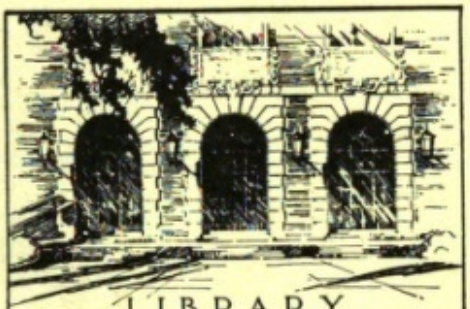

UNCLE SILAS:

A Tale of Bartram-Haugh

BY

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AUTHOR OF 'THE HOUSE BY THE CHURCHYARD,' 'WYLDER'S HAND,' 'GUY DEVERELL,' ETC. ETC.

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TO

THE RIGHT HON.

THE COUNTESS OF GIFFORD,

AS A TOKEN OF

RESPECT, SYMPATHY, AND ADMIRATION,

This Tale

IS INSCRIBED BY

THE AUTHOR.

A PRELIMINARY WORD.

THE WRITER of this Tale ventures, in his own person, to address a very few words, chiefly of explanation, to his readers. A leading situation in this 'Story of Bartram-Haugh' is repeated, with a slight variation, from a short magazine tale of some fifteen pages written by him, and published long ago in a periodical under the title of 'A Passage in the Secret History of an Irish Countess,' and afterwards, still anonymously, in a small volume under an altered title. It is very unlikely that any of his readers should have encountered, and still more so that they should remember, this trifle. The bare possibility, however, he has ventured to anticipate by this brief explanation, lest he should be charged with plagiarism — always a disrespect to a reader.

May he be permitted a few words also of remonstrance against the promiscuous application of the term 'sensation' to that large school of fiction which transgresses no one of those canons of construction and morality which, in producing the unapproachable 'Waverley Novels,' their great author imposed upon himself? No one, it is assumed, would describe Sir Walter Scott's romances as 'sensation novels;' yet in that marvellous series there is not a single tale in which death, crime, and, in some form, mystery, have not a place.

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UNCLE SILAS.

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CHAPTER I.

AUSTIN RUTHYN, OF KNOWL, AND HIS DAUGHTER.

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It was winter—that is, about the second week in November—and great gusts were rattling at the windows, and wailing and thundering among our tall trees and ivied chimneys—a very dark night, and a very cheerful fire blazing, a pleasant mixture of good round coal and spluttering dry wood, in a genuine old fireplace, in a sombre old room. Black wainscoting glimmered up to the ceiling, in small ebony panels; a cheerful clump of wax candles on the tea-table; many old portraits, some grim and pale, others pretty, and some very graceful and charming, hanging from the walls. Few pictures, except portraits long and short, were there. On the whole, I think you would have taken the room for our parlour. It was not like our modern notion of a drawing-room. It was a long room too, and every way capacious, but irregularly shaped.

A girl, of a little more than seventeen, looking, I believe, younger still; slight and rather tall, with a great deal of golden hair, dark grey-eyed, and with a countenance rather sensitive and melancholy, was sitting at the tea-table, in a reverie. I was that girl.

The only other person in the room—the only person in the house related to me—was my father. He was Mr. Ruthyn, of Knowl, so called in his county, but he had many other places, was

of a very ancient lineage, who had refused a baronetage often, and it was said even a viscounty, being of a proud and defiant spirit, and thinking themselves higher in station and purer of blood than two-thirds of the nobility into whose ranks, it was said, they had been invited to enter. Of all this family lore I knew but little and vaguely; only what is to be gathered from the fireside talk of old retainers in the nursery.

I am sure my father loved me, and I know I loved him. With the sure instinct of childhood I apprehended his tenderness, although it was never expressed in common ways. But my father was an oddity. He had been early disappointed in Parliament, where it was his ambition to succeed. Though a clever man, he failed there, where very inferior men did extremely well. Then he went abroad, and became a connoisseur and a collector; took a part, on his return, in literary and scientific institutions, and also in the foundation and direction of some charities. But he tired of this mimic government, and gave himself up to a country life, not that of a sportsman, but rather of a student, staying sometimes at one of his places and sometimes at another, and living a secluded life.

Rather late in life he married, and his beautiful young wife died, leaving me, their only child, to his care. This bereavement, I have been told, changed him—made him more odd and taciturn than ever, and his temper also, except to me, more severe. There was also some disgrace about his younger brother—my uncle Silas—which he felt bitterly.

He was now walking up and down this spacious old room, which, extending round an angle at the far end, was very dark in that quarter. It was his wont to walk up and down thus, without speaking — an exercise which used to remind me of Chateaubriand's father in the great chamber of the Château de Combourg. At the far end he nearly disappeared in the gloom, and then returning emerged for a few minutes, like a portrait with a background of shadow, and then again in silence faded nearly out of view.

This monotony and silence would have been terrifying to a

person less accustomed to it than I. As it was, it had its effect. I have known my father a whole day without once speaking to me. Though I loved him very much, I was also much in awe of him.

While my father paced the floor, my thoughts were employed about the events of a month before. So few things happened at Knowl out of the accustomed routine, that a very trifling occurrence was enough to set people wondering and conjecturing in that serene household. My father lived in remarkable seclusion; except for a ride, he hardly ever left the grounds of Knowl; and I don't think it happened twice in the year that a visitor sojourned among us.

There was not even that mild religious bustle which sometimes besets the wealthy and moral recluse. My father had left the Church of England for some odd sect, I forget its name, and ultimately became, I was told, a Swedenborgian. But he did not care to trouble me upon the subject. So the old carriage brought my governess, when I had one, the old housekeeper, Mrs. Rusk, and myself to the parish church every Sunday. And my father, in the view of the honest rector who shook his head over him—'a cloud without water, carried about of winds, and a wandering star to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness'—corresponded with the 'minister' of his church, and was provokingly contented with his own fertility and illumination; and Mrs. Rusk, who was a sound and bitter churchwoman, said he fancied he saw visions and talked with angels like the rest of that 'rubbitch.'

I don't know that she had any better foundation than analogy and conjecture for charging my father with supernatural pretensions; and in all points when her orthodoxy was not concerned, she loved her master and was a loyal housekeeper.

I found her one morning superintending preparations for the reception of a visitor, in the hunting-room it was called, from the pieces of tapestry that covered its walls, representing scenes *à la Wouvermans*, of falconry, and the chase, dogs, hawks, ladies, gallants, and pages. In the midst of whom Mrs. Rusk, in black silk, was rummaging drawers, counting linen, and issuing orders.

'Who is coming, Mrs. Rusk?'

Well, she only knew his name. It was a Mr. Bryerly. My papa expected him to dinner, and to stay for some days.

'I guess he's one of those creatures, dear, for I mentioned his name just to Dr. Clay (the rector), and he says there *is* a Doctor Bryerly, a great conjurer among the Swedenborg sect—and that's him, I do suppose.'

In my hazy notions of these sectaries there was mingled a suspicion of necromancy, and a weird freemasonry, that inspired something of awe and antipathy.

Mr. Bryerly arrived time enough to dress at his leisure, before dinner. He entered the drawing-room—a tall, lean man, all in ungainly black, with a white choker, with either a black wig, or black hair dressed in imitation of one, a pair of spectacles, and a dark, sharp, short visage, rubbing his large hands together, and with a short brisk nod to me, whom he plainly regarded merely as a child, he sat down before the fire, crossed his legs, and took up a magazine.

This treatment was mortifying, and I remember very well the resentment of which *he* was quite unconscious.

His stay was not very long; not one of us divined the object of his visit, and he did not prepossess us favourably. He seemed restless, as men of busy habits do in country houses, and took walks, and a drive, and read in the library, and wrote half a dozen letters.

His bed-room and dressing-room were at the side of the gallery, directly opposite to my father's, which had a sort of ante-room *en suite*, in which were some of his theological books.

The day after Mr. Bryerly's arrival, I was about to see whether my father's water caraffe and glass had been duly laid on the table in this ante-room, and in doubt whether he was there, I knocked at the door.

I suppose they were too intent on other matters to hear, but receiving no answer, I entered the room. My father was sitting in his chair, with his coat and waistcoat off, Mr. Bryerly kneeling on a stool beside him, rather facing him, his black scratch wig

leaning close to my father's grizzled hair. There was a large tome of their divinity lore, I suppose, open on the table close by. The lank black figure of Mr. Bryerly stood up, and he concealed something quickly in the breast of his coat.

My father stood up also, looking paler, I think, than I ever saw him till then, and he pointed grimly to the door, and said, 'Go.'

Mr. Bryerly pushed me gently back with his hands to my shoulders, and smiled down from his dark features with an expression quite unintelligible to me.

I had recovered myself in a second, and withdrew without a word. The last thing I saw at the door was the tall, slim figure in black, and the dark, significant smile following me: and then the door was shut and locked, and the two Swedenborgians were left to their mysteries.

I remember so well the kind of shock and disgust I felt in the certainty that I had surprised them at some, perhaps, debasing incantation—a suspicion of this Mr. Bryerly, of the ill-fitting black coat, and white choker—and a sort of fear came upon me, and I fancied he was asserting some kind of mastery over my father, which very much alarmed me.

I fancied all sorts of dangers in the enigmatical smile of the lank high-priest. The image of my father, as I had seen him, it might be, confessing to this man in black, who was I knew not what, haunted me with the disagreeable uncertainties of a mind very uninstructed as to the limits of the marvellous.

I mentioned it to no one. But I was immensely relieved when the sinister visitor took his departure the morning after, and it was upon this occurrence that my mind was now employed.

Some one said that Dr. Johnson resembled a ghost, who must be spoken to before it will speak. But my father, in whatever else he may have resembled a ghost, did not in that particular; for no one but I in his household—and I very seldom—dared to address him until first addressed by him. I had no notion how singular this was until I began to go out a little among friends and relations, and found no such rule in force anywhere else.

As I leaned back in my chair thinking, this phantasm of my

father came, and turned, and vanished with a solemn regularity. It was a peculiar figure, strongly made, thick-set, with a face large, and very stern; he wore a loose, black velvet coat and waistcoat. It was, however, the figure of an elderly rather than an old man—though he was then past seventy—but firm, and with no sign of feebleness.

I remember the start with which, not suspecting that he was close by me, I lifted my eyes, and saw that large, rugged countenance looking fixedly on me, from less than a yard away.

After I saw him, he continued to regard me for a second or two; and then, taking one of the heavy candlesticks in his gnarled hand, he beckoned me to follow him; which, in silence and wondering, I accordingly did.

He led me across the hall, where there were lights burning, and into a lobby by the foot of the back stairs, and so into his library.

It is a long, narrow room, with two tall, slim windows at the far end, now draped in dark curtains. Dusky it was with but one candle; and he paused near the door, at the left-hand side of which stood, in those days, an old-fashioned press or cabinet of carved oak. In front of this he stopped.

He had odd, absent ways, and talked more to himself, I believe, than to all the rest of the world put together.

'She won't understand,' he whispered, looking at me enquiringly. 'No, she won't. *Will* she?'

Then there was a pause, during which he brought forth from his breast pocket a small bunch of some half-dozen keys, on one of which he looked frowningly, every now and then balancing it a little before his eyes, between his finger and thumb, as he deliberated.

I knew him too well, of course, to interpose a word.

'They are easily frightened—ay, they are. I'd better do it another way.'

And pausing, he looked in my face as he might upon a picture.

'They *are*—yes—I had better do it another way—another way; yes—and she'll not suspect—she'll not suppose.'

Then he looked steadfastly upon the key, and from it to me, suddenly lifting it up, and said abruptly, 'See, child,' and, after a second or two, '*Remember* this key.'

It was oddly shaped, and unlike others.

'Yes, sir.' I always called him 'sir.'

'It opens that,' and he tapped it sharply on the door of the cabinet. 'In the daytime it is always here,' at which word he dropped it into his pocket again. 'You see?—and at night under my pillow—you hear me?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You won't forget this cabinet—oak—next the door—on your left—you won't forget?'

'No, sir.'

'Pity she's a girl, and so young—ay, a girl, and so young—no sense—giddy. You say, you'll *remember*?'

'Yes, sir.'

'It behoves you.'

He turned round and looked full upon me, like a man who has taken a sudden resolution; and I think for a moment he had made up his mind to tell me a great deal more. But if so, he changed it again; and after another pause, he said slowly and sternly—

'You will tell *no*body what I have said, under pain of my displeasure.'

'Oh! no, sir!'

'Good child!'

'*Except*,' he resumed, 'under one contingency; that is, in case I should be absent, and Dr. Bryerly—you recollect the thin gentleman, in spectacles and a black wig, who spent three days here last month—should come and enquire for the key, you understand, in my absence.'

'Yes, sir.'

So he kissed me on the forehead, and said—

'Let us return.'

Which, accordingly, we did, in silence; the storm outside, like a dirge on a great organ, accompanying our flitting.

CHAPTER II.

UNCLE SILAS.

WHEN we reached the drawing-room, I resumed my chair, and my father his slow and regular walk to and fro, in the great room. Perhaps it was the uproar of the wind that disturbed the ordinary tenor of his thoughts; but, whatever was the cause, certainly he was unusually talkative that night.

After an interval of nearly half an hour, he drew near again, and sat down in a high-backed arm-chair, beside the fire, and nearly opposite to me, and looked at me steadfastly for some time, as was his wont, before speaking; and said he—

'This won't do—you must have a governess.'

In cases of this kind I merely set down my book or work, as it might be, and adjusted myself to listen without speaking.

'Your French is pretty well, and your Italian; but you have no German. Your music may be pretty good—I'm no judge—but your drawing might be better—yes—yes. I believe there are accomplished ladies—finishing governesses, they call them—who undertake more than any one teacher would have professed in my time, and do very well. She can prepare you, and next winter, then, you shall visit France and Italy, where you may be accomplished as highly as you please.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'You shall. It is nearly six months since Miss Ellerton left you—too long without a teacher.'

Then followed an interval.

'Dr. Bryerly will ask you about that key, and what it opens; you show all that to *him*, and no one else.'

'But,' I said, for I had a great terror of disobeying him in ever so minute a matter, 'you will then be absent, sir—how am I to find the key?'

He smiled on me suddenly—a bright but wintry smile—it seldom came, and was very transitory, and kindly though mysterious.

'True, child; I'm glad you are so wise; *that*, you will find, I have provided for, and you shall know exactly where to look. You have remarked how solitarily I live. You fancy, perhaps, I have not got a friend, and you are nearly right—*nearly*, but not altogether. I have a very sure friend—*one*—a friend whom I once misunderstood, but now appreciate.'

I wondered silently whether it could be Uncle Silas.

'He'll make me a call, some day soon; I'm not quite sure when. I won't tell you his name—you'll hear that soon enough, and I don't want it talked of; and I must make a little journey with him. You'll not be afraid of being left alone for a time?'

'And have you promised, sir?' I answered, with another question, my curiosity and anxiety overcoming my awe. He took my questioning very good-humouredly.

'Well—*promise*?—no, child; but I'm under condition; he's not to be denied. I must make the excursion with him the moment he calls. I have no choice; but, on the whole, I rather like it—remember, I say, I rather *like* it.'

And he smiled again, with the same meaning, that was at once stern and sad. The exact purport of these sentences remained fixed in my mind, so that even at this distance of time I am quite sure of them.

A person quite unacquainted with my father's habitually abrupt and odd way of talking, would have fancied that he was possibly a little disordered in his mind. But no such suspicion for a moment troubled me. I was quite sure that he spoke of a real person who was coming, and that his journey was something momentous; and when the visitor of whom he spoke did come, and he departed with him upon that mysterious excursion, I perfectly understood his language and his reasons for saying so much and yet so little.

You are not to suppose that all my hours were passed in the sort of conference and isolation of which I have just given you a specimen; and singular and even awful as were sometimes my *tête-à-têtes* with my father, I had grown so accustomed to his

strange ways, and had so unbounded a confidence in his affection, that they never depressed or agitated me in the manner you might have supposed. I had a great deal of quite a different sort of chat with good old Mrs. Rusk, and very pleasant talks with Mary Quince, my somewhat ancient maid; and besides all this, I had now and then a visit of a week or so at the house of some one of our county neighbours, and occasionally a visitor—but this, I must own, very rarely—at Knowl.

There had come now a little pause in my father's revelations, and my fancy wandered away upon a flight of discovery. Who, I again thought, could this intending visitor be, who was to come, armed with the prerogative to make my stay-at-home father forthwith leave his household gods—his books and his child—to whom he clung, and set forth on an unknown knight-errantry? Who but Uncle Silas, I thought—that mysterious relative whom I had never seen—who was, it had in old times been very darkly hinted to me, unspeakably unfortunate or unspeakably vicious—whom I had seldom heard my father mention, and then in a hurried way, and with a pained, thoughtful look. Once only he had said anything from which I could gather my father's opinion of him, and then it was so slight and enigmatical that I might have filled in the character very nearly as I pleased.

It happened thus. One day Mrs. Rusk was in the oak-room, I being then about fourteen. She was removing a stain from a tapestry chair, and I watched the process with a childish interest. She sat down to rest herself—she had been stooping over her work—and threw her head back, for her neck was weary, and in this position she fixed her eyes on a portrait that hung before her.

It was a full-length, and represented a singularly handsome young man, dark, slender, elegant, in a costume then quite obsolete, though I believe it was seen at the beginning of this century—white leather pantaloons and top-boots, a buff waistcoat, and a chocolate-coloured coat, and the hair long and brushed back.

There was a remarkable elegance and a delicacy in the features, but also a character of resolution and ability that quite took the portrait out of the category of mere fops or fine men. When

people looked at it for the first time, I have so often heard the exclamation—'What a wonderfully handsome man!' and then, 'What a clever face!' An Italian greyhound stood by him, and some slender columns and a rich drapery in the background. But though the accessories were of the luxurious sort, and the beauty, as I have said, refined, there was a masculine force in that slender oval face, and a fire in the large, shadowy eyes, which were very peculiar, and quite redeemed it from the suspicion of effeminacy.

'Is not that Uncle Silas?' said I.

'Yes, dear,' answered Mrs. Rusk, looking, with her resolute little face, quietly on the portrait.

'He must be a very handsome man, Mrs. Rusk. Don't you think so?' I continued.

'He *was*, my dear—yes; but it is forty years since that was painted—the date is there in the corner, in the shadow that comes from his foot, and forty years, I can tell you, makes a change in most of us;' and Mrs. Rusk laughed, in cynical good-humour.

There was a little pause, both still looking on the handsome man in top-boots, and I said—

'And why, Mrs. Rusk, is papa always so sad about Uncle Silas?'

'What's that, child?' said my father's voice, very near. I looked round, with a start, and flushed and faltered, receding a step from him.

'No harm, dear. You have said nothing wrong,' he said gently, observing my alarm. 'You said I was always sad, I think, about Uncle Silas. Well, I don't know how you gather that; but if I were, I will now tell you, it would not be unnatural. Your uncle is a man of great talents, great faults, and great wrongs. His talents have not availed him; his faults are long ago repented of; and his wrongs I believe he feels less than I do, but they are deep. Did she say any more, madam?' he demanded abruptly of Mrs. Rusk.

'Nothing, sir,' with a stiff little courtesy, answered Mrs. Rusk, who stood in awe of him.

'And there is no need, child,' he continued, addressing himself to me, 'that you should think more of him at present. Clear your head of Uncle Silas. One day, perhaps, you will know him—yes, very well—and understand how villains have injured him.

Then my father retired, and at the door he said—

'Mrs. Rusk, a word, if you please,' beckoning to that lady, who trotted after him to the library.

I think he then laid some injunction upon the housekeeper, which was transmitted by her to Mary Quince, for from that time forth I could never lead either to talk with me about Uncle Silas. They let me talk on, but were reserved and silent themselves, and seemed embarrassed, and Mrs. Rusk sometimes pettish and angry, when I pressed for information.

Thus curiosity was piqued; and round the slender portrait in the leather pantaloons and top-boots gathered many-coloured circles of mystery, and the handsome features seemed to smile down upon my baffled curiosity with a provoking significance.

Why is it that this form of ambition—curiosity—which entered into the temptation of our first parent, is so specially hard to resist? Knowledge is power—and power of one sort or another is the secret lust of human souls; and here is, beside the sense of exploration, the undefinable interest of a story, and above all, something forbidden, to stimulate the contumacious appetite.

CHAPTER III.

A NEW FACE.

I THINK it was about a fortnight after that conversation in which my father had expressed his opinion, and given me the mysterious charge about the old oak cabinet in his library, as already detailed, that I was one night sitting at the great drawing-room window, lost in the melancholy reveries of night, and in admiration of the

moonlighted scene. I was the only occupant of the room; and the lights near the fire, at its farther end, hardly reached to the window at which I sat.

The shorn grass sloped gently downward from the windows till it met the broad level on which stood, in clumps, or solitarily scattered, some of the noblest timber in England. Hoar in the moonbeams stood those graceful trees casting their moveless shadows upon the grass, and in the background crowning the undulations of the distance, in masses, were piled those woods among which lay the solitary tomb where the remains of my beloved mother rested.

The air was still. The silvery vapour hung serenely on the far horizon, and the frosty stars blinked brightly. Everyone knows the effect of such a scene on a mind already saddened. Fancies and regrets float mistily in the dream, and the scene affects us with a strange mixture of memory and anticipation, like some sweet old air heard in the distance. As my eyes rested on those, to me, funereal but glorious woods, which formed the background of the picture, my thoughts recurred to my father's mysterious intimations and the image of the approaching visitor; and the thought of the unknown journey saddened me.

In all that concerned his religion, from very early association, there was to me something of the unearthly and spectral.

When my dear mamma died I was not nine years old; and I remember, two days before the funeral, there came to Knowl, where she died, a thin little man, with large black eyes, and a very grave, dark face.

He was shut up a good deal with my dear father, who was in deep affliction; and Mrs. Rusk used to say, 'It is rather odd to see him praying with that little scarecrow from London, and good Mr. Clay ready at call, in the village; much good that little black whipper-snapper will do him!'

With that little black man, on the day after the funeral, I was sent out, for some reason, for a walk; my governess was ill, I know, and there was confusion in the house, and I dare say the maids made as much of a holiday as they could.

I remember feeling a sort of awe of this little dark man; but I was not afraid of him, for he was gentle, though sad—and seemed kind. He led me into the garden—the Dutch garden, we used to call it—with a balustrade, and statues at the farther front, laid out in a carpet-pattern of brilliantly-coloured flowers. We came down the broad flight of Caen stone steps into this, and we walked in silence to the balustrade. The base was too high at the spot where we reached it for me to see over; but holding my hand, he said, 'Look through that, my child. Well, you can't; but *I* can see beyond it—shall I tell you what? I see ever so much. I see a cottage with a steep roof, that looks like gold in the sunlight; there are tall trees throwing soft shadows round it, and flowering shrubs, I can't say what, only the colours are beautiful, growing by the walls and windows, and two little children are playing among the stems of the trees, and we are on our way there, and in a few minutes shall be under those trees ourselves, and talking to those little children. Yet now to me it is but a picture in my brain, and to you but a story told by me, which you believe. Come, dear; let us be going.'

So we descended the steps at the right, and side by side walked along the grass lane between tall trim walls of evergreens. The way was in deep shadow, for the sun was near the horizon; but suddenly we turned to the left, and there we stood in rich sunlight, among the many objects he had described.

'Is this your house, my little men?' he asked of the children—pretty little rosy boys—who assented; and he leaned with his open hand against the stem of one of the trees, and with a grave smile he nodded down to me, saying—

'You see now, and hear, and *feel* for yourself that both the vision and the story were quite true; but come on, my dear, we have further to go.'

And relapsing into silence we had a long ramble through the wood, the same on which I was now looking in the distance. Every now and then he made me sit down to rest, and he in a musing solemn sort of way would relate some little story, reflecting, even to my childish mind, a strange suspicion of a spiritual

meaning, but different from what honest Mrs. Rusk used to expound to me from the Parables, and, somehow, startling in its very vagueness.

Thus entertained, though a little awfully, I accompanied the dark mysterious little 'whipper-snapper' through the woodland glades. We came, to me quite unexpectedly, in the deep sylvan shadows, upon the grey, pillared temple, four-fronted, with a slanting pedestal of lichen-stained steps, the lonely sepulchre in which I had the morning before seen poor mamma laid. At the sight the fountains of my grief reopened, and I cried bitterly, repeating, 'Oh! mamma, mamma, little mamma!' and so went on weeping and calling wildly on the deaf and silent. There was a stone bench some ten steps away from the tomb.

'Sit down beside me, my child,' said the grave man with the black eyes, very kindly and gently. 'Now, what do you see there?' he asked, pointing horizontally with his stick towards the centre of the opposite structure.

'Oh, *that*—that place where poor mamma is?'

'Yes, a stone wall with pillars, too high for either you or me to see over. But——'

Here he mentioned a name which I think must have been Swedenborg, from what I afterwards learnt of his tenets and revelations; I only know that it sounded to me like the name of a magician in a fairy tale; I fancied he lived in the wood which surrounded us, and I began to grow frightened as he proceeded.

'But Swedenborg sees beyond it, over, and *through* it, and has told me all that concerns us to know. He says your mamma is not there.'

'She is taken away!' I cried, starting up, and with streaming eyes, gazing on the building which, though I stamped my feet in my distraction, I was afraid to approach. 'Oh, *is* mamma taken away? Where is she? Where have they brought her to?'

I was uttering unconsciously very nearly the question with which Mary, in the grey of that wondrous morning on which she stood by the empty sepulchre, accosted the figure standing near.

'Your mamma is alive, but too far away to see or hear us; but Swedenborg, standing here, can see and hear her, and tells me all he sees, just as I told you in the garden about the little boys and the cottage, and the trees and flowers which you could not see, but believed in when *I* told you. So I can tell you now as I did then; and as we are both, I hope, walking on to the same place, just as we did to the trees and cottage, you will surely see with your own eyes how true is the description which I give you.'

I was very much frightened, for I feared that when he had done his narrative we were to walk on through the wood into that place of wonders and of shadows where the dead were visible.

He leaned his elbow on his knee, and his forehead on his hand, which shaded his downcast eyes, and in that attitude described to me a beautiful landscape, radiant with a wondrous light, in which, rejoicing, my mother moved along an airy path, ascending among mountains of fantastic height, and peaks, melting in celestial colouring into the air, and peopled with human beings translated into the same image, beauty, and splendour. And when he had ended his relation, he rose, took my hand, and smiling gently down on my pale, wondering face, he said the same words he had spoken before—

'Come, dear, let us be going.'

'Oh! no, no, *no*—not now,' I said, resisting, and very much frightened.

'Home, I mean, dear. We cannot walk to the place I have described. We can only reach it through the gate of death, to which we are all tending, young and old, with sure steps.'

'And where is the gate of death?' I asked in a sort of whisper, as we walked together, holding his hand very fast, and looking stealthily. He smiled sadly and said—

'When, sooner or later, the time comes, as Hagar's eyes were opened in the wilderness, and she beheld the fountain of water, so shall each of us see the door open before us, and enter in and be refreshed.'

For a long time after this walk I was very nervous; the more so for the awful manner in which Mrs. Rusk received my state-

ment—with stern lips and upturned hands and eyes, and an angry expostulation: 'I do wonder at you, Mary Quince, letting the child walk into the wood with that limb of darkness. It is a mercy he did not show her the devil, or frighten her out of her senses, in that lonely place!'

Of these Swedenborgians, indeed, I know no more than I might learn from good Mrs. Rusk's very inaccurate talk. Two or three of them crossed in the course of my early life, like magic-lantern figures, the disk of my very circumscribed observation. All outside was and is darkness. I once tried to read one of their books upon the future state—heaven and hell; but I grew after a day or two so nervous that I laid it aside. It is enough for me to know that their founder either saw or fancied he saw amazing visions, which, so far from superseding, confirmed and interpreted the language of the Bible; and as dear papa accepted their ideas, I am happy in thinking that they did not conflict with the supreme authority of holy writ.

Leaning on my hand, I was now looking upon that solemn wood, white and shadowy in the moonlight, where, for a long time after that ramble with the visionary, I fancied the gate of death, hidden only by a strange glamour, and the dazzling land of ghosts, were situate; and I suppose these early associations gave to my reverie about my father's coming visitor a wilder and a sadder tinge.

