at a glance must be of fabulous antiquity and beyond all price ; the sacks held golden ewers and vessels of strange

" A LIVELY SENSE OF FAVOURS TO COME "

workmanship and pantomimic proportions ; the chests were full of jewels—ropes of creamy-pink pearls as large as average onions, strings of uncut rubies and emeralds, the smallest of which would have been a tight fit in an ordinary collar-box, and diamonds, roughly faceted and polished, each the size of a cocoanut, in whose hearts quivered a liquid and prismatic radiance.

On the most moderate computation, the total value of these gifts could hardly be less than several hundred millions ; never probably in the world's history had any treasury contained so rich a store.

It would have been difficult for anybody, on suddenly finding himself the possessor of this immense incalculable wealth, to make any comment quite worthy of the situation ; but, surely, none could have been more inadequate and indeed inappropriate than Horace's—which, heart-felt, as it was, was couched in the simple monosyllable—" Damn ! "

7. " *Gratitude—a lively Sense of Favours to Come* "

MOST men on suddenly finding themselves in possession of such enormous wealth would have felt some elation. Ventimore, as we have seen, was merely exasperated. And, although this attitude of his may strike the reader as incomprehensible or absolutely wrong-headed, he had more reason on his side than might appear at a first view.

It was undoubtedly the fact that, with the money these treasures represented, he would be in a position to convulse the money markets of Europe and America, bring society to his feet, make and unmake kingdoms—dominate, in short, the entire world.

" But then," as Horace told himself with a groan, " it wouldn't amuse me in the least to convulse money markets. Do I want to see the smartest people in London

THE BRASS BOTTLE

grovelling for anything they think they're likely to get out of me ? As I should be perfectly well aware that their homage was not paid to any personal merit of mine, I could hardly consider it flattering. And why should I make kingdoms ? The only thing I understand and care about is making houses. Then, am I likely to be a better hand at dominating the world than all the others who have tried the experiment ? I doubt it."

He called to mind all the millionaires he had ever read or heard of ; they didn't seem to get much fun out of their riches. The "majority of them were martyrs to dyspepsia. They were often weighed down by the cares and responsibilities of their position ; the only people who were unable to obtain an audience of them at any time were their friends ; they lived in a glare of publicity, and every post brought them hundreds of begging letters, and a few threats ; their children were in constant danger from kidnappers, and they themselves, after knowing no rest in life, could not be certain that even their tombs would be undisturbed. Whether they were extravagant or thrifty, they were equally maligned, and, whatever the fortune they left behind them, they could be absolutely certain that, in a couple of generations, it would be entirely dissipated.

"And the biggest millionaire living," concluded Horace, "is a pauper compared with me !"

But there was another consideration—how was he to realise all this wealth ? He knew enough about precious stones to be aware that a ruby, for instance, of the true "pigeon's blood" colour and the size of a melon, as most of these rubies were, would be worth, even when cut, considerably over a million ; but who would buy it ?

"I think I see myself," he reflected grimly, "calling on some diamond merchant in Hatton Garden with half a dozen assorted jewels in a Gladstone bag. If he believed they were genuine, he'd probably have a fit; but most likely he'd think I'd invented some dodge for manufacturing them, and had been fool enough to overdo the size.

" A LIVELY SENSE OF FAVOURS TO COME "

Anyhow, he'd want to know how they came into my possession, and what could I say ? That they were part of a little present made to me by a Jinnee in grateful acknowledgment of my having relieved him from a brass bottle in which he'd been shut up for nearly three thousand years ! Look at it how you will, it's *not* convincing. I fancy I can guess what he'd say. And what an ass I should look ! Then suppose the thing got into the papers ? "

Got into the papers ? Why, of course it would get into the papers. As if it were possible in these days for a young and hitherto unemployed architect suddenly to surround himself with wondrous carpets, and gold vessels, and gigantic jewels without attracting the notice of some enterprising journalist. He would be interviewed ; the story of his curiously acquired riches would go the round of the papers ; he would find himself the object of incredulity, suspicion, ridicule. In imagination he could already see the headlines on the news-sheets :

BOTTLED BILLIONS.
AMAZING ARABESQUES BY AN ARCHITECT.
HE SAYS THE JAR CONTAINED A JINNEE.
SENSATIONAL STORY.
DIVERTING DETAILS.

And so on, through every phrase of alliterative ingenuity. He ground his teeth at the mere thought of it. Then Sylvia would come to hear of it, and what would *she* think ? She would naturally be repelled, as any nice-minded girl would be, by the idea that her lover was in secret alliance with a supernatural being. And her father and mother—would they allow her to marry a man, however rich, whose wealth came from such a questionable source ? No one would believe that he had not made some unholy bargain before consenting to set this incarcerated spirit free—he, who had acted in absolute ignorance, who had persistently declined all reward after realising what he had done !

THE BRASS BOTTLE

No, it was too much. Try as he might to do justice to the Jinnee's gratitude and generosity, he could not restrain a bitter resentment at the utter want of consideration shown in overloading him with gifts so useless and so compromising. No Jinnee—however old, however unfamiliar with the world as it is now—had any right to be such a fool !

And at this, above the ramparts of sacks and bales, which occupied all the available space in the room, appeared Mrs. Rapkin's face.

" I was going to ask you, sir, before them parcels came," she began, with a dry cough of disapproval, " what you would like in the way of ongray to-morrow night. I thought if I could find a sweetbread at all reasonable——"

To Horace—surrounded as he was by incalculable riches—sweetbreads seemed incongruous just then ; the transition of thought was too violent.

" I can't bother about that now, Mrs. Rapkin," he said ; " we'll settle it to-morrow. I'm too busy."

" I suppose most of these things will have to go back, sir, if they're only sent on approval like ? "

If he only knew where and how he could send them back ! " I—I'm not sure," he said ; " I may have to keep them."

" Well, sir, bargain or none, I wouldn't have 'em as a gift myself, being so dirty and fusty ; they can't be no use to nobody, not to mention there being no room to move with them blocking up all the place. I'd better tell Rapkin to carry 'em all upstairs out of people's way."

" Certainly not," said Horace, sharply, by no means anxious for the Rapkins to discover the real nature of his treasures. " Don't touch them, either of you. Leave them exactly as they are, do you understand ? "

" As you please, Mr. Ventimore, sir ; only, if they're not to be interfered with, I don't see myself how you're going to set your friends down to dinner to-morrow, that's all."

" A LIVELY SENSE OF FAVOURS TO COME "

And, indeed, considering that the table and every available chair, and even the floor, were heaped so high with valuables that Horace himself could only just squeeze his way between the piles, it seemed as if his guests might find themselves inconveniently cramped.

" It will be all right," he said, with an optimism he was very far from feeling ; " we'll manage somehow—leave it to me."

Before he left for his office he took the precaution to baffle any inquisitiveness on the part of his landlady by locking his sitting-room door and carrying away the key, but it was in a very different mood from his former light-hearted confidence that he sat down to his drawing-board in Great Cloister Street that morning. He could not concentrate his mind ; his enthusiasm and his ideas had alike deserted him.

He flung down the dividers he had been using and pushed away the nest of saucers of Indian ink and colours in a fit of petulance. " It's no good' he exclaimed aloud ; " I feel a perfect duffer this morning. I couldn't even design a decent dog-kennel ! "

Even as he spoke he became conscious of a presence in the room, and, looking round, saw Fakrash the Jinnee standing at his elbow, smiling down on him more benevolently than ever, and with a serene expectation of being warmly welcomed and thanked, which made Horace rather ashamed of his own inability to meet it.

" He's a thoroughly good-natured old chap," he thought, self-reproachfully. " He means well, and I'm a beast not to feel more glad to see him. And yet, hang it all ! I can't have him popping in and out of the office like a rabbit whenever the fancy takes him ! "

" Peace be upon thee," said Fakrash. " Moderate the trouble of thy heart, and impart thy difficulties to me."

" Oh, they're nothing, thanks," said Horace, feeling decidedly embarrassed. " I got stuck over my work for the moment, and it worried me a little—that's all."

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" Then thou hast not yet received the gifts which I commanded should be delivered at thy dwelling-place ? "

" Oh, indeed I have ! " replied Horace ; " and—and I really don't know how to thank you for them."

" A few trifling presents," answered the Jinnee, " and by no means suited to thy dignity—yet the best in my power to bestow upon thee for the time being."

" My dear sir, they simply overwhelm me with their magnificence ! They're beyond all price, and—and I've no idea what to do with such a superabundance."

" A superfluity of good things is good," was the Jinnee's sententious reply.

" Not in my particular case. I — I quite feel your goodness and generosity ; but, indeed, as I told you before, it's really impossible for me to accept any such reward."

Fakrash's brows contracted slightly. " How say est thou that it is impossible—seeing that these things are already in thy possession ? "

" I know," said Horace ; " but—you won't be offended if I speak quite plainly ? "

" Art thou not even as a son to me, and can I be angered at any words of thine ? "

" Well," said Horace, with sudden hope, " honestly, then, I would very much rather—if you're sure you don't mind—that you would take them all back again."

" What ? Dost thou demand that I, Fakrash-el-Aamash, should consent to receive back the gifts I have bestowed ? Are they, then, of so little value in thy sight ? "

" They're of too much value. If I took such a reward for—for a very ordinary service, I should never be able to respect myself again."

" This is not the reasoning of an intelligent person," said the Jinnee, coldly.

" If you think me a fool, I can't help it. I'm not an ungrateful fool, at all events. But I feel very strongly that I can't keep these gifts of yours."

" So thou wouldst have me break the oath which I swore to reward thee fitly for thy kind action ? "

" A LIVELY SENSE OF FAVOURS TO COME "

" But you *have* rewarded me already," said Horace, " by contriving that a wealthy merchant should engage me to build him a residence. And—forgive my plain speaking—if you truly desire my happiness (as I am sure you do) you will relieve me of all these precious gems and merchandise, because, to be frank, they will *not* make me happy. On the contrary, they are making me extremely uncomfortable."

" In the days of old," said Fakrash, " all men pursued wealth ; nor could any amass enough to satisfy his desires. Have riches, then, become so contemptible in mortal eyes that thou findest them but an encumbrance ? Explain the matter."

Horace felt a natural delicacy in giving his real reasons. " I can't answer for other men," he said. " All I know is that I've never been accustomed to being rich, and I'd rather get used to it gradually, and be able to feel that I owed it, as far as possible, to my own exertions. For, as I needn't tell *you*, Mr. Fakrash, riches alone don't make any fellow happy. You must have observed that they're apt to—well, to land him in all kinds of messes and worries. . . . I'm talking like a confounded copy-book," he thought, " but I don't care how priggish I am if I can only get my way ! "

Fakrash was deeply impressed. " O young man of marvellous moderation ! " he cried. " Thy sentiments are not inferior to those of the Great Suleyman himself (on whom be peace !). Yet even he doth not utterly despise them, for he hath gold and ivory and precious stones in abundance. Nor hitherto have I ever met a human being capable of rejecting them when offered. But, since thou seemest sincere in holding that my poor and paltry gifts will not advance thy welfare, and since I would do thee good and not evil—be it even as thou wouldst. For excellently was it said : ' The worth of a present depends not on itself, nor on the giver, but on the receiver alone.'"

Horace could hardly believe that he had really pre-

THE BRASS BOTTLE

vailed. " It's extremely good of you, sir," he said, " to take it so well. And if you *could* let that caravan call for them as soon as possible, it would be a great convenience to me. I mean—er—the fact is, I'm expecting a few friends to dine with me to-morrow, and, as my rooms are rather small at the best of times, I don't quite know how I can manage to entertain them at all unless something is done."

" It will be the easiest of actions," replied Fakrash ; " therefore, have no fear that, when the time cometh, thou wilt not be able to entertain thy friends in a fitting manner. And for the caravan, it shall set out without delay."

" By Jove, though, I'd forgotten one thing," said Horace : " I've locked up the room where your presents are—they won't be able to get in without the key."

" Against the servants of the Jinn neither bolts nor bars can prevail. They shall enter therein and remove all that they brought thee, since it is thy desire."

" Very many thanks," said Horace. " And you do *really* understand that I'm every bit as grateful as if I could keep the things ? You see I want all my time and all my energies to complete the designs for this building, which," he added gracefully, " I should never be in a position to do at all, but for your assistance."

" On my arrival," said Fakrash, " I heard thee lamenting the difficulties of the task ; wherein do they consist ? "

" Oh," said Horace, " it's a little difficult to please all the different people concerned, and myself too. I want to make something of it that I shall be proud of, and that will give me a reputation. It's a large house, and there will be a good deal of work in it ; but I shall manage it all right."

" This is a great undertaking indeed," remarked the Jinnee, after he had asked various by no means unintelligent questions and received the answers. " But be persuaded that it shall all turn out most fortunately and thou shalt obtain great renown. And now," he con-

" A LIVELY SENSE OF FAVOURS TO COME "

eluded, " I am compelled to take leave of thee, for I am still without any certain tidings of Suleyman."

" You mustn't let me keep you," said Horace, who had been on thorns for some minutes lest Beevor should return and find him with his mysterious visitor. " You see," he added instructively, " so long as you *will* neglect your own much more important affairs to look after mine, you can hardly expect to make *much* progress, can you ? "

" How excellent is the saying," replied the Jinnee : " ' The time which is spent in doing kindnesses call it not wasted.' "

" Yes, that's very good," said Horace, feeling driven to silence this maxim, if possible, with one of his own invention. " But we have a saying too—how does it go ? Ah, I remember. It is possible for a kindness to be more inconvenient than an injury.' "

" Marvellously gifted was he who discovered such a saying ! " cried Fakrash.

" I imagine," said Horace, " he learnt it from his own experience. By the way, what place were you thinking of drawing—I mean trying—next for Suleyman ? "

" I purpose to repair to Nineveh, and inquire there."

" Capital," said Ventimore, with hearty approval, for he hoped that this would take the Jinnee some little time. " Wonderful city, Nineveh, from all I've heard—though not quite what it used to be, perhaps. Then there's Babylon—you might go on there. And if you shouldn't hear of him there, why not strike down into Central Africa, and do that thoroughly ? Or South America ; it's a pity to lose any chance—you've never been to South America yet ? "

" I have not so much as heard of such a country, and how should Suleyman be there ? "

" Pardon me, I didn't say he *was* there. All I meant to convey was, that he's quite as likely to be there as anywhere else. But if you're going to Nineveh first, you'd better lose no more time, for I've always understood

THE BRASS BOTTLE

that it's rather an awkward place to get at—though probably you won't find it very difficult."

"I care not," said Fakrash, "though the search be long, for in travel there are five advantages——"

"I know" interrupted Horace, "so don't stop to describe them now. I should like to see you fairly started, and you really mustn't think it necessary to break off your search again on my account, because, thanks to you, I shall get on splendidly alone for the future—if you'll kindly see that that merchandise is removed."

"Thine abode shall not be encumbered with it for another hour," said the Jinnee. "O thou judicious one, in whose estimation wealth is of no value, know that I have never encountered a mortal who pleased me as thou hast ; and moreover, be assured that such magnanimity as thine shall not go without a recompense !"

"How often must I tell you," said Horace, in a glow of impatience, "that I am already much more than recompensed ? Now, my kind, generous old friend," he added, with an emotion that was not wholly insincere, "the time has come to bid you farewell—for ever. Let me picture you as revisiting your former haunts, penetrating to quarters of the globe (for, whether you are aware of it or not, this earth of ours is a globe) hitherto unknown to you, refreshing your mind by foreign travel and the study of mankind—but never, never for a moment losing sight of your main object, the eventual discovery of and reconciliation with Suleyman (on whom be peace !). That is the greatest, jjie only happiness you can give me now. Good-bye, and *bon voyage* !"

"May Allah never deprive thy friends of thy presence!" returned the Jinnee, who was apparently touched by this exordium, "for truly thou art a most excellent young man!"

And stepping back into the fireplace, he was gone in an instant.

Ventimore sank back in his chair with a sigh of relief. He had begun to fear that the Jinnee never would take himself off, but he had gone at last—and for good.

" A LIVELY SENSE OF FAVOURS TO COME "

He was half ashamed of himself for feeling so glad, for Fakrash was a good-natured old thing enough in his way. Only he *would* overdo things : he had no sense of proportion. " Why," thought Horace, " if a fellow expressed a modest wish for a canary in a cage he's just the sort of old Jinnee to bring him a whole covey of rocs in an aviary about ten times the size of the Crystal Palace. However, he *does* understand now that I can't take anything more from him, and he isn't offended either, so *that's* all settled. Now I can set to work and knock off these plans in peace and quietness."

But he had not done much before he heard sounds in the next room which told him that Beevor had returned at last. He had been expected back from the country for the last day or two, and it was fortunate that he had delayed so long, thought Ventimore, as he went in to see him and to tell him the unexpected piece of good fortune that he himself had met with since they last met. It is needless to say that, in giving his account, he abstained from any mention of the brass bottle or the Jinnee, as unessential elements in his story.

Beevor's congratulations were quite as cordial as could be expected, as soon as he fully understood that no hoax was intended. " Well, old man," he said, " I *am* glad. I really am, you know. To think of a prize like that coming to you the very first time ! And you don't even know how this Mr. Wackerbath came to hear of you—just happened to see your name up outside and came in, I expect. Why, I dare say if I hadn't chanced to go away as I did—and about a couple of paltry two thousand pound houses, too ! Ah, well, I don't grudge you your luck, though it *does* seem rather——It was worth waiting for ; you'll be cutting *me* out before long—if you don't make a mess of this job. I mean, you know, old chap, if you don't go and give your City man a Gothic castle when what he wants is something with plenty of plate-glass windows and a Corinthian portico. That's the rock I see ahead of *you*. You mustn't mind my giving you a word of warning ! "

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" Oh no," said Ventimore ; " but I shan't give him either a Gothic castle or plenty of plate-glass. I venture to think he'll be pleased with the general idea as I'm working it out."

" Let's hope so," said Beevor. " If you get into any difficulty, you know," he added, with a touch of patronage, " just you come to me."

" Thanks," said Horace, " I will. But I'm getting on very fairly at present."

" I should rather like to see what you've made of it. I might be able to give you a wrinkle here and there."

" It's awfully good of you, but I think I'd rather you didn't see the plans till they're quite finished," said Horace. The truth was that he was perfectly aware that the other would not be in sympathy with his ideas ; and Horace, who had just been suffering from a cold fit of depression about his work, rather shrank from any kind of criticism.

" Oh, just as you please ! " said Beevor, a little stiffly ; " you always *were* an obstinate beggar. I've had a certain amount of experience, you know, in my poor little pottering way, and I thought I might possibly have saved you a cropper or two. But if you think you can manage better alone—only don't get bolted with by one of those architectural hobbies of yours, that's all."

" All right, old fellow. I'll ride my hobby on the curb," said Horace, laughing, as he went back to his own office, where he found that all his former certainty and enjoyment of his work had returned to him, and by the end of the day he had made so much progress that his designs needed only a few finishing touches to be complete enough for his client's inspection.

Better still, on returning to his rooms that evening to change before going to Kensington, he found that the admirable Fakrash had kept his promise—every chest, sack, and bale had been cleared away.

" Them camels come back for the things this afternoon, sir," said Mrs. Rapkin, " and it put me in a fluster

" A LIVELY SENSE OF FAVOURS TO COME "

at first, for I made sure you'd locked your door and took the key. But I must have been mistook—leastways, them Arabs got in somehow. I hope you meant everything to go back ? "

" Quite," said Horace ; " I saw the—the person who sent them this morning, and told him there was nothing I cared for enough to keep."

" And like his impidence sending you a lot o' rubbish like that on approval—and on camels, too ! " declared Mrs. Rapkin. " I'm sure I don't know what them advertising firms will try next—pushing, / call it."

Now that everything was gone, Horace felt a little natural regret and doubt whether he need have been quite so uncompromising in his refusal of the treasures. " I might have kept some of those tissues and things for Sylvia," he thought; " and she loves pearls. And a prayer-carpet would have pleased the Professor tremendously. But no, after all, it wouldn't have done. Sylvia couldn't go about in pearls the size of new potatoes, and the Professor would only have ragged me for more reckless extravagance. Besides, if I'd taken any of the Jinnee's gifts, he might keep on pouring more in, till I should be just where I was before—or worse off, really, because I couldn't decently refuse them, then. So it's best as it is."

And really, considering his temperament and the peculiar nature of his position, it is not easy to see how he could have arrived at any other conclusion.

8. Bachelor's Quarters

HORACE was feeling particularly happy as he walked back the next evening to Vincent Square. He had the consciousness of having done a good day's work, for the sketch-plans for Mr. Wackerbath's mansion were actually completed and despatched to his business address, while Ventimore now felt a comfortable assurance that his designs would more than satisfy his client.

THE BRASS BOTTLE

But it was not that which made him so light of heart. That night his rooms were to be honoured for the first time by Sylvia's presence. She would tread upon his carpet, sit in his chairs, comment upon, and perhaps even handle, his books and ornaments—and all of them would retain something of her charm for ever after. If she only came ! For even now he could not quite believe that she really would ; that some untoward event would not make a point of happening to prevent her, just as he sometimes doubted whether his engagement was not too sweet and wonderful to be true—or, at all events, to last.

As to the dinner, his mind was tolerably easy, for he had settled the remaining details of the *menu* with his landlady that morning, and he could hope that, without being so sumptuous as to excite the Professor's wrath, it would still be not altogether unworthy—and what food could be rare and dainty enough ?—to be set before Sylvia.

He would have liked to provide champagne, but he knew that that wine would savour of ostentation in the Professor's judgment, so he had contented himself instead with claret, a sound vintage which he knew he could depend upon. Flowers, he thought, were clearly permissible, and he had called at a florist's on his way and got some chrysanthemums of palest yellow and deepest terra-cotta, the finest he could see. Some of them would look well on the centre of the table in an old Nankin blue-and-white bowl he had ; the rest he could arrange about the room : there would just be time to see to all that before dressing.

Occupied with these thoughts, he turned into Vincent Square, which looked vaster than ever with the murky haze, inclosed by its high railings, and under a wide expanse of steel-blue sky, across which the clouds were driving fast like ships in full sail scudding for harbour before a storm. Against the mist below, the young and nearly leafless trees showed flat, black profiles as of pressed seaweed, and the sky immediately above the house-tops was tinged with a sullen red from miles of lighted

BACHELOR'S QUARTERS

streets ; from the river came the long-drawn tooting of tugs, mingled with the more distant wails and hysterical shrieks of railway engines on the Lambeth lines.

And now he reached the old semi-detached house in which he lodged, and noticed for the first time how the trellis-work of the veranda made, with the bared creepers and hanging baskets, a kind of decorative pattern against the windows, which were suffused with a roseate glow that looked warm and comfortable and hospitable. He wondered whether Sylvia would notice it when she arrived.

He passed under the old wrought-iron arch that once held an oil-lamp, and up a short but rather steep flight of steps, which led to a brick porch built out at the side. Then he let himself in, and stood spellbound with perplexed amazement,—for he was in a strange house.

In place of the modest passage with the yellow marble wall-paper, the mahogany hat-stand, and the elderly barometer in a state of chronic depression which he knew so well, he found an arched octagonal entrance-hall, with arabesques of blue, crimson, and gold, and richly-embroidered hangings ; the floor was marble, and from a shallow basin of ababaster in the centre a perfumed fountain rose and fell with a lulling patter.

" I must have mistaken the number," he thought, quite forgetting that his latch-key had fitted, and he was just about to retreat before his intrusion was discovered, when the hangings parted, and Mrs. Rapkin presented herself, making so deplorably incongruous a figure in such surroundings and looking so bewildered and woebegone, that Horace, in spite of his own increasing uneasiness, had some difficulty in keeping his gravity.

" Oh, Mr. Ventimore, sir," she lamented ; " whatever *will* you go and do next, I wonder ? To think of your going and having the whole place done up and altered out of knowledge like this, without a word of warning ! If any halterations were required, I *do* think as me and Rapkin had the right to be consulted."

THE BRASS BOTTLE

Horace let all his chrysanthemums drop unheeded into the fountain. He understood now : indeed, he seemed in some way to have understood almost from the first, only he would not admit it even to himself.

The irrepressible Jinnee was at the bottom of this, of course. He remembered now having made that unfortunate remark the day before about the limited accommodation his rooms afforded.

Clearly Fakrash must have taken a mental note of it, and, with that insatiable munificence which was one of his worst failings, had determined, by way of a pleasant surprise, to entirely refurnish and redecorate the apartments according to his own ideas.

It was extremely kind of him ; it showed a truly grateful disposition—" but, oh ! " as Horace thought, in the bitterness of his soul, " if he would only learn to let well alone and mind his own business ! "

However, the thing was done now, and he must accept the responsibility for it, since he could hardly disclose the truth. " Didn't I mention I was having some alterations made ? " he said carelessly. " They've got the work done rather sooner than I expected. Were—were they long over it ? "

" I'm sure I can't tell you, sir, having stepped out to get some things I wanted in for to-night; and Rapkin, he was round the corner at his reading-room ; and when I come back it was all done and the workmen gone 'ome ; and how they could have finished such a job in the time beats me altogether, for when we 'ad the men in to do the back kitchen they took ten days over it."

" Well," said Horace, evading this point, " however they've done this, they've done it remarkably well—you'll admit that, Mrs. Rapkin ? "

" That's as may be, sir," said Mrs. Rapkin, with a sniff, " but it ain't *my* taste, nor yet I don't think it will be Rapkin's taste when he comes to see it."

It was not Ventimore's taste either, though he was not going to confess it. " Sorry for that, Mrs. Rapkin," he

BACHELOR'S QUARTERS

said, " but I've no time to talk about it now. I must rush upstairs and dress."

" Begging your pardon, sir, but that's a total impossibility—for they've been and took away the staircase."

" Taken away the staircase ? Nonsense ! " cried Horace

" So / think, Mr. Ventimore—but it's what them men have done, and if you don't believe me, come and see for yourself."

She drew the hangings aside, and revealed to Ventimore's astonished gaze a vast pillared hall with a lofty domed roof, from which hung several lamps, diffusing a subdued radiance. High up in the wall, on his left, were the two windows which he judged to have formerly belonged to his sitting-room (for either from delicacy or inability, or simply because it had not occurred to him, the Jinnee had not interfered with the external structure), but the windows were now masked by a perforated and gilded lattice, which accounted for the pattern Horace had noticed from without. The walls were covered with blue-and-white Oriental tiles, and a raised platform of alabaster on which were divans ran round two sides of the hall, while the side opposite to him was pierced with horseshoe-shaped arches, apparently leading to other apartments. The centre of the marble floor was spread with costly rugs and piles of cushions, their rich hues glowing through the gold with which they were intricately embroidered.

" Well," said the unhappy Horace, scarcely knowing what he was saying, " it—it all looks very cosy, Mrs. Rapkin."

" It's not for me to say, sir ; but I should like to know where you thought of dining ? "

" Where ? " said Horace. " Why, here, of course. There's plenty of room."

" There isn't a table left in the house," said Mrs. Rapkin ; "so, unless you'd wish the cloth laid on the floor——"

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" Oh, there must be a table somewhere," said Horace, impatiently, " or you can borrow one. Don't *make* difficulties, Mrs. Rapkin. Rig up anything you like. . . . Now I must be off and dress."

He got rid of her, and, on entering one of the archways, discovered a smaller room, in cedar-wood incrustated with ivory and mother-o'-pearl, which was evidently his bedroom. A gorgeous robe, stiff with gold and glittering with ancient gems, was laid out for him—for the Jinnee had thought of everything—but Ventimore, naturally, preferred his own evening clothes.

" Mr. Rapkin ! " he shouted, going to another arch that seemed to communicate with the basement.

" Sir ? " replied his landlord, who had just returned from his " reading-room," and now appeared, without a tie and in his shirt-sleeves, looking pale and wild, as was, perhaps, intelligible in the circumstances. As he entered his unfamiliar marble halls he staggered, and his red eyes rolled and his mouth gaped in a cod-like fashion. " They've been at it 'ere, too, seemin'ly," he remarked huskily.

" There have been a few changes," said Horace, quietly, " as you can see. You don't happen to know where they've put my dress-clothes, do you ? "

" I don't 'appen to know where they've put nothink. Your dress-clothes ? Why, I dunno where they've bin and put our little parler, where me and Maria 'ave set of a hevenin' all these years regular. I dunno where they've put the pantry, nor yet the bath-room, with 'ot and cold water laid on at my own expense. And you arsk me to find your hevenin' soot ! I consider, sir, I consider that a unwall—that a most unwarrantable liberty have bin took at my expense."

" My good man, don't talk rubbish ! " said Horace.

" I 'm talking to you about what I *know*, and I assert that an Englishman's 'ome is his cashle, and nobody's got the right when his backsh turned to go and make a 'Ummums of it. Not *nobody* 'asn't! "

BACHELOR'S QUARTERS

" Make a *what* of it ? " cried Ventimore.

" A 'Ummums—that's English, ain't it ? A bloomin' Tuckish bath ! Who do you suppose is goin' to take apartments furnished in this 'ere ridic'loush style ? What am I goin' to say to my landlord ? It'll about ruine me, this will ; and after you bein' a lodger 'ere for five year and more, and regarded by me and Maria in the light of one of the fam'ly. It's 'ard—it's damned 'ard ! "

" Now, look here," said Ventimore, sharply—for it was obvious that Mr. Rapkin's studies had been lightened by copious refreshment—" pull yourself together, man, and listen to me."

" I respeckfully decline to pull myshelf togerrerr f'r anybody livin'," said Mr. Rapkin, with a noble air. " I shtan' 'ere upon my dignity as a man, sir. I shay, I shtand 'ere upon——" Here he waved his hand, and sat down suddenly upon the marble floor.

" You can stand on anything you like—or can," said Horace ; " but hear what I've got to say. The—the people who made all these alterations went beyond my instructions. I never wanted the house interfered with like this. Still, if your landlord doesn't see that its value is immensely improved, he's a fool, that's all. Anyway, I'll take care *you* shan't suffer. If I have to put everything back in its former state, I will, at my own expense. So don't bother any more about *that*"

" You're a gen'l'man, Mr. Ventimore," said Rapkin, cautiously regaining his feet. " There's no mishtaking a gen'l'man. *Vm* a gen'l'man."