CHAPTER IV.

MADAME DE LA ROUGIERRE.

On a sudden, on the grass before me, stood an odd figure—a very tall woman in grey draperies, nearly white under the moon, courtesying extraordinarily low, and rather fantastically.

I stared in something like a horror upon the large and rather hollow features which I did not know, smiling very unpleasantly

on me; and the moment it was plain that I saw her, the grey woman began gobbling and cackling shrilly—I could not distinctly hear *what* through the window—and gesticulating oddly with her long hands and arms.

As she drew near the window, I flew to the fireplace, and rang the bell frantically, and seeing her still there, and fearing that she might break into the room, I flew out of the door, very much frightened, and met Branston the butler in the lobby.

'There's a woman at the window!' I gasped; 'turn her away, please.'

If I had said a man, I suppose fat Branston would have summoned and sent forward a detachment of footmen. As it was, he bowed gravely, with a—

'Yes, 'm—shall, 'm.'

And with an air of authority approached the window.

I don't think that he was pleasantly impressed himself by the first sight of our visitor, for he stopped short some steps of the window, and demanded rather sternly—

'What ye doin' there, woman?'

To this summons, her answer, which occupied a little time, was inaudible to me. But Branston replied—

'I wasn't aware, ma'am; I heerd nothin'; if you'll go round *that* way, you'll see the hall-door steps, and I'll speak to the master, and do as he shall order.'

The figure said something and pointed.

'Yes, that's it, and ye can't miss of the door.'

And Mr. Branston returned slowly down the long room, and halted with out-turned pumps and a grave inclination before me, and the faintest amount of interrogation in the announcement—

'Please, 'm, she says she's the governess.'

'The governess! *What* governess?'

Branston was too well-bred to smile, and he said thoughtfully—

'P'raps, 'm, I'd best ask the master?'

To which I assented, and away strode the flat pumps of the butler to the library.

I stood breathless in the hall. Every girl at my age knows how

much is involved in such an advent. I also heard Mrs. Rusk, in a minute or two more, emerge I suppose from the study. She walked quickly, and muttered sharply to herself—an evil trick, in which she indulged when much 'put about.' I should have been glad of a word with her; but I fancied she was vexed, and would not have talked satisfactorily. She did not, however, come my way; merely crossing the hall with her quick, energetic step.

Was it really the arrival of a governess? Was that apparition which had impressed me so unpleasantly to take the command of me—to sit alone with me, and haunt me perpetually with her sinister looks and shrilly gabble?

I was just making up my mind to go to Mary Quince, and learn something definite, when I heard my father's step approaching from the library: so I quietly re-entered the drawing-room, but with an anxious and throbbing heart.

When he came in, as usual, he patted me on the head gently, with a kind of smile, and then began his silent walk up and down the room. I was yearning to question him on the point that just then engrossed me so disagreeably; but the awe in which I stood of him forbade.

After a time he stopped at the window, the curtain of which I had drawn, and the shutter partly opened, and he looked out, perhaps with associations of his own, on the scene I had been contemplating.

It was not for nearly an hour after, that my father suddenly, after his wont, in a few words, apprised me of the arrival of Madame de la Rougierre to be my governess, highly recommended and perfectly qualified. My heart sank with a sure presage of ill. I already disliked, distrusted, and feared her.

I had more than an apprehension of her temper and fear of possibly abused authority. The large-featured, smirking phantom, saluting me so oddly in the moonlight, retained ever after its peculiar and unpleasant hold upon my nerves.

'Well, Miss Maud, dear, I hope you'll like your new governess—for it's more than *I* do, just at present at least,' said Mrs. Rusk, sharply—she was awaiting me in my room. 'I hate them French-

Madame de la Rougierre, I found, was always quite ready to explain everything 'à fond;' but somehow her 'explications,' as she termed them, were not very intelligible, and when pressed her temper woke up; so that I preferred, after a while, accepting the expositions just as they came.

Madame was on an unusually large scale, a circumstance which made some of her traits more startling, and altogether rendered her, in her strange way, more awful in the eyes of a nervous *child*, I may say, such as I was. She used to look at me for a long time sometimes, with the peculiar smile I have mentioned, and her great finger upon her lip, like the Eleusinian priestess on the vase.

She would sit, too, sometimes for an hour together, looking into the fire or out of the window, plainly seeing nothing, and with an odd, fixed look of something like triumph—very nearly a smile—on her cunning face.

She was by no means a pleasant *gouvernante* for a nervous girl of my years. Sometimes she had accesses of a sort of hilarity which frightened me still more than her graver moods, and I will describe these by-and-by.

CHAPTER V.

SIGHTS AND NOISES.

THERE is not an old house in England of which the servants and young people who live in it do not cherish some traditions of the ghostly. Knowl has its shadows, noises, and marvellous records. Rachel Ruthyn, the beauty of Queen Anne's time, who died of grief for the handsome Colonel Norbrooke, who was killed in the Low Countries, walks the house by night, in crisp and sounding silks. She is not seen, only heard. The tapping of her high-heeled shoes, the sweep and rustle of her brocades, her sighs as she

pauses in the galleries, near the bed-room doors; and sometimes, on stormy nights, her sobs.

There is, beside, the 'link-man,' a lank, dark-faced, black-haired man, in a sable suit, with a link or torch in his hand. It usually only smoulders, with a deep red glow, as he visits his beat. The library is one of the rooms he sees to. Unlike 'Lady Rachel,' as the maids called her, he is seen only, never heard. His steps fall noiseless as shadows on floor and carpet. The lurid glow of his smouldering torch imperfectly lights his figure and face, and, except when much perturbed, his link never blazes. On those occasions, however, as he goes his rounds, he ever and anon whirls it round his head, and it bursts into a dismal flame. This is a fearful omen, and always portends some direful crisis or calamity. It occurs, however, only once or twice in a century.

I don't know whether Madame had heard anything of these phenomena; but she did report what very much frightened me and Mary Quince. She asked us who walked in the gallery on which her bed-room opened, making a rustling with her dress, and going down the stairs, and breathing long breaths here and there. Twice, she said, she had stood at her door in the dark, listening to these sounds, and once she called to know who it was. There was no answer, but the person plainly turned back, and hurried towards her with an unnatural speed, which made her jump within her door and shut it.

When first such tales are told, they excite the nerves of the young and the ignorant intensely. But the special effect, I have found, soon wears out, and the tale simply takes its place with the rest. So it was with Madame's narrative.

About a week after its relation, I had my experience of a similar sort. Mary Quince went down-stairs for a night-light, leaving me in bed, a candle burning in the room, and there, being tired, I fell asleep before her return. When I awoke the candle had been extinguished. But I heard a step softly approaching. I jumped up—quite forgetting the ghost, and thinking only of Mary Quince—and opened the door, expecting to see the light of her candle. Instead, all was dark, and near me I heard the fall of a bare foot

on the oak floor. It was as if some one had stumbled. I said, 'Mary,' but no answer came, only a rustling of clothes and a breathing at the other side of the gallery, which passed off towards the upper staircase. I turned into my room, freezing with horror, and clapt my door. The noise wakened Mary Quince, who had returned and gone to her bed half an hour before.

About a fortnight after this, Mary Quince, a very veracious spinster, reported to me, that having got up to fix the window, which was rattling, at about four o'clock in the morning, she saw a light shining from the library window. She could swear to its being a strong light, streaming through the chinks of the shutter, and moving, as no doubt the link was waved about his head by the angry 'link-man.'

These strange occurrences helped, I think, just then to make me nervous, and prepared the way for the odd sort of ascendency which, through my sense of the mysterious and supernatural, that repulsive Frenchwoman was gradually, and it seemed without effort, establishing over me.

Some dark points of her character speedily emerged from the prismatic mist with which she had enveloped it.

Mrs. Rusk's observation about the agreeability of new-comers I found to be true; for as Madame began to lose that character, her good-humour abated very perceptibly, and she began to show gleams of another sort of temper, that was lurid and dangerous.

Notwithstanding this, she was in the habit of always having her Bible open by her, and was austerely attentive at morning and evening services, and asked my father, with great humility, to lend her some translations of Swedenborg's books, which she laid much to heart.

When we went out for our walk, if the weather were bad we generally made our promenade up and down the broad terrace in front of the windows. Sullen and malign at times she used to look, and as suddenly she would pat me on the shoulder caressingly, and smile with a grotesque benignity, asking tenderly, 'Are you fatigue, ma chère?' or 'Are you cold-a, dear Maud?'

At first these abrupt transitions puzzled me, sometimes half

frightened me, savouring, I fancied, of insanity. The key, however, was accidentally supplied, and I found that these accesses of demonstrative affection were sure to supervene whenever my father's face was visible through the library windows.

I did not know well what to make of this woman, whom I feared with a vein of superstitious dread. I hated being alone with her after dusk in the school-room. She would sometimes sit for half an hour at a time, with her wide mouth drawn down at the corners, and a scowl, looking into the fire. If she saw me looking at her, she would change all this on the instant, affect a sort of languor, and lean her head upon her hand, and ultimately have recourse to her Bible. But I fancied she did not read, but pursued her own dark ruminations, for I observed that the open book might often lie for half an hour or more under her eyes and yet the leaf never turned.

I should have been glad to be assured that she prayed when on her knees, or read when that book was before her; I should have felt that she was more canny and human. As it was, those external pieties made a suspicion of a hollow contrast with realities that helped to scare me; yet it was but a suspicion—I could not be certain.

Our rector and the curate, with whom she was very gracious, and anxious about my collects and catechism, had an exalted opinion of her. In public places her affection for me was always demonstrative.

In like manner she contrived conferences with my father. She was always making excuses to consult him about my reading, and to confide in him her sufferings, as I learned, from my contumacy and temper. The fact is, I was altogether quiet and submissive. But I think she had a wish to reduce me to a state of the most abject bondage. She had designs of domination and subversion regarding the entire household, I now believe, worthy of the evil spirit I sometimes fancied her.

My father beckoned me into the study one day, and said he—

'You ought not to give poor Madame so much pain. She is one of the few persons who take an interest in you; why should she

have so often to complain of your ill-temper and disobedience?—why should she be compelled to ask my permission to punish you? Don't be afraid, I won't concede that. But in so kind a person it argues much. Affection I can't command—respect and obedience I may—and I insist on your rendering *both* to Madame.'

'But, sir,' I said, roused into courage by the gross injustice of the charge, 'I have always done exactly as she bid me, and never said one disrespectful word to Madame.'

'I don't think, child, *you* are the best judge of that. Go, and *amend*.' And with a displeased look he pointed to the door. My heart swelled with the sense of wrong, and as I reached the door I turned to say another word, but I could not, and only burst into tears.

'There—don't cry, little Maud—only let us do better for the future. There—there—there has been enough.'

And he kissed my forehead, and gently put me out and closed the door.

In the school-room I took courage, and with some warmth upbraided Madame.

'Wat wicked cheaile!' moaned Madame, demurely. 'Read aloud those three—yes, *those* three chapters of the Bible, my dear Maud.'

There was no special fitness in those particular chapters, and when they were ended she said in a sad tone—

'Now, dear, you must commit to memory this pretty priaire for umility of art.'

It was a long one, and in a state of profound irritation I got through the task.

Mrs. Rusk hated her. She said she stole wine and brandy whenever the opportunity offered—that she was always asking her for such stimulants and pretending pains in her stomach. Here, perhaps, there was exaggeration; but I knew it was true that I had been at different times despatched on that errand and pretext for brandy to Mrs. Rusk, who at last came to her bedside with pills and a mustard blister only, and was hated irrevocably ever after.

I felt all this was done to torture me. But a day is a long time to a child, and they forgive quickly. It was always with a sense of danger that I heard Madame say she must go and see Monsieur Ruthyn in the library, and I think a jealousy of her growing influence was an ingredient in the detestation in which honest Mrs. Rusk held her.

CHAPTER VI.

A WALK IN THE WOOD.

Two little pieces of by-play in which I detected her confirmed my unpleasant suspicion. From the corner of the gallery I one day saw her, when she thought I was out and all quiet, with her ear at the keyhole of papa's study, as we used to call the sitting-room next his bed-room. Her eyes were turned in the direction of the stairs, from which only she apprehended surprise. Her great mouth was open, and her eyes absolutely goggled with eagerness. She was devouring all that was passing there. I drew back into the shadow with a kind of disgust and horror. She was transformed into a great gaping reptile. I felt that I could have thrown something at her; but a kind of fear made me recede again toward my room. Indignation, however, quickly returned, and I came back, treading briskly as I did so. When I reached the angle of the gallery again, Madame, I suppose, had heard me, for she was half-way down the stairs.

'Ah, my dear cheaile, I am so glad to find you, and you are dress to come out. We shall have so pleasant walk.'

At that moment the door of my father's study opened, and Mrs. Rusk, with her dark energetic face very much flushed, stepped out in high excitement.

'The Master says you may have the brandy-bottle, Madame and I'm glad to be rid of it—*I* am.'

Madame courtesied with a great smirk, that was full of intangible hate and insult.

'Better your own brandy, if drink you must!' exclaimed Mrs. Rusk. 'You may come to the store-room now, or the butler can take it.'

And off whisked Mrs. Rusk for the back staircase.

There had been no common skirmish on this occasion, but a pitched battle.

Madame had made a sort of pet of Anne Wixted, an under-chambermaid, and attached her to her interest economically by persuading me to make her presents of some old dresses and other things. Anne was such an angel!

But Mrs. Rusk, whose eyes were about her, detected Anne, with a brandy-bottle under her apron, stealing up-stairs. Anne, in a panic, declared the truth. Madame had commissioned her to buy it in the town, and convey it to her bed-room. Upon this, Mrs. Rusk impounded the flask; and, with Anne beside her, rather precipitately appeared before 'the Master.' He heard, and summoned Madame. Madame was cool, frank, and fluent. The brandy was purely medicinal. She produced a document in form of a note. Doctor Somebody presented his compliments to Madame de la Rougierre, and ordered her a table-spoonful of brandy and some drops of laudanum whenever the pain of stomach returned. The flask would last a whole year, perhaps two. She claimed her medicine.

Man's estimate of woman is higher than woman's own. Perhaps in their relations to man they are generally more trustworthy—perhaps woman's is the juster, and the other an appointed illusion. I don't know; but so it is ordained.

Mrs. Rusk was recalled, and I saw, as you are aware, Madame's procedure during the interview.

It was a great battle—a great victory. Madame was in high spirits. The air was sweet—the landscape charming—I, so good—everything so beautiful! Where should we go? *this* way?

I had made a resolution to speak as little as possible to Madame, I was so incensed at the treachery I had witnessed; but such

resolutions do not last long with very young people, and by the time we had reached the skirts of the wood we were talking pretty much as usual.

'I don't wish to go into the wood, Madame.

'And for what?'

'Poor mamma is buried there.'

'Is *there* the vault?' demanded Madame, eagerly.

I assented.

'My faith, curious reason; you say because poor mamma is buried there you will not approach! Why, cheaile, what would good Monsieur Ruthyn say if he heard such thing? You are surely not so unkain', and I am with you. *Allons.* Let us come—even a little part of way.'

And so I yielded, though still reluctant.

There was a grass-grown road, which we easily reached, leading to the sombre building, and we soon arrived before it.

Madame de la Rougierre seemed rather curious. She sat down on the little bank opposite, in her most languid pose—her head leaned upon the tips of her fingers.

'How very sad—how solemn!' murmured Madame. 'What noble tomb! How triste, my dear cheaile, your visit 'ere must it be, remembering a so sweet maman. There is new inscription—is it not new?' And so, indeed, it seemed.

'I am fatigue—maybe you will read it aloud to me slowly and solemnly, my dearest Maud?'

As I approached, I happened to look, I can't tell why, suddenly, over my shoulder; I was startled, for Madame was grimacing after me with a vile derisive distortion. She pretended to be seized with a fit of coughing. But it would not do; she saw that I had detected her, and she laughed aloud.

'Come here, dear cheaile. I was just reflecting how foolish is all this thing—the tomb—the epitaph. I think I would 'av none—no, no epitaph. We regard them first for the oracle of the dead, and find them after only the folly of the living. So I despise. Do you think your house of Knowl down there is what you call haunt, my dear?'

'Why?' said I, flushing and growing pale again. I felt quite afraid of Madame, and confounded at the suddenness of all this.

'Because Anne Wixted she says there is ghost. How dark is this place! and so many of the Ruthyn family they are buried here—is not so? How high and thick are the trees all round! and nobody comes near.'

And Madame rolled her eyes awfully, as if she expected to see something unearthly, and, indeed, looked very like it herself.

'Come away, Madame,' I said, growing frightened, and feeling that if I were once, by any accident, to give way to the panic that was gathering round me, I should instantaneously lose all control of myself. 'Oh, come away!—do, Madame—I'm frightened.'

'No, on the contrary, sit here by me. It is very odd, you will think, ma chère—un goût bizarre, vraiment!—but I love very much to be near to the dead people—in solitary place like this. I am not afraid of the dead people, nor of the ghosts. 'Av you ever see a ghost, my dear?'

'Do, Madame, *pray* speak of something else.'

'Wat little fool! But no, you are not afraid. I'av seen the ghosts myself. I saw one, for example, last night, shape like a monkey, sitting in the corner, with his arms round his knees; very wicked, old, old man his face was like, and white eyes so large.'

'Come away, Madame! you are trying to frighten me,' I said, in the childish anger which accompanies fear.

Madame laughed an ugly laugh, and said—

'Eh bien! little fool!—I will not tell the rest if you are really frightened; let us change to something else.'

'Yes, yes! oh, do—pray do.'

'Wat good man is your father!'

'Very—the kindest darling. I don't know why it is, Madame, I am so afraid of him, and never could tell him how much I love him.'

This confidential talking with Madame, strange to say, implied no confidence; it resulted from fear—it was deprecatory. I treated

her as if she had human sympathies, in the hope that they might be generated somehow.

'Was there not a doctor from London with him a few months ago? Dr. Bryerly, I think they call him.'

'Yes, a Doctor Bryerly, who remained a few days. Shall we begin to walk towards home, Madame? Do, pray.'

'Immediately, cheaile; and does your father suffer much?'

'No—I think not.'

'And what then is his disease?'

'Disease! he has *no* disease. Have you heard anything about his health, Madame?' I said, anxiously.

Oh no, ma foi—I have heard nothing; but if the doctor came, it was not because he was quite well.'

'But that doctor is a doctor in theology, I fancy. I know he is a Swedenborgian; and papa is so well, he *could* not have come as a physician.'

'I am very glad, ma chère, to hear; but still you know your father is old man to have so young cheaile as you. Oh, yes—he is old man, and so uncertain life is. 'As he made his will, my dear? Every man so rich as he, especially so old, aught to 'av made his will.'

'There is no need of haste, Madame; it is quite time enough when his health begins to fail.'

'But has he really compose no will?'

'I really don't know, Madame.'

'Ah, little rogue! you will not tell—but you are not such fool as you feign yourself. No, no; you know everything. Come, tell me all about—it is for your advantage, you know. What is in his will, and when he wrote?'

'But, Madame, I really know nothing of it. I can't say whether there is a will or not. Let us talk of something else.'

'But, cheaile, it will not kill Monsieur Ruthyn to make his will; he will not come to lie here a day sooner by cause of that; but if he make no will, you may lose a great deal of the property. Would not that be pity?'

'I really don't know anything of his will. If papa has made

one, he has never spoken of it to me. I know he loves me—that is enough.'

'Ah! you are not such little goose—you do know everything, of course. Come, come, tell me, little obstinate, otherwise I will break your little finger. Tell me everything.'

'I know nothing of papa's will. You don't know, Madame, how you pain me. Do let us speak of something else.'

'You do know, and you must tell, petite dure-tête, or I will break a your leetle finger.'

With which words she seized that joint, and laughing spitefully, she twisted it suddenly back. I screamed; she continued to laugh.

'Will you tell?'

'Yes, yes! let me go,' I shrieked.

She did not release it, however, immediately, but continued her torture and discordant laughter. At last, however, she did release my finger.

'So she is going to be good cheaile, and to tell everything to her affectionate gouvernante. What do you cry for, little fool?'

'You've hurt me very much—you have broken my finger,' I sobbed.

'Rub it and blow it, and give it a kees, little fool! What cross girl! I will never play with you again—never. Let us go home.'

Madame was silent and morose all the way home. She would not answer my questions, and affected to be very lofty and offended.

This did not last very long, however, and she soon resumed her wonted ways. And she returned to the question of the will, but not so directly, and with more art.

Why should this dreadful woman's thoughts be running so continually upon my father's will? How could it concern her?

CHAPTER VII.

CHURCH SCARSDALE.

I THINK all the females of our household, except Mrs. Rusk, who was at open feud with her, and had only room for the fiercer emotions, were more or less afraid of this inauspicious foreigner.

Mrs. Rusk would say in her confidences in my room—

'Where does she come from?—is she a French or a Swiss one, or is she a Canada woman? I remember one of *them* when I was a girl, and a nice limb *she* was, too! And who did she live with? Where was her last family? Not one of us knows nothing about her, no more than a child; except, of course, the Master—I do suppose he made enquiry. She's always at hugger-mugger with Anne Wixted. I'll pack that *one* about her business, if she don't mind. Tattling and whispering eternally. It's not about her own business she's a-talking. Madame de la Rougepot, *I* call her. She *does* know how to paint up to the ninety-nines—she does, the old cat. I beg your pardon, Miss, but *that* she is—a devil, and no mistake. I found her out first by her thieving the Master's gin, that the doctor ordered him, and filling the decanter up with water—the old villain; but she'll be found out yet, she will; and all the maids is afraid on her. She's not right, they think—a witch or a ghost—I should not wonder. Catherine Jones found her in her bed asleep in the morning after she sulked with you, you know, Miss, with all her clothes on, whatever was the meaning; and I think she has frightened *you*, Miss, and has you as nervous as anythink—I do,' and so forth.

It was true. I *was* nervous, and growing rather more so; and I think this cynical woman perceived and intended it, and was pleased. I was always afraid of her concealing herself in my room, and emerging at night to scare me. She began sometimes to mingle in my dreams, too—always awfully; and this nourished,

of course, the kind of ambiguous fear in which, in waking hours, I held her.

I dreamed one night that she led me, all the time whispering something so very fast that I could not understand her, into the library, holding a candle in her other hand above her head. We walked on tiptoe, like criminals at the dead of night, and stopped before that old oak cabinet which my father had indicated in so odd a way to me. I felt that we were about some contraband practice. There was a key in the door, which I experienced a guilty horror at turning, she whispering in the same unintelligible way, all the time, at my ear. I *did* turn it; the door opened quite softly, and within stood my father, his face white and malignant, and glaring close in mine. He cried in a terrible voice, 'Death!' Out went Madame's candle, and at the same moment, with a scream, I waked in the dark—still fancying myself in the library; and for an hour after I continued in a hysterical state.

Every little incident about Madame furnished a topic of eager discussion among the maids. More or less covertly, they nearly all hated and feared her. They fancied that she was making good her footing with 'the Master;' and that she would then oust Mrs. Rusk—perhaps usurp her place—and so make a clean sweep of them all. I fancy the honest little housekeeper did not discourage that suspicion.

About this time I recollect a pedlar—an odd, gipsified-looking man—called in at Knowl. I and Catherine Jones were in the court when he came, and set down his pack on the low balustrade beside the door.

All sorts of commodities he had—ribbons, cottons, silks, stockings, lace, and even some bad jewellery; and just as he began his display—an interesting matter in a quiet country house—Madame came upon the ground. He grinned a recognition, and hoped 'Madamasel' was well, and 'did not look to see *her* here.'

'Madamasel' thanked him. 'Yes, vary well,' and looked for the first time decidedly 'put out.'

'Wat a pretty things!' she said. 'Catherine, run and tell Mrs. Rusk. She wants scissars, and lace too—I heard her say.'

So Catherine, with a lingering look, departed; and Madame said—

'Will you, dear cheaile, be so kind to bring here my purse, I forgot on the table in my room; also, I advise you, bring *your*.'

Catherine returned with Mrs. Rusk. Here was a man who could tell them something of the old Frenchwoman, at last! Slyly they dawdled over his wares, until Madame had made her market and departed with me. But when the coveted opportunity came, the pedlar was quite impenetrable. 'He forgot everything; he did not believe as he ever saw the lady before. He called a Frenchwoman, all the world over, Madamasel—that wor the name on 'em all. He never seed her in partiklar afore, as he could bring to mind. He liked to see 'em always, 'cause they makes the young uns buy.'

This reserve and oblivion were very provoking, and neither Mrs. Rusk nor Catherine Jones spent sixpence with him;—he was a stupid fellow, or worse.

Of course Madame had tampered with him. But truth, like murder, will out some day. Tom Williams, the groom, had seen her, when alone with him, and pretending to look at his stock, with her face almost buried in his silks and Welsh linseys, talking as fast as she could all the time, and slipping *money*, he did suppose, under a piece of stuff in his box.

In the mean time, I and Madame were walking over the wide, peaty sheep-walks that lie between Knowl and Church Scarsdale. Since our visit to the mausoleum in the wood, she had not worried me so much as before. She had been, indeed, more than usually thoughtful, very little talkative, and troubled me hardly at all about French and other accomplishments. A walk was a part of our daily routine. I now carried a tiny basket in my hand, with a few sandwiches, which were to furnish our luncheon when we reached the pretty scene, about two miles away, whither we were tending.

We had started a little too late; Madame grew unwontedly fatigued and sat down to rest on a stile before we had got half-

way; and there she intoned, with a dismal nasal cadence, a quaint old Bretagne ballad, about a lady with a pig's head:—

'This lady was neither pig nor maid,
And so she was not of human mould;
Not of the living nor the dead.
Her left hand and foot were warm to touch;
Her right as cold as a corpse's flesh!
And she would sing like a funeral bell, with a ding-dong tune.
The pigs were afraid, and viewed her aloof;
And women feared her and stood afar.
She could do without sleep for a year and a day;
She could sleep like a corpse, for a month and more.
No one knew how this lady fed—
On acorns or on flesh.
Some say that she's one of the swine-possessed,
That swam over the sea of Gennesaret.
A mongrel body and demon soul.
Some say she's the wife of the Wandering Jew,
And broke the law for the sake of pork;
And a swinish face for a token doth bear,
That her shame is now, and her punishment coming.'

And so it went on, in a gingling rigmarole. The more anxious I seemed to go on our way, the more likely was she to loiter. I therefore showed no signs of impatience, and I saw her consult her watch in the course of her ugly minstrelsy, and slyly glance, as if expecting something, in the direction of our destination.

When she had sung to her heart's content, up rose Madame, and began to walk onward silently. I saw her glance once or twice, as before, toward the village of Trillsworth, which lay in front, a little to our left, and the smoke of which hung in a film over the brow of the hill. I think she observed me, for she enquired—

'Wat is that a smoke there?'

'That is Trillsworth, Madame; there is a railway station there.'

'Oh, le chemin de fer, so near! I did not think. Where it goes?'

I told her, and silence returned.

Church Scarsdale is a very pretty and odd scene. The slightly undulating sheep-walk dips suddenly into a wide glen, in the lap of which, by a bright, winding rill, rise from the sward the ruins

of a small abbey, with a few solemn trees scattered round. The crows' nests hung untenanted in the trees; the birds were foraging far away from their roosts. The very cattle had forsaken the place. It was solitude itself.

Madame drew a long breath and smiled.

'Come down, come down, cheaile—come down to the churchyard.'

As we descended the slope which shut out the surrounding world, and the scene grew more sad and lonely, Madame's spirits seemed to rise.

'See 'ow many grave-stones—one, *two* hundred. Don't you love the dead, cheaile? I will teach you to love them. You shall see me die here to-day, for half an hour, and be among them. That is what I love.'

We were by this time at the little brook's side, and the low churchyard wall with a stile, reached by a couple of stepping-stones, across the stream, immediately at the other side.

'Come, now!' cried Madame, raising her face, as if to sniff the air; 'we are close to them. You will like them soon as I. You shall see five of them. Ah, ça ira, ça ira, ça ira! Come cross quickily! I am Madame la Morgue—Mrs. Deadhouse! I will present you my friends, Monsieur Cadavre and Monsieur Squelette. Come, come, leetle mortal, let us play. Ouaah!' And she uttered a horrid yell from her enormous mouth, and pushing her wig and bonnet back, so as to show her great, bald head. She was laughing, and really looked quite mad.

'No, Madame, I will not go with you,' I said, disengaging my hand with a violent effort, receding two or three steps.

'Not enter the churchyard! Ma foi—wat mauvais goût! But see, we are already in shade. The sun he is setting soon—where weel you remain, cheaile? I will not stay long.'

'I'll stay here,' I said, a little angrily—for I *was* angry as well as nervous; and through my fear was that indignation at her extravagances which mimicked lunacy so unpleasantly, and were, I knew, designed to frighten me.

Over the stepping-stones, pulling up her dress, she skipped with

her long, lank legs, like a witch joining a Walpurgis. Over the stile she strode, and I saw her head wagging, and heard her sing some of her ill-omened rhymes, as she capered solemnly, with many a grin and courtesy, among the graves and headstones, towards the ruin.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SMOKER.

THREE years later I learned—in a way she probably little expected, and then did not much care about—what really occurred there. I learned even phrases and looks—for the story was related by one who had heard it told—and therefore I venture to narrate what at the moment I neither saw nor suspected. While I sat, flushed and nervous, upon a flat stone by the bank of the little stream, Madame looked over her shoulder, and perceiving that I was out of sight, she abated her pace, and turned sharply towards the ruin which lay at her left. It was her first visit, and she was merely exploring; but now, with a perfectly shrewd and businesslike air, turning the corner of the building, she saw, seated upon the edge of a grave-stone, a rather fat and flashily-equipped young man, with large, light whiskers, a jerry hat, green cutaway coat with gilt buttons, and waistcoat and trousers rather striking than elegant in pattern. He was smoking a short pipe, and made a nod to Madame, without either removing it from his lips or rising, but with his brown and rather good-looking face turned up, he eyed her with something of the impudent and sulky expression that was habitual to it.

'Ha, Deedle, you are there! an' look so well. I am here, too, quite *a*lon; but my friend, she wait outside the churchyard, by-side the leetle river, for she must not think I know you—so I am come *a*lon.'

'You're a quarter late, and I lost a fight by you, old girl, this

morning,' said the gay man, and spat on the ground; 'and I wish you would not call me Diddle. I'll call you Granny if you do.'

'Eh bien! *Dud*, then. She is vary nice—wat you like. Slim waist, wite teeth, vary nice eyes—dark—wat you say is best—and nice leetle foot and ankle.'

Madame smiled leeringly.

Dud smoked on.

'Go on,' said Dud, with a nod of command.

'I am teach her to sing and play—she has such sweet voice!

There was another interval here.

'Well, that isn't much good. I hate women's screechin' about fairies and flowers. Hang her! there's a scarecrow as sings at Curl's Divan. Such a caterwauling upon a stage! I'd like to put my two barrels into her.'

By this time Dud's pipe was out, and he could afford to converse.

'You shall see her and decide. You will walk down the river, and pass her by.'

'That's as may be; howsoever, it would not do, nohow, to buy a pig in a poke, you know. And s'pose I shouldn't like her, arter all?'

Madame sneered, with a patois ejaculation of derision.

'Vary good! Then some one else will not be so 'ard to please—as you will soon find.'

'Some one's bin a-lookin' arter her, you mean?' said the young man, with a shrewd uneasy glance on the cunning face of the French lady.

'I mean precisely—that which I mean,' replied the lady, with a teazing pause at the break I have marked.

'Come, old 'un, none of your d—— old chaff, if you want me to stay here listening to you. Speak out, can't you? There's any chap as has bin a-lookin' arter her—is there?'

'Eh bien! I suppose some.'

'Well, you *suppose*, and *I* suppose—we may *all* suppose, I guess · but that does not make a thing be, as wasn't before; and you tell me as how the lass is kep' private up there, and will be till *you*'re

done educating her—a precious good 'un that is!' And he laughed a little lazily, with the ivory handle of his cane on his lip, and eyeing Madame with indolent derision.

Madame laughed, but looked rather dangerous.

'I'm only chaffin', you know, old girl. *You*'ve bin chaffin'—w'y shouldn't *I*? But I don't see why she can't wait a bit; and what's all the d——d hurry for? *I*'m in no hurry. I don't want a wife on my back for a while. There's no fellow marries till he's took his bit o' fun, and seen life—is there! And why should I be driving with her to fairs, or to church, or to meeting, by jingo!—for they say she's a Quaker—with a babby on each knee, only to please them as will be dead and rotten when *I*'m only beginning?'

'Ah, you are such charming fellow; always the same—always sensible. So I and my friend we will walk home again, and you go see Maggie Hawkes. Good-a-by, Dud—good-a-by.'

'Quiet, you fool!—can't ye?' said the young gentleman, with the sort of grin that made his face vicious when a horse vexed him. 'Who ever said I wouldn't go look at the girl? Why, you know that's just what I come here for—don't you? Only when I think a bit, and a notion comes across me, why shouldn't I speak out? I'm not one o' them shilly-shallies. If I like the girl, I'll not be mug in and mug out about it. Only, mind ye, I'll judge for myself. Is that her a-coming?'

'No; it was a distant sound.'

Madame peeped round the corner. No one was approaching.

'Well, you go round that a-way, and you only look at her, you know, for she is such fool—so nairvous.'

'Oh, is that the way with her?' said Dud, knocking out the ashes of his pipe on a tombstone, and replacing the Turkish utensil in his pocket. 'Well, then, old lass, good-bye,' and he shook her hand. 'And, do ye see, don't ye come up till I pass, for I'm no hand at play-acting; an' if you called me "sir," or was coming it dignified and distant, you know, I'd be sure to laugh, a'most, and let all out. So good-bye, d'ye see, and if you want me again be sharp to time, mind.

From habit he looked about for his dogs, but he had not brought one. He had come unostentatiously by rail, travelling in a third-class carriage, for the advantage of Jack Briderly's company, and getting a world of useful wrinkles about the steeple-chase that was coming off next week.

So he strode away, cutting off the heads of the nettles with his cane as he went; and Madame walked forth into the open space among the graves, where I might have seen her, had I stood up, looking with the absorbed gaze of an artist on the ruin.

In a little while, along the path, I heard the clank of a step, and the gentleman in the green cutaway coat, sucking his cane, and eyeing me with an offensive familiar sort of stare the while, passed me by, rather hesitating as he did so.

I was glad when he turned the corner in the little hollow close by, and disappeared. I stood up at once, and was reassured by a sight of Madame, not very many yards away, looking at the ruin, and apparently restored to her right mind. The last beams of the sun were by this time touching the uplands, and I was longing to recommence our walk home. I was hesitating about calling to Madame, because that lady had a certain spirit of opposition within her, and to disclose a small wish of any sort was generally, if it lay in her power, to prevent its accomplishment.

At this moment the gentleman in the green coat returned, approaching me with a slow sort of swagger.

'I say, Miss, I dropped a glove close by here. May you have seen it?'

'No, sir,' I said, drawing back a little, and looking, I dare say, both frightened and offended.

'I do think I must 'a dropped it close by your foot, Miss'

'No, sir,' I repeated.

'No offence, Miss, but you're sure you didn't hide it?'

I was beginning to grow seriously uncomfortable.

'Don't be frightened, Miss; it's only a bit o' chaff. I'm not going to search.'

I called aloud, 'Madame, Madame!' and he whistled through his fingers, and shouted. 'Madame, Madame,' and added, 'She's as

deaf as a tombstone, or she'll hear that. Gi'e her my compliments, and say I said you're a beauty, Miss;' and with a laugh and a leer he strode off.

Altogether this had not been a very pleasant excursion. Madame gobbled up our sandwiches, commending them every now and then to me. But I had been too much excited to have any appetite left, and very tired I was when we reached home.

'So, there is lady coming to-morrow?' said Madame, who knew everything. 'Wat is her name? I forget.'

'Lady Knollys,' I answered.

'Lady Knollys—wat odd name! She is very young—is she not?'

'Past fifty, I think.'

'Hélas! She's vary old, then. Is she rich?'

'I don't know. She has a place in Derbyshire.'

'Derbyshire—that is one of your English counties, is it not?'

'Oh yes, Madame,' I answered, laughing. 'I have said it to you twice since you came;' and I gabbled through the chief towns and rivers as catalogued in my geography.

'Bah! to be sure—of course, cheaile. And is she your relation?'

'Papa's first cousin.'

'Won't you present-a me, pray?—I would so like!'

Madame had fallen into the English way of liking people with titles, as perhaps foreigners would if titles implied the sort of power they do generally with us.

'Certainly, Madame.'

'You will not forget?'

'Oh no.'

Madame reminded me twice, in the course of the evening, of my promise. She was very eager on this point. But it is a world of disappointment, influenza, and rheumatics; and next morning Madame was prostrate in her bed, and careless of all things but flannel and James's powder.

Madame was *désolée*; but she could not raise her head. She only murmured a question.

'For 'ow long time, dear, will Lady Knollys remain?'

'A very few days, I believe.'

'Hélas! 'ow onlucky! maybe to-morrow I shall be better Ouah! my ear. The laudanum, dear cheaile!'

And so our conversation for that time ended, and Madame buried her head in her old red cashmere shawl.

CHAPTER IX.

MONICA KNOLLYS.

PUNCTUALLY Lady Knollys arrived. She was accompanied by her nephew, Captain Oakley.

They arrived a little before dinner; just in time to get to their rooms and dress. But Mary Quince enlivened my toilet with eloquent descriptions of the youthful Captain whom she had met in the gallery, on his way to his room, with the servant, and told me how he stopped to let her pass, and how 'he smiled so 'ansom.'

I was very young then, you know, and more childish even than my years; but this talk of Mary Quince's interested me, I must confess, considerably. I was painting all sorts of portraits of this heroic soldier, while affecting, I am afraid, a hypocritical indifference to her narration, and I know I was very nervous and painstaking about my toilet that evening. When I went down to the drawing-room, Lady Knollys was there, talking volubly to my father as I entered—a woman not really old, but such as very young people fancy aged—energetic, bright, saucy, dressed handsomely in purple satin, with a good deal of lace, and a rich point—I know not how to call it—not a cap, a sort of head-dress—light and simple, but grand withal, over her greyish, silken hair.

Rather tall, by no means stout, on the whole a good firm figure, with something kindly in her look. She got up, quite like a young person, and coming quickly to meet me with a smile—

'My young cousin!' she cried, and kissed me on both cheeks.

You know who I am? Your cousin Monica—Monica Knollys—and very glad, dear, to see you, though she has not set eyes on you since you were no longer than that paper-knife. Now come here to the lamp, for I must look at you. Who is she like? Let me see. Like your poor mother, I think, my dear; but you've the Aylmer nose—yes—not a bad nose either, and, come! very good eyes, upon my life—yes, certainly something of her poor mother—not a bit like you, Austin.'

My father gave her a look as near a smile as I had seen there for a long time, shrewd, cynical, but kindly too, and said he—

'So much the better, Monica, eh?'

'It was not for me to say—but you know, Austin, you always were an ugly creature. How shocked and indignant the little girl looks! You must not be vexed, you loyal little woman, with Cousin Monica for telling the truth. Papa was and will be ugly all his days. Come, Austin, dear, tell her—is not it so?'

'What! depose against myself! That's not English law, Monica.'

'Well, maybe not; but if the child won't believe her own eyes, how is she to believe me? She has long, pretty hands—you have—and very nice feet too. How old is she?'

'How old, child?' said my father to me, transferring the question.

She recurred again to my eyes.

'That is the true grey—large, deep, soft—very peculiar. Yes, dear, very pretty—long lashes, and such bright tints! You'll be in the Book of Beauty, my dear, when you come out, and have all the poet people writing verses to the tip of your nose—and a very pretty little nose it is!'

I must mention here how striking was the change in my father's spirit while talking and listening to his odd and voluble old Cousin Monica. Reflected from bygone associations, there had come a glimmer of something, not gaiety, indeed, but like an appreciation of gaiety. The gloom and inflexibility were gone, and there was an evident encouragement and enjoyment of the incessant sallies of his bustling visitor.

How morbid must have been the tendencies of his habitual solitude, I think, appeared from the evident thawing and brightening that accompanied even this transient gleam of human society. I was not a companion—more childish than most girls of my age, and trained in all his whimsical ways, never to interrupt a silence, or force his thoughts by unexpected question or remark out of their monotonous or painful channel.

I was as much surprised at the good-humour with which he submitted to his cousin's saucy talk; and, indeed, just then those black-panelled and pictured walls, and that quaint, misshapen room, seemed to have exchanged their stern and awful character for something wonderfully pleasanter to me, notwithstanding the unpleasantness of the personal criticism to which the plain-spoken lady chose to subject me.

Just at that moment Captain Oakley joined us. He was my first actual vision of that awful and distant world of fashion, of whose splendours I had already read something in the three-volumed gospel of the circulating library.

Handsome, elegant, with features almost feminine, and soft, wavy, black hair, whiskers and moustache, he was altogether such a knight as I had never beheld, or even fancied, at Knowl—a hero of another species, and from the region of the demigods. I did not then perceive that coldness of the eye, and cruel curl of the voluptuous lip—only a suspicion, yet enough to indicate the profligate man, and savouring of death unto death.

But I was young, and had not yet the direful knowledge of good and evil that comes with years; and he was so very handsome, and talked in a way that was so new to me, and was so much more charming than the well-bred converse of the humdrum county families with whom I had occasionally sojourned for a week at a time.

It came out incidentally that his leave of absence was to expire the day after to-morrow. A Lilliputian pang of disappointment followed this announcement. Already I was sorry to lose him. So soon we begin to make a property of what pleases us.

I was shy, but not awkward. I was flattered by the attention

of this amusing, perhaps rather fascinating, young man of the world; and he plainly addressed himself with diligence to amuse and please me. I dare say there was more effort than I fancied in bringing his talk down to my humble level, and interesting me and making me laugh about people whom I had never heard of before, than I then suspected.

Cousin Knollys meanwhile was talking to papa. It was just the conversation that suited a man so silent as habit had made him, for her frolic fluency left him little to supply. It was totally impossible, indeed, even in our taciturn household, that conversation should ever flag while she was among us.

Cousin Knollys and I went into the drawing-room together, leaving the gentlemen—rather ill-assorted, I fear—to entertain one another for a time.

'Come here, my dear, and sit near me,' said Lady Knollys, dropping into an easy chair with an energetic little plump, 'and tell me how you and your papa get on. I can remember him quite a cheerful man once, and rather amusing—yes, indeed—and now you see what a bore he is—all by shutting himself up and nursing his whims and fancies. Are those your drawings, dear?'

'Yes, very bad, I'm afraid; but there are a few, *better*, I think, in the portfolio in the cabinet in the hall.'

'They are by *no* means bad, my dear; and you play, of course?'

'Yes—that is, a little—pretty well, I hope.'

'I dare say. I must hear you by-and-by. And how does your papa amuse you? You look bewildered, dear. Well, I dare say, amusement is not a frequent word in this house. But you must not turn into a nun, or worse, into a puritan. What is he? A Fifth-Monarchy-man, or something—I forget; tell me the name, my dear.'

'Papa is a Swedenborgian, I believe.'

'Yes, yes—I forgot the horrid name—a Swedenborgian, that is it. I don't know exactly what they think, but everyone knows they are a sort of pagans, my dear. He's not making one of *you*, dear—is he?'

'I go to church every Sunday.'

'Well, that's a mercy; Swedenborgian is such an ugly name, and besides, they are all likely to be damned, my dear, and that's a serious consideration. I really wish poor Austin had hit on something else; I'd much rather have no religion, and enjoy life while I'm in it, than choose one to worry me here and bedevil me hereafter. But some people, my dear, have a taste for being miserable, and provide, like poor Austin, for its gratification in the next world as well as here. Ha, ha, ha! how grave the little woman looks! Don't you think me very wicked? You know you do; and very likely you are right. Who makes your dresses, my dear? You *are* such a figure of fun!'

'Mrs. Rusk, I think, ordered *this* dress. I and Mary Quince planned it. I thought it very nice. We all like it very well.'

There was something, I dare say, very whimsical about it, probably very absurd, judged at least by the canons of fashion, and old Cousin Monica Knollys, in whose eye the London fashions were always fresh, was palpably struck by it as if it had been some enormity against anatomy, for she certainly laughed very heartily; indeed, there were tears on her cheeks when she had done, and I am sure my aspect of wonder and dignity, as her hilarity proceeded, helped to revive her merriment again and again as it was subsiding.

'There, you mustn't be vexed with old Cousin Monica,' she cried, jumping up, and giving me a little hug, and bestowing a hearty kiss on my forehead, and a jolly little slap on my cheek. 'Always remember your cousin Monica is an outspoken, wicked old fool, who likes you, and never be offended by her nonsense. A council of three—you all sat upon it—Mrs. Rusk, you said, and Mary Quince, and your wise self, the weird sisters; and Austin stepped in, as Macbeth, and said, 'What is't ye do?' you all made answer together, 'A something or other without a name!' Now, seriously, my dear, it is quite unpardonable in Austin—your papa, I mean—to hand you over to be robed and bedizened according to the whimsies of these wild old women—aren't they old? If they know better, it's positively *fiendish*. I'll blow him

up—I will indeed, my dear. You know you're an heiress, and ought not to appear like a jack-pudding.'

'Papa intends sending me to London with Madame and Mary Quince, and going with me himself, if Doctor Bryerly says he may make the journey, and then I am to have dresses and everything.'

'Well, that is better. And who is Doctor Bryerly—is your papa ill?'

'Ill! oh no; he always seems just the same. You don't think him ill—*looking* ill, I mean?' I asked very eagerly and frightened

'No, my dear, he looks very well for his time of life; but why is Doctor What's-his-name here? Is he a physician, or a divine, or a horse-doctor? and why is his leave asked?'

'I—I really don't understand.'

'Is he a what d'ye call'em—a Swedenborgian?'

'I believe so.'

'Oh, I see; ha, ha, ha! And so poor Austin must ask leave to go up to town. Well, go he shall, whether his doctor likes it or not, for it would not do to send you there in charge of your Frenchwoman, my dear. What's her name?'

'Madame de la Rougierre.'

CHAPTER X.

LADY KNOLLYS REMOVES A COVERLET.

LADY KNOLLYS pursued her enquiries.

'And why does not Madame make your dresses, my dear? I wager a guinea the woman's a milliner. Did not she engage to make your dresses?'

'I—I really don't know; I rather think not. She is my governess—a finishing governess, Mrs. Rusk says.'

'Finishing fiddle! Hoity-toity! and my lady's too grand to cut out your dresses and help to sew them? And what *does* she

do? I venture to say she's fit to teach nothing but devilment—not that she has taught *you* much, my dear—*yet* at least. I'll see her, my dear; where is she? Come, let us visit Madame. I should so like to talk to her a little.'

'But she is ill,' I answered, and all this time I was ready to cry for vexation, thinking of my dress, which must be very absurd to elicit so much unaffected laughter from my experienced relative, and I was only longing to get away and hide myself before that handsome Captain returned.

'Ill! is she? what's the matter?'

'A cold—feverish and rheumatic, she says.'

'Oh, a cold; is she up, or in bed?'

'In her room, but not in bed.'

'I should so like to see her, my dear. It is not mere curiosity, I assure you. In fact, curiosity has nothing on earth to do with it. A governess may be a very useful or a very useless person; but she may also be about the most pernicious inmate imaginable. She may teach you a bad accent, and worse manners, and heaven knows what beside. Send the housekeeper, my dear, to tell her that I am going to see her.'

'I had better go myself, perhaps,' I said, fearing a collision between Mrs. Rusk and the bitter Frenchwoman.

'Very well, dear.'

And away I ran, not sorry somehow to escape before Captain Oakley returned.

As I went along the passage, I was thinking whether my dress could be so very ridiculous as my old cousin thought it, and trying in vain to recollect any evidence of a similar contemptuous estimate on the part of that beautiful and garrulous dandy. I could not—quite the reverse, indeed. Still I was uncomfortable and feverish—girls of my then age will easily conceive how miserable, under similar circumstances, such a misgiving would make them.

It was a long way to Madame's room. I met Mrs. Rusk bustling along the passage with a housemaid.

'How is Madame?' I asked.

'Quite well, I believe,' answered the housekeeper, drily. 'No-

thing the matter that *I* know of. She eat enough for two to-day. I wish *I* could sit in my room doing nothing.'

Madame was sitting, or rather reclining, in a low arm-chair, when I entered the room, close to the fire, as was her wont, her feet extended near to the bars, and a little coffee equipage beside her. She stuffed a book hastily between her dress and the chair, and received me in a state of languor which, had it not been for Mrs. Rusk's comfortable assurances, would have frightened me.

'I hope you are better, Madame,' I said, approaching.

'Better than I deserve, my dear cheaile, sufficiently well. The people are all so good, trying me with every little thing, like a bird; here is café—Mrs. Rusk-a, poor woman, I try to swallow a little to please her.'

'And your cold, is it better?'

She shook her head languidly, her elbow resting on the chair, and three finger-tips supporting her forehead, and then she made a little sigh, looking down from the corners of her eyes, in an interesting dejection.

'Je sens des lassitudes in all the members—but I am quaite 'appy, and though I suffer I am console and oblige des bontés, ma chère, que vous avez tous pour moi;' and with these words she turned a languid glance of gratitude on me which dropped on the ground.

'Lady Knollys wishes very much to see you, only for a few minutes, if you could admit her.'

'Vous savez les malades see *never* visitors,' she replied with a startled sort of tartness, and a momentary energy. 'Besides, I cannot converse; je sens de temps en temps des douleurs de tête—of head, and of the ear, the right ear, it is parfois agony absolutely, and now it is here.'

And she winced and moaned, with her eyes closed and her hand pressed to the organ affected.

Simple as I was, I felt instinctively that Madame was shamming. She was over-acting; her transitions were too violent, and beside she forgot that I knew how well she could speak English, and must perceive that she was heightening the interest of her

helplessness by that pretty tessellation of foreign idiom. I therefore said with a kind of courage which sometimes helped me suddenly—

'Oh, Madame, don't you really think you might, without much inconvenience, see Lady Knollys for a very few minutes?'

'Cruel cheaile! you know I have a pain of the ear which makes me 'orribly suffer at this moment, and you demand me whether I will not converse with strangers. I did not think you would be so unkain, Maud; but it is impossible, you must see—quaite impossible. I never, you *know*, refuse to take trouble when I am able—never—*never*.'

And Madame shed some tears, which always came at call, and with her hand pressed to her ear, said very faintly,

'Be so good to tell your friend how you see me, and how I suffer, and leave me, Maud, for I wish to lie down for a little, since the pain will not allow me to remain longer.'

So with a few words of comfort which could not well be refused, but I dare say betraying my suspicion that more was made of her sufferings than need be, I returned to the drawing-room.

'Captain Oakley has been here, my dear, and fancying, I suppose, that you had left us for the evening, has gone to the billiard-room, I think,' said Lady Knollys, as I entered.

That, then, accounted for the rumble and smack of balls which I had heard as I passed the door.

'I have been telling Maud how detestably she is got up.'

'Very thoughtful of you, Monica!' said my father.

'Yes, and really, Austin, it is quite clear you ought to marry; you want some one to take this girl out, and look after her, and who's to do it? She's a dowdy—don't you see? Such a dust! and it *is* really such a pity; for she's a very pretty creature, and a clever woman could make her quite charming.'

My father took Cousin Monica's sallies with the most wonderful good-humour. She had always, I fancy, been a privileged person, and my father, whom we all feared, received her jolly attacks, as I fancy the grim Front-de-Bœufs of old accepted the humours and personalities of their jesters.

'Am I to accept this as an overture?' said my father to his voluble cousin.

'Yes, you may, but not for myself, Austin—I'm not worthy. Do you remember little Kitty Weadon that I wanted you to marry eight-and-twenty years ago, or more, with a hundred and twenty thousand pounds? Well, you know, she has got ever so much now, and she is really a most amiable old thing, and though *you* would not have her then, she has had her second husband since, I can tell you.'

'I'm glad I was not the first,' said my father.

'Well, they really say her wealth is absolutely immense. Her last husband, the Russian merchant, left her everything. She has not a human relation, and she is in the best set.'

'You were always a match-maker, Monica,' said my father, stopping, and putting his hand kindly on hers. 'But it won't do. No, no, Monica; we must take care of little Maud some other way.'

I was relieved. We women have all an instinctive dread of second marriages, and think that no widower is quite above or below that danger; and I remember, whenever my father, which indeed was but seldom, made a visit to town or anywhere else, it was a saying of Mrs. Rusk—

'I shan't wonder, neither need you, my dear, if he brings home a young wife with him.'

So my father, with a kind look at her, and a very tender one on me, went silently to the library, as he often did about that hour.

I could not help resenting my Cousin Knollys' officious recommendation of matrimony. Nothing I dreaded more than a step-mother. Good Mrs. Rusk and Mary Quince, in their several ways, used to enhance, by occasional anecdotes and frequent reflections, the terrors of such an intrusion. I suppose they did not wish a revolution and all its consequences at Knowl, and thought it no harm to excite my vigilance.

But it was impossible long to be vexed with Cousin Monica.

'You know, my dear, your father is an oddity,' she said. 'I

don't mind him—I never did. You must not. Cracky, my dear, cracky—decidedly cracky!'

And she tapped the corner of her forehead, with a look so sly and comical, that I think I should have laughed, if the sentiment had not been so awfully irreverent.

'Well, dear, how is our friend the milliner?'

'Madame is suffering so much from pain in her ear, that she says it would be quite impossible to have the honour——'

'Honour—fiddle! I want to see what the woman's like. Pain in her ear, you say? Poor thing! Well, dear, I think I can cure that in five minutes. I have it myself, now and then. Come to my room, and we'll get the bottles.'

So she lighted her candle in the lobby, and with a light and agile step she scaled the stairs, I following; and having found the remedies, we approached Madame's room together.

I think, while we were still at the end of the gallery, Madame heard and divined our approach, for her door suddenly shut, and there was a fumbling at the handle. But the bolt was out of order.

Lady Knollys tapped at the door, saying—'We'll come in, please, and see you. I've some remedies, which I'm sure will do you good.'

There was no answer; so she opened the door, and we both entered. Madame had rolled herself in the blue coverlet, and was lying on the bed, with her face buried in the pillow, and enveloped in the covering.

'Perhaps she's asleep?' said Lady Knollys, getting round to the side of the bed, and stooping over her.

Madame lay still as a mouse. Cousin Monica set down her two little vials on the table, and, stooping again over the bed, began very gently with her fingers to lift the coverlet that covered her face. Madame uttered a slumbering moan, and turned more upon her face, clasping the coverlet faster about her.

'Madame, it is Maud and Lady Knollys. We have come to relieve your ear. Pray let me see it. She can't be asleep, she's holding the clothes so fast. Do, pray, allow me to see it.'

CHAPTER XI.

LADY KNOLLYS SEES THE FEATURES.

PERHAPS, if Madame had murmured, 'It is quite well—pray permit me to sleep,' she would have escaped an awkwardness. But having adopted the rôle of the exhausted slumberer, she could not consistently speak at the moment; neither would it do, by main force, to hold the coverlet about her face: and so her presence of mind forsook her, and Cousin Monica drew it back, and hardly beheld the profile of the sufferer, when her good-humoured face was lined and shadowed with a dark curiosity and a surprise by no means pleasant; and she stood erect beside the bed, with her mouth firmly shut and drawn down at the corners, in a sort of recoil and perturbation, looking down upon the patient.

'So that's Madame de la Rougierre?' at length exclaimed Lady Knollys, with a very stately disdain. I think I never saw anyone look more shocked.

Madame sat up, very flushed. No wonder, for she had been wrapped so close in the coverlet. She did not look quite at Lady Knollys, but straight before her, rather downward, and very luridly.

I was very much frightened and amazed, and felt on the point of bursting into tears.

'So, Mademoiselle, you have married, it seems, since I had last the honour of seeing you? I did not recognise Mademoiselle under her new name.'

'Yes—I *am* married, Lady Knollys; I thought everyone who knew me had heard of that. Very respectably married, for a person of my rank. I shall not need long the life of a governess. There is no harm, I hope?'