" Of course you are," said Horace, genially, " and I'll tell you how you've going to show it. You're going straight downstairs to get your good wife to pour some cold water over your head ; and then you will finish dressing, see what you can do to get a table of some sort and lay it for dinner, and be ready to announce my friends whey they arrive, and wait afterwards. Do you see ? "

" That will be all ri', Mr. Ventimore," said Rapkin, who was not far gone enough to be beyond understanding

THE BRASS BOTTLE

or obeying. " You leave it entirely to me. I'll unner-take that your friends shall be made comforable, perfectly comforable. I've lived as butler in the besht, the mosht exclu—most arishto—you know the sort o' fam'lies I'm tryin' to r'member—and—and everything was always all ri', and / shall be all ri' in a few minutes."

With this assurance he stumbled downstairs, leaving Horace relieved to some extent. Rapkin would be sober enough after his head had been under the tap for a few minutes, and in any case there would be the hired waiter to rely upon.

If he could only find out where his evening clothes were ! He returned to his room and made another frantic search—but they were nowhere to be found ; and as he could not bring himself to receive his guests in his ordinary morning costume—which the Professor would probably construe as a deliberate slight, and which would certainly seem a solecism in Mrs. Futvoye's eyes, if not in her daughter's—he decided to put on the Eastern robes, with the exception of a turban, which he could not manage to wind round his head.

Thus arrayed he re-entered the domed hall, where he was annoyed to find that no attempt had been made as yet to prepare a dinner-table, and he was just looking forlornly round for a bell when Rapkin appeared. He had apparently followed Horace's advice, for his hair looked wet and sleek, and he was comparatively sober.

" This is too bad ! " cried Horace ; " my friends may be here at any moment now—and nothing done. You don't propose to wait at table like that, do you ? " he added, as he noted the man's overcoat and comforter round his throat.

" I do not propose to wait in any garments whatsoever," said Rapkin ; " I'm a-goin' out, I am."

" Very well," said Horace ; " then send the waiter up—I suppose he's come ? "

" He come—but he went away again—I told him as he wouldn't be required."

BACHELOR'S QUARTERS

" You told him that ! " Horace said angrily, and then controlled himself. " Come, Rapkin, be reasonable. You can't really mean to leave your wife to cook the dinner, and serve it too ! "

" She ain't intending to do neither ; she've left the house already."

" You must fetch her back," cried Horace. " Good heavens, man, *can't* you see what a fix you're leaving me in ? My friends have started long ago—it's too late to wire to them, or make any other arrangements."

There was a knock, as he spoke, at the front door ; and odd enough was the familiar sound of the cast-iron knocker in that Arabian hall.

" There they are ! " he said, and the idea of meeting them at the door and proposing an instant adjournment to a restaurant occurred to him—till he suddenly recollected that he would have to change and try to find some money, even for that. " For the last time, Rankin," he cried in despair, " do you mean to tell me there's no dinner ready ? "

" Oh," said Rapkin, " there's dinner right enough and a lot o' barbarious furriners downstairs a-cookin' of it—that's what broke Maria's 'art—to see it all took out of her 'ands, after the trouble she'd gone to."

" But I must have somebody to wait," exclaimed Horace.

" You've got waiters enough, as far as that goes. But if you expect a hordinary Christian man to wait along of a lot o' narsty niggers, and be at their beck and call, you're mistook, sir, for I'm going to sleep the night at my brother-in-law's and take his advice, he bein' a door-keeper at a solicitor's orfice and knowing the law, about this 'ere business, and so I wish you a good hevening, and 'oping your dinner will be to your liking and satisfaction."

He went out by the farther archway, while from the entrance-hall Horace could hear voices he knew only too well. The Futvoyes had come ; well, at all events, it

THE BRASS BOTTLE

seemed that there would be something for them to eat, since Fakrash, in his anxiety to do the thing thoroughly, had furnished both the feast and attendance himself—but who was there to announce the guests ? Where were these waiters Rapkin had spoken of ? Ought he to go and bring in his visitors himself ?

These questions answered themselves the next instant, for, as he stood there under the dome, the curtains of the central arch were drawn with a rattle, and disclosed a double line of tall slaves in rich raiment, their onyx eyes rolling and their teeth flashing in their chocolate-hued countenances, as they salaamed.

Between this double line stood Professor and Mrs. Futvoye and Sylvia, who had just removed their wraps and were gazing in undisguised astonishment on the splendours which met their view.

Horace advanced to receive them ; he felt he was in for it now, and the only course left him was to put as good a face as he could on the matter, and trust to luck to pull him through without discovery or disaster.

9. " *Persicos Odi, Puer, Apparatus* "

"So you've found your way here at last ? " said Horace, as he shook hands heartily with the Professor and Mrs. Futvoye. " I can't tell you how delighted I am to see you."

As a matter of fact, he was very far from being at ease, which made him rather over-effusive, but he was determined that, if he could help it, he would not betray the slightest consciousness of anything *bizarre* or unusual in his domestic arrangements.

" And these," said Mrs. Futvoye, who was extremely stately in black, with old lace and steel embroidery—" these are the bachelor lodgings you were so modest about! Really," she added, with a humorous twinkle in her shrewd eyes, " you young men seem to understand how to make yourselves comfortable—don't they, Anthony?"

" They do, indeed," said the Professor, dryly, though it manifestly cost him some effort to conceal his appreciation. " To produce such results as these must, if I mistake not, have entailed infinite research—and considerable expense."

" No," said Horace, " no. You—you'd be surprised if you knew how little."

" I should have imagined," retorted the Professor, " that *any* outlay on apartments which I presume you do not contemplate occupying for an extended period must be money thrown away. But, doubtless, you know best."

" But your rooms are quite wonderful, Horace ! " cried Sylvia, her charming eyes dilating with admiration. " And where, *where* did you get that magnificent dressing-gown ? I never saw anything so lovely in my life ! "

She herself was lovely enough in a billowy, shimmering frock of a delicate apple-green hue, her only ornament a deep-blue Egyptian scarab with spread wings, which was suspended from her neck by a slender gold chain.

" I — I ought to apologise for receiving you in this costume," said Horace, with embarrassment ; " but the fact is, I couldn't find my evening clothes anywhere, so—so I put on the first things that came to hand."

" It is hardly necessary," said the Professor, conscious of being correctly clad, and unconscious that his shirt-front was bulging and his long-eared white tie beginning to work up towards his left jaw—" hardly necessary to offer any apology for the simplicity of your costume—which is entirely in keeping with the—ah—strictly Oriental character of your interior."

" *I* feel dreadfully out of keeping ! " said Sylvia, " for there's nothing in the least Oriental about *me*—unless it's my scarab—and he's I don't know how many centuries behind the time, poor dear ! "

" If you said thousands of years,' my dear," corrected the Professor, " you would be more accurate. That scarab was taken out of a tomb of the thirteenth dynasty."

" Well, I'm sure he'd rather be where he is," said

THE BRASS BOTTLE

Sylvia, and Ventimore entirely agreed with her. " Horace, I *must* look at everything. How clever and original of you to transform an ordinary London house into this ! "

" Oh, well, you see," explained Horace, " it—it wasn't exactly done by me."

" Whoever did it," said the Professor, " must have devoted considerable study to Eastern art and architecture. May I ask the name of the firm who executed the alterations ? "

" I really couldn't tell you, sir," answered Horace, who was beginning to understand how very bad a *mauvais quart d'heure* can be.

" You can't tell me ! " exclaimed the Professor. " You order these extensive, and / should say expensive, decorations, and you don't know the firm you selected to carry them out ! "

" Of course I *know*" said Horace, " only I don't happen to remember at this moment. Let me see, now. Was it Liberty ? No, I'm almost certain it wasn't Liberty. It might have been Maple, but I'm not sure. Whoever did do it, they were marvellously cheap."

" I am glad to hear it," said the Professor, in his most unpleasant tone. " Where is your dining-room ? "

" Why, I rather think," said Horace, helplessly, as he saw a train of attendants laying a round cloth on the floor, " I rather think *this* is the dining-room."

" You appear to be in some doubt ? " said the Professor.

" I leave it to them—it depends where they choose to lay the cloth," said Horace. " Sometimes in one place ; sometimes in another. There's a great charm in uncertainty," he faltered.

" Doubtless," said the Professor.

By this time two of the slaves, under the direction of a tall and turbaned black, had set a low ebony stool, inlaid with silver and tortoiseshell in strange devices, on the round carpet, when other attendants followed with a circular silver tray containing covered dishes, which they placed on the stool and salaamed.

" Your—ah—groom of the chambers," said the Professor, " seems to have decided that we should dine here. I observe they are making signs to you that the food is on the table."

" So it is," said Ventimore. " Shall we sit down ? "

" But, my dear Horace," said Mrs. Futvoye, " your butler has forgotten the chairs."

" You don't appear to realise, my dear," said the Professor, " that in such an interior as this chairs would be hopelessly incongruous."

" I'm afraid there aren't any," said Horace, for there was nothing but four fat cushions. " Let's sit down on these," he proposed. " It—it's more fun 1 "

" At my time of life," said the Professor, irritably, as he let himself down on the plumpest cushion, " such fun as may be derived from eating one's meals on the floor fails to appeal to my sense of humour. However, I admit that it is thoroughly Oriental."

" / think it's delightful," said Sylvia ; " ever so much nicer than a stiff, conventional dinner-party."

" One may be unconventional," remarked her father, " without escaping the penalty of stiffness. Go away, sir ! go away ! " he added snappishly, to one of the slaves, who was attempting to pour water over his hands. " Your servant, Ventimore, appears to imagine that I go out to dinner without taking the trouble to wash my hands previously. This, I may mention, is *not* the case."

" It's only an Eastern ceremony, Professor," said Horace.

" I am perfectly well aware of what is customary in the East," retorted the Professor ; " it does not follow that such—ah—hygienic precautions are either necessary or desirable at a Western table."

Horace made no reply ; he was too much occupied in gazing blankly at the silver dish-covers and wondering what in the world might be underneath ; nor was his perplexity relieved when the covers were removed, for he was quite at a loss to guess how he was supposed to help the contents without so much as a fork.

THE BRASS BOTTLE

The chief attendant, however, solved that difficulty by intimating in pantomime that the guests were expected to use their fingers.

Sylvia accomplished this daintily and with intense amusement, but her father and mother made no secret of their repugnance. " If I were dining in the desert with a Sheik, sir," observed the Professor, " I should, I hope, know how to conform to his habits and prejudices. Here in the heart of London, I confess all this strikes me as a piece of needless pedantry."

" I'm very sorry," said Horace ; " I'd have some knives and forks if I could—but I'm afraid these fellows don't even understand what they are, so it's useless to order any. We—we must rough it a little, that's all. I hope that—er—fish is all right, Professor ? "

He did not know precisely what kind of fish it was, but it was fried in oil of sesame and flavoured with a mixture of cinnamon and ginger, and the Professor did not appear to be making much progress with it. Ventimore himself would have infinitely preferred the original cod and oyster sauce, but that could not be helped now.

" Thank you," said the Professor, " it is curious—but characteristic. Not *any* more, thank you."

Horace could only trust that the next course would be more of a success. It was a dish of mutton, stewed with peaches, jujubes, and sugar, which Sylvia declared was delicious. Her parents made no comment.

" Might I ask for something to drink ? " said the Professor, presently ; whereupon a cupbearer poured him a goblet of iced sherbet perfumed with conserve of violets.

" I'm very sorry, my dear fellow," he said, after sipping it, " but if I drink this I shall be ill all next day. If I might have a glass of wine——"

Another slave instantly handed him a cup of wine, which he tasted and set down with a wry face and a shudder. Horace tried some afterwards, and was not

surprised. It was a strong, harsh wine, in which goat-skin and resin struggled for predominance.

" It's an old and, I make no doubt, a fine wine," observed the Professor, with studied politeness, " but I fancy it must have suffered in transportation. I really think that, with my gouty tendency, a little whisky and Apollinaris would be better for me—if you keep such occidental fluids in the house ? "

Horace felt convinced that it would be useless to order the slaves to bring whisky or Apollinaris, which were, of course, unknown in the Jinnee's time, so he could do nothing but apologise for their absence.

" No matter," said the Professor ; " I am not so thirsty that I cannot wait till I get home."

It was some consolation that both Sylvia and her mother commended the sherbet, and even appreciated—or were so obliging as to say they appreciated—the *entree*, which consisted of rice and mincemeat wrapped in vine-leaves, and certainly was not appetising in appearance, besides being difficult to dispose of gracefully.

It was followed by a whole lamb fried in oil, stuffed with pounded pistachio nuts, pepper, nutmeg, and coriander seeds, and liberally besprinkled with rose-water and musk.

Only Horace had sufficient courage to attack the lamb—and he found reason to regret it. Afterwards came fowls stuffed with raisins, parsley, and crumbled bread, and the banquet ended with pastry of weird forms and repellent aspect.

" I hope," said Horace, anxiously, " you don't find this Eastern cookery very—er—unpalatable ? " —he himself was feeling distinctly unwell : " it's rather a change from the ordinary routine."

" I have made a truly wonderful dinner, thank you," replied the Professor, not, it is to be feared, without intention. " Even in the East I have eaten nothing approaching this."

" But where did your landlady pick up this extra-

THE BRASS BOTTLE

ordinary cooking, my dear Horace ? " said Mrs. Futvoye. " I thought you said she was merely a plain cook. Has she ever lived in the East ? "

" Not exactly *in the East*," exclaimed Horace ; " not what you would call *living* there. The fact is," he continued, feeling that he was in danger of drivelling, and that he had better be as candid as he could, " this dinner *wasn't* cooked by her. She—she was obliged to go away quite suddenly. So the dinner was all sent in by—by a sort of contractor, you know. He supplies the whole thing, waiters and all."

" I was thinking," said the Professor, " that for a bachelor—an *engaged* bachelor—you seemed to maintain rather a large establishment."

" Oh, they're only here for the evening, sir," said Horace. " Capital fellows—more picturesque than the local greengrocer—and they don't breathe on the top of your head."

" They're perfect dears, Horace ! " remarked Sylvia ; " only—well, just a *little* creepy-crawly to look at ! "

" It would ill become me to criticise the style and method of our entertainment," put in the Professor, acidly, " otherwise I might be tempted to observe that it scarcely showed that regard for economy which I should have——"

" Now, Anthony," put in his wife, " don't let us have any fault-finding. I'm sure Horace has done it all delightfully—yes, delightfully ; and even if he *has* been just a little extravagant, it's not as if he was obliged to be as economical *now*, you know ! "

" My dear," said the Professor, " I have yet to learn that the prospect of an increased income in the remote future is any justification for reckless profusion in the present."

" If you only knew," said Horace, " you wouldn't call it profusion. It—it's not at all the dinner I meant it to be, and I'm afraid it wasn't particularly nice—but it's certainly not expensive."

" ' Expensive,' is, of course, a very relative term. But I think I have the right to ask whether this is the footing on which you propose to begin your married life ? "

It was an extremely awkward question, as the reader will perceive. If Ventimore replied—as he might with truth—that he had no intention whatever of maintaining his wife in luxury such as that, he stood convicted of selfish indulgence as a bachelor ; if, on the other hand, he declared that he *did* propose to maintain his wife in the same fantastic and exaggerated splendour as the present, it would certainly confirm her father's disbelief in his prudence and economy.

And it was that egregious old ass of a Jinnee, as Horace thought, with suppressed rage, who had let him in for all this, and who was now far beyond all remonstrance or reproach !

Before he could bring himself to answer the question, the attendants had noiselessly removed the tray and stool, and were handing round rosewater in a silver ewer and basin, the character of which, luckily or otherwise, turned the Professor's inquisitiveness into a different channel.

" These are not bad—really not bad at all," he said, inspecting the design. " Where did you manage to pick them up ? "

" I didn't," said Horace ; " they're provided by the—the person who supplies the dinner."

" Can you give me his address ? " said the Professor, scenting a bargain ; " because really, you know, these things are probably antiques—much too good to be used for business purposes."

" I'm wrong," said Horace, lamely ; " these particular things are—are lent, by an eccentric Oriental gentleman, as a great favour."

" Do I know him ? Is he a collector of such things ? "

" You wouldn't have met him ; he—he's lived a very retired life of late."

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" I should very much like to see his collection. If you could give me a letter of introduction——"

" No," said Horace, in a state of prickly heat; " it wouldn't be any use. His collection is never shown. He—he's a most peculiar man. And just now he's abroad."

" Ah ! pardon me if I've been indiscreet; but I concluded from what you said that this—ah—banquet was furnished by a professional caterer."

" Oh, the banquet ? Yes, *that* came from the Stores," said Horace, mendaciously. " The—the Oriental Cookery Department. They've just started it, you know ; so—so I thought I'd give them a trial. But it's not what I call properly organised yet."

The slaves were now, with low obeisances, inviting them to seat themselves on the divan which lined part of the hall.

" Ha ! " said the Professor, as he rose from his cushion, cracking audibly, " so we're to have our coffee and what-not over there, hey ? . . . Well, my boy, I shan't be sorry, I confess, to have something to lean my back against—and a cigar, a mild cigar, will—ah—aid digestion. You *do* smoke here ? "

" Smoke ? " said Horace. " Why, of course ! All over the place. Here," he said, clapping his hands, which brought an obsequious slave instantly to his side ; " just bring coffee and cigars, will you ? "

The slave rolled his brandy-ball eyes in obvious perplexity.

" Coffee," said Horace ; " you must know what coffee is. And cigarettes. Well, *chibouks*, then—' hubble-bubbles '—if that's what you call them."

But the slave clearly did not understand, and it suddenly struck Horace that, since tobacco and coffee were not introduced, even in the East, till long after the Jinnee's time, he, as the founder of the feast, would naturally be unaware how indispensable they had become at the present day.

" I'm really awfully sorry," he said ; " but they don't seem to have provided any. I shall speak to the manager about it. And, unfortunately, I don't know where my own cigars are."

" It's of no consequence," said the Professor, with the sort of stoicism that minds very much. " I am a moderate smoker at best, and Turkish coffee, though delicious, is apt to keep me awake. But if you could let me have a look at that brass bottle you got at poor Collingham's sale, I should be obliged to you."

Horace had no idea where it was then, nor could he, until the Professor came to the rescue with a few words of Arabic, manage to make the slaves comprehend what he wished them to find.

At length, however, two of them appeared, bearing the brass bottle with every sign of awe, and depositing it at Ventimore's feet.

Professor Futvoye, after wiping and adjusting his glasses, proceeded to examine the vessel. " It certainly is a most unusual type of brassware," he said, " as unique in its way as the silver ewer and basin ; and, as you thought, there does seem to be something resembling an inscription on the cap, though in this dim light it is almost impossible to be sure."

While he was poring over it, Horace seated himself on the divan by Sylvia's side, hoping for one of the whispered conversations permitted to affianced lovers; he had pulled through the banquet somehow, and on the whole he felt thankful things had not gone off worse. The noiseless and uncanny attendants, whom he did not know whether to regard as Efreet, or demons, or simply illusions, but whose services he had no wish to retain, had all withdrawn. Mrs. Futvoye was peacefully slumbering, and her husband was in a better humour than he had been all the evening.

Suddenly from behind the hangings of one of the archways came strange, discordant sounds, barbaric janglings and thumpings, varied by yowls as of impassioned cats.

THE BRASS BOTTLE

Sylvia drew involuntarily closer to Horace ; her mother woke with a start, and the Professor looked up from the brass bottle with returning irritation.

" What's this ? What's this ? " he demanded ; " some fresh surprise in store for us ? "

It was quite as much of a surprise for Horace, but he was spared the humiliation of owning it by the entrance of some half-dozen dusky musicians swathed in white and carrying various strangely fashioned instruments, with which they squatted down in a semicircle by the opposite wall, and began to twang, and drub, and squall with the complacent cacophony of an Eastern orchestra. Clearly Fakrash was determined that nothing should be wanting to make the entertainment a complete success.

" What a very extraordinary noise ! " said Mrs. Futvoye ; " surely they can't mean it for music ? "

" Yes, they do," said Horace ; " it—it's really more harmonious than it sounds—you have to get accustomed to the—er—notation. When you do, it's rather soothing than otherwise."

" I dare say," said the poor lady. " And do *they* come from the Stores, too ? "

" No," said Horace, with a fine assumption of candour, " they don't; they come from—the Arab Encampment at Earl's Court—parties and *fetes* attended, you know. But they play *here* for nothing ; they—they want to get their name known, you see ; very deserving and respectable set of fellows."

" My dear Horace ! " remarked Mrs. Futvoye, " if they expect to get engagements for parties and so on, they really ought to try and learn a tune of *some* sort."

" I understand, Horace," whispered Sylvia ; " it's very naughty of you to have gone to all this trouble and expense (for, of course, it *has* cost you a lot) just to please us ; but, whatever dad may say, I love you all the better for doing it ! "

And her hand stole softly into his, and he felt that he could forgive Fakrash everything even—even the orchestra.

But there was something unpleasantly spectral about their shadowy forms, which showed in grotesquely baggy and bulgy shapes in the uncertain light. Some of them wore immense and curious white head-dresses, which gave them the appearance of poulticed thumbs ; and they all went on scraping and twiddling and cater-wauling with a doleful monotony that Horace felt must be getting on his guests' nerves, as it certainly was on his own.

He did not know how to get rid of them, but he sketched a kind of gesture in the air, intended to intimate that, while their efforts had afforded the keenest pleasure to the company generally, they were unwilling to monopolise them any longer, and the artists were at liberty to retire.

Perhaps there is no art more liable to misconstruction than pantomime ; certainly, Ventimore's efforts in this direction were misunderstood, for the music became wilder, louder, more aggressively and abominably out of tune—and then a worse thing happened.

For the curtains separated, and, heralded by sharp yelps from the performers, a female figure floated into the hall and began to dance with a slow and sinuous grace.

Her beauty, though of a pronounced Oriental type, was unmistakable, even in the subdued light which fell on her ; her diaphanous robe indicated a faultless form ; her dark tresses were braided with sequins ; she had the long, lustrous eyes, the dusky cheeks artificially whitened, and the fixed scarlet smile of the Eastern dancing-girl of all time.

And she paced the floor with her tinkling feet, writhing and undulating like some beautiful cobra, while the players worked themselves up to yet higher and higher stages of frenzy.

Ventimore, as he sat there looking helplessly on, felt a return of his resentment against the Jinnee. It was really too bad of him ; he ought, at his age, to have known better !

THE BRASS BOTTLE

Not that there was anything objectionable in the performance itself ; but still, it was *not* the kind of entertainment for such an occasion. Horace wished now he had mentioned to Fakrash who the guests were whom he expected, and then perhaps even the Jinnee would have exercised more tact in his arrangements.

" And does this girl come from Earl's Court ? " inquired Mrs. Futvoye, who was now thoroughly awake.

" Oh dear, no," said Horace ; " I engaged *her* at— at Harrod's—the Entertainment Bureau. They told me there she was rather good—struck out a line of her own, don't you know. But perfectly correct ; she—she only does this to support an invalid aunt."

These statements were, as he felt even in making them, not only gratuitous, but utterly unconvincing, but he had arrived at that condition in which a man discovers with terror the unsuspected amount of mendacity latent in his system.

" I should have thought there were other ways of supporting invalid aunts," remarked Mrs. Futvoye. " What is this young lady's name ? "

" Tinkler," said Horace, on the spur of the moment. " Miss Clementine Tinkler."

" But surely she is a foreigner ? "

" Mademoiselle, I ought to have said. And Tinkla—with an ' a,' you know. I believe her mother was of Arabian extraction—but I really don't know," explained Horace, conscious that Sylvia had withdrawn her hand from his, and was regarding him with covert anxiety.

" I really *must* put a stop to this," he thought. " You're getting bored by all this, darling," he said aloud ; " so am I. I'll tell them to go." And he rose and held out his hand as a sign that the dance should cease.

It ceased at once ; but, to his unspeakable horror, the dancer crossed the floor with a swift jingling rush, and sank in a gauzy heap at his feet, seizing his hand in both hers and covering it with kisses, while she murmured speeches in some tongue unknown to him.

"PERSICOS ODI, PUER, APPARATUS "

" Is this a usual feature in Miss Tinkla's entertainments, may I ask ? " said Mrs. Futvoye, bristling with not unnatural indignation.

" I really don't know," said the unhappy Horace ; " I can't make out what she's saying."

" If I understand her rightly," said the Professor, " she is addressing you as the ' light of her eyes and the vital spirit of her heart.' "

" Oh ! " said Horace, " she's quite mistaken, you know. It—it's the emotional artist temperament—they don't *mean* anything by it. My—my dear young lady," he added, " you've danced most delightfully, and I'm sure we're all most deeply indebted to you ; but we won't detain you any longer. Professor," he added, as she made no offer to rise, " *will* you kindly explain to them in Arabic that I should be obliged by their going at once ? "

The Professor said a few words, which had the desired effect. The girl gave a little scream and scudded through the archway, and the musicians seized their instruments and scuttled after her.

" I am so sorry," said Horace, whose evening seemed to him to have been chiefly spent in apologies ; " it's not at all the kind of entertainment one would expect from a place like Whiteley's."

" By no means," agreed the Professor ; " but I understood you to say Miss Tinkla was recommended to you by Harrod's ? "

" Very likely, sir," said Horace ; " but that doesn't affect the case. I shouldn't expect it from *them*."

" Probably they don't know how shamelessly that young person conducts herself," said Mrs. Futvoye. " And I think it only right that they should be told."

" I shall complain, of course," said Horace. " I shall put it very strongly."

" A protest would have more weight coming from a woman," said Mrs. Futvoye ; " and, as a shareholder in the company, I shall feel bound——"

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" No, I wouldn't/' said Horace ; " in fact, you mustn't. For, now I come to think of it, she didn't come from Harrod's, after all, or Whiteley's either."

" Then perhaps you will be good enough to inform us where she *did* come from ? "

" I would if I knew," said Horace ; " but I don't."

" What ! " cried the Professor, sharply, " do you mean to say you can't account for the existence of a dancing-girl who—in my daughter's presence—kissed your hand and addresses you by endearing epithets ? "

" Oriental metaphor ! " said Horace. " She was a little overstrung. Of course, if I had had any idea she would make such a scene as that——Sylvia," he broke off, "you don't doubt me ? "

" No, Horace," said Sylvia, simply. " I'm sure you must have *some* explanation—only I do think it would be better if you gave it."

" If I *told* you the truth," said Horace, slowly, " you would none of you believe me ! "

" Then you admit," put in the Professor, " that hitherto you have *not* been telling the truth ? "

" Not as invariably as I could have wished," Horace confessed.

" So I suspected. Then, unless you can bring yourself to be perfectly candid, you can hardly wonder at our asking you to consider your engagement as broken off ? "

" Broken off ! " echoed Horace. " Sylvia, you won't give me up ! You *know* I wouldn't do anything unworthy of you ! "

" I'm certain that you can't have done anything which would make me love you one bit the less if I knew it. So why not be quite open with us ? "

" Because, darling," said Horace, " I'm in such a fix that it would only make matters worse."

" In that case," said the Professor, " and as it is already rather late, perhaps you will allow one of your numerous retinue to call a four-wheeler."

Horace clapped his hands, but no one answered the

summons, and he could not find any of the slaves in the antechamber.

" I'm afraid all the servants have left," he explained ; and it is to be feared he would have added that they were all obliged to return to the contractor by eleven, only he caught the Professor's eye and decided that he had better refrain. " If you will wait here, I'll go out and fetch a cab," he added.

" There is no occasion to trouble you," said the Professor ; " my wife and daughter have already got their things on, and we will walk until we find a cab. Now, Mr. Ventimore, we will bid you good night and good-bye. For, after what has happened, you will, I trust, have the good taste to discontinue your visits and make no attempt to see Sylvia again."

" Upon my honour," protested Horace, " I have done nothing to warrant you in shutting your doors against me !"

" I am unable to agree with you. I have never thoroughly approved of your engagement, because, as I told you at the time, I suspected you of recklessness in money matters. Even in accepting your invitation to-night, I warned you, as you may remember, not to make the occasion an excuse for foolish extravagance. I come here, and find you in apartments furnished and decorated (as you informed us) by yourself, and on a scale which would be prodigal in a millionaire. You have a suite of retainers which (except for their nationality and imperfect discipline) a prince might envy. You provide a banquet of—hem !—delicacies which must have cost you infinite trouble and unlimited expense—this, after I had expressly stipulated for a quiet family dinner ! Not content with that, you procure for our diversion Arab music and dancing of a—of a highly recondite character. I should be unworthy the name of father, sir, if I were to intrust my only daughter's happiness to a young man with so little common sense, so little self-restraint. And she will understand my motives and obey my wishes."

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" You're right, Professor, according to your lights," admitted Horace. " And yet—confound it all !—you're utterly wrong, too ! "

" Oh, Horace," cried Sylvia ; " if you had only listened to dad, and not gone to all this foolish, foolish expense, we might have been so happy ! "

" But I have gone to no expense. All this hasn't cost me a penny ! "

" Ah, there is some mystery ! Horace, if you love me, you will explain—here, now, before it's too late ! "

" My darling," groaned Horace, " I would, like a shot, if I thought it would be of the least use ! "

" Hitherto," said the Professor, " you cannot be said to have been happy in your explanations—and I should advise you not to venture on any more. Good night, once more. I only wish it were possible, without needless irony, to make the customary acknowledgments for a pleasant evening."

Mrs. Futvoye had already hurried her daughter away, and, though she had left her husband to express his sentiments unaided, she made it sufficiently clear that she entirely agreed with them.

Horace stood in the outer hall by the fountain, in which his drowned chrysanthemums were still floating, and gazed in stupefied despair after his guests as they went down the path to the gate. He knew only too well that they would never cross his threshold, nor he theirs, again.

Suddenly he came to himself with a start. " I'll try it ! " he cried. " I can't and won't stand this ! " And he rushed after them bareheaded.

" Professor ! " he said, breathlessly, as he caught him up, " one moment. On second thoughts, I *will* tell you my secret, if you will promise me a patient hearing."

" The pavement is hardly the place for confidences," replied the Professor, " and, if it were, your costume is calculated to attract more remark than is desirable. My wife and daughter have gone on—if you will permit

me, I will overtake them—I shall be at home to-morrow morning, should you wish to see me."

" No—to-night, to-night ! " urged Horace. " I can't sleep in that infernal place with this on my mind. Put Mrs. Futvoye and Sylvia into a cab, Professor, and come back. It's not late, and I won't keep you long—but for Heaven's sake, let me tell you my story at once."

Probably the Professor was not without some curiosity on the subject ; at all events he yielded. " Very well," he said, " go into the house and I will rejoin you presently. Only remember," he added, " that I shall accept no statement without the fullest proof. Otherwise you will merely be wasting your time and mine."

" Proof ! " thought Horace, gloomily, as he returned to his Arabian halls. " The only decent proof I could produce would be old Fakrash, and he's not likely to turn up again—especially now I want him."

A little later the Professor returned, having found a cab and despatched his women-folk home. " Now, young man," he said, as he unwound his wrapper and seated himself on the divan by Horace's side, " I can give you just ten minutes to tell your story in, so let me beg you to make it as brief and as comprehensible as you can."

It was not exactly an encouraging invitation in the circumstances, but Horace took his courage in both hands and told him everything, just as it had happened.

" And that's your story ? " said the Professor, after listening to the narrative with the utmost attention, when Horace came to the end.

" That's my story, sir," said Horace. " And I hope it has altered your opinion of me."

" It has," replied the Professor, in an altered tone ; " it has indeed. Yours is a sad case—a very sad case."

" It's rather awkward, isn't it ? But I don't mind so long as you understand. And you'll tell Sylvia—as much as you think proper ? "

" Yes—yes ; I must tell Sylvia."

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" And I may go on seeing her as usual ? "

" Well—will you be guided by my advice—the advice of one who has lived more than double your years ? "

" Certainly," said Horace.

" Then, if I were you, I should go away at once, for a complete change of air and scene."

" That's impossible, sir—you forget my work ! "

" Never mind your work, my boy : leave it for a while, try a sea-voyage, go round the world, get quite away from these associations."

" But I might come across the Jinnee again," objected Horace ; " *he's* travelling, as I told you."

" Yes, yes, to be sure. Still, I should go away. Consult any doctor, and he'll tell you the same thing."

" Consult any——Good God ! " cried Horace ; " I see what it is—you think I'm mad ! "

" No, no, my dear boy," said the Professor, soothingly, " not mad—nothing of the sort ; perhaps your mental equilibrium is just a trifle—it's quite intelligible. You see, the sudden turn in your professional prospects, coupled with your engagement to Sylvia—I've known stronger minds than yours thrown off their balance—temporarily, of course, quite temporarily—by less than that."

" You believe I am suffering from delusions ? "

" I don't say that. I think you may see ordinary things in a distorted light."

" Anyhow, you don't believe there really was a Jinnee inside that bottle ? "

" Remember, you yourself assured me at the time you opened it that you found nothing whatever inside it. Isn't it more credible that you were right then than that you should be right now ? "

" Well," said Horace, " you saw all those black slaves ; you ate, or tried to eat, that unutterably beastly banquet ; you heard that music—and then there was the dancing-girl. And this hall we're in, this robe I've got on—are *they* delusions ? Because if they are, I'm afraid you will have to admit that *you're* mad too."

" PERSICOS ODI, PUER, APPARATUS "

" Ingeniously put," said the Professor. " I fear it is unwise to argue with you. Still, I will venture to assert that a strong imagination like yours, over-heated and saturated with Oriental ideas—to which I fear I may have contributed—is not incapable of unconsciously assisting in its own deception. In other words, I think that you may have provided all this yourself from various quarters without any clear recollection of the fact."

" That's very scientific and satisfactory as far as it goes, my dear Professor," said Horace ; " but there's one piece of evidence which may upset your theory—and that's this brass bottle."

" If your reasoning powers were in their normal condition," said the Professor, compassionately, " you would see that the mere production of an empty bottle can be no proof of what it contained—or, for that matter, that it ever contained anything at all."

" Oh, I see *that*" said Horace ; " but *this* bottle has a stopper with what you yourself admit to be an inscription of some sort. Suppose that inscription confirms my story—what then ? All I ask you to do is to make it out for yourself before you decide that I'm either a liar or a lunatic."

" I warn you," said the Professor, " that if you are trusting to my being unable to decipher the inscription, you are deceiving yourself. You represent that this bottle belongs to the period of Solomon—that is, about a thousand years B.C. Probably you are not aware that the earliest specimens of Oriental metal-work in existence are not older than the tenth century of our era. But, granting that it is as old as you allege, I shall certainly be able to read any inscription there may be on it. I have made out clay tablets in Cuneiform which were certainly written a thousand years before Solomon's time."

" So much the better," said Horace. " I'm as certain as I can be that whatever is written on that lid—whether it's Phoenician, or Cuneiform, or anything else—must have some reference to a Jinnee confined in the bottle,

THE BRASS BOTTLE

or at least bear the seal of Solomon. But there the thing is—examine it for yourself."

"Not now," said the Professor; "it's too late, and the light here is not strong enough. But I tell you what I will do. I'll take this stopper thing home with me, and examine it carefully to-morrow—on one condition."

"You have only to name it," said Horace.

"My condition is, that if I, and one or two other Orientalists to whom I may submit it, come to the conclusion that there is no real inscription at all—or, if any, that a date and meaning must be assigned to it totally inconsistent with your story—you will accept our finding and acknowledge that you have been under a delusion, and dismiss the whole affair from your mind."

"Oh, I don't mind agreeing to *that*," said Horace, "particularly as it's my only chance."

"Very well, then," said the Professor, as he removed the metal cap and put it in his pocket; "you may depend upon hearing from me in a day or two. Meantime, my boy," he continued, almost affectionately, "why not try a short bicycle tour somewhere, hey? You're a cyclist, I know—anything but allow yourself to dwell on Oriental subjects."

"It's not so easy to avoid dwelling on them as you think!" said Horace, with rather a dreary laugh. "And I fancy, Professor, that—whether you like it or not—you'll have to believe in that Jinnee of mine sooner or later."

"I can scarcely conceive," replied the Professor, who was by this time at the outer door, "any degree of evidence which could succeed in convincing me that your brass bottle had ever contained an Arabian Jinnee. However, I shall endeavour to preserve an open mind on the subject. Good evening to you."

As soon as he was alone, Horace paced up and down his deserted halls in a state of simmering rage as he thought how eagerly he had looked forward to his little dinner-party; how intimate and delightful it might have

been, and what a monstrous and prolonged nightmare it had actually proved. And at the end of it there he was in a fantastic, impossible dwelling, deserted by everyone, his chances of setting himself right with Sylvia hanging on the slenderest thread ; unknown difficulties and complications threatening him from every side !

He owed all this to Fakrash. Yes, that incorrigibly grateful Jinnee, with his antiquated notions and his high-flown professions, had contrived to ruin him more disastrously than if he had been his bitterest foe ! Ah ! if he could be face to face with him once more - if only for five minutes—he would be restrained by no false delicacy : he would tell him fairly and plainly what a meddling, blundering old fool he was. But Fakrash had taken his flight for ever : there were no means of calling him back—nothing to be done now but go to bed and sleep—if he could !

Exasperated by the sense of his utter helplessness, Ventimore went to the arch which led to his bed-chamber and drew the curtain back with a furious pull. And just within the archway, standing erect with folded arms and the smile of fatuous benignity which Ventimore was beginning to know and dread, was the form of Fakrash-el-Aamash, the Jinnee !

io- No Place like Home !

MAY thy head long survive ! " said Fakrash, by way of salutation, as he stepped through the archway.

" You're very good," said Horace, whose anger had almost evaporated in the relief of the Jinnee's unexpected return, " but I don't think any head can survive this sort of thing long."

" Art thou content with this dwelling I have provided for thee ? " inquired the Jinnee, glancing around the stately hall with perceptible complacency.

THE BRASS BOTTLE

It would have been positively brutal to say how very far from contented he felt, so Horace could only mumble that he had never been lodged like that before in all his life.

"It is far below thy deserts" Fakrash observed graciously. "And were thy friends amazed at the manner of their entertainment?"

"They were," said Horace.

"A sure method of preserving friends is to feast them with liberality," remarked the Jinnee.

This was rather more than Horace's temper could stand. "You were kind enough to provide my friends with such a feast," he said, "that they'll never come *here* again."

"How so? Were not the meats choice and abounding in fatness? Was not the wine sweet, and the sherbet like unto perfumed snow?"

"Oh, everything was—er—as nice as possible," said Horace. "Couldn't have been better."

"Yet thou sayest that thy friends will return no more—for what reason?"

"Well, you see," explained Horace, reluctantly, "there's such a thing as doing people *too* well. I mean, it isn't everybody that appreciates Arabian cooking. But they might have stood that. It was the dancing-girl that did for me."

"I commanded that a *houri*, lovelier than the full moon, and graceful as a young gazelle, should appear for the delight of thy guests."

"She came," said Horace, gloomily.

"Acquaint me with that which hath occurred—for I perceive plainly that something hath fallen out contrary to thy desires."

"Well," said Horace, "if it had been a bachelor party, there would have been no harm in the *houri*; but, as it happened, two of my guests were ladies, and they—well, they not unnaturally put a wrong construction on it all."

"Verily," exclaimed the Jinnee, "thy words are totally incomprehensible to me."

NO PLACE LIKE HOME !

" I don't know what the custom may be in Arabia," said Horace, " but with us it is not usual for a man to engage a houri to dance after dinner to amuse the lady he is proposing to marry. It's the kind of attention she'd be most unlikely to appreciate."

" Then was one of thy guests the damsel whom thou art seeking to marry ? "

" She was," said Horace, " and the other two were her father and mother. From which you may imagine that it was not altogether agreeable for me when your gazelle threw herself at my feet and hugged my knees and declared that I was the light of her eyes. Of course, it all meant nothing—it's probably the conventional behaviour for a gazelle, and I'm not reflecting upon her in the least. But, in the circumstances, it was compromising."

" I thought," said Fakrash, " that thou assuredst me that thou wast not contracted to any damsel ? "

" I think I only said that there was no one whom I would trouble you to procure as a wife for me," replied Horace ; " I certainly was engaged—though, after this evening, my engagement is at an end—unless . . . that reminds me, do you happen to know whether there really was an inscription on the seal of your bottle, and what it said ? "

" I know naught of any inscription," said the Jinnee ; " bring me the seal that I may see it."

" I haven't got it by me at this moment," said Horace ; " I lent it to my friend—the father of this young lady I told you of. You see, Mr. Fakrash, you got me into—I mean, I was in such a hole over this affair that I was obliged to make a clean breast of it to him. And he wouldn't believe it, so it struck me that there might be an inscription of some sort on the seal, saying who you were, and why Solomon had you confined in the bottle. Then the Professor would be obliged to admit that there's something in my story."

" Truly, I wonder at thee and at the smallness of thy penetration," the Jinnee commented ; " for if there were

THE BRASS BOTTLE

indeed any writing upon this seal, it is not possible that one of thy race should be able to decipher it."

" Oh, I beg your pardon," said Horace ; " Professor Futvoye is an Oriental scholar ; he can make out any inscription, no matter how many thousands of years old it may be. If anything's there, hell decipher it. The question is whether anything is there."

The effect of this speech on Fakrash was as unexpected as it was inexplicable : the Jinnee's features, usually so mild, began to work convulsively until they became terrible to look at, and suddenly, with a fierce howl, he shot up to nearly double his ordinary stature.

" O thou of little sense and breeding ! " he cried, in a loud voice ; " how earnest thou to deliver the bottle in which I was confined into the hands of this learned man ? "

Ventimore, startled as he was, did not lose his self-possession. " My dear sir," he said, " I did not suppose you could have any further use for it. And, as a matter of fact, I didn't give Professor Futvoye the bottle—which is over there in the corner—but merely the stopper. I wish you wouldn't tower over me like that—it gives me a crick in the neck to talk to you. Why on earth should you make such a fuss about my lending the seal; what possible difference can it make to you even if it does confirm my story ? And it's of immense importance to *me* that the Professor should believe I told the truth."

" I spoke in haste," said the Jinnee, slowly resuming his normal size, and looking slightly ashamed of his recent outburst as well as uncommonly foolish. " The bottle truly is of no value ; and as for the stopper, since it is but lent, it is no great matter. If there be any legend upon the seal, perchance this learned man of whom thou speakest will by this time have deciphered it ? "

" No," said Horace, " he won't tackle it till to-morrow. And it's as likely as not that when he does he won't find any reference to *you*—and I shall be up a taller tree than ever ! "

NO PLACE LIKE HOME !

" Art thou so desirous that he should receive proof that thy story is true ? "

" Why, of course I am ! Haven't I been saying so all this time ? "

" Who can satisfy him so surely as I ? "

" You ! " cried Horace. " Do you mean to say you really would ? Mr. Fakrash, you *are* an old brick ! That would be the very thing ! "

" There is naught," said the Jinnee, smiling indulgently, " that I would not do to promote thy welfare, for thou hast rendered me inestimable service. Acquaint me therefore with the abode of this sage, and I will present myself before him, and if haply he should find no inscription upon the seal, or its purport should be hidden from him, then will I convince him that thou hast spoken the truth and no lie."

Horace very willingly gave him the Professor's address. " Only don't drop in on him to-night, you know," he thought it prudent to add, " or you might startle him. Call any time after breakfast to-morrow, and you'll find him in."

" To-night," said Fakrash, " I return to pursue my search after Suleyman, on whom be peace. For not yet have I found him."

" If you *will* try to do so many things at once," said Horace, " I don't see how you can expect much results."

" At Nineveh they knew him not—for where I left a city I found but a heap of ruins, tenanted by owls and bats."

" *They say the lion and the lizard keep the Courts—*" murmured Horace, half to himself. " I was afraid you might be disappointed with Nineveh myself. Why not run over to Sheba ? You might hear of him there."

" Seba of El-Yemen—the country of Bilkees, the Queen beloved of Suleyman," said the Jinnee. " It is an excellent suggestion, and I will follow it without delay."

" But you won't forget to look in on Professor Futvoye to-morrow, will you ? "

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" Assuredly I will not. And now, ere I depart, tell me if there be any other service I may render thee."

Horace hesitated. " There is just one," he said, " only I'm afraid you'll be offended if I mention it."

" On the head and the eye be thy commands ! " said the Jinnee ; " for whatsoever thou desirest shall be accomplished, provided that it lie within my power to perform it."

" Well," said Horace, " if you're sure you don't mind, I'll tell you. You've transformed this house into a wonderful place, more like the Alhambra—I don't mean the one in Leicester Square—than a London lodging-house. But then I am only a lodger here, and the people the house belongs to—excellent people in their way—would very much rather have the house as it was. They have a sort of idea that they won't be able to let these rooms as easily as the others."

" Base and sordid dogs ! " said the Jinnee, with contempt.

" Possibly," said Horace, " it's narrow-minded of them—but that's the way they look at it. They've actually left rather than stay here. And it's *their* house—not mine."

" If they abandon this dwelling, thou wilt remain in the more secure possession."

" Oh, *shall* I, though ? They'll go to law and have me turned out, and I shall have to pay ruinous damages into the bargain. So, you see, what you intended as a kindness will only bring me bad luck."

" Come—without more words—to the statement of thy request," said Fakrash, "for I am in haste."

" All I want you to do," replied Horace in some anxiety as to what the effect of his request would be, " is to put everything here back to what it was before. It won't take you a minute."

" Of a truth," exclaimed Fakrash, " to bestow a favour upon thee is but a thankless undertaking, for not once, but twice, hast thou rejected my benefits—and now, behold, I am at a loss to devise means to gratify thee ! "

NO PLACE LIKE HOME !

"I know I've abused your good nature," said Horace ;
" but if you'll only do this, and then convince the Professor that my story is true, I shall be more than satisfied. I'll never ask another favour of you ! "

" My benevolence towards thee hath no bounds—as thou shalt see ; and I can deny thee nothing, for truly thou art a worthy and temperate young man. Farewell, then, and be it according to thy desire."

He raised his arms above his head, and shot up like a rocket towards the lofty dome, which split asunder to let him pass. Horace, as he gazed after him, had a momentary glimpse of deep blue sky, with a star or two that seemed to be hurrying through the transparent opal scud, before the roof closed in once more.

Then came a low, rumbling sound, with a shock like a mild earthquake : the slender pillars swayed under their horseshoe arches ; the big hanging-lanterns went out ; the walls narrowed, and the floor heaved and rose—till Ventimore found himself up in his own familiar sitting-room once more, in the dark. Outside he could see the great square still shrouded in grey haze—the street lamps were flickering in the wind ; a belated reveller was beguiling his homeward way by rattling his stick against the railings as he passed.

Inside the room everything was exactly as before, and Horace found it difficult to believe that a few minutes earlier he had been standing on that same site, but twenty feet or so below his present level, in a spacious blue-tiled hall, with a domed ceiling and gaudy pillared arches.

But he was very far from regretting his short-lived splendour ; he burnt with shame and resentment whenever he thought of that nightmare banquet, which was so unlike the quiet, unpretentious little dinner he had looked forward to.

However, it was over now, and it was useless to worry himself about what could not be helped. Besides, fortunately, there was no great harm done : the Jinnee had been brought to see his mistake, and, to do him justice,

THE BRASS BOTTLE

had shown himself willing enough to put it right. He had promised to go and see the Professor next day, and the result of the interview could not fail to be satisfactory. And after this, Ventimorc thought, Fakrash would have the sense and good-feeling not to interfere in his affairs again.

Meanwhile he could sleep now with a mind free from his worst anxieties, and he went to his room in a spirit of intense thankfulness that he had a Christian bed to sleep in. He took off his gorgeous robes—the only things that remained to prove to him that the events of that evening had been no delusion—and locked them in his wardrobe with a sense of relief that he would never be required to wear them again, and his last conscious thought before he fell asleep was the comforting reflection that, if there were any barrier between Sylvia and himself, it would be removed in the course of a very few more hours.

II. *A Fool's Paradise*

VENTIMORE found next morning that his bath and shaving-water had been brought up, from which he inferred, quite correctly, that his landlady must have returned.

Secretly he was by no means looking forward to his next interview with her, but she appeared with his bacon and coffee in a spirit so evidently chastened that he saw that he would have no difficulty so far as she was concerned.

"I'm sure, Mr. Ventimore, sir," she began, apologetically, "I don't know what you must have thought of me and Rapkin last night, leaving the house like we did!"

"It was extremely inconvenient," said Horace, "and not at all what I should have expected from you. But possibly you had some reason for it?"

"Why, sir," said Mrs. Rapkin, running her hand nervously along the back of a chair, "the fact is, some-

thing Come over me, and come over Rapkin, as we couldn't stop here another minute not if it was ever so."

" Ah ! " said Horace, raising his eyebrows, " restlessness—eh, Mrs. Rapkin ? Awkward that it should come on just then, though, wasn't it ? "

" It was the look of the place, somehow," said Mrs. Rapkin. " If you'll believe me, sir, it was all changed like—nothing in it the same from top to bottom ! "

" Really ? " said Horace. " I don't notice any difference myself."

" No more don't I, sir, not by daylight ; but last night it was all domes and harches and marble fountains let into the floor, with parties moving about downstairs all silent and as black as your hat—which Rapkin saw them as well as what I did."

" From the state your husband was in last night," said Horace, " I should say he was capable of seeing anything—and double of most things."

" I won't deny, sir, that Rapkin mayn't have been quite hisself, as a very little upsets him after he's spent an afternoon studying the papers and what-not at the libery. But I see the niggers too, Mr. Ventimore, and no one can say I ever take more than is good for me."

" I don't suggest that for a moment, Mrs. Rapkin," said Horace ; " only, if the house was as you describe last night, how do you account for it's being all right this morning ? "

Mrs. Rapkin in her embarrassment was reduced to folding her apron into small pleats. " It's not for me to say, sir," she replied, " but, if I was to give my opinion, it would be as them parties as called 'ere on camels the other day was at the bottom of it."

" I shouldn't wonder if you were right, Mrs. Rapkin," said Horace, blandly ; " you see, you had been exerting yourself over the cooking, and no doubt were in an over-excited state, and, as you say, those camels had taken hold of your imagination until you were ready to see anything that Rapkin saw, and *he* was ready to see anything *you* did."

THE BRASS BOTTLE

It's not at all uncommon. Scientific people, I believe, call it ' Collective Hallucination.' "

" Law, sir ! " said the good woman, considerably impressed by this diagnosis, " you don't mean to say I had *that* ? I was always fanciful from a girl, and could see things in coffee-grounds as nobody else could—but I never was took like that before. And to think of me leaving my dinner half cooked, and you expecting your young lady and her pa and ma ! Well, *there*, now, I *am* sorry. Whatever did you do, sir ? "

" We managed to get food of sorts from somewhere," said Horace, " but it was most uncomfortable for me, and I trust, Mrs. Rapkin—I sincerely trust that it will not occur again."

" That I'll answer for it shan't, sir. And you won't take no notice to Rapkin, sir, will you ? Though it was his seein' the niggers and that as put it into my 'ed ; but I 'ave spoke to him pretty severe already, and he's truly sorry and ashamed for forgetting hisself as he did."

" Very well, Mrs. Rapkin," said Horace ; " we will understand that last night's—hem—rather painful experience is not to be alluded to again—on either side."

He felt sincerely thankful to have got out of it so easily, for it was impossible to say what gossip might not have been set on foot if the Rapkins had not been brought to see the advisability of reticence on the subject.

" There's one more thing, sir, I wished for to speak to you about," said Mrs. Rapkin ; " that great brass vawse as you bought at an oction some time back. I dunno if you remember it ?"

" I remember it," said Horace. " Well, what about it ?"

" Why, sir, I found it in the coal-cellar this morning, and I thought I'd ask if that was where you wished it kep' in future. For, though no amount o' polish could make it what I call a tasty thing, it's neither hornimental nor yet useful where it is at present."

" Oh," said Horace, rather relieved, for he had-an ill—

defined dread from her opening words that the bottle might have been misbehaving itself in some way. " Put it wherever you please, Mrs. Rapkin ; do whatever you like with it—so long as I don't see the thing again ! "

" Very good, sir ; I on'y thought I'd ask the question," said Mrs. Rapkin, as she closed the door upon herself.

Altogether, Horace walked to Great Cloister Street that morning in a fairly cheerful mood and amiably disposed, even towards the Jinnee. With all his many faults, he was a thoroughly good-natured old devil—very superior in every way to the one the *Arabian Nights'* fisherman found in his bottle.

" Ninety-nine Jinn out of a hundred," thought Horace, " would have turned nasty on finding benefit after benefit ' declined with thanks.' But one good point in Fakrash is that he *does* take a hint in good part, and, as soon as he can be made to see where he's wrong, he's always ready to set things right. And he thoroughly understands now that these Oriental dodges of his won't do nowadays, and that when people see a penniless man suddenly wallowing in riches they naturally want to know how he came by them. I don't suppose he will trouble me much in future. If he should look in now and then, I must put up with it. Perhaps, if I suggested it, he wouldn't mind coming in some form that would look less outlandish. If he would get himself up as a banker, or a bishop—the Bishop of Bagdad, say—I shouldn't care how often he called. Only, I can't have him coming down the chimney in either capacity. But he'll see that himself. And he's done me one real service—I mustn't let myself forget that. He sent me old Wackerbath. By the way, I wonder if he's seen my designs yet, and what he thinks of them."

He was at his table, engaged in jotting down some rough ideas for the decoration of the reception-rooms in the projected house, when Beever came in.

" I've got nothing doing just now," he said ; "so I thought I'd come in and have a squint at those plans of yours, if they're forward enough to be seen yet."

THE BRASS BOTTLE

Ventimore had to explain that even the imperfect method of examination proposed was not possible, as he had despatched the drawings to his client the night before.

" Phew ! " said Beevor ; " that's sharp work, isn't it ? "

" I don't know. I've been sticking hard at it for over a fortnight."

" Well, you might have given me a chance of seeing what you've made of it. I let you see all *my* work ! "

" To tell you the honest truth, old fellow, I wasn't at all sure you'd like it, and I was afraid you'd put me out of conceit with what I'd done, and Wackerbath was in a frantic hurry to have the plans—so there it was."

" And do you think he'll be satisfied with them ? "

" He ought to be. I don't like to be cock-sure, but I believe—I really do believe—that I've given him rather more than he expected. It's going to be a devilish good house, though I say it myself."

" Something new-fangled and fantastic, eh ? Well, he mayn't care about it, you know. When you've had my experience, you'll realise that a client is a rum bird to satisfy."

" I shall satisfy *my* old bird," said Horace, gaily. " He'll have a cage he can hop about in to his heart's content."

" You're a clever chap enough," said Beevor ; " but to carry a big job like this through you want one thing—and that's ballast."

" Not while you heave yours at my head ! Come, old fellow, you aren't really riled because I sent off those plans without showing them to you ? I shall soon have them back, and then you can pitch into 'em as much as you please. Seriously, though, I shall want all the help you can spare when I come to the completed designs."

" 'Um," said Beevor, " you've got along very well alone so far—at least, by your own account; so I dare say you'll be able to manage without me to the end. Only, you know," he added, as he left the room, " you haven't won your spurs yet. A fellow isn't necessarily a Gilbert Scott,

or a Norman Shaw, or a Waterhouse just because he happens to get a sixty-thousand pound job the first go off I "

" Poor old Beevor ! " thought Horace, repentantly, " I've put his back up. I might just as well have shown him the plans after all ; it wouldn't have hurt me and it would have pleased *him*. Never mind, I'll make my peace with him after lunch. I'll ask him to give me his idea for a—no, hang it all, even friendship has its limits ! "

He returned from lunch to hear what sounded like an altercation of some sort in his office, in which, as he neared his door, Beevor's voice was distinctly audible.

" My dear sir," he was saying, " I have already told you that it is no affair of mine."

" But I ask you, sir, as a brother architect," said another voice, " whether you consider it professional or reasonable——? "

" As a brother architect," replied Beevor, as Ventimore opened the door, " I would rather be excused from giving an opinion. . . . Ah, here is Mr. Ventimore himself."

Horace entered, to find himself confronted by Mr. Wackerbath, whose face was purple and whose white whiskers were bristling with rage. " So, sir ! " he began. " So, sir !——" and choked ignominiously.

" There appears to have been some misunderstanding, my dear Ventimore," explained Beevor, with a studious correctness which was only a shade less offensive than open triumph. " I think I'd better leave you and this gentleman to talk it over quietly."

" Quietly ! " exclaimed Mr. Wackerbath, with an apoplectic snort ; " *quietly* ! ! "

" I've no idea what you are so excited about, sir," said Horace. " Perhaps you will explain ? "

" Explain ! " Mr. Wackerbath gasped ; " why—no, if I speak just now, I shall be ill : *you* tell him," he added, waving a plump hand in Beevor's direction.

" I'm not in possession of all the facts," said Beevor, smoothly ; " but, so far as I can gather, this gentleman

THE BRASS BOTTLE

thinks that, considering the importance of the work he intrusted to your hands, you have given less time to it than he might have expected. As I have told him, that is a matter which does not concern me, and which he must discuss with you."

So saying, Beevor retired to his own room, and shut the door with the same irreproachable discretion, which conveyed that he was not in the least surprised, but was too much of a gentleman to show it.

"Well, Mr. Wackerbath," began Horace, when they were alone, "so you're disappointed with the house?"

"Disappointed!" said Mr. Wackerbath, furiously. "I am disgusted, sir, disgusted!"

Horace's heart sank lower still; had he deceived himself after all, then? Had he been nothing but a conceited fool, and—most galling thought of all—had Beevor judged him only too accurately? And yet, no, he could not believe it—he *knew* his work was good!

"This is plain speaking with a vengeance," he said; "I'm sorry you're dissatisfied. I did my best to carry out your instructions."

"Oh, you did?" sputtered Mr. Wackerbath. "That's what you call—but go on, sir, go on!"

"I got it done as quickly as possible," continued Horace, "because I understood you wished no time to be lost."

"No one can accuse you of dawdling over it. What I should like to know is how the devil you managed to get it done in the time?"

"I worked incessantly all day and every day," said Horace. "That's how I managed it—and this is all the thanks I get for it!"

"Thanks?" Mr. Wackerbath well-nigh howled. "You—you insolent young charlatan; you expect thanks!"

"Now look here, Mr. Wackerbath," said Horace, whose own temper was getting a little frayed, "I'm not accustomed to being treated like this, and I don't intend to

submit to it. Just tell me—in as moderate language as you can command—what you object to."

" I object to the whole damned thing, sir ! I mean, I repudiate the entire concern. It's the work of a raving lunatic—a place that no English gentleman, sir, with any self-respect or—ah !—consideration for his reputation and position in the country, could consent to occupy for a single hour ! "

" Oh," said Horace, feeling deathly sick, " in that case it is useless, of course, to suggest any modifications."

" Absolutely ! " said Mr. Wackerbath.

" Very well, then ; there's no more to be said," replied Horace. " You will have no difficulty in finding an architect who will be more successful in realising your intentions. Mr. Beevor, the gentleman you met just now," he added, with a touch of bitterness, " would probably be just your man. Of course I retire altogether. And really, if anyone is the sufferer over this, I fancy it's myself. I can't see how you are any the worse."

" Not any the worse ? " cried Mr. Wackerbath, " when the infernal place is built! "

" Built! " echoed Horace, feebly.

" I tell you, sir, I saw it with my own eyes driving to the station this morning ; my coachman and footman saw it ; my wife saw it—damn it, sir, we *all* saw it ! "

Then Horace understood. His indefatigable Jinnee had been at work again ! Of course, for Fakrash it must have been what he would term " the easiest of affairs "—especially after a glance at the plans (and Ventimore remembered that the Jinnee had surprised him at work upon them, and even requested to have them explained to him)—to dispense with contractors and bricklayers and carpenters, and construct the entire building in the course of a single night.