'I hope not,' said Lady Knollys, drily, a little pale, and still looking with a dark sort of wonder upon the flushed face and

forehead of the governess, who was looking downward, straight before her, very sulkily and disconcerted.

'I suppose you have explained everything satisfactorily to Mr. Ruthyn, in whose house I find you?' said Cousin Monica.

'Yes, certainly—everything he requires—in effect there is *nothing* to explain. I am ready to answer to any question. Let *him* demand me.'

'Very good, Mademoiselle.'

'*Madame*, if you please.'

'I forgot—*Madame*—yes. I shall apprise him of everything.'

Madame turned upon her a peaked and malign look, smiling askance with a stealthy scorn.

'For myself, I have nothing to conceal. I have always done my duty. What fine scene about nothing absolutely—what charming remedies for a sick person! Ma foi! how much oblige I am for these so amiable attentions!'

'So far as I can see, Mademoiselle—Madame, I mean—you don't stand very much in need of remedies. Your ear and head don't seem to trouble you just now. I fancy these pains may now be dismissed.'

Lady Knollys was now speaking French.

'Mi ladi has diverted my attention for a moment, but that does not prevent that I suffer frightfully. I am, of course, only poor governess, and such people perhaps ought not to have pain—at least to show when they suffer. It is permitted us to die, but not to be sick.'

'Come, Maud, my dear, let us leave the invalid to her repose and to nature. I don't think she needs my chloroform and opium at present.'

'Mi ladi is herself a physic which chases many things, and powerfully affects the ear. I would wish to sleep, notwithstanding, and can but gain that in silence, if it pleases mi ladi.'

'Come, my dear,' said Lady Knollys, without again glancing at the scowling, smiling, swarthy face in the bed; 'let us leave your instructress to her *conforto*.'

'The room smells all over of brandy, my dear—does she drink?' said Lady Knollys, as she closed the door, a little sharply.

I am sure I looked as much amazed as I felt, at an imputation which then seemed to me so entirely incredible.

'Good little simpleton!' said Cousin Monica, smiling in my face, and bestowing a little kiss on my cheek; 'such a thing as a tipsy lady has never been dreamt of in your philosophy. Well, we live and learn. Let us have our tea in my room—the gentlemen, I dare say, have retired.'

I assented, of course, and we had tea very cosily by her bedroom fire.

'How long have you had that woman?' she asked suddenly, after, for her, a very long rumination.

'She came in the beginning of February—nearly ten months ago—is not it?'

'And who sent her?'

'I really don't know; papa tells me so little—he arranged it all himself, I think.'

Cousin Monica made a sound of acquiescence—her lips closed, and a nod, frowning hard at the bars.

'It *is* very odd!' she said; 'how people *can* be such fools!' Here there came a little pause. 'And what sort of person is she—do you like her?'

'Very well—that is, *pretty* well. You won't tell?—but she rather frightens me. I'm sure she does not intend it, but somehow I am very much afraid of her.'

'She does not beat you?' said Cousin Monica, with an incipient frenzy in her face that made me love her.

'Oh no!'

'Nor ill-use you in any way?'

'No.'

'Upon your honour and word, Maud?'

'No, upon my honour.'

'You know I won't tell her anything you say to me; and I only want to know, that I may put an end to it, my poor little cousin.'

'Thank you, Cousin Monica, very much; but really and truly she does not ill-use me.'

'Nor threaten you, child?'

'Well, *no*—no, she does not threaten.'

'And how the plague *does* she frighten you, child?'

'Well, I really—I'm half ashamed to tell you—you'll laugh at me—and I don't know that she wishes to frighten me. But there is something, is not there, ghosty, you know, about her?'

'*Ghosty*—is there? well, I'm sure I don't know, but I suspect there's something devilish—I mean, she seems roguish—does not she? And I really think she has had neither cold nor pain, but has just been shamming sickness, to keep out of my way.'

I perceived plainly enough that Cousin Monica's damnatory epithet referred to some retrospective knowledge, which she was not going to disclose to me.

'You knew Madame before,' I said. 'Who is she?'

'She assures me she is Madame de la Rougierre, and, I suppose, in French phrase she so calls herself,' answered Lady Knollys, with a laugh, but uncomfortably, I thought.

'Oh, dear Cousin Monica, do tell me—is she—is she very wicked? I am so afraid of her!'

'How should I know, dear Maud? But I do remember her face, and I don't very much like her, and you may depend on it I will speak to your father in the morning about her, and don't, darling, ask me any more about her, for I really have not very much to tell that you would care to hear, and the fact is I *won't* say any more about her—there!

And Cousin Monica laughed, and gave me a little slap on the cheek, and then a kiss.

'Well, just tell me this——'

'Well, I *won't* tell you this, nor anything—not a word, curious little woman. The fact is, I have little to tell, and I mean to speak to your father, and he, I am sure, will do what is right: so don't ask me any more, and let us talk of something pleasanter.'

There was something indescribably winning, it seemed to me, in Cousin Monica. Old as she was, she seemed to me so girlish, compared with those slow, unexceptionable young ladies whom I

had met in my few visits at the county houses. By this time my shyness was quite gone, and I was on the most intimate terms with her.

'You know a great deal about her, Cousin Monica, but you won't tell me.'

'Nothing I should like better, if I were at liberty, little rogue; but you know, after all, I don't really say whether I *do* know anything about her or not, or what sort of knowledge it is. But tell me what you mean by ghosty, and all about it.'

So I recounted my experiences, to which, so far from laughing at me, she listened with very special gravity.

'Does she write and receive many letters?'

I had seen her write letters, and supposed, though I could only recollect one or two, that she received in proportion.

'Are *you* Mary Quince?' asked my lady cousin.

Mary was arranging the window-curtains, and turned, dropping a courtesy affirmatively toward her.

'You wait on my little cousin, Miss Ruthyn, don't you?'

'Yes, 'm,' said Mary, in her genteelest way.

'Does anyone sleep in her room?'

'Yes, 'm, *I*—please, my lady.'

'And no one else?'

'No, 'm—please, my lady.'

'Not even the *governess*, sometimes?

'No, please, my lady.'

'Never, you are quite sure, my dear?' said Lady Knollys, transferring the question to me.

'Oh no, never,' I answered.

Cousin Monica mused gravely, I fancied even anxiously, into the grate; then stirred her tea and sipped it, still looking into the same point of our cheery fire.

'I like your face, Mary Quince; I'm sure you are a good creature,' she said, suddenly turning toward her with a pleasant countenance. 'I'm very glad you have got her, dear. I wonder whether Austin has gone to his bed yet!'

'I think not. I am certain he is either in the library or in his

private room—papa often reads or prays alone at night, and—and he does not like to be interrupted.'

'No, no; of course not—it will do very well in the morning.'

Lady Knollys was thinking deeply, as it seemed to me.

'And so you are afraid of goblins, my dear,' she said at last, with a faded sort of smile, turning toward me; 'well, if *I* were, I know what *I* should do—so soon as I, and good Mary Quince here, had got into my bed-chamber for the night, I should stir the fire into a good blaze, and bolt the door—do you see, Mary Quince?—bolt the door and keep a candle lighted all night. You'll be very attentive to her, Mary Quince, for I—I don't think she is very strong, and she must not grow nervous: so get to bed early, and don't leave her alone—do you see?—and—and remember to bolt the door, Mary Quince, and I shall be sending a little Christmas-box to my cousin, and I shan't forget you. Good-night.'

And with a pleasant courtesy Mary fluttered out of the room.

CHAPTER XII.

A CURIOUS CONVERSATION.

We each had another cup of tea, and were silent for awhile.

'We must not talk of ghosts now. You are a superstitious little woman, you know, and you shan't be frightened.'

And now Cousin Monica grew silent again, and looking briskly round the room, like a lady in search of a subject, her eye rested on a small oval portrait, graceful, brightly tinted, in the French style, representing a pretty little boy, with rich golden hair, large soft eyes, delicate features, and a shy, peculiar expression.

'It is odd; I think I remember that pretty little sketch, very long ago. I think I was then myself a child, but that is a much older style of dress, and of wearing the hair, too, than I ever saw. I am just forty-nine now. Oh dear, yes; that is a good while before I was *born*. What a strange, pretty little boy!—a mysterious

little fellow. Is he quite sincere, I wonder? What rich golden hair! It is very clever—a French artist, I dare say—and who *is* that little boy?'

'I never heard. Some one a hundred years ago, I dare say. But there is a picture down-stairs I am so anxious to ask you about!'

'Oh!' murmured Lady Knollys, still gazing dreamily on the crayon.

'It is the full-length picture of Uncle Silas—I want to ask you about him.'

At mention of his name, my cousin gave me a look so sudden and odd as to amount almost to a start.

'Your uncle Silas, dear? It is very odd, I was just thinking of him;' and she laughed a little.

'Wondering whether that little boy could be he.'

And up jumped active Cousin Monica, with a candle in her hand, upon a chair, and scrutinised the border of the sketch for a name or a date.

'Maybe on the back?' said she.

And so she unhung it, and there, true enough, not on the back of the drawing, but of the frame, which was just as good, in pen-and-ink round Italian letters, hardly distinguishable now from the discoloured wood, we traced—

'*Silas Aylmer Ruthyn, Ætate* viii. 15 *May*, 1779.'

'It is very odd I should not have been told or remembered who it was. I think if I had *ever* been told I *should* have remembered it. I do recollect this picture, though, I am nearly certain. What a singular child's face!'

And my cousin leaned over it with a candle on each side, and her hand shading her eyes, as if seeking by aid of these fair and half-formed lineaments to read an enigma.

The childish features defied her, I suppose; their secret was unfathomable, for after a good while she raised her head, still looking at the portrait, and sighed.

'A very singular face,' she said, softly, as a person might who was looking into a coffin. 'Had not we better replace it?'

So the pretty oval, containing the fair golden hair and large eyes, the pale, unfathomable sphinx, remounted to its nail, and the *funeste* and beautiful child seemed to smile down oracularly on our conjectures.

'So is the face in the large portrait—*very* singular—more, I think, than that—handsomer too. This is a sickly child, I think; but the full-length is so manly, though so slender, and so handsome too. I always think him a hero and a mystery, and they won't tell me about him, and I can only dream and wonder.'

'He has made more people than you dream and wonder, my dear Maud. I don't know what to make of him. He is a sort of idol, you know, of your father's, and yet I don't think he helps him much. His abilities were singular; so has been his misfortune; for the rest, my dear, he is neither a hero nor a wonder. So far as I know, there are very few sublime men going about the world.'

'You really must tell me all you know about him, Cousin Monica. Now don't refuse.'

'But why should you care to hear? There is really nothing pleasant to tell.'

'That is just the reason I wish it. If it were at all pleasant, it would be quite commonplace. I like to hear of adventures, dangers, and misfortunes; and above all, I love a mystery. You know, papa will never tell me, and I dare not ask him; not that he is ever unkind, but, somehow, I am afraid; and neither Mrs. Rusk nor Mary Quince will tell me anything, although I suspect they know a good deal.'

'I don't see any good in telling you, dear, nor, to say the truth, any great harm either.'

'No—now that's *quite* true—no harm. There *can't* be, for I *must* know it all some day, you know, and better now, and from *you*, than perhaps from a stranger, and in a less favourable way.'

'Upon my word, it is a wise little woman; and really, that's not such bad sense after all.'

So we poured out another cup of tea each, and sipped it very

comfortably by the fire, while Lady Knollys talked on, and her animated face helped the strange story.

'It is not very much, after all. Your uncle Silas, you know, is living?'

'Oh yes, in Derbyshire.'

'So I see you do know something of him, sly girl! but no matter. You know how very rich your father is; but Silas was the younger brother, and had little more than a thousand a year. If he had not played, and did not care to marry, it would have been quite enough—ever so much more than younger sons of dukes often have; but he was—well, a *mauvais sujet*—you know what that is. I don't want to say any ill of him—more than I really know—but he was fond of his pleasures, I suppose, like other young men, and he played, and was always losing, and your father for a long time paid great sums for him. I believe he was really a most expensive and vicious young man; and I fancy he does not deny that now, for they say he would change the past if he could.

I was looking at the pensive little boy in the oval frame—aged eight years—who was, a few springs later, 'a most expensive and vicious young man,' and was now a suffering and outcast old one, and wondering from what a small seed the hemlock or the wallflower grows, and how microscopic are the beginnings of the kingdom of God or of the mystery of iniquity in a human being's heart.

'Austin—your papa—was very kind to him—*very*; but then, you know, he's an oddity, dear—he *is* an oddity, though no one may have told you before—and he never forgave him for his marriage. Your father, I suppose, knew more about the lady than I did—I was young then—but there were various reports, none of them pleasant, and she was not visited, and for some time there was a complete estrangement between your father and your uncle Silas; and it was made up, rather oddly, on the very occasion which some people said ought to have totally separated them. Did you ever hear anything—anything *very* remarkable—about your uncle?'

'No, never; they would not tell me, though I am sure they know. Pray go on.'

'Well, Maud, as I have begun, I'll complete the story, though perhaps it might have been better untold. It was something rather shocking—indeed, *very* shocking; in fact, they insisted on suspecting him of having committed a murder.'

I stared at my cousin for some time, and then at the little boy, so refined, so beautiful, so *funeste*, in the oval frame.

'Yes, dear,' said she, her eyes following mine; 'who'd have supposed he could ever have—have fallen under so horrible a suspicion?'

'The wretches! Of course, Uncle Silas—of course, he's innocent?' I said at last.

'Of course, my dear,' said Cousin Monica, with an odd look; 'but you know there are some things as bad almost to be suspected of as to have done, and the country gentlemen chose to suspect him. They did not like him, you see. His politics vexed them; and he resented their treatment of his wife—though I really think, poor Silas, he did not care a pin about her—and he annoyed them whenever he could. Your papa, you know, is very proud of his family—*he* never had the slightest suspicion of your uncle.'

'Oh no!' I cried vehemently.

'That's right, Maud Ruthyn,' said Cousin Monica, with a sad little smile and a nod. 'And your papa was, you may suppose very angry.'

'Of course he was,' I exclaimed.

'You have no idea, my dear, *how* angry. He directed his attorney to prosecute, by wholesale, all who had said a word affecting your uncle's character. But the lawyers were against it, and then your uncle tried to fight his way through it, but the men would not meet him. He was quite slurred. Your father went up and saw the Minister. He wanted to have him a Deputy-Lieutenant, or something, in his county. Your papa, you know, had a very great influence with the Government. Beside his county influence, he had two boroughs then. But the Minister was afraid, the feel-

ing was so very strong. They offered him something in the Colonies, but your father would not hear of it—that would have been a banishment, you know. They would have given your father a peerage to make it up, but he would not accept it, and broke with the party. Except in that way—which, you know, was connected with the reputation of the family—I don't think, considering his great wealth, he has done very much for Silas. To say truth, however, he was very liberal before his marriage. Old Mrs. Aylmer says he made a vow *then* that Silas should never have more than five hundred a year, which he still allows him, I believe, and he permits him to live in the place. But they say it is in a very wild, neglected state.'

'You live in the same county—have you seen it lately, Cousin Monica?'

'No, not very lately,' said Cousin Monica, and began to hum an air abstractedly.

CHAPTER XIII.

BEFORE AND AFTER BREAKFAST.

NEXT morning early I visited my favourite full-length portrait in the chocolate coat and top-boots. Scanty as had been my cousin Monica's notes upon this dark and eccentric biography, they were everything to me. A soul had entered that enchanted form. Truth had passed by with her torch, and a sad light shone for a moment on that enigmatic face.

There stood the *roué*—the duellist—and, with all his faults, the hero too! In that dark large eye lurked the profound and fiery enthusiasm of his ill-starred passion. In the thin but exquisite lip I read the courage of the paladin, who would have 'fought his way,' though single-handed, against all the magnates of his county, and by ordeal of battle have purged the honour of the Ruthyns. There in that delicate half-sarcastic tracery of the nostril I detected

the intellectual defiance which had politically isolated Silas Ruthyn and opposed him to the landed oligarchy of his county, whose retaliation had been a hideous slander. There, too, and on his brows and lip, I traced the patience of a cold disdain. I could now see him as he was—the prodigal, the hero, and the martyr. I stood gazing on him with a girlish interest and admiration. There was indignation, there was pity, there was hope. Some day it might come to pass that I, girl as I was, might contribute by word or deed towards the vindication of that long-suffering, gallant, and romantic prodigal. It was a flicker of the Joan of Arc inspiration, common, I fancy, to many girls. I little then imagined how profoundly and strangely involved my uncle's fate would one day become with mine.

I was interrupted by Captain Oakley's voice at the window. He was leaning on the window-sill, and looking in with a smile —the window being open, the morning sunny, and his cap lifted in his hand.

'Good-morning, Miss Ruthyn. What a charming old place! quite the setting for a romance; such timber, and this really *beautiful* house. I *do* so like these white and black houses—wonderful old things. By-the-by, you treated us very badly last night—you did, indeed; upon my word, now, it really was too bad—running away, and drinking tea with Lady Knollys—so she says. I really —I should not like to tell you how very savage I felt, particularly considering how very short my time is.'

I was a shy, but not a giggling country miss. I knew I was an heiress; I knew I was somebody. I was not the least bit in the world conceited, but I think this knowledge helped to give me a certain sense of security and self-possession, which might have been mistaken for dignity or simplicity. I am sure I looked at him with a fearless enquiry, for he answered my thoughts.

'I do really assure you, Miss Ruthyn, I am quite serious; you have no idea how very much we missed you.'

There was a little pause, and, I believe, like a fool, I lowered my eyes, and blushed.

'I—I was thinking of leaving to-day; I am so unfortunate—my

leave is just out—it *is* so unlucky; but I don't quite know whether my aunt Knollys will allow me to go.'

'*I*?—certainly, my dear Charlie, *I* don't want you at all,' exclaimed a voice—Lady Knollys's—briskly, from an open window close by; 'what could put that in your head, dear?'

And in went my cousin's head, and the window shut down.

'She is *such* an oddity, poor dear Aunt Knollys,' murmured the young man, ever so little put out, and he laughed. 'I never know quite what she wishes, or how to please her; but she's *so* goodnatured; and when she goes to town for the season—she does not always, you know—her house is really very gay—you can't think——'

Here again he was interrupted, for the door opened, and Lady Knollys entered. 'And you know, Charles,' she continued, 'it would not do to forget your visit to Snodhurst; you wrote, you know, and you have only to-night and to-morrow. You are thinking of nothing but that moor; I heard you talking to the gamekeeper; I know he is—is not he, Maud, the brown man with great whiskers, and leggings? I'm very sorry, you know, but I really must spoil your shooting, for they do expect you at Snodhurst, Charlie; and do not you think this window a little too much for Miss Ruthyn? Maud, my dear, the air is very sharp; shut it down, Charles, and you'd better tell them to get a fly for you from the town after luncheon. Come, dear,' she said to me. 'Was not that the breakfast bell? Why does not your papa get a gong?—it is so hard to know one bell from another.'

I saw that Captain Oakley lingered for a last look, but I did not give it, and went out smiling with Cousin Knollys, and wondering why old ladies are so uniformly disagreeable.

In the lobby she said, with an odd, goodnatured look—

'Don't allow any of his love-making, my dear. Charles Oakley has not a guinea, and an heiress would be very convenient. Of course he has his eyes about him. Charles is not by any means foolish; and I should not be at all sorry to see him well married, for I don't think he will do much good any other way; but there are degrees, and his ideas are sometimes very impertinent.'

I was an admiring reader of the *Albums*, the *Souvenirs*, the *Keepsakes*, and all that flood of Christmas-present lore which yearly irrigated England, with pretty covers and engravings; and floods of elegant twaddle—the milk, not destitute of water, on which the babes of literature were then fed. On this, my genius throve. I had a little album, enriched with many gems of original thought and observation, which I jotted down in suitable language. Lately, turning over these faded leaves of rhyme and prose, I lighted, under this day's date, upon the following sage reflection, with my name appended:—

'Is there not in the female heart an ineradicable jealousy, which, if it sways the passions of the young, rules also the *advice* of the *aged*? Do they not grudge to youth the sentiments (though Heaven knows how *shadowed* with sorrow) which they can *no longer inspire*, perhaps even *experience*; and does not youth, in turn, sigh over the envy which has *power* to *blight*?

'MAUD AYLMER RUTHYN.'

'He has not been making love to me,' I said rather tartly, 'and he does not seem to me at all impertinent, and I really don't care the least whether he goes or stays.'

Cousin Monica looked in my face with her old waggish smile, and laughed.

'You'll understand those London dandies better some day, dear Maud; they are very well, but they like money—not to keep, of course—but still they like it and know its value.'

At breakfast my father told Captain Oakley where he might have shooting, or if he preferred going to Dilsford, only half an hour's ride, he might have his choice of hunters, and find the dogs there that morning.

The Captain smiled archly at me, and looked at his aunt. There was a suspense. I hope I did not show how much I was interested—but it would not do. Cousin Monica was inexorable.

'Hunting, hawking, fishing, fiddle-de-dee! You know, Charlie, my dear, it is quite out of the question. He is going to Snodhurst this afternoon, and without quite a rudeness, in which I

should be involved too, he really can't—you know you can't, Charles! and—and he *must* go and keep his engagement.'

So papa acquiesced with a polite regret, and hoped another time.

'Oh, leave all that to me. When you want him, only write me a note, and I'll send him or bring him if you let me. I always know where to find him—don't I, Charlie?—and we shall be only too happy.'

Aunt Monica's influence with her nephew was special, for she 'tipped' him handsomely every now and then, and he had formed for himself agreeable expectations, besides, respecting her will. I felt rather angry at his submitting to this sort of tutelage, knowing nothing of its motive; I was also disgusted by Cousin Monica's tyranny.

So soon as he had left the room, Lady Knollys, not minding me, said briskly to papa, 'Never let that young man into your house again. I found him making speeches, this morning, to little Maud here; and he really has not two pence in the world—it is amazing impudence—and you know such absurd things do happen.'

'Come, Maud, what compliments did he pay you?' asked my father.

I was vexed, and therefore spoke courageously. 'His compliments were not to me; they were all to the house,' I said, drily.

'Quite as it should be—the house, of course; it is that he's in love with,' said Cousin Knollys.

> 'Twas on a widow's jointure land,
> The archer, Cupid, took his stand.'

'Hey! I don't quite understand,' said my father, slily.

'Tut! Austin; you forget Charlie is my nephew.'

'So I did,' said my father.

'Therefore the literal widow in this case *can* have no interest in view but one, and that is yours and Maud's. I wish him well, but he shan't put my little cousin and her expectations into his empty pocket—*not* a bit of it. And *there's* another reason, Austin,

why you should marry—you have no eye for these things, whereas a clever *woman* would see at a glance and prevent mischief.'

'So she would,' acquiesced my father, in his gloomy, amused way. 'Maud, you must try to be a clever woman.'

'So she will in her time, but that is not come yet; and I tell you, Austin Ruthyn, if you won't look about and marry somebody, somebody may possibly marry you.'

'You were always an oracle, Monica; but *here* I am lost in total perplexity,' said my father.

'Yes; sharks sailing round you, with keen eyes and large throats; and you have come to the age precisely when men *are* swallowed up alive like Jonah.'

'Thank you for the parallel, but you know that was not a happy union, even for the fish, and there was a separation in a few days; not that I mean to trust to that; but there's no one to throw me into the jaws of the monster, and I've no notion of jumping there; and the fact is, Monica, there's no monster at all.'

'I'm not so sure.'

'But I'm quite sure,' said my father, a little drily. 'You forget how old I am, and how long I've lived alone—I and little Maud;' and he smiled and smoothed my hair, and, I thought, sighed.

'No one is ever too old to do a foolish thing,' began Lady Knollys.

'Nor to say a foolish thing, Monica. This has gone on too long. Don't you see that little Maud there is silly enough to be frightened at your fun.'

So I was, but I could not divine how he guessed it.

'And well or ill, wisely or madly, I'll *never* marry; so put that out of your head.'

This was addressed rather to me, I think, than to Lady Knollys, who smiled a little waggishly on me, and said—

'To be sure, Maud; maybe you are right; a stepdame is a risk, and I ought to have asked you first what you thought of it; and upon my honour,' she continued merrily but kindly, observing that my eyes, I know not exactly from what feeling, filled with tears,

'I'll never again advise your papa to marry, unless you first tell me you wish it.'

This was a great deal from Lady Knollys, who had a taste for advising her friends and managing their affairs.

'I've a great respect for instinct. I believe, Austin, it is truer than reason, and yours and Maud's are both against me, though I know I have reason on my side.'

My father's brief wintry smile answered, and Cousin Monica kissed me, and said—

'I've been so long my own mistress that I sometimes forget there are such things as fear and jealousy; and are you going to your governess, Maud?'

CHAPTER XIV.

ANGRY WORDS.

I WAS going to my governess, as Lady Knollys said; and so I went. The undefinable sense of danger that smote me whenever I beheld that woman had deepened since last night's occurrence, and was taken out of the region of instinct or prepossession by the strange though slight indications of recognition and abhorrence which I had witnessed in Lady Knollys on that occasion.

The tone in which Cousin Monica had asked, 'are you going to your governess?' and the curious, grave, and anxious look that accompanied the question, disturbed me; and there was something odd and cold in the tone as if a remembrance had suddenly chilled her. The accent remained in my ear, and the sharp brooding look was fixed before me as I glided up the broad dark stairs to Madame de la Rougierre's chamber.

She had not come down to the school-room, as the scene of my studies was called. She had decided on having a relapse, and accordingly had not made her appearance down-stairs that morning. The gallery leading to her room was dark and lonely, and I grew

more nervous as I approached; I paused at the door, making up my mind to knock.

But the door opened suddenly, and, like a magic-lantern figure, presented with a snap, appeared close before my eyes the great muffled face, with the forbidding smirk, of Madame de la Rougierre.

'Wat you mean, my dear cheaile?' she inquired with a malevolent shrewdness in her eyes, and her hollow smile all the time disconcerting me more even than the suddenness of her appearance; 'wat for you approach so softly? I do not sleep, you see, but you feared, perhaps, to have the misfortune of wakening me, and so you came—is it not so?—to leesten, and looke in very gentily; you want to know how I was. Vous êtes bien aimable d'avoir pensé à moi. Bah!' she cried, suddenly bursting through her irony. 'Wy could not Lady Knollys come herself and leesten to the keyhole to make her report? Fi donc! wat is there to conceal? Nothing. Enter, if you please. Every one they are welcome!' and she flung the door wide, turned her back upon me, and, with an ejaculation which I did not understand, strode into the room.

'I did not come with any intention, Madame, to pry or to intrude—you don't think so—you *can't* think so—you can't possibly mean to insinuate anything so insulting!'

I was very angry, and my tremors had all vanished now.

'No, not for *you*, dear cheaile; I was thinking to miladi Knollys, who, without cause, is my enemy. Every one has enemy; you will learn all that so soon as you are little older, and without cause she is mine. Come, Maud, speak a the truth—was it not miladi Knollys who sent you here doucement, doucement, so quaite to my door—is it not so, little rogue?'

Madame had confronted me again, and we were now standing in the middle of her floor.

I indignantly repelled the charge, and searching me for a moment with her oddly-shaped, cunning eyes, she said—

'That is good cheaile, you speak a so direct—I like that, and am glad to hear; but, my dear Maud, that woman——'

'Lady Knollys is papa's cousin,' I interposed a little gravely.

'She does hate a me so, you av no idea. She as tryed to injure me several times, and would employ the most innocent person, unconsciously you know, my dear, to assist her malice.'

Here Madame wept a little. I had already discovered that she could shed tears whenever she pleased. I have heard of such persons, but I never met another before or since.

Madame was unusually frank—no one ever knew better when to be candid. At present I suppose she concluded that Lady Knollys would certainly relate whatever she knew concerning her before she left Knowl; and so Madame's reserves, whatever they might be, were dissolving, and she growing childlike and confiding.

'Et comment va monsieur votre père aujourd'hui?'

'Very well,' I thanked her.

'And how long miladi Knollys her visit is likely to be?'

'I could not say exactly, but for some days.'

'Eh bien, my dear cheaile, I find myself better this morning, and we must return to our lessons. Je veux m'habiller, ma chère Maud; you will wait me in the school-room.'

By this time Madame, who, though lazy, could make an effort, and was capable of getting into a sudden hurry, had placed herself before her dressing-table, and was ogling her discoloured and bony countenance in the glass.