It was a generous and spirited action—but, particularly now that the original designs had been found faulty and rejected, it placed the unfortunate architect in a most invidious position.

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" Well, sir," said Mr. Wackerbath, with elaborate irony, " I presume it is you whom I have to thank for improving my land by erecting this precious palace on it ? "

" I — I——" began Horace, utterly broken down ; and then he saw, with emotions that may be imagined, the Jinnee himself, in his green robes, standing immediately behind Mr. Wackerbath.

" Greeting to ye," said Fakrash, coming forward with his smile of amiable cunning. " If I mistake not," he added, addressing the startled estate-agent, who had jumped visibly, " thou art the merchant for whom my son here," and he laid a hand on Horace's shrinking shoulder, " undertook to construct a mansion ? "

" I am," said Mr. Wackerbath, in some mystification. " Have I the pleasure of addressing Mr. Ventimore, senior ? "

" No, no," put in Horace ; " no relation. He's a sort of informal partner."

" Hast thou not found him an architect of divine gifts ?" inquired the Jinnee, beaming with pride. " Is not the palace that he hath raised for thee by his transcendent accomplishments a marvel of beauty and stateliness, and one that Sultans might envy ? "

" No, sir ! " shouted the infuriated Mr. Wackerbath ; " since you ask my opinion, it's nothing of the sort ! It's a ridiculous tom-fool cross between the palm-house at Kew and the Brighton Pavilion ! There's no billiard-room, and not a decent bedroom in the house. I've been all over it, so I ought to know ; and as for drainage, there isn't a sign of it. And he has the brass—ah, I should say the unblushing effrontery—to call that a country house ! "

Horace's dismay was curiously shot with relief. The Jinnee, who was certainly very far from being a genius except by courtesy, had taken it upon himself to erect the palace according to his own notions of Arabian domestic luxury—and Horace, taught by bitter experience, could sympathise to some extent with his unfortunate client.

A FOOL'S PARADISE

On the other hand, it was balm to his smarting self-respect to find that it was not his own plans, after all, which had been found so preposterous ; and, by some obscure mental process, which I do not propose to explain, he became reconciled, and almost grateful, to the officious Fakrash. And then, too, he was *his* Jinnee, and Horace had no intention of letting him be bullied by an outsider.

" Let me explain, Mr. Wackerbath," he said. " Personally I've nothing to do with this. This gentleman, wishing to spare me the trouble, has taken upon himself to build your house for you, without consulting either of us, and, from what I know of his powers in that direction, I've no doubt that—that it's a devilish fine place, in its way. Anyhow, we make no charge for it—he presents it to you as a free gift. Why not accept it as such and make the best of it ? "

" Make the best of it ? " stormed Mr. Wackerbath. " Stand by and see the best site in three counties defaced by a jimcrack Moorish nightmare like that ! Why, they'll call it ' Wackerbath's Folly,' sir. I shall be the laughing-stock of the neighbourhood. I can't live in the beastly building. I couldn't afford to keep it up, and I won't have it cumbering my land. Do you hear ? / *won't* ! I'll go to law, cost me what it may, and compel you and your Arabian friend there to pull the thing down. I'll take the case up to the House of Lords, if necessary, and fight you as long as I can stand ! "

" As long as thou canst stand ! " repeated Fakrash, gently. " That is a long time truly, O thou litigious one ! . . . On all-fours, ungrateful dog that thou art ! " he cried, with an abrupt and entire change of manner, " and crawl henceforth for the remainder of thy days. I, Fakrash-el-Aamash, command thee ! "

It was both painful and grotesque to see the portly and intensely respectable Mr. Wackerbath suddenly drop forward on his hands while desperately striving to preserve his dignity. " How dare you, sir ? " he almost barked, " how *date* you, I say ? Are you aware that I

THE BRASS BOTTLE

could summon you for this ? Let me up. I *insist* upon getting up ! "

" O contemptible in aspect ! " replied the Jinnee, throwing open the door. " Begone to thy kennel."

" I won't! I can't ! " whimpered the unhappy man. " How dare you expect me—me ! —to cross Westminster Bridge on all-fours ? What will the officials think at Waterloo, where I have been known and respected for years ? How am I to face my family in—in this position ? Do, for mercy's sake, let me get up ! "

Horace had been too shocked and startled to speak before, but now humanity, coupled with disgust for the Jinnee's high-handed methods, compelled him to interfere. " Mr. Fakrash," he said, " this has gone far enough. Unless you stop tormenting this unfortunate gentleman, I've done with you."

" Never," said Fakrash. " He hath dared to abuse my palace, which is far too sumptuous a dwelling for such a son of a burnt dog as he. Therefore, I will make his abode to be in the dust for ever."

" But I *don't* find fault," yelped poor Mr. Wackerbath. " You—you entirely misunderstood the—the few comments I ventured to make. It's a capital mansion, handsome, and yet' homey,' too. I'll never say another word against it. I'll—yes, I'll *live* in it—if only you'll let me up ! "

" Do as he asks you," said Horace to the Jinnee, " or I swear I'll never speak to you again."

" Thou art the arbiter of this matter," was the reply. " And if I yield, it is at thy intercession, and not his. Rise, then," he said to the humiliated client; " depart, and show us the breadth of thy shoulders."

It was this precise moment which Beever, who was probably unable to restrain his curiosity any longer, chose to re-enter the room. " Oh, Ventimore," he began, " did I leave my——? . . . I beg your pardon. I thought you were alone again."

" Don't go, sir," said Mr. Wackerbath, as he scrambled

awkwardly to his feet, his usually florid face mottled in grey and lilac. " I — I should like you to know that, after talking things quietly over with your friend, Mr. Ventimore and his partner here, I am thoroughly convinced that my objections were quite untenable. I retract all I said. The house is—ah—admirably planned : *most* convenient, roomy, and—ah—unconventional. The—the entire freedom from all sanitary appliances is a particular recommendation. In short, I am more than satisfied. Pray forget anything I may have said which might be taken to imply the contrary. . . . Gentlemen, good afternoon ! "

He bowed himself past the Jinnee in a state of deference and apprehension, and was heard stumbling down the staircase. Horace hardly dared to meet Beevor's eyes, which were fixed upon the green-turbaned Jinnee, as he stood apart in dreamy abstraction, smiling placidly to himself.

" I say," Beevor said to Horace, at last, in an undertone, " you never told me you had gone into partnership."

" He's not a regular partner," whispered Ventimore ; " he does odd things for me occasionally, that's all."

" He soon managed to smooth your client down," remarked Beevor.

" Yes," said Horace ; " he's an Oriental, you see, and he has a—very persuasive manner. Would you like to be introduced ? "

" If it's all the same to you," replied Beevor, still below his voice, " I 'd rather be excused. To tell you the truth, old fellow, I don't altogether fancy the looks of him, and it's my opinion," he added, " that the less you have to do with him the better. He strikes me as a wrong-'un, old man."

" No, no," said Horace ; " eccentric, that's all—you don't understand him."

" Receive news ! " began the Jinnee, after Beevor, with suspicion and disapproval evident even on his back and

THE BRASS BOTTLE

shoulders, had retreated to his own room. " Suleyman, the Son of Daoood, sleeps with his fathers."

"I know," retorted Horace, whose nerves were unequal to much reference to Solomon just then. " So does Queen Anne."

" I have not heard of her. But art thou not astounded, then, by my tidings ? "

" I have matters nearer home to think about," said Horace, dryly. " I must say, Mr. Fakrash, you have landed me in a pretty mess ! "

" Explain thyself more fully, for I comprehend thee not."

" Why on earth," Horace groaned, " couldn't you let me build that house my own way ? "

" Did I not hear thee with my own ears lament thy inability to perform the task ? Thereupon, I determined that no disgrace should fall upon thee by reason of such incompetence, since I myself would erect a palace so splendid that it should cause thy name to live for ever. And, behold, it is done."

" It is," said Horace. " And so am I. I don't want to reproach you. I quite feel that you have acted with the best intentions ; but, oh, hang it all ! *can't* you see that you've absolutely wrecked my career as an architect ? "

" That is a thing that cannot be," returned the Jinnee, " seeing that thou hast all the credit."

" The credit ! This is England, not Arabia. What credit can I gain from being supposed to be the architect of an Oriental pavilion, which might be all very well for Haroun-al-Raschid, but I can assure you is preposterous as a home for an average Briton ? "

" Yet that overfed hound," remarked the Jinnee, " expressed much gratification therewith."

" Naturally, after he had found that he could not give a candid opinion except on all-fours. A valuable testimonial, that ! And how do you suppose I can take his money ? No, Mr. Fakrash, if I have to go on all-fours

myself for it, I must say, and I will say, that you've made a most frightful muddle of it ! "

" Acquaint me with thy wishes," said Fakrash, a little abashed, " for thou knowest that I can refuse thee naught."

" Then," said Horace, boldly, " couldn't you remove that palace—dissipate it into space or something ? "

" Verily," said the Jinnee, in an aggrieved tone, " to do good acts unto such as thee is but wasted time, for thou givest me no peace till they are undone ! "

" This is the last time," urged Horace ; " I promise never to ask you for anything again."

" Not for the first time hast thou made such a promise," said Fakrash. " And save for the magnitude of thy service unto me, I would not hearken to this caprice of thine, nor wilt thou find me so indulgent on another occasion. But for this once"—and he muttered some words and made a sweeping gesture with his right hand—" thy desire is granted unto thee. Of the palace and all that is therein there remaineth no trace ! "

" Another surprise for poor old Wackerbath," thought Horace, " but a pleasant one this time. My dear Mr. Fakrash," he said aloud, " I really can't say how grateful I am to you. And now—I hate bothering you like this, but if you *could* manage to look in on Professor Futvoye——"

" What ! " cried the Jinnee, " yet another request ? Already ! "

" Well, you promised you'd do that before, you know!" said Horace.

" For that matter," remarked Fakrash, " I have already fulfilled my promise."

" You have ? " Horace exclaimed. " And does he believe now that it's all true about that bottle ? "

" When I left him," answered the Jinnee, " all his doubts were removed."

" By Jove, you *are* a trump ! " cried Horace, only too glad to be able to commend with sincerity. " And

THE BRASS BOTTLE

do you think, if I went to him now, I should find him the same as usual ? "

" Nay," said Fakrash, with his weak and yet inscrutable smile, " that is more than I can promise thee."

" But why ? " asked Horace, " if he knows all ? "

There was the oddest expression in the Jinnee's furtive eyes : a kind of elfin mischief combined with a sense of wrong-doing, like a naughty child whose palate is still reminiscent of illicit jam. " Because," he replied, with a sound between a giggle and a chuckle, " because, in order to overcome his unbelief, it was necessary to transform him into a one-eyed mule of hideous appearance."

" *What!* " cried Horace. But, whether to avoid thanks or explanations, the Jinnee had disappeared with his customary abruptness.

" Fakrash ! " shouted Horace, " Mr. Fakrash ! Come back ! Do you hear ? I *must* speak to you ! " There was no answer ; the Jinnee might be well on his way to Lake Chad, or Jericho, by that time—he was certainly far enough from Great Cloister Street.

Horace sat down at his drawing-table, and, his head buried in his hands, tried to think out this latest complication. Fakrash had transformed Professor Futvoye into a one-eyed mule. It would have seemed incredible, almost unthinkable, once, but so many impossibilities had happened to Horace of late that one more made little or no strain upon his credulity.

What he felt chiefly was the new barrier that this event must raise between himself and Sylvia ; to do him justice, the mere fact that the father of his *fiancee* was a mule did not lessen his ardour in the slightest. Even if he had felt no personal responsibility for the calamity, he loved Sylvia far too well to be deterred by it, and few family cupboards are without a skeleton of some sort.

With courage and the determination to look only on the bright side of things, almost any domestic drawback can be lived down.

But the real point, as he instantly recognised, was whether in the changed condition of circumstances Sylvia would consent to marry *him*. Might she not, after the experiences of that abominable dinner of the night before, connect him in some way with her poor father's transformation? She might even suspect him of employing this means of compelling the Professor to renew their engagement; and, indeed, Horace was by no means certain himself that the Jinnee might not have acted from some muddle-headed motive of this kind. It was likely enough that the Professor, after learning the truth, should have refused to allow his daughter to marry the *protege* of so dubious a patron, and that Fakrash had then resorted to pressure.

In any case, Ventimore knew Sylvia well enough to feel sure that pride would steel her heart against him so long as this obstacle remained.

It would be unseemly to set down here all that Horace said and thought of the person who had brought all this upon them, but after some wild and futile raving he became calm enough to recognise that his proper place was by Sylvia's side. Perhaps he ought to have told her at first, and then she would have been less unprepared for this—and yet how could he trouble her mind so long as he could cling to the hope that the Jinnee would cease to interfere?

But now he could be silent no longer; naturally the prospect of calling at Cottesmore Gardens just then was anything but agreeable, but he felt it would be cowardly to keep away.

Besides, he could cheer them up; he could bring with him a message of hope. No doubt they believed that the Professor's transformation would be permanent—a harrowing prospect for so united a family; but, fortunately, Horace would be able to reassure them on this point.

Fakrash had always revoked his previous performances as soon as he could be brought to understand their

THE BRASS BOTTLE

fatuity—and Ventimore would take good care that he revoked this.

Nevertheless, it was with a sinking heart and an unsteady hand that he pulled the visitors' bell at the Futvoyes' house that afternoon, for he neither knew in what state he should find that afflicted family, nor how they would regard his intrusion at such a time.

12. *The Messenger of Hope*

ITESSIE, the neat and pretty parlour-maid, opened the door with a smile of welcome which Horace found reassuring. No girl, he thought, whose master had suddenly been transformed into a mule could possibly smile like that. The Professor, she told him, was not at home, which again was comforting. For a *savant*, however careless about his personal appearance, would scarcely venture to brave public opinion in the semblance of a quadruped.

"Is the Professor out?" he inquired, to make sure.

"Not exactly out, sir," said the maid, "but particularly engaged, working hard in his study, and not to be disturbed on no account."

This was encouraging, too, since a mule could hardly engage in literary labour of any kind. Evidently the Jinnee must either have over-rated his supernatural powers, or else have been deliberately amusing himself at Horace's expense.

"Then I will see Miss Futvoye," he said.

"Miss Sylvia is with the master, sir," said the girl; "but if you'll come into the drawing-room I'll let Mrs. Futvoye know you are here."

He had not been in the drawing-room long before Mrs. Futvoye appeared, and one glance at her face confirmed Ventimore's worst fears. Outwardly she was calm enough, but it was only too obvious that her calmness was the result of severe self-repression;

THE MESSENGER OF HOPE

her eyes, usually so shrewdly and placidly observant, had a haggard and hunted look ; her ears seemed on the strain to catch some distant sound.

" I hardly thought we should see you to-day," she began, in a tone of studied reserve ; " but perhaps you came to offer some explanation of the extraordinary manner in which you thought fit to entertain us last night ? If so——"

" The fact is," said Horace, looking into his hat, " I came because I was rather anxious about the Professor."

" About my husband ? " said the poor lady, with a really heroic effort to appear surprised. " He is—as well as could be expected. Why should you suppose otherwise ? " she added, with a flash of suspicion.

" I fancied perhaps that—that he mightn't be quite himself to-day," said Horace, with his eyes on the carpet.

" I see," said Mrs. Futvoye, regaining her composure ; " you were afraid that all those foreign dishes might not have agreed with him. But—except that he is a little irritable this afternoon—he is much as usual."

" I'm delighted to hear it," said Horace, with reviving hope. " Do you think he would see me for a moment ? "

" Great heavens, no ! " cried Mrs. Futvoye, with an irrepressible start ; " I mean," she explained, " that, after what took place last night, Anthony—my husband—very properly feels that an interview would be too painful."

" But when we parted he was perfectly friendly."

" I can only say," replied the courageous woman, " that you would find him considerably altered now."

Horace had no difficulty in believing it.

" At least, I may see Sylvia ? " he pleaded.

" No," said Mrs. Futvoye ; " I really can't have Sylvia disturbed just now. She is very busy, helping her father. Anthony has to read a paper at one of his societies to-morrow night, and she is writing it out from his dictation."

If any departure from strict truth can ever be excusable

THE BRASS BOTTLE

this surely was one ; unfortunately, just then Sylvia herself burst into the room.

" Mother," she cried, without seeing Horace in her agitation, " do come to dad, quick ! He has just begun kicking again, and I can't manage him alone. . . . Oh, you here ? " she broke off, as she saw who was in the room. " Why do you come here now, Horace ? Please, *please* go away ! Papa is rather unwell—nothing serious, only—oh, *do* go away ! "

" Darling ! " said Horace, going to her and taking both her hands, " I know all—do you understand ?—*all!*"

" Mamma ! " cried Sylvia, reproachfully, " have you told him—already ? When we settled that even Horace wasn't to know till—till father recovers ! "

" I have told him nothing, my dear," replied her mother. " He can't possibly know, unless—but no, that isn't possible. And, after all," she added, with a warning glance at her daughter, " I don't know why we should make any mystery about a mere attack of gout. But I had better go and see if your father wants anything." And she hurried out of the room.

Sylvia sat down and gazed silently into the fire. " I dare say you don't know how dreadfully people kick when they've got gout," she remarked presently.

" Oh yes, I do," said Horace, sympathetically ; " at least, I can guess."

" Especially when it's in both legs," continued Sylvia.

" Or," said Horace, gently, " in all four."

" Ah, you *do* know ! " cried Sylvia. " Then it's all the more horrid of you to come ! "

" Dearest," said Horace, " is not this just the time when my place should be near you—and him ? "

" Not near father, Horace ! " she put in anxiously ; " it wouldn't be at all safe."

" Do you really think I have any fear for myself ? "

" Are you sure you quite know—what he is like now ? "

" I understand," said Horace, trying to put it as

THE MESSENGER OF HOPE

considerately as possible, " that a casual observer, who didn't know your father, might mistake him, at first sight, for—for some sort of quadruped."

" He's a mule," sobbed Sylvia, breaking down entirely. " I could bear it better if he had been a *nice* mule. . . . B—but he isn't ! "

" Whatever he may be," declared Horace, as he knelt by her chair endeavouring to comfort her, " nothing can alter my profound respect for him. And you must let me see him, Sylvia ; because I fully believe I shall be able to cheer him up."

" If you imagine you can persuade him to—to laugh it off ! " said Sylvia, tearfully.

" I wasn't proposing to try to make him see the humorous side of his situation," Horace mildly explained. " I trust I have more tact than that. But he may be glad to know that, at the worst, it is only a temporary inconvenience. I'll take care that he's all right again before very long."

She started up and looked at him, her eyes widened with dawning dread and mistrust.

" If you can speak like that," she said, " it must have been *you* who—no, I can't believe it—that would be too horrible ! "

" I who did *what*, Sylvia ? Weren't you there when—when it happened ? "

" No," she replied. " I was only told of it afterwards. Mother heard father talking loudly in his study this morning, as if he was angry with somebody, and at last she grew so uneasy she couldn't bear it any longer, and went in to see what was the matter with him. Dad was quite alone and looked as usual, only a little excited ; and then, without the slightest warning, just as she entered the room, he—he changed slowly into a mule before her eyes ! Anybody but Mums would have lost her head and roused the whole house."

" Thank Heaven she didn't ! " said Horace, fervently. " That was what I was most afraid of."

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" Then—oh, Horace, it *was* you ! It's no use denying it. I feel more certain of it every moment! "

" Now, Sylvia ! " he protested, still anxious, if possible, to keep the worst from her, " what could have put such an idea as that into your head ? "

" I don't know," she said, slowly. " Several things last night. No one who was really nice, and like everybody else, would live in queer rooms like those, and dine on cushions, with dreadful black slaves, and—and dancing-girls and things. You pretended you were quite poor."

" So I am, darling. And as for the rooms, and—and the rest, they're all gone, Sylvia. If you went to Vincent Square to-day, you wouldn't find a trace of them ! "

" That only shows ! " said Sylvia. " But why should you play such a cruel, and—and ungentlemanly trick on poor dad ! If you had ever really loved me——! "

" But I do. Sylvia, you can't really believe me capable of such an outrage ! Look at me and tell me so."

" No, Horace," said Sylvia, frankly. " I don't believe *you* did it. But I believe you know who *did*. And you had better tell me at once ! "

" If you're quite sure you can stand it," he replied, " I'll tell you everything." And, as briefly as possible, he told her how he had unsealed the brass bottle, and all that had come of it.

She bore it, on the whole, better than he had expected ; perhaps, being a woman, it was some consolation to her to remind him that she had foretold something of this kind from the very first.

" But, of course, I never really thought it would be so awful as this ! " she said. " Horace, how *could* you be so careless as to let a great wicked thing like that escape out of its bottle ? "

" I had a notion it was a manuscript," said Horace—" till he came out. But he isn't a great wicked thing, Sylvia. He's an amiable old Jinnee enough. And he'd

THE MESSENGER OF HOPE

do anything for me. Nobody could be more grateful and generous than he has been."

"Do you call it generous to change the poor, dear dad into a mule?" inquired Sylvia, with a little curl of her upper lip.

"That was an oversight" said Horace; "he meant no harm by it. In Arabia they do these things—or used to in his day. Not that that's much excuse for him. Still, he's not so young as he was, and besides, being bottled up for all those centuries must have narrowed him rather. You must try and make allowances for him, darling."

"I shan't," said Sylvia, "unless he apologises to poor father, and puts him right at once."

"Why, of course, he'll do that," Horace answered confidently. "I'll see that he does. I don't mean to stand any more of his nonsense. I'm afraid I've been just a little too slack for fear of hurting his feelings; but this time he's gone too far, and I shall talk to him like a Dutch uncle. He's always ready to do the right thing when he's once shown when he has gone wrong—only he takes such a lot of showing, poor old chap!"

"But when do you think he'll—do the right thing?"

"Oh, as soon as I see him again."

"Yes; but when *will* you see him again?"

"That's more than I can say. He's away just now—in China, or Peru, or somewhere."

"Horace! Then he won't be back for months and months!"

"Oh yes, he will. He can do the whole trip, *alter et retour*, you know, in a few hours. He's an active old beggar for his age. In the meantime, dearest, the chief thing is to keep up your father's spirits. So I think I'd better—I was just telling Sylvia, Mrs. Futvoye," he said, as that lady re-entered the room, "that I should like to see the Professor at once."

"It's quite, *quite* impossible!" was the nervous reply. "He's in such a state that he's unable to see any-

THE BRASS BOTTLE

one. You don't know how fractious gout makes him ! "

" Dear Mrs. Futvoye," said Horace, " believe me, I know more than you suppose."

" Yes, mother dear," put in Sylvia, " he knows everything—*really* everything. And perhaps it might do dad good to see him."

Mrs. Futvoye sank helplessly down on a settee. " Oh, dear me ! " she said. " I don't know *what* to say. I really don't. If you had seen him plunge at the mere suggestion of a doctor ! "

Privately, though naturally he could not say so, Horace thought a vet. might be more appropriate, but eventually he persuaded Mrs. Futvoye to conduct him to her husband's study.

" Anthony, love," she said, as she knocked gently at the door, " I've brought Horace Ventimore to see you for a few moments, if he may."

It seemed, from the sounds of furious snorting and stamping within, that the Professor resented this intrusion on his privacy. " My dear Anthony," said his devoted wife, as she unlocked the door and turned the key on the inside after admitting Horace, " try to be calm. Think of the servants downstairs. Horace is so anxious to help."

As for Ventimore, he was speechless—so inexpressibly shocked was he by the alteration in the Professor's appearance. He had never seen a mule in sorrier condition or in so vicious a temper. Most of the lighter furniture had been already reduced to matchwood ; the glass doors of the bookcase were starred or shattered ; precious Egyptian pottery and glass were strewn in fragments on the carpet, and even the mummy, though it still smiled with the same enigmatic cheerfulness, seemed to have suffered severely from the Professorial hoofs.

Horace instinctively felt that any words of conventional sympathy would jar here ; indeed, the Professor's **attitude and expression reminded him** irresistibly of a

THE MESSENGER OF HOPE

certain "Blondin Donkey" he had seen enacted by music-hall artists, at the point where it becomes sullen and defiant. Only, he had laughed helplessly at the Blondin Donkey, and somehow he felt no inclination to laugh now.

"Believe me, sir," he began, "I would not disturb you like this unless—steady there, for Heaven's sake, Professor, don't kick till you've heard me out!" For the mule, in a clumsy, shambling way which betrayed the novice, was slowly revolving on his own axis so as to bring his hind-quarters into action, while still keeping his only serviceable eye upon his unwelcome visitor.

"Listen to me, sir," said Horace, manoeuvring in his turn. "I'm not to blame for this, and if you brain me, as you seem to be endeavouring to do, you'll simply destroy the only living man who can get you out of this."

The mule appeared impressed by this, and backed cumbrously into a corner, from which he regarded Horace with a mistrustful but attentive eye. "If, as I imagine, sir," continued Horace, "you are, though temporarily deprived of speech, perfectly capable of following an argument, will you kindly signify it by raising your right ear?" The mule's right ear rose with a sharp twitch.

"Now we can get on," said Horace. "First let me tell you that I repudiate all responsibility for the proceedings of that infernal Jinnee. . . . I wouldn't stamp like that—you might go through the floor, you know.... Now, if you will only exercise a little patience——"

At this the exasperated animal made a sudden run at him with his mouth open, which obliged Horace to shelter himself behind a large leather arm-chair. "You really *must* keep cool, sir," he remonstrated; "your nerves are naturally upset. If I might suggest a little champagne—you could manage it in—in a bucket, and it would help you to pull yourself together. A whisk of your—er—tail would imply consent." The Professor's tail instantly swept some rare Arabian glass lamps and

THE BRASS BOTTLE

vases from a shelf at his rear, whereupon Mrs. Futvoye went out, and returned presently with a bottle of champagne and a large china *jardiniere*, as the best substitute she could find for a bucket.

When the mule had drained the flower-pot greedily and appeared refreshed, Horace proceeded : "I have every hope, sir," he said, " that before many hours you will be smiling—pray don't prance like that, I mean what I say—smiling over what now seems to you, very justly, a most annoying and serious catastrophe. I shall speak seriously to Fakrash (the Jinnee, you know), and I am sure that, as soon as he realises what a frightful blunder he has made, he will be the first to offer you every reparation in his power. For, old foozle as he is, he's thoroughly good-hearted."

The Professor drooped his ears at this, and shook his head with a doleful incredulity that made him look more like the Pantomime Donkey than ever.

" I think I understand him fairly well by this time, sir," said Horace, " and I'll answer for it that there's no real harm in him. I give you my word of honour that, if you'll only remain quiet and leave everything to me, you shall very soon be released from this absurd position. That's all I came to tell you, and now I won't trouble you any longer. If you *could* bring yourself, as a sign that you bear me no ill-feeling, to give me your—your off-foreleg at parting, I——"

But the Professor turned his back in so pointed and ominous a manner that Horace judged it better to withdraw without insisting further. " I'm afraid," he said to Mrs. Futvoye, after they had rejoined Sylvia in the drawing-room—" I'm afraid the Professor is still a little sore with me about this miserable business."

" I don't know what else you can expect," replied the lady, rather tartly ; " he can't help feeling—as we all must and do, after what you said just now—that, but for you, this would never have happened ! "

" If you mean it was all through my attending that

THE MESSENGER OF HOPE

sale," said Horace, " you might remember that I only went there at his request. You know that, Sylvia."

" Yes, Horace," said Sylvia ; " but papa never asked you to buy a hideous brass bottle with a nasty Genius in it. And anyone with ordinary common sense would have kept it properly corked ! "

" What, you against me too, Sylvia ! " cried Horace, cut to the quick.

" No, Horace, never against you. I didn't mean to say what I did. Only it *is* such a relief to put the blame on somebody. I know, I *know* you feel it almost as much as we do. But so long as poor, dear daddy remains as he is, we can never be anything to one another. You must see that, Horace ! "

" Yes, I see that," he said ; " but, trust me, Sylvia, he shall *not* remain as he is. I swear he shall not. In another day or two, at the outside, you will see him his own self once more. And then—oh, darling, darling, you won't let anything or anybody separate us ? Promise me that ! "

He would have held her in his arms, but she kept him at a distance. " When dad is himself again," she said, " I shall know better what to say. I can't promise anything now, Horace."

Horace recognised that no appeal would draw a more definite answer from her just then ; so he took his leave, with the feeling that, after all, matters must improve before very long, and in the meantime he must bear the suspense with patience.

He got through dinner as well as he could in his own rooms, for he did not like to go to his club lest the Jinnee should suddenly return during his absence.

" If he wants me he'd be quite equal to coming on to the club after me," he reflected, " for he has about as much sense of the fitness of things as Mary's lamb. I shouldn't care about seeing him suddenly bursting through the floor of the smoking-room. Nor would the committee."

THE BRASS BOTTLE

He sat up late, in the hope that Fakrash would appear ; but the Jinnee made no sign, and Horace began to get uneasy. " I wish there was some way of ringing him up," he thought. " If he were only the slave of a ring or a lamp, I'd rub it ; but it wouldn't be any use to rub that bottle—and, besides, he isn't a slave. Probably he has a suspicion that he has not exactly distinguished himself over his latest feat, and thinks it prudent to keep out of my way for the present. But if he fancies he'll make things any better for himself by that he'll find himself mistaken."

It was maddening to think of the unhappy Professor still fretting away hour after hour in the uncongenial form of a mule, waiting impatiently for the relief that never came. If it lingered much longer, he might actually starve, unless his family thought of getting in some oats for him, and he could be prevailed upon to touch them. And how much longer could they succeed in concealing the nature of his affliction ? How long before all Kensington, and the whole civilised world, would know that one of the leading Orientalists in Europe was restlessly prancing on four legs around his study in Cottesmore Gardens ?

Racked by speculations such as these, Ventimore lay awake till well into the small hours, when he dropped off into troubled dreams that, wild as they were, could not be more grotesquely fantastic than the realities to which they were the alternative.

13. *A Choice of Evils*

NOT even his morning tub could brace Ventimore's spirits to their usual cheerfulness. After sending away his breakfast almost untasted he stood at his window, looking drearily out over the crude green turf of Vincent Square at the indigo masses of the Abbey and the Victoria Tower and the huge gasometers to the right which loomed faintly through a dun-coloured haze.