'Wat horror! I am so pale. Quel ennui! wat bore! Ow weak av I grow in two three days!'

And she practised some plaintive, invalid glances into the mirror. But on a sudden there came a little sharp inquisitive frown as she looked over the frame of the glass, upon the terrace beneath. It was only a glance, and she sat down languidly in her arm-chair to prepare, I suppose, for the fatigues of the toilet.

My curiosity was sufficiently aroused to induce me to ask—

'But why, Madame, do you fancy that Lady Knollys dislikes you?'

''Tis not fancy, my dear Maud. Ah ha, no! Mais c'est toute une histoire—too tedious to tell now—some time maybe—and you will learn when you are little older, the most violent hatreds

often they are the most without cause. But, my dear cheaile, the hours they are running from us, and I must dress. Vite, vite! so you run away to the school-room, and I will come after.'

Madame had her dressing-case and her mysteries, and palpably stood in need of repairs; so away I went to my studies. The room which we called the school-room was partly beneath the floor of Madame's bed-chamber, and commanded the same view; so, remembering my governess's peering glance from her windows, I looked out, and saw Cousin Monica making a brisk promenade up and down the terrace-walk. Well, that was quite enough to account for it. I had grown very curious, and I resolved when our lessons were over to join her and make another attempt to discover the mystery.

As I sat over my books, I fancied I heard a movement outside the door. I suspected that Madame was listening. I waited for a time, expecting to see the door open, but she did not come; so I opened it suddenly myself, but Madame was not on the threshold nor on the lobby. I heard a rustling, however, and on the staircase over the banister I saw the folds of her silk dress as she descended.

She is going, I thought, to seek an interview with Lady Knollys. She intends to propitiate that dangerous lady; so I amused some eight or ten minutes in watching Cousin Monica's quick march and right-about face upon the parade-ground of the terrace. But no one joined her.

'She is certainly talking to papa,' was my next and more probable conjecture. Having the profoundest distrust of Madame, I was naturally extremely jealous of the confidential interviews in which deceit and malice might make their representations plausibly and without answer.

'Yes, I'll run down and see—see *papa*; she shan't tell lies behind my back, horrid woman!'

At the study-door I knocked, and forthwith entered. My father was sitting near the window, his open book before him, Madame standing at the other side of the table, her cunning eyes bathed in tears, and her pocket-handkerchief pressed to her mouth.

Her eyes glittered stealthily on me for an instant: she was sobbing—*désolée*, in fact—that grim grenadier lady, and her attitude was exquisitely dejected and timid. But she was, notwithstanding, reading closely and craftily my father's face. He was not looking at her, but rather upward toward the ceiling, reflectively leaning on his hand, with an expression, not angry, but rather surly and annoyed.

'I ought to have heard of this before, Madame,' my father was saying as I came in; 'not that it would have made any difference—not the least; mind that. But it was the kind of thing that I ought to have heard, and the omission was not strictly right.'

Madame, in a shrill and lamentable key, opened her voluble reply, but was arrested by a nod from my father, who asked me if I wanted anything.

'Only—only that I was waiting in the school-room for Madame, and did not know where she was.'

'Well, she is here, you see, and will join you up-stairs in a few minutes.'

So back I went again, huffed, angry, and curious, and sate back in my chair with a clouded countenance, thinking very little about lessons.

When Madame entered, I did not lift my head or eyes.

'Good cheaile! reading,' said she, as she approached briskly and reassured.

'No,' I answered tartly; 'not good, nor a child either; I'm not reading, I've been thinking.'

'Très-bien!' she said, with an insufferable smile, 'thinking is very good also; but you look unhappy—very, poor cheaile. Take care you are not grow jealous for poor Madame talking sometime to your papa; you must not, little fool. It is only for a your good, my dear Maud, and I had no objection you should stay.'

'*You*! Madame!' I said loftily. I was very angry, and showed it through my dignity, to Madame's evident satisfaction.

'No—it was your papa, Mr. Ruthyn, who weesh to speak alone; for me I do not care; there was something I weesh to tell him. I don't care who know, but Mr. Ruthyn he is deeferent.'

I made no remark.

'Come, leetle Maud, you are not to be so cross; it will be much better you and I to be good friends together. Why should a we quarrel?—wat nonsense! Do you imagine I would anywhere undertake a the education of a young person unless I could speak with her parent?—wat folly! I would like to be your friend, however, my poor Maud, if you would allow—you and I together —wat you say?'

'People grow to be friends by liking, Madame, and liking comes of itself, not by bargain; I like every one who is kind to me.'

'And so I. You are like me in so many things, my dear Maud! Are you quaite well to-day? I think you look fateague; so I feel, too, vary tire. I think we weel put off the lessons to to-morrow. Eh? and we will come to play la grace in the garden.'

Madame was plainly in a high state of exultation. Her audience had evidently been satisfactory, and, like other people, when things went well, her soul lighted up into a sulphureous good-humour, not very genuine nor pleasant, but still it was better than other moods.

I was glad when our calisthenics were ended, and Madame had returned to her apartment, so that I had a pleasant little walk with Cousin Monica.

We women are persevering when once our curiosity is roused, but she gaily foiled mine, and, I think, had a mischievous pleasure in doing so. As we were going in to dress for dinner, however, she said, quite gravely—

'I am sorry, Maud, I allowed you to see that I have any unpleasant impressions about that governess lady. I shall be at liberty some day to explain all about it, and, indeed, it will be enough to tell your father, whom I have not been able to find all day; but really we are, perhaps, making too much of the matter, and I cannot say that I know anything against Madame that is conclusive, or—or, indeed, at all; but that there are reasons, and —you must not ask any more—no, you must not.'

That evening, while I was playing the overture to Cenerentola, for the entertainment of my cousin, there arose from the tea-table,

where she and my father were sitting, a spirited and rather angry harangue from Lady Knollys' lips; I turned my eyes from the music towards the speakers; the overture swooned away with a little hesitating babble into silence, and I listened.

Their conversation had begun under cover of the music which I was making, and now they were too much engrossed to perceive its discontinuance. The first sentence I heard seized my attention; my father had closed the book he was reading, upon his finger, and was leaning back in his chair, as he used to do when at all angry; his face was a little flushed, and I knew the fierce and glassy stare which expressed pride, surprise, and wrath.

'Yes, Lady Knollys, there's an animus; I know the spirit you speak in—it does you no honour,' said my father.

'And I know the spirit *you* speak in, the spirit of *madness*,' retorted Cousin Monica, just as much in earnest. 'I can't conceive how you *can* be so *demented*, Austin. What has perverted you? are you *blind*?'

'*You* are, Monica; your own unnatural prejudice—*unnatural* prejudice, blinds you. What is it all?—*nothing*. Were I to act as you say, I should be a *coward* and a traitor. I see, I *do* see, all that's real. I'm no Quixote, to draw my sword on illusions.'

'There should be no halting here. How *can* you—do you ever *think*? I wonder you can breathe. I feel as if the evil one were in the house.'

A stern, momentary frown was my father's only answer, as he looked fixedly at her.

'People need not nail up horseshoes and mark their door-stones with charms to keep the evil spirit out,' ran on Lady Knollys, who looked as pale and angry, in her way, 'but you open your door in the dark and invoke unknown danger. How can you look at that child that's—she's *not* playing,' said Lady Knollys, abruptly stopping.

My father rose, muttering to himself, and cast a lurid glance at me, as he went in high displeasure to the door. Cousin Monica, now flushed a little, glanced also silently at me, biting the tip of her slender gold cross, and doubtful how much I had heard.

My father opened the door suddenly, which he had just closed, and looking in, said, in a calmer tone—

'Perhaps, Monica, you would come for a moment to the study; I'm sure you have none but kindly feelings towards me and little Maud, there; and I thank you for your good-will; but you must see other things more reasonably, and I think you will.'

Cousin Monica got up silently and followed him, only throwing up her eyes and hands as she did so, and I was left alone, wondering and curious more than ever.

CHAPTER XV.

A WARNING.

I SATE still, listening and wondering, and wondering and listening; but I ought to have known that no sound could reach me where I was from my father's study. Five minutes passed and they did not return. Ten, fifteen. I drew near the fire and made myself comfortable in a great arm-chair, looking on the embers, but not seeing all the scenery and *dramatis personæ* of my past life or future fortunes, in their shifting glow, as people in romances usually do; but fanciful castles and caverns in blood-red and golden glare, suggestive of dreamy fairy-land, salamanders, sunsets, and palaces of fire-kings, and all this partly shaping and partly shaped by my fancy, and leading my closing eyes and drowsy senses off into dream-land. So I nodded and dozed, and sank into a deep slumber, from which I was roused by the voice of my cousin Monica. On opening my eyes, I saw nothing but Lady Knollys' face looking steadily into mine, and expanding into a good-natured laugh as she watched the vacant and lack-lustre stare with which I returned her gaze.

'Come, dear Maud, it is late; you ought to have been in your bed an hour ago.'

Up I stood, and so soon as I had begun to hear and see aright,

it struck me that Cousin Monica was more grave and subdued than I had seen her.

'Come, let us light our candles and go together.'

Holding hands, we ascended, I sleepy, she silent; and not a word was spoken until we reached my room. Mary Quince was in waiting, and tea made.

'Tell her to come back in a few minutes; I wish to say a word to you,' said Lady Knollys.

The maid accordingly withdrew.

Lady Knollys' eyes followed her till she closed the door behind her.

'I'm going in the morning.'

'So soon!'

'Yes, dear; I could not stay; in fact, I should have gone to-night, but it was too late, and I leave instead in the morning.'

'I am so sorry—so *very* sorry,' I exclaimed, in honest disappointment, and the walls seemed to darken round me, and the monotony of the old routine loomed more terrible in prospect.

'So am I, dear Maud.'

'But can't you stay a little longer; *won't* you?'

'No, Maud; I'm vexed with Austin—very much vexed with your father; in short, I can't conceive anything so entirely preposterous, and dangerous, and insane as his conduct, now that his eyes are quite opened, and I must say a word to you before I go, and it is just this:—you must cease to be a mere child, you must try and be a woman, Maud: now don't be frightened or foolish, but hear me out. That woman—what does she call herself—Rougierre? I have reason to believe is—in fact, from circumstances, *must* be your enemy; you will find her very deep, daring, and unscrupulous, I venture to say, and you can't be too much on your guard. Do you quite understand me, Maud?'

'I do,' said I, with a gasp, and my eyes fixed on her with a terrified interest, as if on a warning ghost.

'You must bridle your tongue, mind, and govern your conduct, and command even your features. It is hard to practise reserve; but you must—you must be secret and vigilant. Try and be in

appearance just as usual; don't quarrel; tell her nothing, if you do happen to know anything, of your father's business; be always on your guard when with her, and keep your eye upon her everywhere. Observe everything, disclose nothing—do you see?'

'Yes,' again I whispered.

'You have good, honest servants about you, and, thank God, they don't like her. But you must not repeat to them one word I am now saying to you. Servants are fond of dropping hints, and letting things ooze out in that way, and in their quarrels with her would compromise you—you understand me?'

'I do,' I sighed, with a wild stare.

'And—and, Maud, don't let her meddle with your food.'

Cousin Monica gave me a pale little nod, and looked away.

I could only stare at her; and under my breath I uttered an ejaculation of terror.

'Don't be so frightened; you must not be foolish; I only wish you to be upon your guard. I have my suspicions, but I may be quite wrong; your father thinks I am a fool; perhaps I am—perhaps not; maybe he may come to think as I do. But you must not speak to him on the subject; he's an odd man, and never did and never will act wisely, when his passions and prejudices are engaged.'

'Has she ever committed any great crime?' I asked, feeling as if I were on the point of fainting.

'No, dear Maud, I never said anything of the kind; don't be so frightened: I only said I have formed, from something I know, an ill opinion of her; and an unprincipled person, under temptation, is capable of a great deal. But no matter how wicked she may be, you may defy her, simply by assuming her to be so, and acting with caution; she is cunning and selfish, and she'll do nothing desperate. But I would give her no opportunity.'

'Oh, dear! Oh, Cousin Monica, don't leave me.'

'My dear, I *can't* stay; your papa and I—we've had a quarrel. I know I'm right, and he's wrong, and he'll come to see it soon, if he's left to himself, and then all will be right. But just now he misunderstands me, and we've not been civil to one another. I could

not think of staying, and he would not allow you to come away with me for a short visit, which I wished. It won't last, though; and I do assure you, my dear Maud, I am quite happy about you now that you are quite on your guard. Just act respecting that person as if she were capable of any treachery, without showing distrust or dislike in your manner, and nothing will remain in her power; and write to me whenever you wish to hear from me, and if I can be of any real use, I don't care, I'll come: so there's a wise little woman; do as I've said, and depend upon it everything will go well, and I'll contrive before long to get that nasty creature away.'

Except a kiss and a few hurried words in the morning when she was leaving, and a pencilled farewell for papa, there was nothing more from Cousin Monica for some time.

Knowl was dark again—darker than ever. My father, gentle always to me, was now—perhaps it was contrast with his fitful return to something like the world's ways, during Lady Knollys' stay—more silent, sad, and isolated than before. Of Madame de la Rougierre I had nothing at first particular to remark. Only, reader, if you happen to be a rather nervous and very young girl, I ask you to conceive my fears and imaginings, and the kind of misery which I was suffering. Its intensity I cannot now even myself recall. But it overshadowed me perpetually—a care, an alarm. It lay down with me at night and got up with me in the morning, tinting and disturbing my dreams, and making my daily life terrible. I wonder now that I lived through the ordeal. The torment was secret and incessant, and kept my mind in unintermitting activity.

Externally things went on at Knowl for some weeks in the usual routine. Madame was, so far as her unpleasant ways were concerned, less tormenting than before, and constantly reminded me of 'our leetle vow of friendship, you remember, dearest Maud!' and she would stand beside me, and looked from the window with her bony arm round my waist, and my reluctant hand drawn round in hers; and thus she would smile, and talk affectionately and even playfully; for at times she would grow

quite girlish, and smile with her great carious teeth, and begin to quiz and babble about the young 'faylows,' and tell bragging tales of her lovers, all of which were dreadful to me.

She was perpetually recurring, too, to the charming walk we had had together to Church Scarsdale, and proposing a repetition of that delightful excursion, which, you may be sure, I evaded, having by no means so agreeable a recollection of our visit.

One day, as I was dressing to go out for a walk, in came good Mrs. Rusk, the housekeeper, to my room.

'Miss Maud, dear, is not that too far for you? It is a long walk to Church Scarsdale, and you are not looking very well.'

'To Church Scarsdale?' I repeated; 'I'm not going to Church Scarsdale; who said I was going to Church Scarsdale? There is nothing I should so much dislike.'

'Well, I never!' exclaimed she. 'Why, there's old Madame 's been down-stairs with me for fruit and sandwiches, telling me you were longing to go to Church Scarsdale——'

'It's quite untrue,' I interrupted. 'She knows I hate it.'

'She does?' said Mrs. Rusk, quietly; 'and you did not tell her nothing about the basket? Well—if there isn't a story! Now what may she be after—what is it—what *is* she driving at?'

'I can't tell, but I won't go.'

'No, of course, dear, you won't go. But you may be sure there's some scheme in her old head. Tom Fowkes says she's bin two or three times to drink tea at Farmer Gray's—now, could it be she's thinking to marry him?' And Mrs. Rusk sat down and laughed heartily, ending with a crow of derision.

'To think of a young fellow like that, and his wife, poor thing, not dead a year—maybe she's got money?'

'I don't know—I don't care—perhaps, Mrs. Rusk, you mistook Madame. I will go down; I am going out.'

Madame had a basket in her hand. She held it quietly by her capacious skirt, at the far side, and made no allusion to the preparation, neither to the direction in which she proposed walking, and prattling artlessly and affectionately she marched by my side.

Thus we reached the stile at the sheep-walk, and then I paused.

Now, Madame, have not we gone far enough in this direction? —suppose we visit the pigeon-house in the park?'

'Wat folly! my dear a Maud—you cannot walk so far.'

'Well, towards home, then.'

'And wy not a this way? We ave not walk enough, and Mr. Ruthyn he will not be pleased if you do not take proper exercise. Let us walk on by the path, and stop when you like.'

'Where do you wish to go, Madame?'

'Nowhere particular—come along; don't be fool, Maud.'

'This leads to Church Scarsdale.'

'A yes indeed! wat sweet place! bote we need not a walk all the way to there.'

'I'd rather not walk outside the grounds to-day, Madame.'

'Come, Maud, you shall not be fool—wat you mean, Mademoiselle?' said the stalworth lady, growing yellow and greenish with an angry mottling, and accosting me very gruffly.

'I don't care to cross the stile, thank you, Madame. I shall remain at this side.'

'You shall do wat I tell you!' exclaimed she.

'Let go my arm, Madame, you hurt me,' I cried.

She had griped my arm very firmly in her great bony hand, and seemed preparing to drag me over by main force.

'Let me go,' I repeated shrilly, for the pain increased.

'La!' she cried with a smile of rage and a laugh, letting me go and shoving me backward at the same time, so that I had a rather dangerous tumble.

I stood up, a good deal hurt, and very angry, notwithstanding my fear of her.

'I'll ask papa if I am to be so ill-used.'

'Wat av I done?' cried Madame, laughing grimly from her hollow jaws; 'I did all I could to help you over—'ow could I prevent you to pull back and tumble if you would do so? That is the way wen you petites Mademoiselles are naughty and hurt yourself they always try to make blame other people. Tell a wat you like—you think I care?'

'Very well, Madame.'

'Are a you coming?'

'No.'

She looked steadily in my face and very wickedly. I gazed at her as with dazzled eyes—I suppose as the feathered prey do at the owl that glares on them by night. I neither moved back nor forward, but stared at her quite helplessly.

'You are nice pupil—charming young person! So polite, so obedient, so amiable! I will walk towards Church Scarsdale,' she continued, suddenly breaking through the conventionalism of her irony, and accosting me in savage accents. 'You weel stay behind if you dare. I tell you to accompany—do you hear?'

More than ever resolved against following her, I remained where I was, watching her as she marched fiercely away, swinging her basket as though in imagination knocking my head off with it.

She soon cooled, however, and looking over her shoulder, and seeing me still at the other side of the stile, she paused, and beckoned me grimly to follow her. Seeing me resolutely maintain my position, she faced about, tossed her head, like an angry beast, and seemed uncertain for a while what course to take with me.

She stamped and beckoned furiously again. I stood firm. I was very much frightened, and could not tell to what violence she might resort in her exasperation. She walked towards me with an inflamed countenance, and a slight angry wagging of the head; my heart fluttered, and I awaited the crisis in extreme trepidation. She came close, the stile only separating us, and stopped short, glaring and grinning at me like a French grenadier who has crossed bayonets. but hesitates to close.

CHAPTER XVI.

DOCTOR BRYERLY LOOKS IN.

WHAT had I done to excite this ungovernable fury? We had often before had such small differences, and she had contented herself with being sarcastic, teasing, and impertinent.

'So, for future you are gouvernante and I the cheaile for you to command—is not so?—and you must direct where we shall walk. Très-bien! we shall see; Monsieur Ruthyn he shall know every thing. For me I do not care—not at all—I shall be rather pleased, on the contrary. Let him decide. If I shall be responsible for the conduct and the health of Mademoiselle his daughter, it must be that I shall have authority to direct her wat she must do—it must be that she or I shall obey. I ask only witch shall command for the future—voilà tout!'

I was frightened, but resolute—I dare say I looked sullen and uncomfortable. At all events, she seemed to think she might possibly succeed by wheedling; so she tried coaxing and cajoling, and patted my cheek, and predicted that I would be 'a good cheaile,' and not 'vex poor Madame,' but do for the future 'wat she tell a me.'

She smiled her wide wet grin, smoothed my hand, and patted my cheek, and would in the excess of her conciliatory paroxysm have kissed me; but I withdrew, and she commented only with a little laugh, and a 'Foolish little thing! but you will be quite amiable just now.'

'Why, Madame,' I asked, suddenly raising my head and looking her straight in the face, 'do you wish me to walk to Church Scarsdale so particularly to-day?'

She answered my steady look with a contracted gaze and an unpleasant frown.

'Wy do I?—I do not understand a you; there is *no* particular

day—wat folly! Wy I like Church Scarsdale? Well, it is such pretty place. There is all! Wat leetle fool! I suppose you think I want to keel a you and bury you in the churchyard?'

And she laughed, and it would not have been a bad laugh for a ghoul.

'Come, my dearest Maud, you are not a such fool to say, if *you* tell me go thees a way, I weel go that; and if you say, go that a way, I weel go thees—you are rasonable leetle girl—come along—*allons donc*—we shall av soche agreeable walk—weel a you?'

But I was immovable. It was neither obstinacy nor caprice, but a profound fear that governed me. I was then afraid—yes, *afraid*. Afraid of *what*? Well, of going with Madame de la Rougierre to Church Scarsdale that day. That was all. And I believe that instinct was true.

She turned a bitter glance toward Church Scarsdale, and bit her lip. She saw that she must give it up. A shadow hung upon her drab features. A little scowl—a little sneer—wide lips compressed with a false smile, and a leaden shadow mottling all. Such was the countenance of the lady who only a minute or two before had been smiling and murmuring over the stile so amiably with her idiomatic 'blarney,' as the Irish call that kind of blandishment.

There was no mistaking the malignant disappointment that hooked and warped her features—my heart sank—a tremendous fear overpowered me. Had she intended poisoning me? What was in that basket? I looked in her dreadful face. I felt for a minute quite frantic. A feeling of rage with my father, with my Cousin Monica, for abandoning me to this dreadful rogue, took possession of me, and I cried, helplessly wringing my hands—

'Oh! it is a shame—it is a shame—it is a shame!'

The countenance of the gouvernante relaxed. I think she in turn was frightened at my extreme agitation. It might have worked unfavourably with my father.

'Come, Maud, it is time you should try to control your temper. You shall not walk to Church Scarsdale if you do not like—I only invite. *There!* It is quite as you please, where we shall

walk then? Here to the peegeon-house? I think you say. Tout bien! Remember I concede you everything. Let us go.'

We went, therefore, towards the pigeon-house, through the forest trees; I not speaking as the children in the wood did with their sinister conductor, but utterly silent and scared; she silent also, meditating, and sometimes with a sharp side-glance gauging my progress towards equanimity. Her own was rapid; for Madame was a philosopher, and speedily accommodated herself to circumstances. We had not walked a quarter of an hour when every trace of gloom had left her face, which had assumed its customary brightness, and she began to sing with a spiteful hilarity as we walked forward, and indeed seemed to be approaching one of her waggish, frolicsome moods. But her fun in these moods was solitary. The joke, whatever it was, remained in her own keeping. When we approached the ruined brick tower—in old times a pigeon-house—she grew quite frisky, and twirled her basket in the air, and capered to her own singing.

Under the shadow of the broken wall, and its ivy, she sat down with a frolicsome *plump*, and opened her basket, inviting me to partake, which I declined. I must do her justice, however, upon the suspicion of poison, which she quite disposed of by gobbling up, to her own share, everything which the basket contained.

The reader is not to suppose that Madame's cheerful demeanour indicated that I was forgiven. Nothing of the kind. One syllable more, on our walk home, she addressed not to me. And when we reached the terrace, she said—

'You will please, Maud, remain for two—three minutes in the Dutch garden, while I speak with Mr. Ruthyn in the study.'

This was spoken with a high head and an insufferable smile; and I more haughtily, but quite gravely, turned without disputing, and descended the steps to the quaint little garden she had indicated.

I was surprised and very glad to see my father there. I ran to him, and began, 'Oh! papa!' and then stopped short, adding only, 'may I speak to you now?'

He smiled kindly and gravely on me.

'Well, Maud, say your say.'

'Oh, sir, it is only this: I entreat that our walks, mine and Madame's, may be confined to the grounds.'

'And why?'

'I—I'm afraid to go with her.'

'*Afraid*!' he repeated, looking hard at me. 'Have you lately had a letter from Lady Knollys?'

'No, papa, not for two months or more.'

There was a pause.

'And why *afraid*, Maud?'

'She brought me one day to Church Scarsdale; you know what a solitary place it is, sir; and she frightened me so that I was afraid to go with her into the churchyard. But she went and left me alone at the other side of the stream, and an impudent man passing by stopped and spoke to me, and seemed inclined to laugh at me, and altogether frightened me very much, and he did not go till Madame happened to return.'

'What kind of man—young or old?'

'A young man; he looked like a farmer's son, but very impudent, and stood there talking to me whether I would or not; and Madame did not care at all, and laughed at me for being frightened; and, indeed, I am very uncomfortable with her.'

He gave me another shrewd look, and then looked down cloudily and thought.

'You say you are uncomfortable and frightened. How is this—what causes these feelings?'

'I don't know, sir; she likes frightening me; I am afraid of her—we are all afraid of her, I think. The servants, I mean, as well as I.'

My father nodded his head contemptuously, twice or thrice, and muttered, 'A pack of fools!'

'And she was so very angry to-day with me, because I would not walk again with her to Church Scarsdale. I am very much afraid of her. I—' and quite unpremeditatedly I burst into tears.

'There, there, little Maud, you must not cry. She is here only for your good. If you are afraid—even *foolishly* afraid—it is

enough. Be it as you say; your walks are henceforward confined to the grounds; I'll tell her so.'

I thanked him through my tears very earnestly.

'But, Maud, beware of prejudice; women are unjust and violent in their judgments. Your family has suffered in some of its members by such injustice. It behoves us to be careful not to practise it.'

That evening in the drawing-room my father said, in his usual abrupt way—

'About my departure, Maud: I've had a letter from London this morning, and I think I shall be called away sooner than I at first supposed, and for a little time we must manage apart from one another. Do not be alarmed. You shall not be in Madame de la Rougierre's charge, but under the care of a relation; but even so, little Maud will miss her old father, I think.'

His tone was very tender, so were his looks; he was looking down on me with a smile, and tears were in his eyes. This softening was new to me. I felt a strange thrill of surprise, delight, and love, and springing up, I threw my arms about his neck and wept in silence. He, I think, shed tears also.

'You said a visitor was coming; some one, you mean, to go away with. Ah, yes, you love him better than me.'

'No, dear, no; but I *fear* him; and I am sorry to leave you, little Maud.'

'It won't be very long,' I pleaded.

'No, dear,' he answered with a sigh.

I was tempted almost to question him more closely on the subject, but he seemed to divine what was in my mind, for he said—

'Let us speak no more of it, but only bear in mind, Maud, what I told you about the oak cabinet, the key of which is here,' and he held it up as formerly: 'you remember what you are to do in case Doctor Bryerly should come while I am away?'

'Yes, sir.'

His manner had changed, and I had returned to my accustomed formalities.

It was only a few days later that Dr. Bryerly actually did arrive

at Knowl, quite unexpectedly, except, I suppose, by my father. He was to stay only one night.

He was twice closeted in the little study up-stairs with my father, who seemed to me, even for him, unusually dejected, and Mrs. Rusk inveighing against 'them rubbitch,' as she always termed the Swedenborgians, told me 'they were making him quite shaky-like, and he would not last no time, if that lanky, lean ghost of a fellow in black was to keep prowling in and out of his room like a tame cat.'

I lay awake that night, wondering what the mystery might be that connected my father and Dr. Bryerly. There was something more than the convictions of their strange religion could account for. There was something that profoundly agitated my father. It may not be reasonable, but so it is. The person whose presence, though we know nothing of the cause of that effect, is palpably attended with pain to anyone who is dear to us, grows odious, and I began to detest Doctor Bryerly.

It was a grey, dark morning, and in a dark pass in the gallery, near the staircase, I came full upon the ungainly Doctor, in his glossy black suit.

I think, if my mind had been less anxiously excited on the subject of his visit, or if I had not disliked him so much, I should not have found courage to accost him as I did. There was something sly, I thought, in his dark, lean face; and he looked so low, so like a Scotch artisan in his Sunday clothes, that I felt a sudden pang of indignation, at the thought that a great gentleman, like my father, should have suffered under his influence, and I stopped suddenly, instead of passing him by with a mere salutation, as he expected, 'May I ask a question, Doctor Bryerly?'

'Certainly.'

'Are you the friend whom my father expects?'

'I don't quite see.'