A CHOICE OF EVILS

He felt a positive loathing for his office, to which he had gone with such high hopes and enthusiasm of late. There was no work for him to do there any longer, and the sight of his drawing-table and materials would, he knew, be intolerable in their mute mockery.

Nor could he with any decency present himself again at Cottesmore Gardens while the situation still remained unchanged, as it must do until he had seen Fakrash.

When would the Jinnee return, or—horrible suspicion !—did he never intend to return at all ?

" Fakrash ! " he groaned aloud, " you *caiCt* really mean to leave me in such a regular deuce of a hole as this ? "

" At thy service ! " said a well-known voice behind him, and he turned to see the Jinnee standing smiling on the hearthrug—and at this accomplishment of his dearest desire all his indignation surged back.

" Oh, *there* you are ! " he said irritably. " Where on earth have you been all this time ? "

" Nowhere on earth," was the bland reply ; " but in the regions of the air, seeking to promote thy welfare."

" If you have been as brilliantly successful up there as you have down here," retorted Horace, " I have much to thank you for."

" I am more than repaid," answered the Jinnee, who, like many highly estimable persons, was almost impervious to irony, " by such assurances of thy gratitude."

" I'm *not* grateful," said Horace, fuming. " I'm devilish annoyed ! "

" Well hath it been written," replied the Jinnee :—

' Be disregardful of thine affairs, and commit them to the course of
Fate,
For often a thing that enrages thee may eventually be to thee
pleasing/ "

" I don't see the remotest chance of that, in my case," said Horace.

" Why is thy countenance thus troubled, and what new complaint hast thou against me ? "

THE BRASS BOTTLE

"What the devil do you mean by turning a distinguished and perfectly inoffensive scholar into a wall-eyed mule?" Horace broke out. "If that is your idea of a practical joke——!"

"It is one of the easiest affairs possible," said the Jinnee, complacently running his fingers through the thin strands of his beard. "I have accomplished such transformations on several occasions.*"

"Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself, that's all. The question is now—how do you propose to restore him again?"

"Far from undoing be that which is accomplished!" was the sententious answer.

"What?" cried Horace, hardly believing his ears; "you surely don't mean to allow that unhappy Professor to remain like that for ever, do you?"

"None can alter what is predestined."

"Very likely not. But it wasn't decreed that a learned man should be suddenly degraded to a beastly mule for the rest of his life. Destiny wouldn't be such a fool!"

"Despise not mules, for they are useful and valuable animals in the household."

"But, confound it all, have you no imagination? Can't you enter at all into the feelings of a man—a man of wide learning and reputation—suddenly plunged into such a humiliating condition?"

"Upon his own head be it," said Fakrash, coldly. "For he hath brought this fate upon himself."

"Well, how do you suppose that you have helped *me* by this performance? Will it make him any the more disposed to consent to my marrying his daughter? Is that all you know of the world?"

"It is not my intention that thou shouldest take his daughter to wife."

"Whether you approve or not, it's my intention to marry her."

"Assuredly she will not marry thee so long as her father remaineth a mule."

A CHOICE OF EVILS

" There I agree with you. But is that your notion of doing me a good turn ? "

" I did not consider thy interest in this matter."

" Then will you be good enough to consider it now ? I have pledged my word that he shall be restored to his original form. Not only my happiness is at stake, but my honour."

" By failure to perform the impossible none can lose honour. And this is a thing that cannot be undone."

" Cannot be undone ? " repeated Horace, feeling a cold clutch at his heart. " Why ? "

" Because," said the Jinnee, sullenly, " I have forgotten the way."

" Nonsense ! " retorted Horace ; " I don't believe it. Why," he urged, descending to flattery, " you're such a clever old Johnny—I beg your pardon, I meant such a clever old *Jinnee*—you can do anything, if you only give your mind to it. Just look at the way you changed this house back again to what it was. Marvellous ! "

" That was the veriest trifle," said Fakrash, though he was obviously pleased by this tribute to his talent; " this would be a different affair altogether."

" But child's play to *you!*" insinuated Horace. " Come, you know very well you can do it if you only choose."

" It may be as thou sayest. But I do not choose."

" Then I think," said Horace, " that, considering the obligation you admit yourself you are under to me, I have a right to know the reason—the *real* reason—why you refuse."

" Thy claim is not without justice," answered the Jinnee, after a pause, " nor can I decline to gratify thee."

" That's right," cried Horace ; " I knew you'd see it in the proper light when it was once put to you. Now, don't lose any more time, but restore that unfortunate man at once, as you've promised."

" Not so," said the Jinnee ; " I promised thee a reason for my refusal—and that thou shalt have. Know then,

THE BRASS BOTTLE

O my son, that this indiscreet one had, by some vile and unhallowed arts, divined the hidden meaning of what was written upon the seal of the bottle wherein I was confined, and was preparing to reveal the same unto all men."

" What would it matter to you if he did ? "

" Much—for the writing contained a false and lying record of my actions."

" If it is all lies, it can't do you any harm. Why not treat them with the contempt they deserve ? "

" They are not a//lies," the Jinnee admitted reluctantly.

" Well, never mind. Whatever you've done, you've expiated it by this time."

" Now that Suleyman is no more, it is my desire to seek out my kinsmen of the Green Jinn, and live out my days in amity and honour. How can that be if they hear my name execrated by all mortals ? "

" Nobody would think of execrating you about an affair three thousand years old. It's too stale a scandal."

" Thou speakest without understanding. I tell thee that if men knew but the half of my misdoings," said Fakrash, in a tone not altogether free from a kind of sombre complacency, " the noise of them would rise even unto the uppermost regions, and scorn and loathing would be my portion."

" Oh, it's not so bad as all that," said Horace, who had a private impression that the Jinnee's " past " would probably turn out to be chiefly made up of peccadilloes. " But, anyway, I'm sure the Professor will readily agree to keep silence about it ; and, as you have, of course, got the seal in your own possession again——"

" Nay ; the seal is still in his possession, and it is naught to me where it is deposited," said Fakrash, " since the only mortal who hath deciphered it is now a dumb animal."

" Not at all," said Horace. " There are several friends of his who could decipher that inscription quite as easily as he did."

A CHOICE OF EVILS

" Is this the truth ? " said the Jinnee, in visible alarm.

" Certainly, " said Horace. " Within the last quarter of a century archaeology has made great strides. Our learned men can now read Babylonian bricks and Chaldean tablets as easily as if they were advertisements on galvanised iron. You may think you've been extremely clever in turning the Professor into an animal, but you'll probably find you've only made another mistake."

" How so ? " inquired Fakrash.

" Well, " said Horace, seeing his advantage, and pushing it unscrupulously, " now that, in your infinite wisdom, you have ordained that he should be a mule, he naturally can't possess property. Therefore all his effects will have to be sold, and amongst them will be that seal of yours, which, like many other things in his collection, will probably be bought up by the British Museum, where it will be examined and commented upon by every Orientalist in Europe. I suppose you've thought of all that ? "

" O young man of marvellous sagacity ! " said the Jinnee ; " truly I had omitted to consider these things, and thou hast opened my eyes in time. For I will present myself unto this man-mule and adjure him to reveal where he hath bestowed this seal, so that I may regain it."

" He can't do that, you know, so long as he remains a mule."

" I will endow him with speech for the purpose."

" Let me tell you this, " said Horace : " he's in a very nasty temper just now, naturally enough, and you won't get anything out of him until you have restored him to human form. If you do that, he'll agree to anything."

" Whether I restore him or not will depend not on me, but on the damsel who is his daughter, and to whom thou art contracted in marriage. For first of all I must speak with her."

" So long as I am present and you promise not to play any tricks, " said Horace, " I've no objection, for I believe, if you once saw her and heard her plead for her

THE BRASS BOTTLE

poor father, you wouldn't have the heart to hold out any longer. But you must give me your word that you'll behave yourself."

"Thou hast it," said the Jinnee; "I do but desire to see her on thine account."

"Very well," agreed Horace; "but I really can't introduce you in that turban—she'd be terrified. Couldn't you contrive to get yourself up in commonplace English clothes, just for once—something that wouldn't attract so much attention?"

"Will this satisfy thee?" inquired the Jinnee, as his green turban and flowing robes suddenly resolved themselves into the conventional chimney-pot hat, frock-coat, and trousers of modern civilisation.

He bore a painful resemblance in them to the kind of elderly gentleman who comes on in the harlequinade to be bonneted by the clown; but Horace was in no mood to be critical just then.

"That's better," he said encouragingly; "much better. Now," he added, as he led the way to the hall and put on his own hat and overcoat, "we'll go out and find a hansom and be at Kensington in less than twenty minutes."

"We shall be there in less than twenty seconds," said the Jinnee, seizing him by the arm above the elbow; and Horace found himself suddenly carried up into the air and set down, gasping with surprise and want of breath, on the pavement opposite the Futvoyes' door.

"I should just like to observe," he said, as soon as he could speak, "that if we've been seen, we shall probably cause a sensation. Londoners are not accustomed to seeing people skimming over the chimney-pots like amateur rooks."

"Trouble not for that," said Fakrash, "for no mortal eyes are capable of following our flight."

"I hope not," said Horace, "or I shall lose any reputation I have left. I think," he added, "I'd better go in alone first and prepare them, if you won't mind

waiting outside. I'll come to the window and wave my pocket-handkerchief when they're ready. And *do* come in by the door like an ordinary person, and ask the maid-servant if you may see me."

"I will bear it in mind," answered the Jinnee, and suddenly sank, or seemed to sink, through a chink in the pavement.

Horace, after ringing at the Futvoyes' door, was admitted and shown into the drawing-room, where Sylvia presently came to him, looking as lovely as ever, in spite of the pallor due to sleeplessness and anxiety. "It is kind of you to call and inquire," she said, with the unnatural calm of suppressed hysteria. "Dad is much the same this morning. He had a fairly good night, and was able to take part of a carrot for breakfast—but I'm afraid he's just remembered that he has to read a paper on 'Oriental Occultism' before the Asiatic Society this evening, and it's worrying him a little. . . . Oh, Horace!" she broke out, unexpectedly, "how perfectly awful all this is! How *are* we to bear it?"

"Don't give way, darling!" said Horace; "you will not have to bear it much longer."

"It's all very well, Horace, but unless something is done *soon* it will be too late. We can't go on keeping a mule in the study without the servants suspecting something, and where are we to put poor dear father? It's too ghastly to think of his having to be sent away to—to a Home of Rest for Horses—and yet what *is* to be done with him? . . . Why do you come if you can't do anything?"

"I shouldn't be here unless I could bring you good news. You remember what I told you about the Jinnee?"

"Remember!" cried Sylvia. "As if I could forget! Has he really come back, Horace?"

"Yes. I think I have brought him to see that he has made a foolish mistake in enchanting your unfortunate father, and he seems willing to undo it on certain corxli-tions. He is somewhere within call at this moment, and

THE BRASS BOTTLE

will come in whenever I give the signal. But he wishes to speak to you first."

"To *me*? Oh no, Horace!" exclaimed Sylvia, recoiling, "Fd so much rather not. I don't like things that have come out of brass bottles. I shouldn't know what to say, and it would frighten me horribly."

"You must be brave, darling!" said Horace. "Remember that it depends on you whether the Professor is to be restored or not. And there's nothing alarming about old Fakrash, either. I've got him to put on ordinary things, and he really don't look so bad in them. He's quite a mild, amiable old noodle, and he'll do anything for you, if you'll only stroke him down the right way. You *will* see him, won't you, for your father's sake?"

"If I must," said Sylvia, with a shudder, "I—I'll be as nice to him as I can."

Horace went to the window and gave the signal, though there was no one in sight. However, it was evidently seen, for the next moment there was a resounding blow at the front door, and a little later Jessie, the parlour-maid, announced, "Mr. Fatrasher Larmash—to see Mr. Ventimore," and the Jinnee stalked gravely in, with his tall hat on his head.

"You are probably not aware of it, sir," said Horace, "but it is the custom here to uncover in the presence of a lady." The Jinnee removed his hat with both hands, and stood silent and impassive.

"Let me present you to Miss Sylvia Futvoye," Ventimore continued, "the lady whose name you have already heard."

There was a momentary gleam in Fakrash's odd, slanting eyes as they lighted on Sylvia's shrinking figure, but he made no acknowledgment of the introduction.

"The damsel is not without comeliness," he remarked to Horace; "but there are lovelier far than she."

"I didn't ask you for either criticisms or comparisons," said Ventimore, sharply; "there is nobody in the world equal to Miss Futvoye, in my opinion, and you will be

good enough to remember that fact. She is exceedingly distressed (as any dutiful daughter would be) by the cruel and senseless trick you have played her father, and she begs that you will rectify it at once. Don't you, Sylvia ? "

" Yes, indeed ! " said Sylvia, almost in a whisper, " if — i f it isn't troubling you too much ! "

" I have been turning over thy words in my mind," said Fakrash to Horace, still ignoring Sylvia, " and I am convinced that thou art right. Even if the contents of the seal were known of all men, they would raise no clamour about affairs that concern them not. Therefore it is naught to me in whose hands the seal may be. Dost thou not agree with me in this ? "

" Of course I do," said Horace. " And it naturally follows that——"

" It naturally follows, as thou sayeth," said the Jinnee, with a cunning assumption of indifference, " that I have naught to gain by demanding back the seal as the price of restoring this damsel's father to his original form. Wherefore, so far as I am concerned, let him remain a mule for ever ; unless, indeed, thou art ready to comply with my conditions."

" Conditions ! cried Horace, utterly unprepared for this conclusion. " What can you possibly want from me ? But state them. I'll agree to anything, in reason ! "

" I demand that thou shouldst renounce the hand of this damsel."

" That's out of all reason," said Horace, " and you know it. I will never give her up, so long as she is willing to keep me."

" Maiden," said the Jinnee, addressing Sylvia for the first time, " the matter rests with thee. Wilt thou release this my son from his contract, since thou art no fit wife for such as he ? "

" How can I , " cried Sylvia, " when I love him and he loves me ? What a wicked, tyrannical old thing you must be to expect it ! I *can't* give him up."

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" It is but giving up what can never be thine," said Fakrash. " And be not anxious for him, for I will reward and console him a thousandfold for the loss of thy society. A little while, and he shall remember thee no more."

" Don't believe him, darling," said Horace ; " you know me better than that."

" Remember," said the Jinnee, " that by thy refusal thou wilt condemn thy parent to remain a mule throughout all his days. Art thou so unnatural and hard-hearted a daughter as to do this thing ? "

" Oh, I couldn't ! " cried Sylvia. " I can't let poor father remain a mule all his life when one word—and yet what *am* I to do ? Horace, what shall I say ? Advise me . . . Advise me ! "

" Heaven help us both ! " groaned Ventimore. " If I could only see the right thing to do ! Look here, Mr. Fakrash," he added, " this is a matter that requires consideration. Will you relieve us of your presence for a short time, while we talk it over ? "

" With all my heart," said the Jinnee, in the most obliging manner in the world, and vanished instantly.

" Now, darling," began Horace, after he had gone, " if that unspeakable old scoundrel is really in earnest, there's no denying that he's got us in an extremely tight place. But I can't bring myself to believe that he *does* mean it. I fancy he's only trying us. And what I want you to do is not to consider me in the matter at all."

" How can I help it ? " said poor Sylvia. " Horace, you—you don't *want* to be released, do you ? "

" I ? " said Horace, " when you are all I have in the world ! That's so likely, Sylvia ! But we are bound to look facts in the face. To begin with, even if this hadn't happened, your people wouldn't let our engagement continue. For my prospects have changed again, dearest. I'm even worse off than when we first met, for that confounded Jinnee has contrived to lose my first and only client for me—the one thing worth having he ever gave

me." And he told her the story of the mushroom palace and Mr. Wackerbath's withdrawal. " So you see, darling," he concluded, " I haven't even a home to offer you ; and if I had, it would be miserably uncomfortable for you with that old Marplot continually dropping in on us—especially if, as I'm afraid he has, he's taken some unreasonable dislike to you."

" But surely you can talk him over ? " said Sylvia ; " you said you could do anything you liked with him."

" I'm beginning to find," he replied, ruefully enough, " that he's not so easily managed as I thought. And for the present, I'm afraid, if we are to get the Professor out of this, that there's nothing for it but to humour old Fakrash."

" Then you actually advise me to—to break it off ? " she cried ; " I never thought you would do that ! "

" For your own sake," said Horace ; " for your father's sake. If you won't, Sylvia, I *must*. And you will spare me that ? Let us both agree to part, and—and trust that we shall be united some day."

" Don't try to deceive me or yourself, Horace," she said ; " if we part now, it will be for ever."

He had a dismal conviction that she was right. " We must hope for the best," he said drearily ; " Fakrash may have some motive in all this we don't understand. Or he may relent. But part we must, for the present."

" Very well," she said. " If he restores dad, I will give you up. But not unless."

" Hath the damsel decided ? " asked the Jinnee, suddenly reappearing ; " for the period of deliberation is past."

" Miss Futvoye and I , " Horace answered for her, " are willing to consider our engagement at an end, until you approve of its renewal, on condition that you restore her father at once."

" Agreed ! " said Fakrash. " Conduct me to him, and we will arrange the matter without delay."

Outside they met Mrs. Futvoye on her way from the

THE BRASS BOTTLE

study. " You here, Horace ? " she exclaimed. " And who is this—gentleman ? "

" This," said Horace, " is the—er—author of the Professor's misfortunes, and he has come here at my request to undo his work."

" It *would* be so kind of him ! " exclaimed the distressed lady, who was by this time far beyond either surprise or resentment. " I'm sure, if he knew all we have gone through——! " and she led the way to her husband's room.

As soon as the door was opened the Professor seemed to recognise his tormentor in spite of his changed raiment, and was so powerfully agitated that he actually reeled on his four legs, and " stood over " in a lamentable fashion.

" O man of distinguished attainments ! " began the Jinnee, " whom I have caused, for reasons that are known unto thee, to assume the shape of a mule, speak, I adjure thee, and tell me where thou hast deposited the inscribed seal which is in thy possession."

The Professor spoke ; and the effect of articulate speech proceeding from the mouth of what was to all outward seeming an ordinary mule was strange beyond description. " I'll see you damned first," he said sullenly. " You can't do worse to me than you've done already ! "

" As thou wilt," said Fakrash ; " but unless I regain it, I will not restore thee to what thou wast."

" Well, then," said the mule, savagely, " you'll find it in the top right-hand drawer of my writing-table : the key is in that diorite bowl on the mantelpiece."

The Jinnee unlocked the drawer, and took out the metal cap, which he placed in the breast pocket of his incongruous frock-coat. " So far, well," he said ; " next thou must deliver up to me the transcription thou hast made, and swear to preserve an inviolable secrecy regarding the meaning thereof."

" Do you know what you're asking, sir ? " said the mule, laying back his ears viciously. " Do you think that to oblige you I'm going to suppress one of the most

remarkable discoveries of my whole scientific career ? Never, sir—never ! "

" Since if thou refusest I shall assuredly deprive thee of speech once more and leave thee a mule, as thou art now, of hideous appearance," said the Jinnee, " thou art like to gain little by a discovery which thou wilt be unable to impart. However, the choice rests with thee."

The mule rolled his one eye, and showed all his teeth in a vicious snarl. " You've got the whip-hand of me," he said, " and I may as well give in. There's a transcript inside my blotting-case—it's the only copy I've made."

Fakrash found the paper, which he rubbed into invisibility between his palms, as any ordinary conjurer might do.

" Now raise thy right forefoot," he said, " and swear by all thou holdest sacred never to divulge what thou hast learnt"—which oath the Professor, in the vilest of tempers, took clumsily enough.

" Good," said the Jinnee, with a grim smile. " Now let one of thy women bring me a cup of fair water."

Sylvia went out, and came back with a cup of water. " It's filtered," she said anxiously ; " I don't know if that will do ? "

" It will suffice," said Fakrash. " Let both the women withdraw."

" Surely," remonstrated Mrs. Futvoye, " you don't mean to turn his wife and daughter out of the room at such a moment as this ? We shall be perfectly quiet, and we may even be of some help."

" Do as you're told, my dear ! " snapped the ungrateful mule ; " do as you're told. You'll only be in the way here. Do you suppose he doesn't know his own beastly business ? "

They left accordingly ; whereupon Fakrash took the cup—an ordinary breakfast-cup with a Greek key-border pattern in pale blue round the top—and, drenching the mule with the contents, exclaimed, " Quit this form and return to the form in which thou wast! "

THE BRASS BOTTLE

For a dreadful moment or two it seemed as if no effect was to be produced ; the animal simply stood and shivered, and Ventimore began to feel an agonising suspicion that the Jinnee really had, as he had first asserted, forgotten how to perform this particular incantation.

All at once the mule reared, and began to beat the air frantically with his fore-hoofs ; after which he fell heavily backward into the nearest arm-chair (which was, fortunately, a solid and capacious piece of furniture) with his fore-legs hanging limply at his side, in a semi-human fashion. There was a brief convulsion, and then, by some gradual process unspeakably impressive to witness, the man seemed to break through the mule, the mule became merged in the man—and Professor Futvoye, restored to his own natural form and habit, sat gasping and trembling in the chair before them.

14. " *Since there's no Help, come, let us Kiss and Part !* "

AS soon as the Professor seemed to have regained his faculties, Horace opened the door and called in Sylvia and her mother, who were, as was only to be expected, overcome with joy on seeing the head of the family released from his ignoble condition of a singularly ill-favoured quadruped.

" There, there," said the Professor, as he submitted to their embraces and incoherent congratulations, " it's nothing to make a fuss about. I'm quite myself again as you can see. And," he added, with an unreasonable outburst of ill-temper, " if one of you had only had the common sense to think of such a simple remedy as sprinkling a little cold water over me when I was first taken like that, I should have been spared a great deal of unnecessary inconvenience. But that's always the way with women—lose their heads the moment anything goes wrong ! If I had not kept perfectly cool myself——"

" SINCE THERE'S NO HELP . . . "

" It was very, very stupid of us not to think of it, papa," said Sylvia, tactfully ignoring the fact that there was scarcely an undamaged article in the room ; " still, you know, if we had thrown the water it mightn't have had the same effect."

" I 'm not in a condition to argue now," said her father ; " you didn't trouble to try it, and there's no more to be said."

" No more to be said ! " exclaimed Fakrash. " O thou monster of ingratitude, hast thou no thanks for him who hath delivered thee from thy predicament ? "

" As I am already indebted to you, sir," said the Professor, " for about twenty-four hours of the most poignant and humiliating mental and bodily anguish a human being can endure, inflicted for no valid reason that I can discover, except the wanton indulgence of your unholy powers, I can only say that any gratitude of which I am conscious is of a very qualified description. As for you, Ventimore," he added, turning to Horace, " I don't know—I can only guess at—the part you have played in this wretched business ; but in any case you will understand, once for all, that all relations between us must cease."

" Father," said Sylvia, tremulously, " Horace and I have already agreed that—that we must separate."

" At my bidding," explained Fakrash, suavely ; " for such an alliance would be totally unworthy of his merits and condition."

This frankness was rather too much for the Professor, whose temper had not been improved by his recent trials.

" Nobody asked for your opinion, sir ! " he snapped. " A person who has only recently been released from a term of long and, from all I have been able to ascertain, well-deserved imprisonment, is scarcely entitled to pose as an authority on social rank. Have the decency not to interfere again with my domestic affairs."

" Excellent is the saying," remarked the imperturbable Jinnee, " Let the rat that is between the paws of the

THE BRASS BOTTLE

leopard observe rigidly all the rules of politeness and refrain from words of provocation.' For to return thee to the form of a mule once more would be no difficult undertaking."

" I think I failed to make myself clear," the Professor hastened to observe—" failed to make myself clear. I — I merely meant to congratulate you on your fortunate escape from the consequences of what I — I don't doubt was an error of justice. I — I am sure that, in the future, you will employ your—your very remarkable abilities to better purpose, and I would suggest that the greatest service you can do this unfortunate young man here is to abstain from any further attempts to promote his interests."

" Hear, hear! " Horace could not help throwing in, though in so discreet an undertone that it was inaudible.

" Far be this from me," replied Fakrash. " For he has become unto me even as a favourite son, whom I design to place upon the golden pinnacle of felicity. Therefore, I have chosen for him a wife, who is unto this damsel of thine as the full moon to the glow-worm, and as the bird of Paradise to an unfledged sparrow. And the nuptials shall be celebrated before many hours."

" Horace ! " cried Sylvia, justly incensed, " why—*why* didn't you tell me this before ? "

" Because," said the unhappy Horace, " this is the very first I've heard of it. He's always springing some fresh surprise on me," he added, in a whisper—" but they never come to anything much. And he can't marry me against my will, you know."

" No," said Sylvia, biting her lip. " I never supposed he could do that, Horace."

" I'll settle this at once," he replied. . " Now, look here, Mr. Jinnee," he added, " I don't know what new scheme you have got in your head—but if you are proposing to marry me to anybody in particular——"

" Have I not informed thee that I have it in contempla-

" SINCE THERE'S NO HELP . . . "

tion to obtain for thee the hand of a King's daughter of marvellous beauty and accomplishments ? "

" You know perfectly well you never mentioned it before," said Horace, while Sylvia gave a little low cry.

" Repine not, O damsel," counselled the Jinnee, " since it is for his welfare. For, though as yet he believeth it not, when he beholds the resplendent beauty of her countenance he will swoon away with delight and forget thy very existence."

" I shall do nothing of the sort," said Horace, savagely. " Just understand that I don't intend to marry any Princess. You may prevent me—in fact, you *have*—from marrying this lady, but you can't force me to marry anybody else. I defy you ! "

" When thou hast seen thy bride's perfections thou wilt need no compulsion," said Fakrash. " And if thou shouldst refuse, know this : that thou wilt be exposing those who are dear to thee in this household to calamities of the most unfortunate description."

The awful vagueness of this threat completely crushed Horace ; he could not think, he did not even dare to imagine, what consequences he might bring upon his beloved Sylvia and her helpless parents by persisting in his refusal.

" Give me time," he said, heavily ; " I want to talk this over with you."

" Pardon me, Ventimore," said the Professor, with acidulous politeness ; " but, interesting as this discussion of your matrimonial arrangements is to you and your—a—protector, I should greatly prefer that you chose some more fitting place for arriving at a decision which is in the circumstances a foregone conclusion. I am rather tired and upset, and I should be obliged if you and this gentleman could bring this most trying interview to a close as soon as you conveniently can."

" You hear, Mr. Fakrash ? " said Horace, between his teeth, " it is quite time we left. If you go at once, I will follow you very shortly."

THE BRASS BOTTLE

"Thou wilt find me awaiting thee," answered the Jinnee, and, to Mrs. Futvoye's and Sylvia's alarm disappeared through one of the bookcases.

"Well," said Horace, gloomily, "you see how I'm situated? That obstinate old devil has cornered me. I'm done for!"

"Don't say that," said the Professor; "you appear to be on the eve of a most, brilliant alliance, in which I am sure you have our best wishes—the best wishes of us all," he added pointedly.

"Sylvia," said Horace, still lingering, "before I go, tell me that, whatever I may have to do, you will understand that—that it will be for your sake!"

"Please don't talk like that," she said. "We may never see one another again. Don't let my last recollection of you be of—a hypocrite, Horace!"

"A hypocrite!" he cried. "Sylvia, this is too much! What have I said or done to make you think me that?"

"Oh, I am not so simple as you suppose, Horace," she replied. "I see now why all this has happened: why poor dad was tormented; why you insisted on my setting you free. But I would have released you without *that*! Indeed, all this elaborate artifice wasn't in the least necessary!"

"You believe I was an accomplice in that old fool's plot?" he said. "You believe me such a cur as that?"

"I don't blame you," she said. "I don't believe you could help yourself. He can make you do whatever he chooses. And, then, you are so rich now, it is natural that you should want to marry some one—some one more suited to you—like this lovely Princess of yours."

"Of mine I" groaned the exasperated Horace. "When I tell you I've never even seen her! As if any Princess in the world would marry me to please a Jinnee out of a brass bottle! And if she did, Sylvia, you can't believe that any Princess would make me forget you!"

"It depends so very much on the Princess," was all Sylvia could be induced to say.

" SINCE THERE'S NO HELP . . . "

" Well," said Horace, " if that's all the faith you have in me, I suppose it's useless to say any more. Good-bye, Mrs. Futvoye ; good-bye, Professor. I wish I could tell you how deeply I regret all the trouble I have brought on you by my own folly. All I can say is, that I will bear anything in future rather than expose you or any of you to the smallest risk."

" I trust, indeed," said the Professor, stiffly, " that you will use all the influence at your command to secure me from any repetition of an experience that might well have unmanned a less equable temperament than my own."

" Good-bye, Horace," said Mrs. Futvoye, more kindly. " I believe you are more to be pitied than blamed, whatever others may think. And don't forget—if Anthony does—that, but for you, he might, instead of sitting there comfortable in his arm-chair, be lashing out with his hind legs and kicking everything to pieces at this very moment ! "

" I deny that I lashed out! " said the Professor. " My—a—hind quarters may have been under imperfect control—but I never lost my reasoning powers or my good humour for a single instant. I can say that truthfully."

If the Professor could say that truthfully amidst the general wreck in which he sat, like another Marius, he had little to learn in the gentle art of self-deception ; but there was nothing to gain by contradicting him then.

" Good-bye, Sylvia," said Horace, and held out his hand.

" Good-bye," she said, without offering to take it or look at him—and, after a miserable pause, he left the study. But before he had reached the front door he heard a swish and swirl of drapery behind him, and felt her light hand on his arm. " Ah, no ! " she said, clinging to him, " I can't let you go like this. I didn't mean all the things I said just now. I *do* believe in you, Horace—at least, I'll try hard to . . . And I shall always, *always* love you, Horace . . . I shan't care—very much—even

THE BRASS BOTTLE

if you forget me, so long as you are happy . . . Only don't be *too* happy. Think of me sometimes ! "

" I shall *not* be too happy," he said, as he held her close to his heart and kissed her pathetically drawn mouth and flushed cheeks. " And I shall think of you always."