'The friend, I mean, with whom he is to make an expedition to some distance, I think, and for some little time?'

'No,' said the Doctor, with a shake of his head.

'And who is he?'

'I really have not a notion, Miss.'

'Why, he said that *you knew*,' I replied.

The Doctor looked honestly puzzled.

'Will he stay long away? pray tell me.'

The Doctor looked into my troubled face with inquiring and darkened eyes, like one who half reads another's meaning; and then he said a little briskly, but not sharply—

'Well, *I* don't know, I'm sure, Miss; no, indeed, you must have mistaken; there's nothing that *I* know.'

There was a little pause, and he added—

'No. He never mentioned any friend to me.' I fancied that he was made uncomfortable by my question, and wanted to hide the truth. Perhaps I was partly right.

'Oh! Doctor Bryerly, pray, *pray* who is the friend, and where is he going?'

'I do *assure* you,' he said, with a strange sort of impatience, 'I don't know; it is all nonsense.'

And he turned to go, looking, I think, annoyed and disconcerted.

A terrific suspicion crossed my brain like lightning.

'Doctor, one word,' I said, I believe, quite wildly. 'Do you—do you think his mind is at all affected?'

'Insane?' he said, looking at me with a sudden, sharp inquisitiveness, that brightened into a smile. 'Pooh, pooh! Heaven forbid! not a saner man in England.'

Then with a little nod he walked on, carrying, as I believed, notwithstanding his disclaimer, the secret with him. In the afternoon Doctor Bryerly went away.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN ADVENTURE.

For many days after our quarrel, Madame hardly spoke to me. As for lessons, I was not much troubled with them. It was plain, too, that my father had spoken to her, for she never after that day proposed our extending our walks beyond the precincts of Knowl.

Knowl, however, was a very considerable territory, and it was possible for a much better pedestrian than I to tire herself effectually, without passing its limits. So we took occasionally long walks.

After some weeks of sullenness, during which for days at a time she hardly spoke to me, and seemed lost in dark and evil abstraction, she once more, and somewhat suddenly, recovered her spirits, and grew quite friendly. Her gaieties and friendliness were not reassuring, and in my mind presaged approaching mischief and treachery. The days were shortening to the wintry span. The edge of the red sun had already touched the horizon as Madame and I, overtaken at the warren by his last beams, were hastening homeward.

A narrow carriage-road traverses this wild region of the park, to which a distant gate gives entrance. On descending into this unfrequented road, I was surprised to see a carriage standing there. A thin, sly postilion, with that pert, turned-up nose which the old caricaturist Woodward used to attribute to the gentlemen of Tewkesbury, was leaning on his horses, and looked hard at me as I passed. A lady who sat within looked out, with an extra-fashionable bonnet on, and also treated us to a stare. Very pink and white cheeks she had, very black glossy hair and bright eyes —fat, bold, and rather cross, she looked—and in her bold way she examined us curiously as we passed.

I mistook the situation. It had once happened before that an

intending visitor at Knowl had entered the place by that park-road, and lost several hours in a vain search for the house.

'Ask him, Madame, whether they want to go to the house; I dare say they have missed their way,' whispered I.

'*Eh bien*, they will find again. I do not choose to talk to post-boys; *allons*!'

But I asked the man as we passed, 'Do you want to reach the house?'

By this time he was at the horses' heads, buckling the harness.

'Noa,' he said in a surly tone, smiling oddly on the winkers, but, recollecting his politeness, he added, 'Noa, thankee, misses, it's what they calls a picnic; we'll be takin' the road now.'

He was smiling now on a little buckle with which he was engaged.

'Come—nonsense!' whispered Madame sharply in my ear, and she whisked me by the arm, so we crossed the little stile at the other side.

Our path lay across the warren, which undulates in little hillocks. The sun was down by this time, blue shadows were stretching round us, colder in the splendid contrast of the burnished sunset sky.

Descending over these hillocks we saw three figures a little in advance of us, not far from the path we were tracing. Two were standing smoking and chatting at intervals: one tall and slim, with a high chimney-pot, worn a little on one side, and a white great-coat buttoned up to the chin; the other shorter and stouter, with a dark-coloured wrapper. These gentlemen were facing rather our way as we came over the edge of the eminence, but turned their backs on perceiving our approach. As they did so, I remember so well each lowered his cigar suddenly, with the simultaneousness of a drill. The third figure sustained the picnic character of the group, for he was repacking a hamper. He stood suddenly erect as we drew near, and a very ill-looking person he was, low-browed, square-chinned, and with a broad, broken nose. He wore gaiters, and was a little bandy, very broad, and had a closely-cropped bullet head, and deep-set little eyes. The moment I saw him, I beheld

the living type of the burglars and bruisers whom I had so often beheld with a kind of scepticism in *Punch*. He stood over his hamper and scowled sharply at us for a moment; then with the point of his foot he jerked a little fur cap that lay on the ground into his hand, drew it tight over his lowering brows, and called to his companions, just as we passed him—'Hallo! mister. How's this?'

'All right,' said the tall person in the white great-coat, who, as he answered, shook his shorter companion by the arm, I thought angrily.

This shorter companion turned about. He had a muffler loose about his neck and chin. I thought he seemed shy and irresolute, and the tall man gave him a great jolt with his elbow, which made him stagger, and I fancied a little angry, for he said, as it seemed, a sulky word or two.

The gentleman in the white surtout, however, standing direct in our way, raised his hat with a mock salutation, placing his hand on his breast, and forthwith began to advance with an insolent grin and an air of tipsy frolic.

'Jist in time, ladies; five minutes more and we'd a bin off. Thankee, Mrs. Mouser, ma'am, for the honour of the meetin', and more particular for the pleasure of making your young lady's acquaintance—niece, ma'am? daughter, ma'am? granddaughter, by Jove, is it? Hallo! there, mild 'un, I say, stop packin'.' This was to the ill-favoured person with the broken nose. 'Bring us a couple o' glasses and a bottle o' curaçoa; what are you fear'd on, my dear? this is Lord Lollipop, here, a reg'lar charmer, wouldn't hurt a fly, hey, Lolly? Isn't he pretty, Miss? and I'm Sir Simon Sugarstick—so called after old Sir Simon, ma'am; and I'm so tall and straight, Miss, and slim—ain't I? and ever so sweet, my honey, when you come to know me, just like a sugarstick; ain't I, Lolly, boy?'

'I'm Miss Ruthyn, tell them, Madame,' I said, stamping on the ground, and very much frightened.

'Be quaite, Maud. If you are angry, they will hurt us; leave me to speak,' whispered the gouvernante.

All this time they were approaching from separate points. I glanced back, and saw the ruffianly-looking man within a yard or two, with his arm raised and one finger up, telegraphing, as it seemed, to the gentlemen in front.

'Be quaite, Maud,' whispered Madame, with an awful adjuration, which I do not care to set down. 'They are teepsy; don't seem 'fraid.'

I *was* afraid—terrified. The circle had now so narrowed that they might have placed their hands on my shoulders.

'Pray, gentlemen, wat you want? *weel* a you 'av the goodness to permit us to go on?'

I now observed for the first time, with a kind of shock, that the shorter of the two men, who prevented our advance, was the person who had accosted me so offensively at Church Scarsdale. I pulled Madame by the arm, whispering, 'Let us run.'

'Be quaite, my dear Maud,' was her only reply.

'I tell you what,' said the tall man, who had replaced his high hat more jauntily than before on the side of his head, 'we've caught you now, fair game, and we'll let you off on conditions. You must not be frightened, Miss. Upon my honour and soul, I mean no mischief; do I, Lollipop? I call him Lord Lollipop; it's only chaff, though; his name's Smith. Now, Lolly, I vote we let the prisoners go, when we just introduce them to Mrs. Smith; she's sitting in the carriage, and keeps Mr. S. here in precious good order, I promise you. There's easy terms for you, eh, and we'll have a glass o' curaçoa round, and so part friends. Is it a bargain? Come!'

'Yes, Maud, we must go—wat matter?' whispered Madame vehemently.

'You shan't,' I said, instinctively terrified.

'You'll go with Ma'am, young 'un, won't you?' said Mr. Smith, as his companion called him.

Madame was holding my arm, but I snatched it from her, and would have run; the tall man, however, placed his arms round me and held me fast with an affectation of playfulness, but his grip was hard enough to hurt me a good deal. Being now

thoroughly frightened, after an ineffectual struggle, during which I heard Madame say, 'You fool, Maud, weel you come with me? see wat you are doing,' I began to scream, shriek after shriek, which the man attempted to drown with loud hooting, peals of laughter, forcing his handkerchief against my mouth, while Madame continued to bawl her exhortations to 'be quaite' in my ear.

'I'll lift her, I say!' said a gruff voice behind me.

But at this instant, wild with terror, I distinctly heard other voices shouting. The men who surrounded me were instantly silent, and all looked in the direction of the sound, now very near, and I screamed with redoubled energy. The ruffian behind me thrust his great hand over my mouth.

'It is the gamekeeper,' cried Madame. '*Two* gamekeepers—we are safe—thank Heaven!' and she began to call on Dykes by name.

I only remember, feeling myself at liberty—running a few steps—seeing Dykes' white furious face—clinging to his arm, with which he was bringing his gun to a level, and saying, 'Don't fire—they'll murder us if you do.'

Madame, screaming lustily, ran up at the same moment.

'Run on to the gate and lock it—I'll be wi' ye in a minute,' cried he to the other gamekeeper; who started instantly on this mission, for the three ruffians were already in full retreat for the carriage.

Giddy—wild—fainting—still terror carried me on.

'Now, Madame Rogers—s'pose you take young Misses on—I must run and len' Bill a hand.'

'No, no; you moste not,' cried Madame. 'I am fainting myself, and more villains they may be near to us.'

But at this moment we heard a shot, and, muttering to himself and grasping his gun, Dykes ran at his utmost speed in the direction of the sound.

With many exhortations to speed, and ejaculations of alarm, Madame hurried me on toward the house, which at length we reached without further adventure.

As it happened, my father met us in the hall. He was perfectly transported with fury on hearing from Madame what had happened, and set out at once, with some of the servants, in the hope of intercepting the party at the park-gate.

Here was a new agitation; for my father did not return for nearly three hours, and I could not conjecture what might be occurring during the period of his absence. My alarm was greatly increased by the arrival in the interval of poor Bill, the under-gamekeeper, very much injured.

Seeing that he was determined to intercept their retreat, the three men had set upon him, wrested his gun, which exploded in the struggle, from him, and beat him savagely. I mention these particulars, because they convinced everybody that there was something specially determined and ferocious in the spirit of the party, and that the fracas was no mere frolic, but the result of a predetermined plan.

My father had not succeeded in overtaking them. He traced them to the Lugton Station, where they had taken the railway, and no one could tell him in what direction the carriage and post-horses had driven.

Madame was, or affected to be, very much shattered by what had occurred. Her recollection and mine, when my father questioned us closely, differed very materially respecting many details of the *personnel* of the villanous party. She was obstinate and clear; and although the gamekeeper corroborated my description of them, still my father was puzzled. Perhaps he was not sorry that some hesitation was forced upon him, because although at first he would have gone almost any length to detect the persons, on reflection he was pleased that there was not evidence to bring them into a court of justice, the publicity and annoyance of which would have been inconceivably distressing to me.

Madame was in a strange state—tempestuous in temper, talking incessantly—every now and then in floods of tears, and perpetually on her knees pouring forth torrents of thanksgiving to Heaven for our joint deliverance from the hands of those villains. Notwithstanding our community of danger and her thankfulness on my

behalf, however, she broke forth into wrath and railing whenever we were alone together.

'Wat fool you were! so disobedient and obstinate; if you 'ad done wat *I* say, then we should av been quaite safe; those persons they were tipsy, and there is nothing so dangerous as to quarrel with tipsy persons; I would 'av brought you quaite safe—the lady she seem so nice and quaite, and we should 'av been safe with her—there would 'av been nothing absolutely; but instead you would scream and pooshe, and so they grow quite wild, and all the impertinence and violence follow of course; and that a poor Bill—all his beating and danger to his life it is cause entairely by you.'

And she spoke with more real virulence than that kind of upbraiding generally exhibits.

'The beast!' exclaimed Mrs. Rusk, when she, I, and Mary Quince were in my room together, 'with all her crying and praying, I'd like to know as much as she does, maybe, about them rascals. There never was sich like about the place, long as I remember it, till she came to Knowl, old witch! with them unmerciful big bones of hers, and her great bald head, grinning here, and crying there, and her nose everywhere. The old French hypocrite!'

Mary Quince threw in an observation, and I believe Mrs. Rusk rejoined, but I heard neither. For whether the housekeeper spoke with reflection or not, what she said affected me strangely. Through the smallest aperture, for a moment, I had had a peep into Pandemonium. Were not peculiarities of Madame's demeanour and advice during the adventure partly accounted for by the suggestion? Could the proposed excursion to Church Scarsdale have had any purpose of the same sort? What was proposed? How was Madame interested in it? Were such immeasurable treason and hypocrisy possible? I could not explain nor quite believe in the shapeless suspicion that with these light and bitter words of the old housekeeper had stolen so horribly into my mind.

After Mrs. Rusk was gone I awoke from my dismal abstraction with something like a moan and a shudder, with a dreadful sense of danger.

'Oh! Mary Quince,' I cried, 'do *you* think she really knew?'

'*Who*, Miss Maud?'

'Do you think Madame knew of those dreadful people? Oh, no—say you don't—you don't believe it—tell me she did not. I'm distracted, Mary Quince, I'm frightened out of my life.'

'There now, Miss Maud, dear—there now, don't take on so—why should she?—no sich a thing. Mrs. Rusk, law bless you, she's no more meaning in what she says than the child unborn.'

But I was really frightened. I was in a horrible state of uncertainty as to Madame de la Rougierre's complicity with the party who had beset us at the warren, and afterwards so murderously beat our poor gamekeeper. How was I ever to get rid of that horrible woman? How long was she to enjoy her continual opportunities of affrighting and injuring me?

'She hates me—she hates me, Mary Quince; and she will never stop until she has done me some dreadful injury. Oh! will no one relieve me—will no one take her away? Oh, papa, papa, papa! you will be sorry when it is too late.'

I was crying and wringing my hands, and turning from side to side, at my wits' ends, and honest Mary Quince in vain endeavoured to quiet and comfort me.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A MIDNIGHT VISITOR

THE frightful warnings of Lady Knollys haunted me too. Was there no escape from the dreadful companion whom fate had assigned me? I made up my mind again and again to speak to my father and urge her removal. In other things he indulged me; here, however, he met me drily and sternly, and it was plain that he fancied I was under my cousin Monica's influence, and also that he had secret reasons for persisting in an opposite course. Just then I had a gay, odd letter from Lady Knollys, from some

country house in Shropshire. Not a word about Captain Oakley. My eye skimmed its pages in search of that charmed name. With a peevish feeling I tossed the sheet upon the table. Inwardly I thought how ill-natured and unwomanly it was.

After a time, however, I read it, and found the letter very good-natured. She had received a note from papa. He had 'had the impudence to forgive *her* for *his* impertinence.' But for my sake she meant, notwithstanding this aggravation, really to pardon him; and whenever she had a disengaged week, to accept his invitation to Knowl, from whence she was resolved to whisk me off to London, where, though I was too young to be presented at Court and come out, I might yet—besides having the best masters and a good excuse for getting rid of Medusa—see a great deal that would amuse and surprise me.

'Great news, I suppose, from Lady Knollys?' said Madame, who always knew who in the house received letters by the post, and by an intuition from whom they came.

'Two letters—you and your papa. She is quite well, I hope?'

'Quite well, thank you, Madame.'

Some fishing questions, dropped from time to time, fared no better. And as usual, when she was foiled even in a trifle, she became sullen and malignant.

That night, when my father and I were alone, he suddenly closed the book he had been reading, and said—

'I heard from Monica Knollys to-day. I always liked poor Monnie; and though she's no witch, and very wrong-headed at times, yet now and then she does say a thing that's worth weighing. Did she ever talk to you of a time, Maud, when you are to be your own mistress?'

'No,' I answered, a little puzzled, and looking straight in his rugged, kindly face.

'Well, I thought she might—she's a rattle, you know—always *was* a rattle, and that sort of people say whatever comes uppermost. But that's a subject for me, and more than once, Maud, it has puzzled me.'

He sighed.

'Come with me to the study, little Maud.'

So, he carrying a candle, we crossed the lobby, and marched together through the passage, which at night always seemed a little awesome, darkly wainscoted, uncheered by the cross-light from the hall, which was lost at the turn, leading us away from the frequented parts of the house to that misshapen and lonely room about which the traditions of the nursery and the servants' hall had so many fearful stories to recount.

I think my father had intended making some disclosure to me on reaching this room. If so, he changed his mind, or at least postponed his intention.

He had paused before the cabinet, respecting the key of which he had given me so strict a charge, and I think he was going to explain himself more fully than he had done. But he went on, instead, to the table where his desk, always jealously locked, was placed, and having lighted the candles which stood by it, he glanced at me, and said—

'You must wait a little, Maud; I shall have something to say to you. Take this candle and amuse yourself with a book meanwhile.'

I was accustomed to obey in silence. I chose a volume of engravings, and ensconced myself in a favourite nook in which I had often passed a half-hour similarly. This was a deep recess by the fireplace, fenced on the other side by a great old escritoir. Into this I drew a stool, and, with candle and book, I placed myself snugly in the narrow chamber. Every now and then I raised my eyes and saw my father either writing or ruminating, as it seemed to me, very anxiously at his desk.

Time wore on—a longer time than he had intended, and still he continued absorbed at his desk. Gradually I grew sleepy, and as I nodded, the book and room faded away, and pleasant little dreams began to gather round me, and so I went off into a deep slumber.

It must have lasted long, for when I wakened my candle had burnt out; my father, having quite forgotten me, was gone, and the room was dark and deserted. I felt cold and a little stiff, and for some seconds did not know where I was.

I had been wakened, I suppose, by a sound which I now distinctly heard, to my great terror, approaching. There was a rustling; there was a breathing. I heard a creaking upon the plank that always creaked when walked upon in the passage. I held my breath and listened, and coiled myself up in the innermost recess of my little chamber.

Sudden and sharp, a light shone in from the nearly-closed study door. It shone angularly on the ceiling like a letter L reversed. There was a pause. Then some one knocked softly at the door, which after another pause was slowly pushed open. I expected, I think, to see the dreaded figure of the linkman. I was scarcely less frightened to see that of Madame de la Rougierre. She was dressed in a sort of grey silk, which she called her Chinese silk—precisely as she had been in the daytime. In fact, I do not think she had undressed. She had no shoes on. Otherwise her toilet was deficient in nothing. Her wide mouth was grimly closed, and she stood scowling into the room with a searching and pallid scrutiny, the candle held high above her head at the full stretch of her arm.

Placed as I was in a deep recess, and in a seat hardly raised above the level of the floor, I escaped her, although it seemed to me for some seconds, as I gazed on this spectre, that our eyes actually met.

I sat without breathing or winking, staring upon the formidable image which with upstretched arm, and the sharp lights and hard shadows thrown upon her corrugated features, looked like a sorceress watching for the effect of a spell.

She was plainly listening intensely. Unconsciously she had drawn her lower lip altogether between her teeth, and I well remember what a deathlike and idiotic look the contortion gave her. My terror lest she should discover me amounted to positive agony. She rolled her eyes stealthily from corner to corner of the room, and listened with her neck awry at the door.

Then to my father's desk she went. To my great relief, her back was towards me. She stooped over it, with the candle close by; I saw her try a key—it could be nothing else—and I heard her blow through the wards to clear them.

Then, again, she listened at the door, candle in hand, and then with long tiptoe steps came back, and papa's desk in another moment was open, and Madame cautiously turning over the papers it contained.

Twice or thrice she paused, glided to the door, and listened again intently with her head near the ground, and then returned and continued her search, peeping into papers one after another, tolerably methodically, and reading some quite through.

While this felonious business was going on, I was freezing with fear lest she should accidentally look round and her eyes light on me; for I could not say what she might not do rather than have her crime discovered.

Sometimes she would read a paper twice over; sometimes a whisper no louder than the ticking of a watch, sometimes a brief chuckle under her breath, bespoke the interest with which here and there a letter or a memorandum was read.

For about half an hour, I think, this went on; but at the time it seemed to me all but interminable. On a sudden she raised her head and listened for a moment, replaced the papers deftly, closed the desk without noise, except for the tiny click of the lock, extinguished the candle, and rustled stealthily out of the room, leaving in the darkness the malign and hag-like face on which the candle had just shone still floating filmy in the dark.

Why did I remain silent and motionless while such an outrage was being committed? If, instead of being a very nervous girl, preoccupied with an undefinable terror of that wicked woman, I had possessed courage and presence of mind, I dare say I might have given an alarm, and escaped from the room without the slightest risk. But so it was; I could no more stir than the bird who, cowering under its ivy, sees the white owl sailing back and forward under its predatory cruise.

Not only during her presence, but for more than an hour after, I remained cowering in my hiding-place, and afraid to stir, lest she might either be lurking in the neighbourhood, or return and surprise me.

You will not be astonished, that after a night so passed I was

ill and feverish in the morning. To my horror, Madame de la Rougierre came to visit me at my bedside. Not a trace of guilty consciousness of what had passed during the night was legible in her face. She had no sign of late watching, and her toilet was exemplary.

As she sat smiling by me, full of anxious and affectionate enquiry, and smoothed the coverlet with her great felonious hand, I could quite comprehend the dreadful feeling with which the deceived husband in the 'Arabian Nights' met his ghoul wife, after his nocturnal discovery.

Ill as I was, I got up and found my father in that room which adjoined his bedchamber. He perceived, I am sure, by my looks, that something unusual had happened. I shut the door, and came close beside his chair.

'Oh, papa, I have such a thing to tell you!' I forgot to call him 'Sir.' 'A secret; and you won't say who told you? Will you come down to the study?'

He looked hard at me, got up, and kissing my forehead, said—'Don't be frightened, Maud; I venture to say it is a mare's nest; at all events, my child, we will take care that no danger reaches you; come, child.'

And by the hand he led me to the study. When the door was shut, and we had reached the far end of the room next the window, I said, but in a low tone, and holding his arm fast—

'Oh, sir, you don't know what a dreadful person we have living with us—Madame de la Rougierre, I mean. Don't let her in if she comes; she would guess what I am telling you, and one way or another I am sure she would kill me.'

'Tut, tut, child. You *must* know that's nonsense,' he said, looking pale and stern.

'Oh no, papa. I am horribly frightened, and Lady Knollys thinks so too.'

'Ha! I dare say; one fool makes many. We all know what Monica thinks.'

'But I *saw* it, papa. She stole your key last night, and opened your desk, and read all your papers.'

'Stole my key!' said my father, staring at me perplexed, but at the same instant producing it. 'Stole it! Why here it is!'

'She unlocked your desk; she read your papers for ever so long. Open it now, and see whether they have not been stirred.'

He looked at me this time in silence, with a puzzled air; but he did unlock the desk, and lifted the papers curiously and suspiciously. As he did so he uttered a few of those inarticulate interjections which are made with closed lips, and not always intelligible; but he made no remark.

Then he placed me on a chair beside him, and sitting down himself, told me to recollect myself, and tell him distinctly all I had seen. This accordingly I did, he listening with deep attention.

'Did she remove any paper?' asked my father, at the same time making a little search, I suppose, for that which he fancied might have been stolen.

'No; I did not see her take anything.'

'Well, you are a good girl, Maud. Act discreetly. Say nothing to anyone—not even to your cousin Monica.'

Directions which, coming from another person would have had no great weight, were spoken by my father with an earnest look and a weight of emphasis that made them irresistibly impressive and I went away with the seal of silence upon my lips.

'Sit down, Maud, *there*. You have not been very happy with Madame de la Rougierre. It is time you were relieved. This occurrence decides it.'

He rang the bell.

'Tell Madame de la Rougierre that I request the honour of seeing her for a few minutes here.'

My father's communications to her were always equally ceremonious. In a few minutes there was a knock at the door, and the same figure, smiling, courtesying, that had scared me on the same threshold last night, like the spirit of evil, presented itself.

My father rose, and Madame having at his request taken a chair opposite, looking, as usual in his presence, all amiability, he proceeded at once to the point.

'Madame de la Rougierre, I have to request you that you will give me the key now in your possession, which unlocks this desk of mine.'

With which termination he tapped his gold pencil-case suddenly on it.

Madame, who had expected something very different, became instantly so pale, with a dull purplish hue upon her forehead, that, especially when she had twice essayed with her white lips, in vain, to answer, I expected to see her fall in a fit.

She was not looking in his face; her eyes were fixed lower, and her mouth and cheek sucked in, with a strange distortion at one side.

She stood up suddenly, and staring straight in his face, she succeeded in saying, after twice clearing her throat—

'I cannot comprehend, Monsieur Ruthyn, unless you intend to insult me.'

'It won't do, Madame; I must have that *false key*. I give you the opportunity of surrendering it quietly here and now.'

'But who dares to say I possess such thing?' demanded Madame, who, having rallied from her momentary paralysis, was now fierce and voluble as I had often seen her before.

'You know, Madame, that you can rely on what I say, and I tell you that you were seen last night visiting this room, and with a key in your possession, opening this desk, and reading my letters and papers contained in it. Unless you forthwith give me that key, and any other false keys in your possession—in which case I shall rest content with dismissing you summarily—I will take a different course. You know I am a magistrate;—and I shall have you, your boxes, and places up-stairs, searched forthwith, and I will prosecute you criminally. The thing is clear; you aggravate by denying; you must give me that key, if you please, instantly, otherwise I ring this bell, and you shall see that I mean what I say.'

There was a little pause. He rose and extended his hand towards the bell-rope. Madame glided round the table, extended her hand to arrest his.

'I will do everything, Monsieur Ruthyn—whatever you wish.'

And with these words Madame de la Rougierre broke down altogether. She sobbed, she wept, she gabbled piteously, all manner of incomprehensible roulades of lamentation and entreaty; coyly, penitently, in a most interesting agitation, she produced the very key from her breast, with a string tied to it. My father was little moved by this piteous tempest. He coolly took the key and tried it in the desk, which it locked and unlocked quite freely, though the wards were complicated. He shook his head and looked her in the face.

'Pray, who made this key? It is a new one, and made expressly to pick this lock.'

But Madame was not going to tell any more than she had expressly bargained for; so she only fell once more into her old paroxysm of sorrow, self-reproach, extenuation, and entreaty.

'Well,' said my father, 'I promised that on surrendering the key you should go. It is enough. I keep my word. You shall have an hour and a half to prepare in. You must then be ready to depart. I will send your money to you by Mrs. Rusk; and if you look for another situation, you had better not refer to me. Now be so good as to leave me.'

Madame seemed to be in a strange perplexity. She bridled up, dried her eyes fiercely, and dropped a great courtesy, and then sailed away towards the door. Before reaching it she stopped on the way, turning half round, with a peaked, pallid glance at my father, and she bit her lip viciously as she eyed him. At the door the same repulsive pantomime was repeated, as she stood for a moment with her hand upon the handle. But she changed her bearing again with a sniff, and with a look of scorn, almost heightened to a sneer, she made another very low courtesy and a disdainful toss of her head, and so disappeared, shutting the door rather sharply behind her.

CHAPTER XIX.

AU REVOIR.

MRS. RUSK was fond of assuring me that Madame 'did not like a bone in my skin.' Instinctively I knew that she bore me no good-will, although I really believe it was her wish to make me think quite the reverse. At all events I had no desire to see Madame again before her departure, especially as she had thrown upon me one momentary glance in the study, which seemed to me charged with very peculiar feelings.

You may be very sure, therefore, that I had no desire for a formal leave-taking at her departure. I took my hat and cloak, therefore, and stole out quietly.

My ramble was a sequestered one, and well screened, even at this late season, with foliage; the pathway devious among the stems of old trees, and its flooring interlaced and groined with their knotted roots. Though near the house, it was a sylvan solitude; a little brook ran darkling and glimmering through it, wild strawberries and other woodland plants strewed the ground, and the sweet notes and flutter of small birds made the shadow of the boughs cheery.

I had been fully an hour in this picturesque solitude when I heard in the distance the ring of carriage-wheels, announcing to me that Madame de la Rougierre had fairly set out upon her travels. I thanked heaven; I could have danced and sung with delight; I heaved a great sigh and looked up through the branches to the clear blue sky.