" And you won't fall in love with your Princess ? " entreated Sylvia, at the end of her altruism. " Promise ! "

" If I am ever provided with one," he replied, " I shall loathe her—for not being you. But don't let us lose heart, darling. There must be some way of talking that old idiot out of this nonsense and bringing him round to common sense. I'm not going to give in just yet! "

These were brave words—but, as they both felt, the situation had little enough to warrant them, and, after one last long embrace, they parted, and he was no sooner on the steps than he felt himself caught up as before and borne through the air with breathless speed, till he was set down, he could not have well said how, in a chair in his own sitting-room at Vincent Square.

" Well," he said, looking at the Jinnee, who was standing opposite, with a smile of intolerable complacency, " I suppose you feel satisfied with yourself over this business ? "

" It hath indeed been brought to a favourable conclusion," said Fakrash. " Well hath the poet written——"

" I don't think I can stand any more * Elegant Extracts ' this afternoon," interrupted Horace. " Let us come to business. You seem," he went on, with a strong effort to keep himself in hand, " to have formed some plan for marrying me to a King's daughter. May I ask for full particulars ? "

" No honour and advancement can be in excess of thy deserts," answered the Jinnee.

" Very kind of you to say so—but you are probably unaware that, as society is constituted at the present time, the objections to such an alliance would be quite insuperable."

" SINCE THERE'S NO HELP . . . "

" For me," said the Jinnee, " few obstacles are insuperable. But speak thy mind freely."

" I will," said Horace. " To begin with, no European Princess of the Blood Royal would entertain the idea for a moment. And if she did, she would forfeit her rank and cease to be a Princess, and I should probably be imprisoned in a fortress for *Use majeste* or something."

" Dismiss thy fears, for I do not propose to unite thee to any Princess that is born of mortals. The bride I intend for thee is a Jinneeyeh ; the peerless* Bedeea-el-Jemal, daughter of my kinsman Shalyal, the Ruler of the Blue Jann."

" Oh, is she, though ? " said Horace, blankly. " I'm exceedingly obliged, but, whatever may be the lady's attractions——"

" Her nose," recited the Jinnee, with enthusiasm, " is like unto the keen edge of a polished sword ; her hair resembleth jewels, and her cheeks are ruddy as wine. She hath heavy hips, and when she loqketh aside she putteth to shame the wild cows."

" My good, excellent friend," said Horace, by no means impressed by this catalogue of charms, " one doesn't marry to mortify wild cows."

" When she walketh with a vacillating gait," continued Fakrash, as though he had not been interrupted, " the willow branch itself turneth green with envy."

" Personally," said Horace, " a waddle doesn't strike me as particularly fascinating—it's quite a matter of taste. Do you happen to have seen this enchantress lately ? "

" My eyes have not been refreshed by her manifold beauties since I was enclosed by Suleyman—whose name be accursed—in the brass bottle of which thou knowest. Why dost thou ask ? "

" Merely because it occurred to me that, after very nearly three thousand years, your charming kinswoman may—well, to put it as mildly as possibly, not have altogether escaped the usual effects of Time. I mean, she must be getting on, you know ! "

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" O, silly-bearded one ! " said the Jinnee, in half-scornful rebuke ; " art thou, then, ignorant that we of the Jinn are not as mortals, that we should feel the ravages of age ? "

" Forgive me if I'm personal/" said Horace ; " but surely your own hair and beard might be described as rather inclining to grey."

" Not from age," said Fakrash. " This cometh from long confinement."

" I see," said Horace. " Like the Prisoner of Chillon. Well, assuming that the lady in question is still in the bloom of early youth, I see one fatal difficulty to becoming her suitor."

" Doubtless," said the Jinnee, " thou art referring to Jarjarees, the son of Rejmoos, the son of Iblees ? "

" No, I wasn't," said Horace ; " because, you see, I don't remember having ever heard of him. However, he's *another* fatal difficulty. That makes two of them."

" Surely I have spoken of him to thee as my deadliest foe ? It is true that he is a powerful and vindictive Efreet, who hath long persecuted the beauteous Bedeea with hateful attentions. Yet it may be possible, by good fortune, to overthrow him."

" Then I gather that any suitor for Bedeea's hand would be looked upon as a rival by the amiable Jarjarees ?"

" Far is he from being of an amiable disposition," answered the Jinnee, simply, " and he would be so transported by rage and jealousy that he would certainly challenge thee to mortal combat."

" Then that settles it," said Horace. " I don't think anyone can fairly call me a coward, but I do draw the line at fighting an Efreet for the hand of a lady I've never seen. How do I know he'll fight fair ? "

" He would probably appear unto thee first in the form of a lion, and if he could not thus prevail against thee, transform himself into a serpent, and then into a buffalo or some other wild beast/

" And I should have to tackle the entire menagerie ? "

" SINCE THERE'S NO HELP . . . "

said Horace. " Why, my dear sir, I should never get beyond the lion ! "

" I would assist thee to assume similar transformations," said the Jinnee, " and thus thou mayst be enabled to defeat him. For I burn with desire to behold mine enemy reduced to cinders."

" It's much more likely that you would have to sweep *me* up ! " said Horace, who had a strong conviction that anything in which the Jinnee was concerned would be bungled somehow. " And if you're so anxious to destroy this Jarjarees, why don't you challenge him to meet you in some quiet place in the desert and settle him yourself ? It's much more in your line than it is in mine ! "

He was not without hopes that Fakrash might act on this suggestion, and that so he would be relieved of him in the simplest and most satisfactory way ; but any such hopes were as usual doomed to disappointment.

" It would be of no avail," said the Jinnee, " for it hath been written of old that Jarjarees shall not perish save by the hand of a mortal. And I am persuaded that thou wilt turn out to be that mortal, since thou art both strong and fearless, and, moreover, it is also predestined that Bedeea shall wed one of the sons of men."

" Then," said Horace, feeling that this line of defence must be abandoned, " I fall back on objection number one. Even if Jarjarees were obliging enough to retire in my favour, I should still decline to become the—a—consort of a Jinneeyeh whom I've never seen, and don't love."

" Thou hast heard of her incomparable charms, and verily the ear may love before the eye."

" It may," admitted Horace, " but neither of *my* ears is the least in love at present."

" These reasons are of no value," said Fakrash, " and if thou hast no better——"

" Well," said Ventimore, " I think I have. You profess to be anxious to—to requite the trifling service I rendered you, though hitherto, you'll admit yourself,

THE BRASS BOTTLE

you haven't made a very brilliant success of it. But, putting the past aside," he continued, with a sudden dryness in his throat; " putting the past aside, I ask you to consider what possible benefit or happiness such a match as this—I'm afraid I'm not so fortunate as to secure your attention ? " he broke off, as he observed the Jinnee's eyes beginning to film over in the disagreeable manner characteristic of certain birds.

" Proceed," said Fakrash, unskinning his eyes for a second ; "I am hearkening unto thee."

" It seems to me," stammered Horace, inconsequently enough, " that all that time inside a bottle—well, you can't call it *experience* exactly ; and possibly in the interval you've forgotten all you knew about feminine nature. I think you *must* have."

" It is not possible that such knowledge should be forgotten," said the Jinnee, resenting this imputation in quite a human way. " Thy words appear to me to lack sense. Interpret them, I pray thee."

" Why," explained Horace, " you don't mean to tell me that this young and lovely relation of yours, a kind of immortal, and—and with the devil's own pride, would be gratified by your proposal to bestow her hand upon an insignificant and unsuccessful London architect ? She'd turn up that sharp and polished nose of hers at the mere idea of so unequal a match ! "

" An excellent rank is that conferred by wealth," remarked the Jinnee.

" But I'm *not* rich, and I've already declined any riches from you," said Horace. " And, what's more to the point, I'm perfectly and hopelessly obscure. If you had the slightest sense of humour—which I fear you have not—you would at once perceive the absurdity of proposing to unite a radiant, ethereal, superhuman being to a commonplace professional nonentity in a morning coat and a top hat. It's really too ridiculous ! "

" What thou hast just said is not altogether without wisdom," said Fakrash, to whom this was evidently a

" SINCE THERE'S NO HELP . . . "

new point of view. " Art thou, indeed, so utterly unknown ? "

" Unknown ? " repeated Horace ; " I should rather think I was ! I'm simply an inconsiderable unit in the population of the vastest city in the world ; or, rather, not a unit—a cipher. And, don't you see, a man to be worthy of your exalted kinswoman ought to be a celebrity. There are plenty of them about."

" What meanest thou by a celebrity ? " inquired Fakrash, falling into the trap more readily than Horace had ventured to hope.

" Oh, well, a distinguished person, whose name is on everybody's lips, who is honoured and praised by all his fellow-citizens. Now, *that* kind of man no Jinneeyeh could look down upon."

" I perceive," said Fakrash, thoughtfully. " Yes, I was in danger of committing a rash action. How do men honour such distinguished individuals in these days ? "

" They generally overfeed them," said Horace. " In London the highest honour a hero can be paid is to receive the freedom of the City, which is only conferred in very exceptional cases, and for some notable service. But, of course, there are other sorts of celebrities, as you could see if you glanced through the society papers."

" I cannot believe that thou, who seemest a gracious and talented young man, can be indeed so obscure as thou hast represented."

" My good sir, any of the flowers that blush unseen in the desert air, or the gems concealed in ocean caves, so excellently described by one of our poets, could give me points and a beating in the matter of notoriety. I'll make you a sporting offer. There are over five million inhabitants in this London of ours. If you go out into the streets and ask the first five hundred you meet whether they know me, I don't mind betting you—what shall I say ? a new hat—that you won't find half a dozen who've ever heard of my existence. Why not go out and see for yourself ? "

THE BRASS BOTTLE

To his surprise and gratification the Jinnee took this suggestion seriously. " I will go forth and make inquiry," he said, "for I desire further enlightenment concerning thy statements. But, remember," he added : " should I still require thee to wed the matchless Bedeea-el-Jemal, and thou shouldst disobey me, thou wilt bring disaster, not on thine own head, but on those thou art most desirous of protecting."

" Yes, so you told me before," said Horace, brusquely. " Good evening." But Fakrash was already gone. In spite of all he had gone through and the unknown difficulties before him, Ventimore was seized with what Uncle Remus calls " a spell of the dry grins " at the thought of the probable replies that the Jinnee would meet with in the course of his inquiries. " I 'm afraid he won't be particularly impressed by the politeness of a London crowd," he thought; " but at least they'll convince him that I am not exactly a prominent citizen, Then he'll give up this idiotic match of his—I don't know, though. He's such a pig-headed old fool that he may stick to it all the same. I may find myself encumbered with a Jinneeyeh bride several centuries my senior before I know where I am. No, I forgot; there's the jealous Jarjarees to be polished off first. I seem to remember something about a quick-change combat with an Efreet in the *Arabian Nights*. I may as well look it up, and see what may be in store for me."

And after dinner he went to his shelves and took down Lane's three-volume edition of the *Arabian Nights*, which he set himself to study with a new interest. It was long since he had looked into these wondrous tales, old beyond all human calculation, and fresher, even now, than the most modern of successful romances. After all, he was tempted to think, they might possess quite as much historical value as many works with graver pretensions to accuracy.

He found a full account of the combat with the Efreet in " The Story of the Second Royal Mendicant " in the

first volume, and was unpleasantly surprised to discover that the Efreets name was actually given as " Jarjarees, the son of Rejmoos, the son of Iblees "—evidently the same person to whom Fakrash had referred as his bitterest foe. He was described as " of hideous aspect," and had, it seemed, not only carried off the daughter of the Lord of the Ebony Island on her wedding night, but, on discovering her in the society of the Royal Mendicant, had revenged himself by striking off her hands, her feet, and her head, and transforming his human rival into an ape. " Between this fellow and old Fakrash," he reflected ruefully, at this point, " I seem likely to have a fairly lively time of it! "

He read on till he reached the memorable encounter between the King's daughter and Jarjarees, who presented himself "in a most striking shape, with hands like winnowing forks, and legs like masts, and eyes like burning torches"—which was calculated to unnerve the stoutest novice. The Efreets began by transforming himself from a lion to a scorpion, upon which the Princess became a serpent; then he changed to an eagle, and she to a vulture ; he to a black cat, and she to a wolf; he to a burst pomegranate, and she to a cock ; he to a fish, and she to a larger fish still.

" If Fakrash can shove me through all that without a fatal hitch somewhere," Ventimore told himself, " I shall be agreeably disappointed in him." But, after reading a few more lines, he cheered up. For the Efreets finished as a flame, and the Princess as a " body of fire." " And when we looked towards him," continued the narrator, " we perceived that he had become a heap of ashes."

" Come," said Horace to himself, " that puts Jarjarees out of action, anyway ! The odd thing is that Fakrash should never have heard of it."

But, as he saw on reflection, it was not so very odd, after all, as the incident had probably happened after the Jinnee had been consigned to his brass bottle, where intelligence of any kind would be most unlikely to reach him.

THE BRASS BOTTLE

He worked steadily through the whole of the second volume and part of the third ; but, although he picked up a certain amount of information upon Oriental habits and modes of thought and speech which might come in usefully later, it was not until he arrived at the 24th Chapter of the third volume that his interest really revived.

For the 24th Chapter contained " The Story of Seyf-el-Mulook and Bedeea-el-Jemal/" and it was only natural that he should be anxious to know all that there was to know concerning the antecedents of one who might be his *fiancée* before long. He read eagerly.

Bedeea, it appeared, was the lovely daughter of Shahyal, one of the Kings of the Believing Jann ; her father—not Fakrash himself, as the Jinnee had incorrectly represented—had offered her in marriage to no less a personage than King Solomon himself, who, however, had preferred the Queen of Sheba. Seyf, the son of the King of Egypt, afterwards fell desperately in love with Bedeea, but she and her grandmother both declared that between mankind and the Jann there could be no agreement.

" And Seyf was a King's son ! " commented Horace. " I needn't alarm myself. She wouldn't be likely to have anything to say to *me*. It's just as I told Fakrash."

His heart grew lighter still as he came to the end, for he learnt that, after many adventures which need not be mentioned here, the devoted Seyf did actually succeed in gaining the proud Bedeea as his wife. " Even Fakrash could not propose to marry me to some one who has a husband already," he thought. " Still, she *may* be a widow ! "

To his relief, however, the conclusion ran thus ; " Seyf-el-Mulook lived with Bedeea-el-Jemal a most pleasant and agreeable life . . . until they were visited by the terminator of delights and the separator of companions."

" If that means anything at all," he reasoned, " it means that Seyf and Bedeea are both deceased. Even a Jinneeyeh seems to be mortal. Or perhaps she became so by marrying a mortal ; I dare say that Fakrash himself

wouldn't have lasted all this time if he hadn't been bottled, like a tinned tomato. But Fm glad I found this out, because Fakrash is evidently unaware of it, and, if he *should* persist in any more of this nonsense, I think I see my way now to getting the better of him."

So, with renewed hope and in vastly improved spirits, he went to bed and was soon sound asleep.

15. *Blushing Honours*

IT was rather late the next morning when Ventimore opened his eyes, to discover the Jinnee standing by the foot of his bed. "Oh, it's *you*, is it?" he said sleepily. "How did you—a—get on last night?"

"I gained such information as I desired," said Fakrash, guardedly; "and now, for the last time, I am come to ask thee whether thou wilt still persist in refusing to wed the illustrious Bedeea-el-Jemal? And have a care how thou answerest."

"So you haven't given up the idea?" said Horace. "Well, since you make such a point of it, I'll meet you are far as this. If you produce the lady, and she consents to marry me, I won't decline the honour. But there's one condition I really *must* insist on."

"It is not for thee to make stipulations. Still, yet this once I will hear thee."

"I'm sure you'll see that it's only fair. Supposing, for any reason, you can't persuade the Princess to meet me within a reasonable time—shall we say a week?—"

"Thou shalt be admitted to her presence within twenty-four hours," said the Jinnee.

"That's better still. Then, if I don't see her within twenty-four hours, I am to be at liberty to infer that the negotiations are off, and I may marry anybody else I please, without any opposition from you? Is that understood?"

"It is agreed," said Fakrash, "for **I am confident that** Bedeea will accept thee joyfully."

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" We shall see," said Horace. " But it might be as well if you went and prepared her a little. I suppose you know where to find her—and you've only twenty-four hours, you know."

" More than is needed," answered the Jinnee, with such childlike confidence, that Horace felt almost ashamed of so easy a victory. " But the sun is already high. Arise, my son, put on these robes"—and with this he flung on the bed the magnificent raiment which Venti-more had last worn on the night of his disastrous entertainment—" and when thou hast broken thy fast, prepare to accompany me."

" Before I agree to that," said Horace, sitting up in bed, " I should like to know where you're taking me to."

" Obey me without demur," said Fakrash, " or thou knowest the consequences."

It seemed to Horace that it was as well to humour him, and he got up accordingly, washed and shaved, and, putting on his dazzling robe of cloth-of-gold thickly sewn with gems, he joined Fakrash—who, by the way, was similarly, if less gorgeously, arrayed—in the sitting-room, in a state of some mystification.

" Eat quickly," commanded the Jinnee, " for the time is short." And Horace, after hastily disposing of a cold poached egg and a cup of coffee, happened to go to the windows.

" Good heavens!" he cried. " What does all this mean?"

He might well ask. On the opposite side of the road, by the railings of the square, a large crowd had collected, all staring at the house in eager expectation. As they caught sight of him they raised a cheer, which caused him to retreat in confusion, but not before he had seen a great golden chariot with six magnificent coal-black horses, and a suite of swarthy attendants in barbaric liveries, standing by the pavement below. " Whose carriage is that ? " he asked.

"* It belongs to thee," said the Jinnee ; " descend then, and make thy progress in it through the City "

BLUSHING HONOURS

" I will not," said Horace. " Even to oblige you I simply can't drive along the streets in a thing like the band-chariot of a travelling circus."

" It is necessary," declared Fakrash. " Must I again recall to thee the penalty of disobedience ? "

" Oh, very well," said Horace, irritably. " If you insist on my making a fool of myself, I suppose I must. But where am I to drive, and why ? "

" That," replied Fakrash, " thou shalt discover at the fitting moment." And so, amidst the shouts of the spectators, Ventimore climbed up into the strange-looking vehicle, while the Jinnee took his seat by his side. Horace had a parting glimpse of Mr. and Mrs. Rapkin's respective noses flattened against the basement window, and then two dusky slaves mounted to a seat at the back of the chariot, and the horses started off at a stately trot in the direction of Rochester Row.

" I think you might tell me what all this means," he said. " You've no conception what an ass I feel, stuck up here like this ! "

" Dismiss bashfulness from thee, since all this is designed to render thee more acceptable in the eyes of the Princess Bedeea," said the Jinnee.

Horace said no more, though he could not but think that this parade would be thrown away.

But as they turned into Victoria Street and seemed to be heading straight for the Abbey, a horrible thought occurred to him. After all, his only authority for the marriage and decease of Bedeea was the *Arabian Nights*, which was not unimpeachable evidence. What if she were alive and waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom ? No one but Fakrash would have conceived such an idea as marrying him to a Jinneeyeh in Westminster Abbey ; but he was capable of any extravagance, and there were apparently no limits to his power.

" Mr. Fakrash," he said hoarsely, " surely this isn't my—my wedding day ? You're not going to have the ceremony *there* ? "

THE BRASS BOTTLE

"Nay," said the Jinnee, "be not impatient. For this edifice would be totally unfitted for the celebration of such nuptials as thine."

As he spoke, the chariot left the Abbey on the right and turned down the Embankment. The relief was so intense that Horace's spirits rose irrepressibly. It was absurd to suppose that even Fakrash could have arranged the ceremony in so short a time. He was merely being taken for a drive, and fortunately his best friends could not recognise him in his Oriental disguise. And it was a glorious morning, with a touch of frost in the air and a sky of streaky turquoise and pale golden clouds; the broad river glittered in the sunshine; the pavements were lined with admiring crowds, and the carriage rolled on amidst frantic enthusiasm, like some triumphal car.

"How they're cheering us!" said Horace. "Why, they couldn't make more row for the Lord Mayor himself."

"What is this Lord Mayor of whom thou speakest?" inquired Fakrash.

"The Lord Mayor?" said Horace. "Oh, he's unique. There's nobody in the world quite like him. He administers the law, and if there's any distress in any part of the earth he relieves it. He entertains monarchs and Princes and all kinds of potentates at his banquets, and altogether he's a tremendous swell."

"Hath he dominion over the earth and the air and all that is therein?"

"Within his own precincts, I believe he has," said Horace, rather hazily, "but I really don't know precisely how wide his powers are." He was vainly trying to recollect whether such matters as sky-signs, telephones, and telegraphs in the City were within the Lord Mayor's jurisdiction or the County Council's.

Fakrash remained silent just as they were driving underneath Charing Cross Railway Bridge, when he started perceptibly at the thunder of the trains overhead and the piercing whistles of the engines. "Tell me," he

said, clutching Horace by the arm, " what meaneth this ? "

" You don't mean to say," said Horace, " that you have been about London all these days, and never noticed things like these before ? "

" Till now," said the Jinnee, " I have had no leisure to observe them and discover their nature."

" Well," said Horace, anxious to let the Jinnee see that he had not the monopoly of miracles, " since your day we have discovered how to tame or chain the great forces of Nature and compel them to do our will. We control the Spirits of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water, and make them give us light and heat, carry our messages, fight our quarrels for us, transport us wherever we wish to go, with a certainty and precision that throw even your performances, my dear sir, entirely into the shade."

Considering what a very large majority of civilised persons would be as powerless to construct the most elementary machine as to create the humblest kind of horse, it is not a little odd how complacently we credit ourselves with all the latest achievements of our generation. Most of us accept the amazement of the simple-minded barbarian on his first introduction to modern inventions as a gratifying personal tribute : we feel a certain superiority, even if we magnanimously refrain from boastfulness. And yet our own particular share in these discoveries is limited to making use of them under expert guidance, which any barbarian, after overcoming his first terror, is quite as competent to do as we are.

It is a harmless vanity enough, and especially pardonable in Ventimore's case, when it was so desirable to correct any tendency to " uppishness " on the part of the Jinnee.

" And doth the Lord Mayor dispose of these forces at his will ? " inquired Fakrash, on whom Ventimore's explanation had evidently produced some impression.

" Certainly," said Horace ; " whenever he has occasion."

THE BRASS BOTTLE

The Jinnee seemed engrossed in his own thoughts, for he said no more just then.

They were now nearing St. Paul's Cathedral, and Horace's first suspicion returned with double force.

" Mr. Fakrash, answer me," he said. " Is this my wedding day or not ? If it is, it's time I was told ! "

" Not yet," said the Jinnee, enigmatically, and indeed it proved to be another false alarm, for they turned down Cannon Street and towards the Mansion House.

" Perhaps you can tell me why we're going through Victoria Street, and what all this crowd has come out for ? " asked Ventimore. For the throng was denser than ever ; the people surged and swayed in serried ranks behind the City police, and gazed with a wonder and awe that for once seemed to have entirely silenced the Cockney instinct of *persiflage*.

" For what else but to do thee honour ? " answered Fakrash.

" What bosh ! " said Horace. " They mistake me for the Shah or somebody—and no wonder, in this get-up."

" Not so," said the Jinnee. " Thy names are familiar to them."

Horace glanced up at the hastily improvised decorations ; on one large strip of bunting which spanned the street he read : " Welcome to the City's most distinguished guest ! " " They can't mean me," he thought; and then another legend caught his eye : " Well done, Ventimore ! " And an enthusiastic householder next door had burst into poetry and displayed the couplet:

" Would we had twenty more
Like Horace Ventimore ! "

" They *do* mean me ! " he exclaimed. " Now, Mr. Fakrash, *will* you kindly explain what tomfoolery you've been up to now ? I know you're at the bottom of this business."

It struck him that the Jinnee was slightly embarrassed. " Didst thou not say," he replied, " that he who should

BLUSHING HONOURS

receive the freedom of the City from his fellow-men would be worthy of Bedeea-el-Jemal ? "

" I may have said something of the sort. But, good heavens ! you don't mean that you have contrived that / should receive the freedom of the City ? "

" It was the easiest affair possible," said the Jinnee, but he did not attempt to meet Horace's eye.

" Was it, though ? " said Horace, in a white rage. " I don't want to be inquisitive, but I should like to know what I've done to deserve it ? "

" Why trouble thyself with the reason ? Let it suffice thee that such honour is bestowed upon thee."

By this time the chariot had crossed Cheapside and was entering King Street.

" This really won't do ! " urged Horace. " It's not fair to me. Either I've done something, or you must have made the Corporation *believe* I've done something, to be received like this. And, as we shall be in the Guildhall in a very few seconds, you may as well tell me what it is ! "

" Regarding that matter," replied the Jinnee, in some confusion, " I am truly as ignorant as thyself."

As he spoke they drove through some temporary wooden gates into the courtyard, where the Honourable Artillery Company presented arms to them, and the carriage drew up before a large marquee decorated with shields and clustered banners.

" Well, Mr. Fakrash," said Horace, with suppressed fury, as he alighted, " you have surpassed yourself this time. You've got me into a nice scrape, and you'll have to pull me through it as well as you can."

" Have no uneasiness," said the Jinnee, as he accompanied his *protege* into the marquee, which was brilliant with pretty women in smart frocks, officers in scarlet tunics and plumed hats, and servants in State liveries.

Their entrance was greeted by a politely-subdued buzz of applause and admiration, and an official, who introduced himself as the Prime Warden of the Candlestick-makers' Company, advanced to meet them. " The Lord

THE BRASS BOTTLE

Mayor will receive you in the Library," he said. " If you will have the kindness to follow me——"

Horace followed him mechanically. " I'm in for it now," he thought, " whatever it is. If I can only trust Fakrash to back me up—but I'm hanged if I don't believe he's more nervous than I am ! "

As they came into the noble Library of the Guildhall a fine string band struck up, and Horace, with the Jinnee in his rear, made his way through a lane of distinguished spectators towards a dais, on the steps of which, in his gold-rimmed robes and black-feathered hat, stood the Lord Mayor, with his sword and mace-bearers on either hand, and behind him a row of beaming sheriffs.

A truly stately and imposing figure did the Chief Magistrate for that particular year present: tall, dignified, with a lofty forehead whose polished temples reflected the light, an aquiline nose, and piercing black eyes under heavy white eyebrows, a frosty pink in his wrinkled cheeks, and a flowing silver beard with a touch of gold still lingering under the lower lip : he seemed, as he stood there, a worthy representative of the greatest and richest city in the world.

Horace approached the steps with an unpleasant sensation of weakness at the knees, and no sort of idea what he was expected to do or say when he arrived.

And, in his perplexity, he turned for support and guidance to his self-constituted mentor—only to discover that the Jinnee, whose short-sightedness and ignorance had planted him in his present false position, had mysteriously and perfidiously disappeared, and left him to grapple with the situation single-handed.

16. *A Killing Frost*

IFORTUNATELY for Ventimore, the momentary dismay he had felt on finding himself deserted by his unfathomable Jinnee at the very outset of the ceremony passed **unnoticed, as the Prime Warden of the**

Candlestick-makers' Company immediately came to his rescue by briefly introducing him to the Lord Mayor, who, with dignified courtesy, had descended to the lowest step of the dais, to receive him.

" Mr. Ventimore," said the Chief Magistrate, cordially, as he pressed Horace's hand, " you must allow me to say that I consider this one of the greatest privileges—if not *the* greatest privilege—that have fallen to my lot during a term of office in which I have had the honour of welcoming more than the usual number of illustrious visitors."

" My Lord Mayor," said Horace, with absolute sincerity, " you really overwhelm me. I — I only wish I could feel that I had done anything to deserve this—this magnificent compliment! "

" Ah ! " replied the Lord Mayor, in a paternally rallying tone. " Modest, my dear sir, I perceive. Like all truly great men ! A most admirable trait ! Permit me to present you to the Sheriffs."

The Sheriffs appeared highly delighted. Horace shook hands with both of them ; indeed, in the flurry of the moment he very nearly offered to do so with the Sword and Mace bearers as well, but their hands were, as it happened, otherwise engaged.

" The actual presentation," said the Lord Mayor, " takes place in the Great Hall, as you are doubtless aware."

" I — I have been given to understand so," said Horace, with a sinking heart—for he had begun to hope that the worst was over.

" But before we adjourn," said his host, " you will let me tempt you to partake of some slight refreshment—just a snack ? "

Horace was not hungry, but it occurred to him that he might get through the ceremony with more credit after a glass of champagne ; so he accepted the invitation, and was conducted to an extemporised buffet at one end of the Library, where he fortified himself for the impending ordeal with a *caviare* sandwich and a bumper of the driest champagne in the Corporation cellars.

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" They talk of abolishing us," said the Lord Mayor, as he took an anchovy on toast; " but I maintain, Mr. Ventimore—I maintain that we, with our ancient customs, our time-honoured traditions, form a link with the past, which a wise statesman will preserve, if I may employ a somewhat vulgar term, untinkered with."

Horace agreed, remembering a link with a far more ancient past with which he devoutly wished he had refrained from tinkering.

" Talking of ancient customs," the Lord Mayor continued, with an odd blend of pride and apology, " you will shortly have an illustration of our antiquated procedure, which may impress you as quaint."

Horace, feeling absolutely idiotic, murmured that he felt sure it would do that.

" Before presenting you for the freedom, the Prime Warden and five officials of the Candlestick-makers' Company will give their testimony as compurgators in your favour, making oath that you are ' a man of good name and fame/ and that (you will be amused at this, Mr. Ventimore)—that you ' do not desire the freedom of this City, whereby to defraud the Queen or the City.' Ha, ha ! Curious way of putting it, is it not ? "

" Very," said Horace, guiltily, and not a little concerned on the officials' account.

" A mere form ! " said the Lord Mayor ; " but I for one, Mr. Ventimore—I for one should be sorry to see these picturesque old practices die out. To my mind," he added, as he finished *apdtSdefoiegras* sandwich, " the modern impatience to sweep away all the ancient landmarks (whether they be superannuated or not) is one of the most disquieting symptoms of the age. You won't have any more champagne ? Then I think we had better be making our way to the Great Hall for the Event of the Day."

" I'm afraid," said Horace, with a sudden consciousness of his incongruously Oriental attire—" I'm afraid this is not quite the sort of dress for such a ceremony. If I had known——"

A KILLING FROST

" Now, don't say another word ! " said the Lord Mayor. " Your costume is very nice—very nice indeed, and—and most appropriate, I am sure. But I see the City Marshal is waiting for us to head the procession. Shall we lead the way ? "

The band struck up the March of the Priests from *Athalie*, and Horace, his head in a whirl, walked with his host, followed by the City Lands Committee, the Sheriffs, and other dignitaries, through the Art Gallery and into the Great Hall, where their entrance was heralded by a flourish of trumpets.

The Hall was crowded, and Ventimore found himself the object of a popular demonstration which would have filled him with joy and pride if he could only have felt that he had done anything whatever to justify it, for it was ridiculous to suppose that he had rendered himself a public benefactor by restoring a convicted Jinnee to freedom and society generally.

His only consolation was that the English are a race not given to effusiveness without very good reason, and that before the ceremony was over he would be enabled to gather what were the particular services which had excited such unbounded enthusiasm.

Meanwhile he stood there on the crimson-draped and flower-bedecked dais, bowing repeatedly, and trusting that he did not look so forlornly foolish as he felt. A long shaft of sunlight struck down between the Gothic rafters, and dappled the brown stone walls with patches of gold ; the electric lights in the big hooped chandeliers showed pale and feeble against the subdued glow of the stained glass ; the air was heavy with the scent of flowers and essences. Then there was a rustle of expectation in the audience, and a pause, in which it seemed to Horace that everybody on the dais was almost as nervous and at a loss what to do next as he was himself. He wished with all his soul that they would hurry the ceremony through, anyhow, and let him go.

At length the proceedings began by a sort of solemn

THE BRASS BOTTLE

affectation of having merely met there for the ordinary business of the day, which, to Horace just then, seemed childish in the extreme ; it was resolved that " items i to 4 on the agenda need not be discussed," which brought them to item 5.

Item 5 was a resolution, read by the Town Clerk, that " the freedom of the City should be presented to Horace Ventimore, Esq., Citizen and Candlestick-maker " (which last Horace was not aware of being, but supposed vaguely that it had been somehow managed while he was at the buffet in the Library), " in recognition of his services "—the resolution ran, and Horace listened with all his ears—" especially in connection with . . . " It was most unfortunate—but at this precise point the official was seized with an attack of coughing, in which all was lost but the conclusion of the sentence, " that have justly . . . entitled him to the gratitude and admiration of his fellow-countrymen."

Then the six compurgators came forward and vouched for Ventimore's fitness to receive the freedom. He had painful doubts whether they altogether understood what a responsibility they were undertaking—but it was too late to warn them, and he could only trust that they knew more of their business than he did.

After this the City Chamberlain read him an address, to which Horace listened in resigned bewilderment. The Chamberlain referred to the unanimity and enthusiasm with which the resolution had been carried, and said that it was his pleasing and honourable duty, as the mouthpiece of that ancient City, to address what he described with some inadequacy as " a few words " to one by adding whose name to their roll of freemen the Corporation honoured rather themselves than the recipient of their homage.

It was flattering, but to Horace's ear the phrases sounded excessive, almost fulsome—though, of course, that depended very much on what he had done, which he had still to ascertain. The orator proceeded to read

him the "Illustrious List of London's Roll of Fame," a recital which made Horace shiver with apprehension. For what names they were ! What glorious deeds they had performed ! How was it possible that he—plain Horace Ventimore, a struggling architect who had missed his one great chance—could have achieved (especially without even being aware of it) anything that would not seem ludicrously insignificant by comparison ?

He had a morbid fancy that the marble goddesses, or whoever they were, at the base of Nelson's monument opposite, were regarding him with stony disdain and indignation ; that the statue of Wellington knew him for an arrant impostor, and averted his head with cold contempt ; and that the effigy of Lord Mayor Beckford on the right of the dais would come to life and denounce him in another moment.

"Turning now to your own distinguished services," he suddenly heard the City Chamberlain resuming, "you are probably aware, sir, that it is customary on these occasions to mention specifically the particular merit which has been deemed worthy of civic recognition."

Horace was greatly relieved to hear it, for it struck him as a most sensible and, in his own particular case, essential formality.

"But, on the present occasion, sir," proceeded the speaker, "I feel, as all present must feel, that it would be unnecessary—nay, almost impertinent—were I to weary the public ear by a halting recapitulation of deeds with which it is already so appreciatively familiar." At this he was interrupted by deafening and long-continued applause, at the end of which he continued : "I have only, therefore, to greet you in the name of the Corporation, and to offer you the right hand of fellowship as a Freeman, and Citizen, and Candlestick-maker of London."

As he shook hands he presented Horace with a copy of the Oath of Allegiance, intimating that he was to read it aloud. Naturally Ventimore had not the least objection to swear to be good and true to our Sovereign Lady Queen

THE BRASS BOTTLE

Victoria, or to be obedient to the Lord Mayor, and warn him of any conspiracies against the Queen's peace which might chance to come under his observation ; so he took the oath cheerfully enough, and hoped that this was really the end of the ceremony.

However, to his great chagrin and apprehension, the Lord Mayor rose with the evident intention of making a speech. He said that the conclusion of the City to bestow the highest honour in their gift upon Mr. Horace Ventimore had been—here he hesitated—somewhat hastily arrived at. Personally, he would have liked a longer time to prepare, to make the display less inadequate to, and worthier of, this exceptional occasion. He thought that was the general feeling. (It evidently was, judging from the loud and unanimous cheering.) However, for reasons which—for reasons with which they were as well acquainted as himself, the notice had been short. The Corporation had yielded (as they always did, as it would always be their pride and pleasure *to* yield) to popular pressure which was practically irresistible, and had done the best they could in the limited—he might almost say the unprecedentedly limited—period allowed them. The proudest leaf in Mr. Ventimore's chaplet of laurels to-day was, he would venture to assert, the sight of the extraordinary enthusiasm and assemblage, not only in that noble hall, but in the thoroughfares of this mighty Metropolis. Under the circumstances, this was a marvellous tribute to the admiration and affection which Mr. Ventimore had succeeded in inspiring in the great heart of the people, rich and poor, high and low. He would not detain his hearers any longer ; all that remained for him to do was to ask Mr. Ventimore's acceptance of a golden casket containing the roll of freedom, and he felt sure that their distinguished guest, before proceeding to inscribe his name on the register, would oblige them all by some account from his own lips of—of the events in which he had figured so prominently and so creditably.

Horace received the casket mechanically ; there was

a universal cry of " Speech ! " from the audience, to which he replied by shaking his head in helpless deprecation—but in vain ; he found himself irresistibly pressed towards the rail in front of the dais, and the roar of applause which greeted him saved him from all necessity of attempting to speak for nearly two minutes.

During that interval he had time to clear his brain and think what he had better do or say in his present unenviable dilemma. For some time past a suspicion had been growing in his mind, until it had now almost swollen into certainty. He felt that, before he compromised himself, or allowed his too generous entertainers to compromise themselves irretrievably, it was absolutely necessary to ascertain his real position, and, to do that, he must make some sort of speech. With this resolve, all his nervousness and embarrassment and indecision melted away ; he faced the assembly coolly and gallantly, convinced that his best alternative now lay in perfect candour.

" My Lord Mayor, my lords, ladies, and gentlemen," he began, in a clear voice which penetrated to the farthest gallery and commanded instant attention. " If you expect to hear from me any description of what I've done to be received like this, I'm afraid you will be disappointed. For my own belief is that I've done nothing whatever."

There was a general outcry of " No, no ! " at this, and a fervid murmur of protest.

" It's all very well to say ' No, no,' " said Horace, " and I am extremely grateful to you all for the interruption. Still, I can only repeat that I am absolutely unaware of having ever rendered my Country, or this great City, a single service deserving of the slightest acknowledgment. I wish I could feel I had—but the simple truth is that, if I have, the fact has entirely slipped from my memory."

Again there were murmurs, this time with a certain under-current of irritation ; and he could hear the Lord Mayor behind him remarking to the City Chamberlain that this was not at all the kind of speech for the occasion.

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" I know what you 're thinking," said Horace. " You 're thinking this is mock modesty on my part. But its' nothing of the sort. I don't know what I've done—but I presume you are all better informed. Because the Corporation wouldn't have given me that very charming casket—you wouldn't all of you be here like this—unless you were under a strong impression that I'd done *something* to deserve it." At this there was a fresh outburst of applause. " Just so," said Horace, calmly. " Well, now, will any of you be kind enough to tell me, in a few words, *what* you suppose I've done ? "

There was a dead silence, in which everyone looked at his or her neighbour and smiled feebly.

" My Lord Mayor," continued Horace, " I appeal to you to tell me and this distinguished assembly why on earth we're all here ! "

The Lord Mayor rose. " I think it sufficient to say," he announced, with dignity, " that the Corporation and myself were unanimously of opinion that this distinction should be awarded—for reasons which it is unnecessary and—hum—ha—invidious to enter into here."

" I am sorry," persisted Horace, " but I must press your lordship for those reasons. I have an object. . . . Will the City Chamberlain oblige me, then ? . . . No ? Well, then, the Town Clerk ? . . . No ?—it's just as I suspected : none of you can give me your reasons, and shall I tell you why ? Because there *aren't* any. . . . Now, do bear with me for a moment. I'm quite aware this is very embarrassing for all of you—but remember that it's infinitely more awkward for *me* ! I really cannot accept the freedom of the City under any suspicion of false pretences. It would be a poor reward for your hospitality, and base and unpatriotic into the bargain, to depreciate the value of so great a distinction by permitting it to be conferred unworthily. If, after you've heard what I am going to tell you, you still insist on my accepting such an honour, of course I will not be so ungracious as to refuse it. But I really don't feel that it would be right to inscribe

A KILLING FROST

my name on your Roll of Fame without some sort of explanation. If I did, I might, for anything I know, involuntarily be signing the death-warrant of the Corporation ! "

There was a breathless hush upon this ; the silence grew so intense that, to borrow a slightly involved metaphor from a distinguished friend of the writer's, " you might have picked up a pin in it ! " Horace leaned sideways against the rail in an easy attitude, so as to face the Lord Mayor, as well as a portion of his audience.

" Before I go any farther," he said, " will your lordship pardon me if I suggest that it might be as well to direct that all reporters present should immediately withdraw ? "

The reporters' table was instantly in a stir of anger, and many of the guests expressed some dissatisfaction. " We, at least," said the Lord Mayor, rising, flushed with annoyance, " have no reason to dread publicity. I decline to make a hole-and-corner affair of this. I shall give no such orders."

" Very well," said Horace, when the chorus of approval had subsided. " My suggestion was made quite as much in the Corporation's interests as in mine. I merely thought that, when you all clearly understood how grossly you've been deluded, you might prefer to have the details kept out of the newspapers if possible. But if you particularly want them published over the whole world, why, of course——"

An uproar followed here, under cover of which the Lord Mayor contrived to give orders to have the doors fastened till further directions.

" Don't make this more difficult and disagreeable for me than it is already ! " said Horace, as soon as he could obtain a hearing again. " You don't suppose that I should have come here in this Tom-fool's dress, imposing myself on the hospitality of this great City, if I could have helped it ! If you've been brought here under false pretences, so have I If you've been made to look rather

THE BRASS BOTTLE

foolish, what is *your* situation to mine ? The fact is, I am the victim of a headstrong force which I am utterly unable to control. . . ."

Upon this a fresh uproar arose, and prevented him from continuing for some time. " I only ask for fair play and a patient hearing I " he pleaded. " Give me that, and I will undertake to restore you all to good humour before I have done."

They calmed down at this appeal, and he was able to proceed. " My case is simply this," he said. " A little time ago I happened to go to an auction and buy a large brass bottle. . . ."

For some inexplicable reason his last words roused the audience to absolute frenzy ; they would not hear anything about the brass bottle. Every time he attempted to mention it they howled him down, they hissed, they groaned, they shook their fists ; the din was positively deafening.

Nor was the demonstration confined to the male portion of the assembly. One lady, indeed, who is a prominent leader in society, but whose name shall not be divulged here, was so carried away by her feelings as to hurl a heavy cut-glass bottle of smelling salts at Horace's offending head. Fortunately, for him, it missed him and only caught one of the officials (Horace was not in a mood to notice details very accurately, but he had a notion that it was the City Remembrancer) somewhere about the region of the watch-pocket.

" Will you hear me out ? " Ventimore shouted. " I'm not trifling. I haven't told you yet what was inside the bottle. When I opened it, I found . . . "

He got no farther—for, as the words left his lips, he felt himself seized by the collar of his robe and lifted off his feet by an urgency he was powerless to resist.

Up and up he was carried, past the great chandeliers, between the carved and gilded rafters, pursued by a universal shriek of dismay and horror. Down below he could see the throng of pale, upturned faces, and hear the

wild screams and laughter of several ladies of great distinction in violent hysterics. And the next moment he was in the glass lantern, and the latticed panes gave way like tissue paper as he broke through into the open air, causing the pigeons on the roof to whirr up in a flutter of alarm.

Of course, he knew that it was the Jinnee who was abducting him in this sensational manner, and he was rather relieved than alarmed by Fakrash's summary proceeding, for he seemed, for once, to have hit upon the best way out of a situation that was rapidly becoming impossible.

17. *High Words*

ONCE outside in the open air, the Jinnee "towered" like a pheasant shot through the breast, and Horace closed his eyes with a combined swing-witchback-and-Channel-passage sensation during a flight which apparently continued for hours, although in reality it probably did not occupy more than a very few seconds. His uneasiness was still further increased by his inability to guess where he was being taken to—for he felt instinctively that they were not travelling in the direction of home.

At last he felt himself set down on some hard, firm surface, and ventured to open his eyes once more. When he realised where he actually was, his knees gave way under him, and he was seized with a sudden giddiness that very nearly made him lose his balance. For he found himself standing on a sort of narrow ledge or cornice immediately under the ball at the top of St. Paul's.

Many feet beneath him spread the dull, leaden summit of the dome, its raised ridges stretching like huge serpents over the curve, beyond which was a glimpse of the green roof of the nave and the two west towers, with their grey columns and urn-topped buttresses and gilded pineapples, which shone ruddily in the sun.

THE BRASS BOTTLE

He had an impression of Ludgate Hill and Fleet Street as a deep, winding ravine, steeped in partial shadow ; of long sierras of roofs and chimney-pots, showing their sharp outlines above mouse-coloured smoke-wreaths ; of the broad, pearl-tinted river, with oily ripples and a golden glitter where the sunlight touched it ; of the gleaming slope of mud under the wharves and warehouses on the Surrey side ; of barges and steamers moored in black clusters ; of a small tug fussing noisily down the river, leaving a broadening arrow-head in its wake.

Cautiously he moved round towards the east, where the houses formed a blurred mosaic of cream, slate, indigo, and dull reds and browns, above which slender rose-flushed spires and towers pierced the haze, stained in countless places by pillars of black, grey, and amber smoke, and lightened by plumes and jets of silvery steam, till all blended by imperceptible gradations into a sky of tenderest gold slashed with translucent blue.

It was a magnificent view, and none the less so because the indistinctness of all beyond a limited radius made the huge City seem not only mystical, but absolutely boundless in extent. But although Ventimore was distinctly conscious of all this, he was scarcely in a state to appreciate its grandeur just then. He was much too concerned with wondering why Fakrash had chosen to plant him up there in so insecure a position, and how he was ever to be rescued from it, since the Jinnee had apparently disappeared.

He was not far off, however, for presently Horace saw him stalk round the narrow cornice with an air of being perfectly at home on it.

" So there you are ! " said Ventimore ; " I thought you'd deserted me again. What have you brought me up here for ? "

" Because I desired to have speech with thee in private/' replied the Jinnee.

" We're not likely to be intruded on here, certainly/' said Horace. " But isn't it rather exposed, rather public ? "

If we're seen up here, you know, it will cause a decided sensation."

" I have laid a spell on all below that they should not raise their eyes. Be seated, therefore, and hear my words."

Horace lowered himself carefully to a sitting position, so that his legs dangled in space, and Fakrash took a seat by his side. " O, most indiscreet of mankind ! " he began, in an aggrieved tone ; " thou hast been near the committal of a great blunder, and doing ill to thyself and to me ! "

" Well, I *do* like that ! " retorted Horace ; " when you let me in for all that freedom of the City business, and then sneaked off, leaving me to get out of it the best way I could, and only came back just as I was about to explain matters, and carried me up through the roof like a sack of flour. Do you consider that tactful on your part ? "

" Thou hadst drunk wine and permitted it to creep as far as the place of secrets."

" Only one glass," said Horace ; " and I wanted it, I can assure you. I was obliged to make a speech to them, and, thanks to you, I was in such a hole that I saw nothing for it but to tell the truth."

" Veracity, as thou wilt learn," answered the Jinnee, " is not invariably the Ship of Safety. Thou wert about to betray the benefactor who procured for thee such glory and honour as might well cause the gall-bladder of lions to burst with envy ! "

" If any lion with the least sense of humour could have witnessed the proceedings," said Ventimore, " he might have burst with laughter—certainly not envy. Good Lord ! Fakrash," he cried, in his indignation, " I've never felt such an absolute ass in my whole life ! If nothing would satisfy you but my receiving the freedom of the City, you might at least have contrived some decent excuse for it ! But you left out the only point there was in the whole thing—and all for what ? "

" What doth it signify why the whole populace should

THE BRASS BOTTLE

come forth to acclaim thee and do thee honour, so long as they did so ? " said Fakrash, sullenly. " For the report of thy fame would reach Bedeea-el-Jemal."

" That's just where you're mistaken," said Horace. " If you had not been in too desperate a hurry to make a few inquiries, you would have found out that you were taking all this trouble for nothing."

" How say est thou ? "

" Well, you would have discovered that the Princess is spared all temptation to marry beneath her by the fact that she became the bride of somebody else about thirty centuries ago. She married a mortal, one Seyf-el-Mulook, a King's son, and they've both been dead a considerable time—another obstacle to your plans."

" It is a lie," declared Fakrash.

" If you will take me back to Vincent Square, I shall be happy to show you the evidence in your national records," said Horace. " And you may be glad to know that your old enemy, Mr. Jarjarees, came to a violent end, after a very sporting encounter with a King's daughter, who, though proficient in advanced magic, unfortunately perished herself, poor lady, in the final round."

" I had intended *thee* to accomplish his downfall," said Fakrash.

" I know," said Horace. " It was most thoughtful of you. But I doubt if I should have done it half as well—and it would have probably cost me an eye, at the very least. It's better as it is."

" And how long hast thou known of these things ? "

" Only since last night."

" Since last night ? And thou didst not unfold them unto me till this instant ? "

" I've had such a busy morning, you see," explained Horace. " There's been no time."

" Silly-bearded fool that I was to bring this misbegotten dog into the august presence of the great Lord Mayor himself (on whom be peace !)," cried the Jinnee.

" I object to being referred to as a misbegotten dog,"

said Horace, " but with the rest of your remark I entirely concur. I'm afraid the Lord Mayor is very far from being at peace just now." He pointed to the steep roof of the Guildhall, with its dormers and fretted pinnacles, and the slender lantern through which he had so lately made his inglorious exit. " There's the devil of a row going on under that lantern just now, Mr. Fakrash, you may depend upon that. They've locked the doors till they can decide what to do next—which will take them some time. And it's your fault! "

" It was thy doing. Why didst thou dare to inform the Lord Mayor that he was deceived ? "

" Why ? Because I thought he ought to know. Because I was bound, particularly after my oath of allegiance, to warn him of any conspiracy against him. Because I was in such a hat. He'll understand all that—he won't blame *me* for this business."

" It is fortunate," observed the Jinnee, " that I flew away with thee before thou couldst pronounce my name."

" You gave yourself away," said He ce. " They all saw you, you know. You weren't flying so particularly fast. They'll recognise you again. If you *will* carry off a man from under the Lord Mayor's very nose, and shoot up through the roof like a rocket with him, you can't expect to escape some notice. You see, you happen to be the only unbottled Jinnee in this City."

Fakrash shifted his seat on the cornice. " I have committed no act of disrespect unto the Lord Mayor," he said, " therefore he can have no just cause of anger against me.

Horace perceived that the Jinnee was not altogether at ease, and pushed his advantage accordingly.

" My dear good old friend," he said, " you don't seem to realise yet what an awful thing you've done. For your own mistaken purposes, you have compelled the Chief Magistrate and the Corporation of the greatest City in the world to make themselves hopelessly ridiculous. They'll never hear the last of this affair. **Just look at the crowds**

THE BRASS BOTTLE

waiting patiently below there. Look at the flags. Think of that gorgeous conveyance of yours standing outside the Guildhall. Think of the assembly inside—all the most aristocratic, noble, and distinguished personages in the land," continued Horace, piling it on as he proceeded ; " all collected for what ? To be made fools of by a Jinnee out of a brass bottle ! "

" For their own sakes will they preserve silence," said Fakrash, with a gleam of unwonted shrewdness.

" Probably they would hush it up, if they only could," conceded Horace. " But how *can* they ? What are they to say ? What plausible explanation can they give ? Besides, there's the Press : you don't know what the Press is ; but I assure you its power is tremendous—it's simply impossible to keep anything secret from it nowadays. It has eyes and ears everywhere, and a thousand tongues. Five minutes after the doors in that hall are unlocked (and they can't keep them locked *much* longer) the reporters will be handing in their special description of you and your hateful vagaries to their respective journals. Within half an hour bills will be carried through every quarter of London—bills with enormous letters : * Extraordinary Scene at the Guildhall.' Strange End to a Civic Function.' Startling Appearance of an Oriental Genie in the City.' ' Abduction of a Guest of the Lord Mayor.' Intense Excitement.' Full Particulars !' And by that time the story will have flashed round the whole world. Keep silence,' indeed ! Do you imagine for a moment that the Lord Mayor, or anybody else concerned, however remotely, will ever forget, or be allowed to forget, such an outrageous incident as this ? If you do, believe me, you're mistaken."

" Truly, it would be a terrible thing to incur the wrath of the Lord Mayor," said the Jinnee, in troubled accents.

" Awful ! " said Horace. " But you seem to have managed it."

" He weareth round his neck a magic jewel, which giveth him dominion over devils—is it not so ? "

" You know best," said Horace.

" It was the splendour of that jewel and the majesty of his countenance that rendered me afraid to enter his presence, lest he should recognise me for what I am and command me to obey him, for verily his might is greater even than Suleyman's, and his hand heavier upon such of the Jinn as fall into his power ! "

" If that's so," said Horace, " I should strongly advise you to find some way of putting things straight before it's too late—you've no time to lose."

" Thou say est well," said Fakrash, springing to his feet, and turning his face towards Cheapside. Horace shuffled himself along the ledge in a seated position after the Jinnee, and, looking down between his feet, could just see the tops of the thin and rusty trees in the churchyard, the black and serried swarms of foreshortened people in the street, and the scarlet-rimmed mouths of chimney-pots on the tiled roofs below.

" There is but one remedy I know," said the Jinnee, " and it may be that I have lost power to perform it. Yet will I make the endeavour." And, stretching forth his right hand toward the east, he muttered some kind of command or invocation.

Horace almost fell off the cornice with apprehension of what might follow. Would it be a thunderbolt, a plague, some frightful convulsion of Nature ? He felt sure that Fakrash would hesitate at no means, however violent, of burying all traces of his blunder in oblivion, and very little hope that, whatever he did, it would prove anything but some worse indiscretion than his previous performances.

Happily none of these extreme measures seemed to have occurred to the Jinnee, though what followed was strange and striking enough.

For presently, as if in obedience to the Jinnee's weird gesticulations, a lurid belt of fog came rolling up from the direction of the Royal Exchange, swallowing up building after building in its rapid course ; one by one the Guild-

THE BRASS BOTTLE

hall, Bow Church, Cheapside itself, and the churchyard disappeared, and Horace, turning his head to the left, saw the murky tide sweeping on westward, blotting out Ludgate Hill, the Strand, Charing Cross, and Westminster—till at last he and Fakrash were alone above a limitless plain of bituminous cloud, the only living things left, as it seemed, in a blank and silent universe.

" Look again ! " said Fakrash, and Horace, looking eastward, saw the spire of Bow Church rosy once more, the Guildhall standing clear and intact, and the streets and house-tops gradually reappearing. Only the flags, with their unrestful shiver and ripple of colour, had disappeared, and, with them, the waiting crowds and the mounted constables. The ordinary traffic of vans, omnibuses, and cabs was proceeding as though it had never been interrupted—the clank and jingle of harness chains, the cries and whip-crackings of drivers, rose with curious distinctness above the incessant trampling roar which is the ground-swell of the human ocean.

" That cloud which thou sawest," said Fakrash, " hath swept away with it all memory of this affair from the minds of every mortal assembled to do thee honour. See, they go about their several businesses, and all the past incidents are to them as though they had never been."

It was not often that Horace could honestly commend any performance of the Jinnee's, but at this he could not restrain his admiration. " By Jove ! " he said, " that certainly gets the Lord Mayor and everybody else out of the mess as neatly as possible. I must say, Mr. Fakrash, it's much the best thing I've seen you do yet."

" Wait," said the Jinnee, " for presently thou shalt see me perform a yet more excellent thing."

There was a most unpleasant green glow in his eyes and a bristle in his thin beard as he spoke, which suddenly made Horace feel uncomfortable. He did not like the look of the Jinnee at all.

" I really think you've done enough for to-day," he

said. " And this wind up here is rather searching. I shan't be sorry to find myself on the ground again.*

" That," replied the Jinnee, " thou shalt assuredly do before long, O impudent and deceitful wretch ! " And he laid a long, lean hand on Horace's shoulder.

" He is put out about something ! " thought Ventimore. " But what ? " " My dear sir," he said aloud, " I don't understand this tone of yours. What have I done to offend you ? "

" Divinely gifted was he who said : * Beware of losing hearts in consequence of injury, for the bringing them back after flight is difficult.' "

" Excellent ! " said Horace. " But I don't quite see the application."

" The application," explained the Jinnee, " is that I am determined to cast thee down from here with my own hand ! "

Horace turned faint and dizzy for a moment. Then, by a strong effort of will, he pulled himself together.

" Oh, come now," he said, " you don't really mean that, you know. After all your kindness ! You're much too good-natured to be capable of anything so atrocious."

" All pity hath been eradicated from my heart," returned Fakrash. " Therefore prepare to die, for thou art presently about to perish in the most unfortunate manner."

Ventimore could not repress a shudder. Hitherto he had never been able to take Fakrash quite seriously, in spite of all his supernatural powers ; he had treated him with a half-kindly, half-contemptuous tolerance, as a well-meaning but hopelessly incompetent old foozle. That the Jinnee should ever become malevolent towards him had never entered his head till now—and yet he undoubtedly had. How was he to cajole and disarm this formidable being ? He must keep cool and act promptly, or he would never see Sylvia again.

As he sat there on the narrow ledge, with a faint and not unpleasant smell of hops saluting his nostrils from some distant brewery, he tried hard to collect his thoughts,

THE BRASS BOTTLE

but could not. He found himself, instead, idly watching the busy, jostling crowd below, who were all unconscious of the impending drama so high above them. Just over the rim of the dome he could see the opaque white top of a lamp on a shelter, where a pigmy constable stood, directing the traffic.

Would he look up if Horace called for help ? Even if he could, what help could he render ? All he could do would be to keep the crowd back and send for a covered stretcher. No, he would *not* dwell on these horrors ; he *must* fix his mind on some way of circumventing Fakrash.

How did the people in the *Arabian Nights* manage ? The fisherman, for instance ? He persuaded his Jinnee to return to the bottle by pretending to doubt whether he had ever really been inside it.

But Fakrash, though simple enough in some respects, was not quite such a fool as that. Sometimes the Jinn could be mollified and induced to grant a reprieve by being told stories, one inside the other, like a nest of Oriental boxes. Unfortunately Fakrash did not seem in the humour for listening to apologues, and, even if he were, Horace could not think of or improvise any just then. " Besides," he thought, " I can't sit up here telling him anecdotes for ever. I'd almost sooner die ! " Still, he remembered that it was generally possible to draw an Arabian Efreet into discussion : they all loved argument, and had a rough conception of justice.

" I think, Mr. Fakrash," he said, " that, in common fairness, I have a right to know what offence I have committed."

" To recite thy misdeeds," replied the Jinnee, " would occupy much time."

" I don't mind that," said Horace, affably. " I can give you as long as you like. I'm in no sort of hurry."

" With me it is otherwise," retorted Fakrash, making a stride towards him. " Therefore court not life, for thy death hath become unavoidable."

" Before we part," said Horace, " you won't refuse to answer one or two questions ? "

" Didst thou not undertake never to ask any further favour of me ? Moreover, it will avail thee naught. For I am positively determined to slay thee."

" I demand it," said Horace, " in the most great name of the Lord Mayor (on whom be peace) ! "

It was a desperate shot—but it took effect. The Jinnee quailed visibly.

" Ask, then," he said ; " but briefly, for the time groweth short."

Horace determined to make one last appeal to Fakrash's sense of gratitude, sine? it had always seemed the dominant trait in his character.

" Well," he said, " but for me, wouldn't you be still in that brass bottle ? "

" That," replied the Jinnee, " is the very reason why I purpose to destroy thee ! "

" Oh ! " was all Horace could find to say at this most unlooked-for answer. His sheet anchor, in which he had trusted implicitly, had suddenly dragged—and he was drifting fast to destruction.

" Are there any other questions which thou wouldst ask ? " inquired the Jinnee, with grim indulgence ; " or wilt thou encounter thy doom without further procrastination ? "

Horace was determined not to give in just yet; he had a very bad hand, but he might as well play the game out and trust to luck to gain a stray trick.

" I haven't nearly done yet," he said. " And, remember, you've promised to answer me—in the name of the Lord Mayor! "

" I will answer one other question, and no more," said the Jinnee, in an inflexible tone ; and Ventimore realised that his fate would depend upon what he said next.