But things are oddly timed. Just at this moment I heard Madame's voice close at my ear, and her large bony hand was laid on my shoulder. We were instantly face to face—I recoiling, and for a moment speechless with fright.

In very early youth we do not appreciate the restraints which

act upon malignity, or know how effectually fear protects us where conscience is wanting. Quite alone, in this solitary spot, detected and overtaken with an awful instinct by my enemy, what might not be about to happen to me at that moment?

'Frightened as usual, Maud,' she said quietly, and eyeing me with a sinister smile, 'and with cause you think, no doubt. Wat 'av you done to injure poor Madame? Well, I think I know, little girl, and have quite discover the cleverness of my sweet little Maud. Eh—is not so? Petite carogne—ah, ha, ha!'

I was too much confounded to answer.

'You see, my dear cheaile,' she said, shaking her uplifted finger with a hideous archness at me, 'you could not hide what you 'av done from poor Madame. You cannot look so innocent but I can see your pretty little villany quite plain—you dear little diablesse.

'Wat I 'av done I 'av no reproach of myself for it. If I could explain, your papa would say I 'av done right, and you should thank me on your knees; but I cannot explain yet.'

She was speaking, as it were, in little paragraphs, with a momentary pause between each, to allow its meaning to impress itself.

'If I were to choose to explain, your papa he would implore me to remain. But no—I would not—notwithstanding your so cheerful house, your charming servants, your papa's amusing society, and your affectionate and sincere heart, my sweet little maraude.

'I am to go to London first, where I 'av, oh, so good friends! next I will go abroad for some time; but be sure, my sweetest Maud, wherever I may 'appen to be, I will remember you—ah, ha! Yes; *most certainly*, I will remember you.

'And although I shall not be always near, yet I shall know everything about my charming little Maud; you will not know how, but I shall indeed, *everything*. And be sure, my dearest cheaile, I will some time be able to give you the sensible proofs of my gratitude and affection—you understand.

'The carriage is waiting at the yew-tree stile, and I must go on. You did not expect to see me—here; I will appear, perhaps, as suddenly another time. It is great pleasure to us both—this oppor-

tunity to make our adieux. Farewell! my dearest little Maud. I will never cease to think of you, and of some way to recompense the kindness you 'av shown for poor Madame.'

My hand hung by my side, and she took, not it, but my thumb, and shook it, folded in her broad palm, and looking on me as she held it, as if meditating mischief. Then suddenly she said—

'You will always remember Madame, I *think*, and I will remind you of me beside; and for the present farewell, and I hope you may be as 'appy as you deserve.'

The large sinister face looked on me for a second with its latent sneer, and then, with a sharp nod and a spasmodic shake of my imprisoned thumb, she turned, and holding her dress together, and showing her great bony ankles, she strode rapidly away over the gnarled roots into the perspective of the trees, and I did not awake, as it were, until she had quite disappeared in the distance.

Events of this kind made no difference with my father; but every other face in Knowl was gladdened by the removal. My energies had returned, my spirits were come again. The sunlight was happy, the flowers innocent, the songs and flutter of the birds once more gay, and all nature delightful and rejoicing.

After the first elation of relief, now and then a filmy shadow of Madame de la Rougierre would glide across the sunlight, and the remembrance of her menace return with an unexpected pang of fear.

'Well, if *there* isn't impittens!' cried Mrs. Rusk. 'But never you trouble your head about it, Miss. Them sort's all alike—you never saw a rogue yet that was found out and didn't threaten the honest folk as he was leaving behind with all sorts; there was Martin the gamekeeper, and Jervis the footman, I mind well how hard they swore all they would not do when they was a-going, and who ever heard of them since? They always threatens that way—them sort always does, and none ever the worse—not but she would if she could, mind ye, but there it is; she can't do nothing but bite her nails and cuss us—not she—ha, ha, ha!'

So I was comforted. But Madame's evil smile, nevertheless, from time to time, would sail across my vision with a silent

menace, and my spirits sank, and a Fate, draped in black, whose face I could not see, took me by the hand, and led me away, in the spirit, silently, on an awful exploration from which I would rouse myself with a start, and Madame was gone for a while.

She had, however, judged her little parting well. She contrived to leave her glamour over me, and in my dreams she troubled me.

I was, however, indescribably relieved. I wrote in high spirits to Cousin Monica; and wondered what plans my father might have formed about me, and whether we were to stay at home, or go to London, or go abroad. Of the last—the pleasantest arrangement, in some respects—I had nevertheless an occult horror. A secret conviction haunted me that were we to go abroad, we should there meet Madame, which to me was like meeting my evil genius.

I have said more than once that my father was an odd man; and the reader will, by this time, have seen that there was much about him not easily understood. I often wonder whether, if he had been franker, I should have found him less odd than I supposed, or more odd still. Things that moved me profoundly did not apparently affect him at all. The departure of Madame, under the circumstances which attended it, appeared to my childish mind an event of the vastest importance. No one was indifferent to the occurrence in the house but its master. He never alluded again to Madame de la Rougierre. But whether connected with her exposure and dismissal, I could not say, there did appear to be some new care or trouble now at work in my father's mind.

'I have been thinking a great deal about you, Maud. I am anxious. I have not been so troubled for years. Why has not Monica Knollys a little more sense?'

This oracular sentence he spoke, having stopped me in the hall; and then saying, 'We shall see,' he left me as abruptly as he appeared.

Did he apprehend any danger to me from the vindictiveness of Madame?

A day or two afterwards, as I was in the Dutch garden, I saw him on the terrace steps. He beckoned to me, and came to meet me as I approached.

'You must be very solitary, little Maud; it is not good. I have written to Monica: in a matter of detail she is competent to advise; perhaps she will come here for a short visit.'

I was very glad to hear this.

'*You* are more interested than for my time *I* can be, in vindicating his character.'

'Whose character, sir?' I ventured to enquire during the pause that followed.

One trick which my father had acquired from his habits of solitude and silence was this of assuming that the context of his thoughts was legible to others, forgetting that they had not been spoken

'Whose?—your uncle Silas's. In the course of nature he must survive me. He will then represent the family name. Would you make some sacrifice to clear that name, Maud?'

I answered briefly; but my face, I believe, showed my enthusiasm.

He turned on me such an approving smile as you might fancy lighting up the rugged features of a pale old Rembrandt.

'I can tell you, Maud; if my life could have done it, it should not have been undone—*ubi lapsus, quid feci.* But I had almost made up my mind to change my plan, and leave all to time—*edax rerum*—to illuminate or to *consume.* But I think little Maud would like to contribute to the restitution of her family name. It may cost you something—are you willing to buy it at a sacrifice? Is there—I don't speak of fortune, that is not involved—but is there any other honourable sacrifice you would shrink from to dispel the disgrace under which our most ancient and honourable name must otherwise continue to languish?'

'Oh, none—none indeed, sir—I am delighted!'

Again I saw the Rembrandt smile.

'Well, Maud, I am sure there is *no* risk; but you are to suppose there is. Are you still willing to accept it?'

Again I assented.

'You are worthy of your blood, Maud Ruthyn. It will come soon, and it won't last long. But you must not let people like Monica Knollys frighten you.'

I was lost in wonder.

'If you allow them to possess you with their follies, you had better recede in time—they may make the ordeal as terrible as hell itself. You have zeal—have you nerve?'

I thought in such a cause I had nerve for anything.

'Well, Maud, in the course of a few months—and it may be sooner—there must be a change. I have had a letter from London this morning that assures me of that. I must then leave you for a time; in my absence be faithful to the duties that will arise. To whom much is committed, of him will much be required. You shall promise me not to mention this conversation to Monica Knollys. If you are a talking girl, and cannot trust yourself, say so, and we will not ask her to come. Also, don't invite her to talk about your uncle Silas—I have reasons. Do you quite understand my conditions?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Your uncle Silas,' he said, speaking suddenly in loud and fierce tones that sounded from so old a man almost terrible, 'lies under an intolerable slander. I don't correspond with him; I don't sympathise with him; I never quite did. He has grown religious, and that's well; but there are things in which even religion should not bring a man to acquiesce; and from what I can learn, he, the person primarily affected—the cause, though the innocent cause—of this great calamity—bears it with an easy apathy which is mistaken, and liable easily to be mistaken, and such as no Ruthyn, under the circumstances, ought to exhibit. I told him what he ought to do, and offered to open my purse for the purpose; but he would not, or *did* not; indeed, he *never* took my advice; he followed his own, and a foul and dismal shoal he has drifted on. It is not for his sake—why should I?—that I have longed and laboured to remove the disgraceful slur under which his ill-fortune has thrown us. He troubles himself little

about it, I believe—he's meek, meeker than I. He cares less about his children than I about you, Maud; he is selfishly sunk in futurity—a feeble visionary. I am not so. I believe it to be a duty to take care of others beside myself. The character and influence of an ancient family is a peculiar heritage—sacred but destructible; and woe to him who either destroys or suffers it to perish!'

This was the longest speech I ever heard my father speak before or after. He abruptly resumed—

'Yes, we will, Maud—you and I—we'll leave one proof on record, which, fairly read, will go far to convince the world.'

He looked round, but we were alone. The garden was nearly always solitary, and few visitors ever approached the house from that side.

'I have talked too long, I believe; we are children to the last. Leave me, Maud. I think I know you better than I did, and I am pleased with you. Go, child—I'll sit here.'

If he had acquired new ideas of me, so had I of him from that interview. I had no idea till then how much passion still burned in that aged frame, nor how full of energy and fire that face, generally so stern and ashen, could appear. As I left him seated on the rustic chair, by the steps, the traces of that storm were still discernible on his features. His gathered brows, glowing eyes, and strangely hectic face, and the grim compression of his mouth, still showed the agitation which, somehow, in grey old age, shocks and alarms the young.

CHAPTER XX.

AUSTIN RUTHYN SETS OUT ON HIS JOURNEY.

THE Rev. William Fairfield, Doctor Clay's somewhat bald curate, a mild, thin man, with a high and thin nose, who was preparing me for confirmation, came next day; and when our catechetical

conference was ended, and before lunch was announced, my father sent for him to the study, where he remained until the bell rang out its summons.

'We have had some interesting—I may say *very* interesting—conversation, your papa and I, Miss Ruthyn,' said my reverend *vis-à-vis*, so soon as nature was refreshed, smiling and shining, as he leaned back in his chair, his hand upon the table, and his finger curled gently upon the stem of his wine-glass. 'It never was your privilege, I believe, to see your uncle, Mr. Silas Ruthyn, *of* Bartram-Haugh?'

'No—never; he leads so retired—so *very* retired a life.'

'Oh, no,—of course, no; but I was going to remark a likeness—I mean, of course, a *family* likeness—only *that* sort of thing—you understand—between him and the profile of Lady Margaret in the drawing-room—is not it Lady Margaret?—which you were so good as to show me on Wednesday last. There certainly *is* a likeness. I *think* you would agree with me, if you had the pleasure of seeing your uncle.'

'You know him, then? I have never seen him.'

'Oh dear, yes—I am happy to say, I know him very well. I have that privilege. I was for three years curate of Feltram, and I had the honour of being a pretty constant visitor at Bartram-Haugh during that, I may say, protracted period; and I think it really never has been my privilege and happiness, I may say, to enjoy the acquaintance and society of so very experienced a Christian, as my admirable friend, I may call him, Mr. Ruthyn, of Bartram-Haugh. I look upon him, I do assure you, quite in the light of a saint; not, of course, in the Popish sense, but in the very highest, you will understand me, which *our* Church allows,—a man built up in faith—full of faith—faith and grace—altogether exemplary; and I often ventured to regret, Miss Ruthyn, that Providence in its mysterious dispensations should have placed him so far apart from his brother, your respected father. His influence and opportunities would, no doubt, we may venture to hope, at least have been blessed; and, perhaps, we—my valued rector and I—might possibly have seen more of him at church, than, I deeply

regret, we *have* done.' He shook his head a little, as he smiled with a sad complacency on me through his blue steel spectacles, and then sipped a little meditative sherry.

'And you saw a good deal of my uncle?'

'Well, a *good* deal, Miss Ruthyn—I may say a *good* deal—principally at his own house. His health is wretched—miserable health—a sadly afflicted man he has been, as, no doubt, you are aware. But afflictions, my dear Miss Ruthyn, as you remember Doctor Clay so well remarked on Sunday last, though birds of ill omen, yet spiritually resemble the ravens who supplied the prophet; and when they visit the faithful, come charged with nourishment for the soul.'

'He is a good deal embarrassed pecuniarily, I should say,' continued the curate, who was rather a good man than a very well-bred one. 'He found a difficulty—in fact it was not in his power—to subscribe generally to our little funds, and—and objects, and I used to say to him, and I really felt it, that it was more gratifying, such were his feeling and his power of expression, to be refused by him than assisted by others.'

'Did papa wish you to speak to me about my uncle?' I enquired, as a sudden thought struck me; and then I felt half ashamed of my question.

He looked surprised.

'No, Miss Ruthyn, certainly not. Oh dear, no. It was merely a conversation between Mr. Ruthyn and me. He never suggested my opening that, or indeed any other point in my interview with you, Miss Ruthyn—not the least.'

'I was not aware before that Uncle Silas was so religious.'

He smiled tranquilly, not quite up to the ceiling, but gently upward, and shook his head in pity for my previous ignorance, as he lowered his eyes—

'I don't say that there may not be some little matters in a few points of doctrine which we could, perhaps, wish otherwise. But these, you know, are speculative, and in all essentials he is Church—not in the perverted modern sense; far from it—unexceptionably Church, strictly so. Would there were more among us of the

same mind that is in him! Ay, Miss Ruthyn, even in the highest places of the Church herself.'

The Rev. William Fairfield, while fighting against the Dissenters with his right hand, was, with his left, hotly engaged with the Tractarians. A good man I am sure he was, and I dare say sound in doctrine, though naturally, I think, not very wise. This conversation with him gave me new ideas about my uncle Silas. It quite agreed with what my father had said. These principles and his increasing years would necessarily quiet the turbulence of his resistance to injustice, and teach him to acquiesce in his fate.

You would have fancied that one so young as I, born to wealth so vast, and living a life of such entire seclusion, would have been exempt from care. But you have seen how troubled my life was with fear and anxiety during the residence of Madame de la Rougierre, and now there rested upon my mind a vague and awful anticipation of the trial which my father had announced, without defining it.

An 'ordeal' he called it, requiring not only zeal but nerve, which might possibly, were my courage to fail, become frightful, and even intolerable. What, and of what nature, could it be? Not designed to vindicate the fair fame of the meek and submissive old man—who, it seemed, had ceased to care for his bygone wrongs, and was looking to futurity—but the reputation of our ancient family.

Sometimes I repented my temerity in having undertaken it. I distrusted my courage. Had I not better retreat, while it was yet time? But there was shame and even difficulty in the thought. How should I appear before my father? Was it not important—had I not deliberately undertaken it—and was I not bound in conscience? Perhaps he had already taken steps in the matter which committed *him*. Besides, was I sure that, even were I free again, I would not once more devote myself to the trial, be it what it might? You perceive I had more spirit than courage. I think I had the mental attributes of courage; but then I was but a hysterical girl, and in so far neither more nor less than a coward.

No wonder I distrusted myself; no wonder also my will stood

out against my timidity. It was a struggle, then; a proud, wild resolve against constitutional cowardice.

Those who have ever had cast upon them more than their strength seemed framed to bear—the weak, the aspiring, the adventurous and self-sacrificing in will, and the faltering in nerve—will understand the kind of agony which I sometimes endured.

But, again, consolation would come, and it seemed to me that I must be exaggerating my risk in the coming crisis; and certain at least, if my father believed it attended with real peril, he would never have wished to see me involved in it. But the silence under which I was bound was terrifying—doubly so when the danger was so shapeless and undivulged.

I was soon to understand it all—soon, too, to know all about my father's impending journey, whither, with what visitor, and why guarded from me with so awful a mystery.

That day there came a lively and goodnatured letter from Lady Knollys. She was to arrive at Knowl in two or three days' time. I thought my father would have been pleased, but he seemed apathetic and dejected.

'One does not always feel quite equal to Monica. But for you—yes, thank God. I wish she could only stay, Maud, for a month or two; I may be going then, and would be glad—provided she talks about suitable things—very glad, Maud, to leave her with you for a week or so.'

There was something, I thought, agitating my father secretly that day. He had the strange hectic flush I had observed when he grew excited in our interview in the garden about Uncle Silas. There was something painful, perhaps even terrible, in the circumstances of the journey he was about to make, and from my heart I wished the suspense were over, the annoyance past, and he returned.

That night my father bid me good-night early and went upstairs. After I had been in bed some little time, I heard his hand-bell ring. This was not usual. Shortly after I heard his man, Ridley, talking with Mrs. Rusk in the gallery. I could not be mistaken in their voices. I knew not why I was startled and

excited, and had raised myself to listen on my elbow. But they were talking quietly, like persons giving or taking an ordinary direction, and not in the haste of an unusual emergency.

Then I heard the man bid Mrs. Rusk good-night and walk down the gallery to the stairs, so that I concluded he was wanted no more, and all must therefore be well. So I laid myself down again, though with a throbbing at my heart, and an ominous feeling of expectation, listening and fancying footsteps.

I was going to sleep when I heard the bell ring again; and, in a few minutes, Mrs. Rusk's energetic step passed along the gallery; and, listening intently, I heard, or fancied, my father's voice and hers in dialogue. All this was very unusual, and again I was, with a beating heart, leaning with my elbow on my pillow.

Mrs. Rusk came along the gallery in a minute or so after, and stopping at my door, began to open it gently. I was startled, and challenged my visitor with—

'Who's there?'

'It's only Rusk, Miss. Dearie me! and are you awake still?'

'Is papa ill?'

'Ill! not a bit ill, thank God. Only there's a little black book as I took for your prayer-book, and brought in here; ay, here it is, sure enough, and he wants it. And then I must go down to the study, and look out this one, "C, 15;" but I can't read the name, noways; and I was afraid to ask him again; if you be so kind to read it, Miss—I suspeck my eyes is a-going.'

I read the name; and Mrs. Rusk was tolerably expert at finding out books, as she had often been employed in that way before. So she departed.

I suppose that this particular volume was hard to find, for she must have been a long time away, and I had actually fallen into a doze when I was roused in an instant by a dreadful crash and a piercing scream from Mrs. Rusk. Scream followed scream, wilder and more terror-stricken. I shrieked to Mary Quince, who was sleeping in the room with me:—'Mary, do you hear? what is it? It is something dreadful.'

The crash was so tremendous that the solid flooring even of my

room trembled under it, and to me it seemed as if some heavy man had burst through the top of the window, and shook the whole house with his descent. I found myself standing at my own door, crying, 'Help, help! murder! murder!' and Mary Quince, frightened half out of her wits, by my side.

I could not think what was going on. It was plainly something most horrible, for Mrs. Rusk's screams pealed one after the other unabated, though with a muffled sound, as if the door was shut upon her: and by this time the bells of my father's room were ringing madly.

'They are trying to murder him!' I cried, and I ran along the gallery to his door, followed by Mary Quince, whose white face I shall never forget, though her entreaties only sounded like unmeaning noises in my ears.

'Here! help, help, help!' I cried, trying to force open the door.

'Shove it, shove it, for God's sake! he's across it,' cried Mrs. Rusk's voice from within; 'drive it in. I can't move him.'

I strained all I could at the door, but ineffectually. We heard steps approaching. The men were running to the spot, and shouting as they did so—

'Never mind; hold on a bit; here we are; all right;' and the like.

We drew back, as they came up. We were in no condition to be seen. We listened, however, at my open door.

Then came the straining and bumping at the door. Mrs. Rusk's voice subsided to a sort of wailing; the men were talking all together, and I suppose the door opened, for I heard some of the voices, on a sudden, as if in the room; and then came a strange lull, and talking in very low tones, and not much even of that.

'What *is* it, Mary? what *can* it be?' I ejaculated, not knowing what horror to suppose. And now, with a counterpane about my shoulders, I called loudly and imploringly, in my horror, to know what had happened.

But I heard only the subdued and eager talk of men engaged in some absorbing task, and the dull sounds of some heavy body being moved.

Mrs. Rusk came towards us looking half wild, and pale as a spectre, and putting her thin hands to my shoulders, she said—'Now, Miss Maud, darling, you must go back again; 'tisn't no place for you; you'll see all, my darling, time enough—you will. There now, there, like a dear, do get into your room.'

What was that dreadful sound? Who had entered my father's chamber? It was the visitor whom we had so long expected, with whom he was to make the unknown journey, leaving me alone. The intruder was Death!

CHAPTER XXI.

ARRIVALS.

My father was dead—as suddenly as if he had been murdered. One of those fearful aneurisms that lie close to the heart, showing no outward sign of giving way in a moment, had been detected a good time since by Dr. Bryerly. My father knew what must happen, and that it could not be long deferred. He feared to tell me that he was soon to die. He hinted it only in the allegory of his journey, and left in that sad enigma some words of true consolation that remained with me ever after. Under his rugged ways was hidden a wonderful tenderness. I could not believe that he was actually dead. Most people for a minute or two, in the wild tumult of such a shock, have experienced the same scepticism. I insisted that the doctor should be instantly sent for from the village.

'Well, Miss Maud, dear, I *will* send to please you, but it is all to no use. If only you saw him yourself you'd know that. Mary Quince, run you down and tell Thomas, Miss Maud desires he'll go down this minute to the village for Dr. Elweys.'

Every minute of the interval seemed to me like an hour. I don't know what I said, but I fancied that if he were not already

dead, he would lose his life by the delay. I suppose I was speaking very wildly, for Mrs. Rusk said—

'My dear child, you ought to come in and see him; indeed but you should, Miss Maud. He's quite dead an hour ago. You'd wonder all the blood that's come from him—you would indeed; it's soaked through the bed already.'

'Oh, don't, don't, *don't*, Mrs. Rusk.'

'Will you come in and see him, just?'

'Oh, no, no, no, no!"

'Well, then, my dear, don't of course, if you don't like; there's no need. Would not you like to lie down, Miss Maud? Mary Quince, attend to her. I must go into the room for a minute or two.'

I was walking up and down the room in distraction. It was a cool night; but I did not feel it. I could only cry:—'Oh, Mary, Mary! what shall I do? Oh, Mary Quince! what shall I do?'

It seemed to me it must be near daylight by the time the Doctor arrived. I had dressed myself. I dared not go into the room where my beloved father lay.

I had gone out of my room to the gallery, where I awaited Dr. Elweys, when I saw him walking briskly after the servant, his coat buttoned up to his chin, his hat in his hand, and his bald head shining. I felt myself grow cold as ice, and colder and colder, and with a sudden sten my heart seemed to stand still.

I heard him ask the maid who stood at the door, in that low, decisive, mysterious tone which doctors cultivate—

'In *here*?'

And then, with a nod, I saw him enter.

'Would not you like to see the Doctor, Miss Maud?' asked Mary Quince.

The question roused me a little.

'Thank you, Mary; yes, I must see him.'

And so, in a few minutes, I did. He was very respectful, very sad, semi-undertakerlike, in air and countenance, but quite explicit. I heard that my dear father 'had died palpably from the rupture of some great vessel near the heart.' The disease had, no

doubt, been 'long established, and is in its nature incurable.' It is 'consolatory in these cases that in the act of dissolution, which is instantaneous, there can be no suffering.' These, and a few more remarks, were all he had to offer; and having had his fee from Mrs. Rusk, he, with a respectful melancholy, vanished.

I returned to my room, and broke into paroxysms of grief, and after an hour or more grew more tranquil.

From Mrs. Rusk I learned that he had seemed very well—better than usual, indeed—that night, and that on her return from the study with the book he required, he was noting down, after his wont, some passages which illustrated the text on which he was employing himself. He took the book, detaining her in the room, and then mounting on a chair to take down another book from a shelf, he had fallen, with the dreadful crash I had heard, dead upon the floor. He fell across the door, which caused the difficulty in opening it. Mrs. Rusk found she had not strength to force it open. No wonder she had given way to terror. I think I should have almost lost my reason.

Everyone knows the reserved aspect and the taciturn mood of the house, one of whose rooms is tenanted by that mysterious guest.

I do not know how those awful days, and more awful nights, passed over. The remembrance is repulsive. I hate to think of them. I was soon draped in the conventional black, with its heavy folds of crape. Lady Knollys came, and was very kind. She undertook the direction of all those details which were to me so inexpressibly dreadful. She wrote letters for me beside, and was really most kind and useful, and her society supported me indescribably. She was odd, but her eccentricity was leavened with strong common sense; and I have often thought since with admiration and gratitude of the tact with which she managed my grief.

There is no dealing with great sorrow as if it were under the control of our wills. It is a terrible phenomenon, whose laws we must study, and to whose conditions we must submit, if we would mitigate it. Cousin Monica talked a great deal of my father. This was easy to her, for her early recollections were full of him.

One of the terrible dislocations of our habits of mind respecting the dead is that our earthly future is robbed of them, and we thrown exclusively upon retrospect. From the long look forward they are removed, and every plan, imagination, and hope henceforth a silent and empty perspective. But in the past they are all they ever were. Now let me advise all who would comfort people in a new bereavement to talk to them, very freely, all they can, in this way of the dead. They will engage in it with interest, they will talk of their own recollections of the dead, and listen to yours, though they become sometimes pleasant, sometimes even laughable. I found it so. It robbed the calamity of something of its supernatural and horrible abruptness; it prevented that monotony of object which is to the mind what it is to the eye, and prepares the faculty for those mesmeric illusions that derange its sense.

Cousin Monica, I am sure, cheered me wonderfully. I grow to love her more and more, as I think of all her trouble, care, and kindness.

I had not forgotten my promise to dear papa about the key, concerning which he had evinced so great an anxiety. It was found in the pocket where he had desired me to remember he always kept it, except when it was placed, while he slept, under his pillow.

'And so, my dear, that wicked woman was actually found picking the lock of your poor papa's desk. I *wonder* he did not punish her—you know that is *burglary*.'

'Well, Lady Knollys, you know she is gone, and so I care no more about her—that is, I mean, I need not fear her.'

'No, my dear, but you must call me Monica—do you mind—I'm your cousin, and you call me Monica, unless you wish to vex me. No, of course, you need not be afraid of her. And she's gone. But I'm an old thing, you know, and not so tender-hearted as you; and I confess I should have been very glad to hear that the wicked old witch had been sent to prison and hard labour—I should. And what do you suppose she was looking for—what did she want to steal? I think I can guess—what do *you* think?'

'To read the papers; maybe to take bank-notes—I'm not sure,' I answered.

Well, I think most likely she wanted to get at your poor papa's *will*—that's *my* idea.'

'There is nothing surprising in the supposition, dear,' she resumed. 'Did not you read the curious trial at York, the other day? There is nothing so valuable to steal as a will, when a great deal of property is to be disposed of by it. Why, you would have given her ever so much money to get it back again. Suppose you go down, dear—I'll go with you, and open the cabinet in the study.'

'I don't think I can, for I promised to give the key to Dr. Bryerly, and the meaning was that *he* only should open it.'

Cousin Monica uttered an inarticulate 'H'm!' of surprise or disapprobation.

'Has he been written to?

'No, I do not know his address.'

'Not know his address! come, that is curious,' said Knollys, a little testily.

I could not—no one now living in the house could furnish even a conjecture. There was even a dispute as to which train he had gone by—north or south—they crossed the station at an interval of five minutes. If Dr. Bryerly had been an evil spirit, evoked by a secret incantation, there could not have been more complete darkness as to the immediate process of his approach.

'And how long do you mean to wait, my dear? No matter; at all events you may open the *desk*; you may find papers to direct you—you may find Dr. Bryerly's address—you may find, heaven knows what.'

So down we went—I assenting—and we opened the desk. How dreadful the desecration seems—all privacy abrogated—the shocking compensation for the silence of death!

Henceforward all is circumstantial evidence—all conjectural—except the *litera scripta*, and to this evidence every note-book, and every scrap of paper and private letter, must contribute—ransacked, bare in the light of day—what it can.

At the top of the desk lay two notes sealed, one to Cousin Monica, the other to me. Mine was a gentle and loving little

farewell — nothing more — which opened afresh the fountains of my sorrow, and I cried and sobbed over it bitterly and long.