18. *A Game of Bluff*

" T H Y second question, O pertinacious one ? " said I the Jinnee, impatiently. He was standing with folded arms looking down on Horace, who was still seated on the narrow cornice, not daring to glance below again, lest he should lose his head altogether.

" I 'm coming to it," said Ventimore ; " I want to know why you should propose to dash me to pieces in this barbarous way as a return for letting you out of that bottle. Were you so comfortable in it as all that ? "

" In the bottle I was at least suffered to rest, and none molested me. But in releasing me thou didst perfidiously conceal from me that Suleyman was dead and gone, and that there reigneth one in his stead mightier a thousand-fold, who afflicteth our race with labours and tortures exceeding all the punishments of Suleyman."

" What on earth have you got into your head now ? You can't mean the Lord Mayor ! "

" Whom else ? " said the Jinnee, solemnly. " And though, for this once, by a device I have evaded his vengeance, yet do I know full well that either by virtue of the magic jewel upon his breast, or through that malignant monster with the myriad ears and eyes and tongues, which thou callest ' The Press,' I shall inevitably fall into his power before long."

For the life of him, in spite of his desperate plight, Horace could not help laughing. " I beg your pardon, Mr. Fakrash," he said, as soon as he could speak, " but—the Lord Mayor ! It's really too absurd. Why, he wouldn't hurt a hair on a fly's head ! "

" Seek not to deceive me further ! " said Fakrash, furiously. " Didst thou not inform me with thy own mouth that the spirits of Earth, Air, Water, and Fire were subject to his will ? Have I no eyes ? Do I not behold from here the labours of my captive brethren ? What are those on yonder bridges but enslaved Jinn, shrieking

and groaning in clanking fetters, and snorting forth steam, as they drag their wheeled burdens behind them ? Are there not others toiling, with panting efforts, through the sluggish waters ; others again, imprisoned in lofty pillars, from which the smoke of their breath ascendeth even unto Heaven ? Doth not the air throb and quiver with their restless struggles as they writhe below in darkness and torment ? And thou hast the shamelessness to pretend that these things are done in the Lord Mayor's own realms without his knowledge ! Verily thou must take me for a fool ! "

" After all," reflected Ventimore, " i f he chooses to consider that railway engines and steamers, and machinery generally, are inhabited by so many Jinn ' doing time,' it's not to my interest to undeceive him—indeed, it's quite the contrary ! "

" I wasn't aware the Lord Mayor had so much power as all that," he said ; " but very likely you're right. And if you're so anxious to keep in favour with him, it would be a great mistake to kill me. That *would* annoy him."

" Not so," said the Jinnee, " for I should declare that thou hadst spoken slightly of him in my hearing, and that I had slain thee on that account."

" Your proper course," said Horace, " would be to hand me over to him, and let *him* deal with the case. Much more regular."

" That may be," said Fakrash ; " but I have conceived so bitter a hatred to thee by reason of thy insolence and treachery, that I cannot forego the delight of slaying thee with my own hand."

" Can't you, really ? " said Horace, on the verge of despair. " And *then*, what will you do ? "

" Then," replied the Jinnee, " I shall flee away to Arabia, where I shall be safe."

" Don't you be too sure of that! " said Horace. " You see all those wires stretched on poles down there ? Those are the pathways of certain Jinn known as electric currents, and the Lord Mayor could send a message along

THE BRASS BOTTLE

them which would be at Baghdad before you had flown farther than Folkestone. And I may mention that Arabia is now more or less under British jurisdiction."

He was bluffing, of course, for he knew perfectly well that, even if any extradition treaty could be put in force, the arrest of a Jinnee would be no easy matter.

"Thou art of opinion, then, that I should be no safer in mine own country?" inquired Fakrash.

"I swear by the name of the Lord Mayor (to whom be all reverence!) " said Horace, "that there is no land you could fly to where you would be any safer than you are here."

"If I were but sealed up in my bottle once more," said the Jinnee, "would not even the Lord Mayor have respect unto the seal of Suleyman, and forbear to disturb me?"

"Why, of course he would!" cried Horace, hardly daring to believe his ears. "That's really a brilliant idea of yours, my dear Mr. Fakrash."

"And in the bottle I should not be compelled to work," continued the Jinnee. "For labour of all kinds hath ever been abhorrent unto me."

"I can quite understand that," said Horace, sympathetically. "Just imagine your having to drag an excursion train to the seaside on a Bank Holiday, or being condemned to print off a cheap comic paper, or even the *War Cry*, when you might be leading a snug and idle existence in your bottle. If I were you, I should go and get inside it at once. Suppose we go back to Vincent Square and find it?"

"I shall return to the bottle, since in that alone there is safety," said the Jinnee. "But I shall return alone."

"Alone?" cried Horace. "You're not going to leave me stuck up here all by myself?"

"By no means," said the Jinnee. "Have I not said that I am about to cast thee to perdition? Too long have I delayed in the accomplishment of this duty."

Once more Horace gave himself up for lost; which was

A GAME OF BLUFF

doubly bitter, just when he had begun to consider that the danger was past. But even then, he was determined to fight to the last.

"One moment," he said. "Of course, if you've set your heart on pitching me over, you must. Only—I may be quite mistaken—but I don't quite see how you are going to manage the rest of your programme without me, that's all."

"O deficient in intelligence!" cried the Jinnee. "What assistance canst thou render me?"

"Well," said Horace, "of course, you can get into the bottle alone—that's simple enough. But the difficulty I see is this: Are you quite sure you can put the cap on yourself—from the *inside*, you know?" "If he *can*" he thought, "I'm done for!"

"That," began the Jinnee, with his usual confidence, "will be the easiest of—nay," he corrected himself, "there be things that not even the Jinn themselves can accomplish, and one of them is to seal a vessel while remaining within it. I am indebted to thee for reminding me thereof."

"Not at all," said Ventimore. "I shall be delighted to come and seal you up comfortably myself."

"Again thou speakest folly," exclaimed the Jinnee. "How canst thou seal me up after I have dashed thee into a thousand pieces?"

"That," said Horace, with all the urbanity he could command, "is precisely the difficulty I was trying to convey."

"There will be no difficulty, for as soon as I am in the bottle I shall summon certain inferior Efreets, and they will replace the seal."

"When you are once in the bottle," said Horace, at a venture, "you probably won't be in a position to summon anybody."

"*Before* I get into the bottle, then!" said the Jinnee, impatiently. "Thou dost but juggle with words!"

"But about those Efreets," persisted Horace. "You

THE BRASS BOTTLE

know what Efreets *are* ! How can you be sure that, when they've got you in the bottle, they won't hand you over to the Lord Mayor ? I shouldn't trust them myself—but, of course, you know best ! "

" Whom shall I trust, then ? " said Fakrash, frowning.

" I'm sure I don't know. It's rather a pity you're so determined to destroy me, because, as it happens, I'm just the one person living who could be depended on to seal you up and keep your secret. However, that's your affair. After all, why should I care what becomes of you ? I shan't be there ! "

" Even at this hour," said the Jinnee, undecidedly, " I might find it in my heart to spare thee, were I but sure that thou wouldst be faithful unto me ! "

" I should have thought I was more to be trusted than one of your beastly Efreets ! " said Horace, with well-assumed indifference. " But never mind, I don't know that I care, after all. I've nothing particular to live for now. You've ruined me pretty thoroughly, and you may as well finish your work. I've a good mind to jump over and save you the trouble. Perhaps, when you see me bouncing down that dome, you'll be sorry ! "

" Refrain from rashness ! " said the Jinnee, hastily, without suspecting that Ventimore had no serious intention of carrying out his threat. " If thou wilt do as thou art bidden, I will not only pardon thee, but grant thee all that thou desirest."

" Take me back to Vincent Square first," said Horace. " This is not the place to discuss business."

" Thou say est rightly," replied the Jinnee ; " hold fast to my sleeve, and I will transport thee to thine abode."

" Not till you promise to play fair," said Horace, pausing on the brink of the ledge. " Remember, if you let me go now you drop the only friend you've got in the world ! "

" May I be thy ransom ! " replied Fakrash. " There shall not be harmed a hair of thy head ! "

Even then Horace had his misgivings ; but as there

was no other way of getting off that cornice, he decided to take the risk. And, as it proved, he acted judiciously, for the Jinnee flew to Vincent Square with honourable precision, and dropped him neatly into the arm-chair in which he had little hoped ever to find himself again.

"I have brought thee hither/' said Fakrash, "and yet I am persuaded that thou art even now devising treachery against me, and wilt betray me if thou canst."

Horace was about to assure him once more that no one could be more anxious than himself to see him safely back in his bottle, when he recollected that it was impolitic to appear too eager.

"After the way you've behaved' he said, "I'm not at all sure that I ought to help you. Still, I said I would, on certain conditions, and I'll keep my word."

"Conditions!" thundered the Jinnee. "Wilt thou bargain with me yet further?"

"My excellent friend," said Horace, quietly, "you know perfectly well that you can't get yourself safely sealed up again in that bottle without my assistance. If you don't like my terms, and prefer to take your chance of finding an Efreet who is willing to brave the Lord Mayor, well, you've only to say so."

"I have loaded thee with all manner of riches and favours, and I will bestow no more upon thee," said the Jinnee, sullenly. "Nay, in token of my displeasure, I will deprive thee even of such gifts as thou hast retained." He pointed his grey forefinger at Ventimore, whose turban and jewelled robes instantly shrivelled into cobwebs and tinder, and fluttered to the carpet in filmy shreds, leaving him in nothing but his under-clothing.

"That only shows what a nasty temper you're in," said Horace, blandly, "and doesn't annoy me in the least. If you'll excuse me, I'll go and put on some things I can feel more at home in; and perhaps by the time I return you'll have cooled down."

He slipped on some clothes hurriedly and re-entered

THE BRASS BOTTLE

the sitting-room. " Now, Mr. Fakrash," he said, " we'll have this out. You talk of having loaded me with benefits. You seem to consider I ought to be grateful to you. In Heaven's name, for what ? I've been as forbearing as possible all this time, because I gave you credit for meaning well. Now, I'll speak plainly. I told you from the first, and I tell you now, that I want no riches nor honours from you. The one real good turn you did me was bringing me that client, and you spoilt that because you would insist on building the palace yourself, instead of leaving it to me ! As for the rest—here am I, a ruined and discredited man, with a client who probably supposes I'm in league with the devil; with the girl I love, and might have married, believing that I have left her to marry a Princess ; and her father, unable ever to forgive me for having seen him as a one-eyed mule. In short, I'm in such a mess all round that I don't care two straws whether I live or die ! "

" What is all this to me ? " said the Jinnee.

" Only this—that unless you can see your way to putting things straight for me, I'm hanged if I take the trouble to seal you up in that bottle ! "

" How am I to put things straight for thee ? " cried Fakrash, peevishly.

" If you could make all those people entirely forget that affair in the Guildhall, you can make my friends forget the brass bottle and everything connected with it, can't you ? "

" There would be no difficulty in that," Fakrash admitted.

" Well, do it—and I'll swear to seal you up in the bottle exactly as if you had never been out of it, and pitch you into the deepest part of the Thames, where no one will ever disturb you."

" First produce the bottle, then," said Fakrash, " for I cannot believe but that thou hast some lurking guile in thy heart."

A GAME OF BLUFF

" I'll ring for my landlady and have the bottle brought up," said Horace. " Perhaps that will satisfy you ? Stay, you'd better not let her see you."

" I will render myself invisible," said the Jinnee, suiting the action to his words. " But beware lest thou play me false," his voice continued, "for I shall hear thee ! "

" So you've come in, Mr. Ventimore ? " said Mrs. Rapkin, as she entered. " And without the furrin' gentleman ? I was surprised, and so was Rapkin the same, to see you ridin' off this morning in that gorgeous chariot and 'osses, and dressed up that lovely ! * Depend upon it,' I says to Rapkin, I says, ' depend upon it, Mr. Ventimore'U be sent for to Buckinham Pallis, if it ain't Windsor Castle ! ' "

" Never mind that now," said Horace, impatiently ; " I want that brass bottle I bought the other day. Bring it up at once, please."

" I thought you said the other day you never wanted to set eyes on it again, and I was to do as I pleased with it, sir ? "

" Well, I've changed my mind, so let me have it, quick."

" I'm sure I'm very sorry, sir, but that you can't, because Rapkin, not wishful to have the place lumbered up with rubbish, disposed of it on'y last night to a gentleman as keeps a rag and bone emporium off the Bridge Road, and 'alf a crown was the most he'd give for it, sir."

" Give me his name," said Horace.

" Dilger, sir—Emanuel Dilger. When Rapkin comes in I'm sure he'd go round with pleasure, and see about it, if required."

" I'll go round myself," said Horace. " It's all right, Mrs. Rapkin, quite a natural mistake on your part, but—but I happen to want the bottle again. You needn't stay."

" O thou smooth-faced and double-tongued one ! " said the Jinnee, after she had gone, as he reappeared

THE BRASS BOTTLE

to view. " Did I not foresee that thou wouldst deal crookedly ? Restore unto me my bottle ! "

" I'll go and get it at once," said Horace ; "I shan't be five minutes." And he prepared to go.

" Thou shalt not leave this house," cried Fakrash, " for I perceive plainly that this is but a device of thine to escape and betray me to the Press Devil ! "

If you can't see," said Horace, angrily, " that I'm quite as anxious to see you safely back in that confounded bottle as ever you can be to get there, you must be pretty dense ! *Can't* you understand ? The bottle's sold, and I can't buy it back without going out. Don't be so infernally unreasonable ! "

" Go, then," said the Jinnee, " and I will await thy return here. But know this : that if thou delayest long or returnest without my bottle, I shall know that thou art a traitor, and will visit thee and those who are dear to thee with the most unpleasant punishments ! "

" I'll be back in half an hour, at most," said Horace, feeling that this would allow him ample margin, and thankful that it did not occur to Fakrash to go in person.

He put on his hat, and hurried off in the gathering dusk. He had some little trouble in finding Mr. Dilger's establishment, which was a dirty, dusty little place in a back street, with a few deplorable old chairs, rickety washstands, and rusty fenders outside, and the interior almost completely blocked by piles of dingy mattresses, empty clock-cases, tarnished and cracked mirrors, broken lamps, damaged picture-frames, and everything else which one would imagine could have no possible value for any human being. But in all this collection of worthless curios the brass bottle was nowhere to be seen.

Ventimore went in and found a youth of about thirteen straining his eyes in the fading light over one of those halfpenny humorous journals which, thanks to an improved system of education, at least eighty per cent, of our juvenile population are now enabled to appreciate.

" I want to see Mr. Dilger," he began.

" You can't," said the youth. " 'Cause he aii\ 't in. He's attending of an auction."

" When *will* he be in, do you know ? "

" Might be back to his tea—but I wasn't to expect him not before supper."

" You don't happen to have any old metal bottles—copper or—or brass would do—for sale ? "

" You don't git at me like that! Bottles is made o' glorss."

" Well, a jar, then—a big brass pot—anything of that kind ? "

" Don't keep 'em," said the boy, and buried himself once more in his copy of *Spicy Sniggers*.

" I'll just look round," said Horace, and began to poke about with a sinking heart, and a horrid dread that he might have come to the wrong shop, for the big pot-bellied vessel certainly did not seem to be there. At last, to his unspeakable joy, he discovered it under a piece of tattered druggot. " Why, this is the sort of thing I meant," he said, feeling in his pocket and discovering that he had exactly a sovereign. " How much do you want for it ? "

" I dunno," said the boy.

" I don't mind three shillings," said Horace, who did not wish to appear too keen at first.

" I'll tell the *guv'nor* when he comes in," was the reply, " and you can look in later."

" I want it at once," insisted Horace. " Come, I'll give you three-and-six for it."

" It's more than it's wurf," replied the candid youth.

" Perhaps," said Horace, " but I'm rather pressed for time. If you'll change this sovereign, I'll take the bottle away with me."

" You seem uncommon anxious to get 'old on it, mister ! " said the boy, with sudden suspicion.

" Nonsense ! " said Horace. " I live close by, and I thought I might as well take it, that's all."

" Oh, if that's all, you can wait till the *guv'nor's* in."

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" I — I mayn't be passing this way again for some time," said Horace.

" Bound to be, if you live close by," and the provoking youth returned to his *Sniggers*.

" Do you call this attending to your master's business ? " said Horace. " Listen to me, you young rascal. I'll give you five shillings for it. You're not going to be fool enough to refuse an offer like that ? "

" I ain't goin' to be fool enough to refuse it—nor yet I ain't goin' to be fool enough to take it, 'cause I'm only 'ere to see as nobody don't come in and sneak fings. I ain't got no authority to sell any fink, and I don't know the price o' nuffink, so there you ^yave it."

" Take the five shillings," said Horace, " and if it's too little I'll come round and settle with your master later."

" I thought you said you wasn't likely to be porsin' again ? No, mister, you don't kid me that way ! "

Horace had a mad impulse to snatch up the precious bottle then and there and make off with it, and might have yielded to the temptation, with disastrous consequences, had not an elderly man entered the shop at that moment. He was bent, and wore rather more fluff and flue upon his person than most well-dressed people would consider necessary, but he came in with a certain air of authority, nevertheless.

" Mr. Dilger, sir," piped the youth, " 'ere's a gent took a fancy to this 'ere brass pot o' yours. Says he *must* 'ave it. Five shillings he'd got to, but I told him he'd 'ave to wait till you come in."

" Quite right, my lad ! " said Mr. Dilger, cocking a watery but sharp old eye at Horace. " Five shillings ! Ah, sir, you can't know much about these hold brass antiquities to make an offer like that."

" I know as much as most people," said Horace. " But let us say six shillings."

" Couldn't be done, sir; couldn't, indeed. Why, I give a pound for it myself at Christie's, as sure as

A GAME OF BLUFF

I'm standin' 'ere in the presence o' my Maker _x and you a sinner!" he declared impressively, if rather ambiguously.

"Your memory is not quite accurate," said Horace. "You bought it last night from a man of the name of Rapkin, who lets lodgings in Vincent Square, and you paid exactly half a crown for it."

"If you say so I dare say it's correct, sir," said Mr. Dilger, without exhibiting the least confusion. "And if I did buy it off Mr. Rapkin, he's a respectable party, and ain't likely to have come by it dishonest."

"I never said he did. What will you take for the thing?"

"Well, just look at the work in it. They don't turn out the like o' that nowadays. Dutch, that is; what they used for to put their milk and such-like in."

"Damn it!" said Horace, completely losing his temper. "I know what it was used for. Will you tell me what you want for it?"

"I couldn't let a curiosity like that go a penny under thirty shillings," said Mr. Dilger, affectionately. "It would be robbin' myself."

"I'll give you a sovereign for it—there," said Horace. "You know best what profit that represents. That's my last word."

"My last word to that, sir, is good heavenin'," said the worthy man.

"Good evening, then," said Horace, and walked out of the shop; rather to bring Mr. Dilger to terms than because he really meant to abandon the bottle, for he dared not go back without it, and he had nothing about him just then on which he could raise the extra ten shillings, supposing the dealer refused to trust him for the balance—and the time was growing dangerously short.

Fortunately, the well-worn ruse succeeded, for Mr. Dilger ran out after him and laid an unwashed claw upon his coat-sleeve. "Don't go, mister," he said;

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" I like to do business if I can ; though, 'pon my word and honour, a sovereign for a work o' art like that ! Well, just for luck and bein' my birthday, we'll call it a deal."

Horace handed over the coin, which left him with a few pence. " There ought to be a lid or stopper of some sort," he said suddenly. " What have you done with that ? "

" No, sir, there you're mistook, you are, indeed. I do assure you you never see a pot of this partickler pattern with a lid to it. Never ! "

" Oh, don't you, though ? " said Horace. " I know better. Never mind," he said, as he recollected that the seal was in Fakrash's possession. " I'll take it as it is. Don't trouble to wrap it up. I'm in rather a hurry."

It was almost dark when he got back to his rooms, where he found the Jinnee shaking with mingled rage and apprehension.

" No welcome to thee ! " he cried. " Dilatory dog that thou art ! Hadst thou delayed another minute, I would have called down some calamity upon thee."

" Well, you need not trouble yourself to do that now," returned Ventimore. " Here's your bottle, and you can creep into it as soon as you please."

" But the seal ! " shrieked the Jinnee. " What hast thou done with the seal which was upon the bottle ? "

" Why, you've got it yourself, of course," said Horace, " in one of your pockets."

" O thou of base antecedents ! " howled Fakrash, shaking out his flowing draperies. " How should I have the seal ? This is but a fresh device of thine to undo me ! "

" Don't talk rubbish ! " retorted Horace. " You made the Professor give it up to you yesterday. You must have lost it somewhere or other: Never mind ! I'll get a large cork or bung, which will do just as well. And I've lots of sealing-wax."

" I will have no seal but the seal of Suleyman ! " declared the Jinnee. " For with no other will there be security. Verily I believe that that accursed sage, thy friend, hath contrived by some cunning to get the seal once more into his hands. I will go at once to his abode and compel him to restore it /

" I wouldn't," said Horace, feeling extremely uneasy, for it was evidently a much simpler thing to let a Jinnee out of a bottle than to get him in again. " He's quite incapable of taking it. And if you go out now you'll only make a fuss and attract the attention of the Press, which I thought you rather wanted to avoid."

" I shall attire myself in the garments of a mortal—even those I assumed on a former occasion," said Fakrash, and as he spoke his outer robes modernised into a frock-coat. " Thus shall I escape attention."

" Wait one moment," said Horace. " What is that bulge in your breast-pocket ? "

" Of a truth," said the Jinnee, looking relieved but not a little foolish as he extracted the object, " it is indeed the seal."

" You're in such a hurry to think the worst of everybody, you see ! " said Horace. " Now, *do* try to carry away with you into your seclusion a better opinion of human nature."

" Perdition to all the people of this age ! " cried Fakrash, reassuming his green robe and turban, " for I now put no faith in human beings and would afflict them all, were not the Lord Mayor (on whom be peace !) mightier than I. Therefore, while it is yet time, take thou the stopper, and swear that, after I am in this bottle, thou wilt seal it as before and cast it into deep waters, where no eye will look upon it more ! "

" With all the pleasure in the world ! " said Horace ; " only you must keep *your* part of the bargain first. You will kindly obliterate all recollection of yourself and the brass bottle from the minds of every human being who has had anything to do with you or it."

THE BRASS BOTTLE

" Not so," objected the Jinnee, " for thus wouldst thou forget thy compact."

" Oh, very well, leave *me* out, then," said Horace. " Not that anything could make me forget *you* ! "

Fakrash swept his right hand round in a half circle. " It is accomplished," he said. " All recollection of myself and yonder bottle is now erased from the memories of everyone but thyself."

" But how about my client ? " said Horace. " I can't afford to lose *him*, you know."

" He shall return unto thee," said the Jinnee, trembling with impatience. " Now perform thy share."

Horace had triumphed. It had been a long and desperate duel with this singular being, who was at once so crafty and so childlike, so credulous and so suspicious, so benevolent and so malign. Again and again he had despaired of victory, but he had won at last. In another minute or so this formidable Jinnee would be safely bottled once more and powerless to intermeddle and plague him for the future.

And yet, in the very moment of triumph, quixotic as such scruples may seem to some, Ventimore's conscience smote him. He could not help a certain pity for the old creature, who was shaking there convulsively, prepared to re-enter his bottle-prison rather than incur a wholly imaginary doom. Fakrash had aged visibly within the last hour ; now he looked even older than his three thousand and odd years. True, he had led Horace a fearful life of late, but at first, at least, his intentions had been good. His gratitude, if mistaken in its form, was the sign of a generous disposition. Not every Jinnee, surely, would have endeavoured to press untold millions and honours and dignities of all kinds upon him, in return for a service which most mortals would have considered amply repaid by a brace of birds and an invitation to an evening party.

And how was Horace treating *him* ? He was taking what, in his heart, he felt to be a rather mean advantage

of the Jinnee's ignorance of modern life to cajole him into returning to his captivity. Why not suffer him to live out the brief remainder of his years (for he could hardly last more than another century or two at most) in freedom ? Fakrash had learnt his lesson : he was not likely to interfere again in human affairs ; he might find his way back to the Palace of the Mountain of the Clouds and end his days there, in peaceful enjoyment of the society of such of the Jinn as might still survive unbottled.

So, obeying—against his own interests—some kindlier impulse, Horace made an effort to deter the Jinnee, who was already hovering in air above the neck of the bottle in a swirl of revolving draperies, like some blundering old bee vainly endeavouring to hit the opening into his hive.

" Mr. Fakrash," he cried, " before you go any farther, listen to me. There's no real necessity, after all, for you to go back to your bottle. If you'll only wait a little——"

But the Jinnee, who had now swelled to gigantic proportions, and whose form and features were only dimly recognisable through the wreaths of black vapour in which he was involved, answered him from his pillar of smoke in a terrible voice. " Wouldst thou still persuade me to linger ? " he cried. " Hold thy peace and be ready to fulfil thine undertaking."

" But, look here," persisted Horace. " I should feel such a brute if I sealed you up without telling you——" The whirling and roaring column, in shape like an inverted cone, was being fast sucked down into the vessel, till only a semi-materialised but highly infuriated head was left above the neck of the bottle.

" Must I tarry," it cried, " till the Lord Mayor arrive with his Memlooks, and the hour of safety is expired ? By my head, if thou delayest another instant, I will put no more faith in thee ! And I will come forth once more, and afflict thee and thy friends—ay, and all the dwellers in this accursed city—with the most painful and unheard-of calamities."

THE BRASS BOTTLE

And, with these words, the head sank into the bottle with a loud clap resembling thunder.

Horace hesitated no longer. The Jinnee himself had absolved him from all further scruples ; to imperil Sylvia and her parents—not to mention all London—out of consideration for one obstinate and obnoxious old demon, would clearly be carrying sentiment much too far.

Accordingly, he made a rush for the jar and slipped the metal cover over the mouth of the neck, which was so hot that it blistered his fingers, and, seizing the poker, he hammered down the secret catch until the lid fitted as closely as Suleyman himself could have required.

Then he stuffed the bottle into a kit-bag, adding a few coals to give it extra weight, and toiled off with it to the nearest steamboat pier, where he spent his remaining pence in purchasing a ticket to the Temple.

Next day the following paragraph appeared in one of the evening papers, which probably had more space than usual at its disposal :—

" SINGULAR OCCURRENCE ON A PENNY STEAMER

" A gentleman on board one of the Thames steamboats (so we are informed by an eye-witness) met with a somewhat ludicrous mishap yesterday evening. It appears that he had with him a small portmanteau, or large hand-bag, which he was supporting on the rail of the stern bulwark. Just as the vessel was opposite the Savoy Hotel he incautiously raised his hand to the brim of his hat, thereby releasing hold of the bag, which overbalanced itself and fell into the deepest part of the river, where it instantly sank. The owner (whose carelessness occasioned considerable amusement to passengers in his immediate vicinity) appeared no little disconcerted by the oversight, and was not un-

THE EPILOGUE

naturally reticent as to the amount of his loss, though he was understood to state that the bag contained nothing of any great value. However this may be, he has probably learnt a lesson which will render him more careful in future."

The Epilogue

ON a certain evening in May, Horace Ventimore dined in a private room at the Savoy, as one of the guests of Mr. Samuel Wackerbath. In fact, he might almost be said to be the guest of the evening, as the dinner was given by way of celebrating the completion of the host's new country house at Lipsfield, of which Horace was the architect, and also to congratulate him on his approaching marriage (which was fixed to take place early in the following month) with Miss Sylvia Futvoye.

"Quite a small and friendly party!" said Mr. Wackerbath, looking round on his numerous sons and daughters, as he greeted Horace in the reception-room. "Only ourselves, you see, Miss Futvoye, a young lady with whom you are fairly well acquainted, and her people, and an old schoolfellow of mine and his wife, who are not yet arrived. He's a man of considerable eminence," he added, with a roll of reflected importance in his voice; "quite worth your cultivating. Sir Lawrence Pountney, his name is. I don't know if you remember him, but he discharged the onerous duties of Lord Mayor of London the year before last, and acquitted himself very creditably—in fact, he got a baronetcy for it."

As the year before last was the year in which Horace had paid his involuntary visit to the Guildhall, he was able to reply with truth that he *did* remember Sir Lawrence.

He was not altogether comfortable when the ex-Lord Mayor was announced, for it would have been more than awkward if Sir Lawrence had chanced to remember *him*.

THE BRASS BOTTLE

Fortunately, he gave no sign that he did so, though his manner was graciousness itself. "Delighted, my dear Mr. Ventimore," he said, pressing Horace's hand almost as warmly as he had done that October day on the dais, "most delighted to make your acquaintance! I am always glad to meet a rising young man, and I hear that the house you have designed for my old friend here is a perfect palace—a marvel, sir!"

"I knew he was my man," declared Mr. Wackerbath, as Horace modestly disclaimed Sir Lawrence's compliment. "You remember, Pountney, my dear fellow, that day when we were crossing Westminster Bridge together, and I was telling you I thought of building? 'Go to one of the leading men—an R.A. and all that sort of thing you said, 'then you'll be sure of getting your money's worth.' But I said, No. I like to choose for myself; to—ah—exercise my own judgment in these matters. And there's a young fellow I have in my eye who'll beat 'em all, if he's given the chance. I'm off to see him now.' And off I went to Great Cloister Street (for he hadn't those palatial offices of his in Victoria Street, at that time) without losing another instant, and dropped in on him with my little commission. Didn't I, Ventimore?"

"You did indeed," said Horace, wondering how far these reminiscences would go.

"And," continued Mr. Wackerbath, patting Horace on the shoulder, "from that day to this I've never had a moment's reason to regret it. We've worked in perfect sympathy. His ideas coincided with mine. I think he found that I met him, so to speak, on all-fours."

Ventimore assented, though it struck him that a happier expression might, and would, have been employed if his client had remembered one particular interview in which he had not figured to advantage.

They went in to dinner, in a room sumptuously decorated with panels of grey-green brocade and softly shaded lamps, and screens of gilded leather; through the centre