The other was for 'Lady Knollys.' I did not see how she received it, for I was already absorbed in mine. But in awhile she came and kissed me in her girlish, goodnatured way. Her eyes used to fill with tears at sight of my paroxysms of grief. Then she would begin, 'I remember it was a saying of his,' and so she would repeat it—something maybe wise, maybe playful, at all events consolatory—and the circumstances in which she had heard him say it, and then would follow the recollections suggested by these; and so I was stolen away half by him, and half by Cousin Monica, from my despair and lamentation.

Along with these lay a large envelope, inscribed with the words 'Directions to be complied with immediately on my death.' One of which was, 'Let the event be *forthwith* published in the *county* and principal *London* papers.' This step had been already taken. We found no record of Dr. Bryerly's address.

We made search everywhere, except in the cabinet, which I would on no account permit to be opened except, according to his direction, by Dr. Bryerly's hand. But nowhere was a will, or any document resembling one, to be found. I had now, therefore, no doubt that his will was placed in that cabinet.

In the search among my dear father's papers we found two sheafs of letters, neatly tied up and labelled—these were from my uncle Silas.

My cousin Monica looked down upon these papers with a strange smile; was it satire—was it that indescribable smile with which a mystery which covers a long reach of years is sometimes approached?

These were odd letters. If here and there occurred passages that were querulous and even abject, there were also long passages of manly and altogether noble sentiment, and the strangest rodomontade and maunderings about religion. Here and there a letter would gradually transform itself into a prayer, and end with a doxology and no signature; and some of them expressed such wild

and disordered views respecting religion, as I imagine he can never have disclosed to good Mr. Fairfield, and which approached more nearly to the Swedenborg visions than to anything in the Church of England.

I read these with a solemn interest, but my cousin Monica was not similarly moved. She read them with the same smile—faint, serenely contemptuous, I thought—with which she had first looked down upon them. It was the countenance of a person who amusedly traces the working of a character that is well understood.

'Uncle Silas is very religious?' I said, not quite liking Lady Knollys' looks.

'Very,' she said, without raising her eyes or abating her old bitter smile, as she glanced over a passage in one of his letters.

'You don't think he *is*, Cousin Monica?' said I. She raised her head and looked straight at me.

'Why do you say that, Maud?'

'Because you smile incredulously, I think, over his letters.

'Do I?' said she; 'I was not thinking—it was quite an accident. The fact is, Maud, your poor papa quite mistook me. I had no prejudice respecting him—no theory. I never knew what to think about him. I do not think Silas a product of nature, but a child of the Sphinx, and I never could understand him—that's all.'

'I always felt so too; but that was because I was left to speculation, and to glean conjectures as I might from his portrait, or anywhere. Except what you told me, I never heard more than a few sentences; poor papa did not like me to ask questions about him, and I think he ordered the servants to be silent.'

'And much the same injunction this little note lays upon me—not quite, but something like it; and I don't know the meaning of it.'

And she looked enquiringly at me.

'You are not to be *alarmed* about your uncle Silas, because your being afraid would unfit you for an *important service* which you have undertaken for your family, the nature of which I shall

soon understand, and which, although it is quite *passive*, would be made very sad if *illusory fears* were allowed to *steal into your mind*.'

She was looking into the letter in poor papa's handwriting, which she had found addressed to her in his desk, and emphasised the words, I suppose, which she quoted from it.

'Have you any idea, Maud, darling, what this *service* may be?' she enquired, with a grave and anxious curiosity in her countenance.

'None, Cousin Monica; but I have thought long over my undertaking to do it, or submit to it, be it what it may; and I will keep the promise I voluntarily made, although I know what a coward I am, and often distrust my courage.'

'Well, I am not to frighten you.'

'How could you? Why should I be afraid? *Is* there anything frightful to be disclosed? Do tell me—you *must* tell me.'

'No, darling, I did not mean *that*—I don't mean that;—I could, if I would; I—I don't know exactly what I meant. But your poor papa knew him better than I—in fact, I did not know him at all—that is, ever quite understood him—which your poor papa, I see, had ample opportunities of doing.' And after a little pause, she added—'So you do not know what you are expected to do or to undergo.'

'Oh! Cousin Monica, I know you think he committed that murder,' I cried, starting up, I don't know why, and I felt that I grew deadly pale.

'I don't believe any such thing, you little fool; you must not say such horrible things, Maud,' she said, rising also, and looking both pale and angry. 'Shall we go out for a little walk? Come, lock up these papers, dear, and get your things on; and if that Dr. Bryerly does not turn up to-morrow, you must send for the Rector, good Doctor Clay, and let him make search for the will—there may be directions about many things, you know; and, my dear Maud, you are to remember that Silas is *my* cousin as well as your uncle. Come, dear, put on your hat.'

So we went out together for a little cloistered walk.

CHAPTER XXII

SOMEBODY IN THE ROOM WITH THE COFFIN.

WHEN we returned, a 'young' gentleman had arrived. We saw him in the parlour as we passed the window. It was simply a glance, but such a one as suffices to make a photograph, which we can study afterwards, at our leisure. I remember him at this moment—a man of six-and-thirty—dressed in a grey travelling suit, not over-well made; light-haired, fat-faced, and clumsy; and he looked both dull and cunning, and not at all like a gentleman.

Branston met us, announced the arrival, and handed me the stranger's credentials. My cousin and I stopped in the passage to read them.

'*That's* your uncle Silas's,' said Lady Knollys, touching one of the two letters with the tip of her finger.

'Shall we have lunch, Miss?'

'Certainly.' So Branston departed.

'Read it with me, 'Cousin Monica,' I said. And a very curious letter it was. It spoke as follows:—

'How can I thank my beloved niece for remembering her aged and forlorn kinsman at such a moment of anguish?'

'I had written a note of a few, I dare say, incoherent words by the next post after my dear father's death.

'It is, however, in the hour of bereavement that we most value the ties that are broken, and yearn for the sympathy of kindred.'

Here came a little distich of French verse, of which I could only read *ciel* and *l'amour*.

'Our quiet household here is clouded with a new sorrow. How inscrutable are the ways of Providence! I—though a few years younger—how much the more infirm—how shattered in energy

and in mind—how mere a burden—how entirely *de trop*—am spared to my sad place in a world where I can be no longer useful, where I have but one business—prayer, but one hope—the tomb; and he—apparently so robust—the centre of so much good—so necessary to you—so necessary, alas! to me—is taken! He is gone to his rest—for us, what remains but to bow our heads, and murmur, "His will be done"? I trace these lines with a trembling hand, while tears dim my old eyes. I did not think that any earthly event could have moved me so profoundly. From the world I have long stood aloof. I once led a life of pleasure—alas! of wickedness—as I now do one of austerity; but as I never was rich, so my worst enemy will allow I never was avaricious. My sins, I thank my Maker, have been of a more reducible kind, and have succumbed to the discipline which Heaven has provided. To earth and its interests, as well as to its pleasures, I have long been dead. For the few remaining years of my life I ask but quiet—an exemption from the agitations and distractions of struggle and care, and I trust to the Giver of all Good for my deliverance—well knowing, at the same time, that whatever befalls will, under His direction, prove best. Happy shall I be, my dearest niece, if in your most interesting and, in some respects, forlorn situation, I can be of any use to you. My present religious adviser—of whom I ventured to ask counsel on your behalf—states that I ought to send some one to represent me at the melancholy ceremony of reading the will which my beloved and now happy brother has, no doubt, left behind; and the idea that the experience and professional knowledge possessed by the gentleman whom I have selected may possibly be of use to you, my dearest niece, determines me to place him at your disposal. He is the junior partner in the firm of Archer and Sleigh, who conduct any little business which I may have from time to time; may I entreat your hospitality for him during a brief stay at Knowl? I write, even for a moment, upon these small matters of business with an effort—a painful one, but necessary. Alas! my brother! The cup of bitterness is now full. Few and evil must the remainder of my old days be. Yet, while they last, I remain always

for my beloved niece, that which all her wealth and splendour cannot purchase—a loving and faithful kinsman and friend,

'SILAS RUTHYN.'

'Is not it a kind letter?' I said, while tears stood in my eyes.

'Yes,' answered Lady Knollys, drily.

'But don't you think it so, really?'

'Oh! kind, very kind,' she answered in the same tone, 'and perhaps a little cunning.'

'Cunning!—how?'

'Well, you know I'm a peevish old Tabby, and of course I scratch now and then, and see in the dark. I dare say Silas is sorry, but I don't think he is in sackcloth and ashes. He has reason to be sorry and anxious, and I say I think he is both; and you know he pities you very much, and also himself a good deal; and he wants money, and you—his beloved niece—have a great deal—and altogether it is an affectionate and prudent letter: and he has sent his attorney here to make a note of the will; and you are to give the gentleman his meals and lodging; and Silas, very thoughtfully, invites you to confide your difficulties and troubles to *his* solicitor. It is very kind, but not imprudent.'

'Oh, Cousin Monica, don't you think at such a moment it is hardly natural that he should form such petty schemes, even were he capable at other times of practising so low? Is it not judging him hardly? and you, you know, so little acquainted with him.'

'I told you, dear, I'm a cross old thing—and there's an end; and I really don't care two pence about him; and of the two I'd much rather he were no relation of ours.'

Now, was not this prejudice? I dare say in part it was. So, too, was my vehement predisposition in his favour. I am afraid we women are factionists; we always take a side, and nature has formed us for advocates rather than judges; and I think the function, if less dignified, is more amiable.

I sat alone at the drawing-room window, at nightfall, awaiting my cousin Monica's entrance.

Feverish and frightened I felt that night. It was a sympathy, I fancy, with the weather. The sun had set stormily. Though the air was still, the sky looked wild and storm-swept. The crowding clouds, slanting in the attitude of flight, reflected their own sacred aspect upon my spirits. My grief darkened with a wild presaging of danger, and a sense of the supernatural fell upon me. It was the saddest and most awful evening that had come since my beloved father's death.

All kinds of shapeless fears environed me in silence. For the first time, dire misgivings about the form of faith affrighted me. Who were these Swedenborgians who had got about him—no one could tell how—and held him so fast to the close of his life? Who was this bilious, bewigged, black-eyed Doctor Bryerly, whom none of us quite liked and all a little feared; who seemed to rise out of the ground, and came and went, no one knew whence or whither, exercising, as I imagined, a mysterious authority over him? Was it all good and true, or a heresy and a witchcraft? Oh, my beloved father! was it all well with you?

When Lady Knollys entered, she found me in floods of tears, walking distractedly up and down the room. She kissed me in silence; she walked back and forward with me, and did her best to console me.

'I think, Cousin Monica, I would wish to see him once more. Shall we go up?'

'Unless you really wish it very much, I think, darling, you had better not mind it. It is happier to recollect them as they were; there's a change, you know, darling, and there is seldom any comfort in the sight.'

'But I do wish it *very* much. Oh! won't you come with me?'

And so I persuaded her, and up we went hand in hand, in the deepening twilight; and we halted at the end of the dark gallery, and I called Mrs. Rusk, growing frightened.

'Tell her to let us in, Cousin Monica,' I whispered.

'She wishes to see him, my lady—does she?' enquired Mrs. Rusk, in an under-tone, and with a mysterious glance at me, as she softly fitted the key to the lock.

'Are you quite sure, Maud, dear?'

'Yes, yes.'

But when Mrs. Rusk entered bearing the candle, whose beam mixed dismally with the expiring twilight, disclosing a great black coffin standing upon trestles, near the foot of which she took her stand, gazing sternly into it, I lost heart again altogether and drew back.

'No, Mrs. Rusk, she won't; and I am very glad, dear,' she added to me. 'Come, Mrs. Rusk, come away. Yes, darling,' she continued to me, 'it is much better for you;' and she hurried me away, and down-stairs again. But the awful outlines of that large black coffin remained upon my imagination with a new and terrible sense of death.

I had no more any wish to see him. I felt a horror even of the room, and for more than an hour after a kind of despair and terror, such as I have never experienced before or since at the idea of death.

Cousin Monica had had her bed placed in my room, and Mary Quince's moved to the dressing-room adjoining it. For the first time the superstitious awe that follows death, but not immediately, visited me. The idea of seeing my father enter the room, or open the door and look in, haunted me. After Lady Knollys and I were in bed, I could not sleep. The wind sounded mournfully outside, and the small sounds, the rattlings, and strainings that responded from within, constantly startled me, and simulated the sounds of steps, of doors opening, of knockings, and so forth, rousing me with a palpitating heart as often as I fell into a doze.

At length the wind subsided, and these ambiguous noises abated, and I, fatigued, dropped into a quiet sleep. I was awaked by a sound in the gallery—which I could not define. A considerable time had passed, for the wind was now quite lulled. I sat up in my bed a good deal scared, listening breathlessly for I knew not what.

I heard a step moving stealthily along the gallery. I called my cousin Monica softly; and we both heard the door of the room in

which my father's body lay unlocked, some one furtively enter, and the door shut.

'What can it be? Good Heavens, Cousin Monica, do you hear it?'

'Yes, dear; and it is two o'clock.'

Everyone at Knowl was in bed at eleven. We knew very well that Mrs. Rusk was rather nervous, and would not, for worlds, go alone, and at such an hour, to the room. We called Mary Quince. We all three listened, but we heard no other sound. I set these things down here because they made so terrible an impression upon me at the time.

It ended by our peeping out, all three in a body, upon the gallery. Through each window in the perspective came its blue sheet of moonshine; but the door on which our attention was fixed was in the shade, and we thought we could discern the glare of a candle through the key-hole. While in whispers we were debating this point together, the door opened, the dusky light of a candle emerged, the shadow of a figure crossed it within, and in another moment the mysterious Doctor Bryerly—angular, ungainly, in the black cloth coat that fitted little better than a coffin—issued from the chamber, candle in hand; murmuring, I suppose, a prayer—it sounded like a farewell—as he looked back, pallid and grim, into the room; and then stepped cautiously upon the gallery floor, shutting and locking the door upon the dead; and then having listened for a second, the saturnine figure, casting a gigantic and distorted shadow upon the ceiling and side-wall from the lowered candle, strode lightly down the long dark passage, away from us.

I can only speak for myself, and I can honestly say that I felt as much frightened as if I had just seen a sorcerer stealing from his unhallowed business. I think Cousin Monica was also affected in the same way, for she turned the key on the inside of the door when we entered. I do not think one of us believed at the moment that what we had seen was a Doctor Bryerly of flesh and blood, and yet the first thing we spoke of in the morning was Doctor Bryerly's arrival. The mind is a different organ by night and by day.

CHAPTER XXIII.

I TALK WITH DOCTOR BRYERLY.

Doctor Bryerly had, indeed, arrived at half-past twelve o'clock at night. His summons at the hall-door was little heard at our remote side of the old house of Knowl; and when the sleepy, half-dressed servant opened the door, the lank Doctor, in glossy black clothing, was standing alone, his portmanteau on its end upon the steps, and his vehicle disappearing in the shadows of the old trees.

In he came, sterner and sharper of aspect than usual.

'I've been expected? I'm Doctor Bryerly. Haven't I? So, let whoever is in charge of the body be called. I must visit it forthwith.'

So the Doctor sat in the back drawing-room, with a solitary candle; and Mrs. Rusk was called up, and, grumbling much and very peevish, dressed and went down, her ill-temper subsiding in a sort of fear as she approached the visitor.

'How do you do, Madam? A sad visit this. Is anyone watching in the room where the remains of your late master are laid?'

'No.'

'So much the better; it is a foolish custom. Will you please conduct me to the room? I must pray where he lies—no longer *he*! And be good enough to show me my bedroom, and so no one need wait up, and I shall find my way.'

Accompanied by the man who carried his valise, Mrs Rusk showed him to his apartment; but he only looked in, and then glanced rapidly about to take 'the bearings' of the door.

'Thank you—yes. Now we'll proceed, here, along here? Let me see. A turn to the right and another to the left—yes. He has been dead some days. Is he yet in his coffin?'

'Yes, sir; since yesterday afternoon.'

Mrs. Rusk was growing more and more afraid of this lean figure

sheathed in shining black cloth, whose eyes glittered with a horrible sort of cunning, and whose long brown fingers groped before him, as if indicating the way by guess.

'But, of course, the lid 's not on; you've not screwed him down, hey?'

'No, sir.'

'That's well. I must look on the face as I pray. He is in his place; I here on earth. He in the spirit; I in the flesh. The neutral ground lies there. So are carried the vibrations, and so the light of earth and heaven reflected back and forward—apaugasma, a wonderful though helpless engine, the ladder of Jacob, and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. Thanks, I'll take the key. Mysteries to those who *will* live altogether in houses of clay, no mystery to such as will use their eyes and read what is revealed. *This* candle, it is the longer, please; no—no need of a pair, thanks; just this, to hold in my hand. And remember, all depends upon the willing mind. Why do you look frightened? Where is your faith? Don't you know that spirits are about us at all times? Why should you fear to be near the body? The spirit is everything; the flesh profiteth nothing.'

'Yes, sir,' said Mrs. Rusk, making him a great courtesy in the threshold.

She was frightened by his eerie talk, which grew, she fancied, more voluble and energetic as they approached the corpse.

'Remember, then, that when you fancy yourself alone and wrapt in darkness, you stand, in fact, in the centre of a theatre, as wide as the starry floor of heaven, with an audience, whom no man can number, beholding you under a flood of light. Therefore, though your body be in solitude and your mortal sense in darkness, remember to walk as being in the light, surrounded with a cloud of witnesses. Thus walk; and when the hour comes, and you pass forth unprisoned from the tabernacle of the flesh, although it still has its relations and its rights'—and saying this, as he held the solitary candle aloft in the doorway, he nodded towards the coffin, whose large black form was faintly traceable against the shadows

beyond—'you will rejoice; and being clothed upon with your house from on high, you will not be found naked. On the other hand, he that loveth corruption shall have enough thereof. Think upon these things. Good-night.'

And the Swedenborgian Doctor stepped into the room, taking the candle with him, and closed the door upon the shadowy still-life there, and on his own sharp and swarthy visage, leaving Mrs. Rusk in a sort of panic in the dark alone, to find her way to her room the best way she could.

Early in the morning Mrs. Rusk came to my room to tell me that Doctor Bryerly was in the parlour, and begged to know whether I had not a message for him. I was already dressed, so, though it was dreadful seeing a stranger in my then mood, taking the key of the cabinet in my hand, I followed Mrs. Rusk down-stairs.

Opening the parlour door, she stepped in, and with a little courtesy said,—

'Please, sir, the young mistress—Miss Ruthyn.'

Draped in black and very pale, tall and slight, 'the young mistress' was; and as I entered I heard a newspaper rustle, and the sound of steps approaching to meet me.

Face to face we met, near the door; and, without speaking, I made him a deep courtesy.

He took my hand, without the least indication on my part, in his hard lean grasp, and shook it kindly, but familiarly, peering with a stern sort of curiosity into my face as he continued to hold it. His ill-fitting, glossy black cloth, ungainly presence, and sharp, dark, vulpine features had in them, as I said before, the vulgarity of a Glasgow artisan in his Sabbath suit. I made an instantaneous motion to withdraw my hand, but he held it firmly.

Though there was a grim sort of familiarity, there was also decision, shrewdness, and, above all, kindness, in his dark face—a gleam on the whole of the masterly and the honest—that along with a certain paleness, betraying, I thought, restrained emotion, indicated sympathy and invited confidence.

'I hope, Miss, you are pretty well?' He pronounced 'pretty'

as it is spelt. 'I have come in consequence of a solemn promise exacted more than a year since by your deceased father, the late Mr. Austin Ruthyn of Knowl, for whom I cherished a warm esteem, being knit besides with him in spiritual bonds. It has been a shock to you, Miss?'

'It has, indeed, sir.'

'I've a doctor's degree, I have—Doctor of Medicine, Miss. Like St. Luke, preacher and doctor. I was in business once, but this is better. As one footing fails, the Lord provides another. The stream of life is black and angry; how so many of us get across without drowning, I often wonder. The best way is not to look too far before—just from one stepping-stone to another; and though you may wet your feet, He won't let you drown—He has not allowed me.'

And Doctor Bryerly held up his head, and wagged it resolutely.

'You are born to this world's wealth; in its way a great blessing, though a great trial, Miss, and a great trust; but don't suppose you are destined to exemption from trouble on that account, any more than poor Emmanuel Bryerly. As the sparks fly upwards, Miss Ruthyn! Your cushioned carriage may overturn on the high-road, as I may stumble and fall upon the foot-path. There are other troubles than debt and privation. Who can tell how long health may last, or when an accident may happen the brain; what mortifications may await you in your own high sphere; what unknown enemies may rise up in your path; or what slanders may asperse your name—ha, ha! It is a wonderful equilibrium—a marvellous dispensation—ha, ha!' and he laughed with a shake of his head, I thought a little sarcastically, as if he was not sorry my money could not avail to buy immunity from the general curse.

'But what money can't do, *prayer* can—bear that in mind, Miss Ruthyn. We can all pray; and though thorns and snares, and stones of fire lie strewn in our way, we need not fear them. He will give His angels charge over us, and in their hands they will bear us up, for He hears and sees everywhere, and His angels are innumerable.'

He was now speaking gently and solemnly, and paused. But another vein of thought he had unconsciously opened in my mind, and I said—

'And had my dear papa no other medical adviser?'

He looked at me sharply, and flushed a little under his dark tint. His medical skill was, perhaps, the point on which his human vanity vaunted itself, and I dare say there was something very disparaging in my tone.

'And if he *had* no other, he might have done worse. I've had many critical cases in my hands, Miss Ruthyn. I can't charge myself with any miscarriage through ignorance. My diagnosis in Mr. Ruthyn's case has been verified by the result. But I was *not* alone; Sir Clayton Barrow saw him, and took my view; a note will reach him in London. But this, excuse me, is not to the present purpose. The late Mr. Ruthyn told me I was to receive a key from you, which would open a cabinet where he had placed his will—ha! thanks,—in his study. And, I think, as there may be directions about the funeral, it had better be read forthwith. Is there any gentleman—a relative or man of business—near here, whom you would wish sent for?'

'No, none, thank you; I have confidence in you, sir.'

I think I spoke and looked frankly, for he smiled very kindly, though with closed lips.

'And you may be sure, Miss Ruthyn, your confidence shall not be disappointed.' Here was a long pause. 'But you are very young, and you must have some one by in your interest, who has some experience in business. Let me see. Is not the Rector, Dr. Clay, at hand? In the town?—very good; and Mr. Danvers, who manages the estate, *he* must come. And get Grimston—you see I know all the names—Grimston, the attorney; for though he was not employed about this will, he has been Mr. Ruthyn's solicitor a great many years: we must have Grimston; for, as I suppose you know, though it is a short will, it is a very strange one. I expostulated, but you know he was very decided when he took a view. He read it to you, eh?

'No, sir.'

'Oh, but he told you so much as relates to you and your uncle, Mr. Silas Ruthyn, of Bartram-Haugh?'

'No, indeed, sir.'

'Ha! I wish he had.'

And with these words Doctor Bryerly's countenance darkened.

'Mr. Silas Ruthyn is a religious man?'

'Oh, *very*!' said I.

'You've seen a good deal of him?'

'No, I never saw him,' I answered.

'H'm? Odder and odder! But he's a good man, isn't he?'

'Very good, indeed, sir—a very religious man.'

Doctor Bryerly was watching my countenance as I spoke, with a sharp and anxious eye; and then he looked down, and read the pattern of the carpet like bad news, for a while, and looking again in my face, askance, he said—

'He was very near joining *us*—on the point. He got into correspondence with Henry Voerst, one of our best men. They call us Swedenborgians, you know; but I dare say that won't go much further, now. I suppose, Miss Ruthyn, one o'clock would be a good hour, and I am sure, under the circumstances, the gentlemen will make a point of attending.'

'Yes, Dr. Bryerly, the notes shall be sent, and my cousin, Lady Knollys, would, I am sure, attend with me while the will is being read—there would be no objection to her presence?'

'None in the world. I can't be quite sure who are joined with me as executors. I'm almost sorry I did not decline; but it is too late regretting. One thing you must believe, Miss Ruthyn: in framing the provisions of the will I was never consulted—although I expostulated against the only very unusual one it contains when I heard it. I did so strenuously, but in vain. There was one other against which I protested—having a right to do so—with better effect. In no other way does the will in any respect owe anything to my advice or dissuasion. You will please believe this; also that I am your friend. Yes, indeed, it is my duty.'

The latter words he spoke looking down again, as it were in soliloquy; and thanking him, I withdrew.

When I reached the hall, I regretted that I had not asked him to state distinctly what arrangements the will made so nearly affecting, as it seemed, my relations with my uncle Silas, and for a moment I thought of returning and requesting an explanation. But then, I bethought me, it was not very long to wait till one o'clock—so *he*, at least, would think. I went up-stairs, therefore, to the 'school-room,' which we used at present as a sitting-room, and there I found Cousin Monica awaiting me.

'Are you quite well, dear?' asked Lady Knollys, as she came to meet and kiss me.

'Quite well, Cousin Monica.'

'No nonsense, Maud! you're as white as that handkerchief—what's the matter? Are you ill—are you frightened? Yes, you're trembling—you're terrified, child.'

'I believe I *am* afraid. There *is* something in poor papa's will about Uncle Silas—about *me*. I don't know—Doctor Bryerly says, and he seems so uncomfortable and frightened himself, I am sure it is something very bad. I am *very* much frightened—I am—I *am*. Oh, Cousin Monica! you won't leave me?'

So I threw my arms about her neck, clasping her very close, and we kissed one another, I crying like a frightened child—and indeed in experience of the world I was no more.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE OPENING OF THE WILL.

PERHAPS the terror with which I anticipated the hour of one, and the disclosure of the unknown undertaking to which I had bound myself, was irrational and morbid. But, honestly, I doubt it; my tendency has always been that of many other weak characters, to act impetuously, and afterwards to reproach myself for consequences which I have, perhaps, in reality, had little or no share in producing.

It was Doctor Bryerly's countenance and manner in alluding to a particular provision in my father's will that instinctively awed me. I have seen faces in a nightmare that haunted me with an indescribable horror, and yet I could not say wherein lay the fascination. And so it was with his—an omen, a menace, lurked in its sallow and dismal glance.

'You must not be so frightened, darling,' said Cousin Monica. 'It is foolish; it *is*, *really*; they can't cut off your head, you know: they can't really harm you in any essential way. If it involved a risk of a little money, you would not mind it; but men are such odd creatures—they measure all sacrifices by money. Doctor Bryerly would look just as you describe, if you were doomed to lose 500*l.*, and yet it would not kill you.'

A companion like Lady Knollys is reassuring; but I could not take her comfort altogether to heart, for I felt that she had no great confidence in it herself.

There was a little French clock over the mantelpiece in the school-room, which I consulted nearly every minute. It wanted now but ten minutes of one.

'Shall we go down to the drawing-room, dear?' said Cousin Knollys, who was growing restless like me.

So down-stairs we went, pausing by mutual consent at the great window at the stair-head, which looks out on the avenue. Mr. Danvers was riding his tall, grey horse at a walk, under the wide branches toward the house, and we waited to see him get off at the door. In his turn he loitered there, for the good Rector's gig, driven by the Curate, was approaching at a smart ecclesiastical trot.

Doctor Clay got down, and shook hands with Mr. Danvers; and after a word or two, away drove the Curate with that upward glance at the windows from which so few can refrain.

I watched the Rector and Mr. Danvers loitering on the steps as a patient might the gathering of surgeons who are to perform some unknown operation. They, too, glanced up at the window as they turned to enter the house, and I drew back. Cousin Monica looked at her watch.

'Four minutes only. Shall we go to the drawing-room?'

Waiting for a moment to let the gentlemen get by on the way to the study, we, accordingly, went down, and I heard the Rector talk of the dangerous state of Grindleston bridge, and wondered how he could think of such things at a time of sorrow. Everything about those few minutes of suspense remains fresh in my recollection. I remember how they loitered and came to a halt at the corner of the oak passage leading to the study, and how the Rector patted the marble head and smoothed the inflexible tresses of William Pitt, as he listened to Mr. Danvers' details about the presentment; and then, as they went on, I recollect the boisterous nose-blowing that suddenly resounded from the passage, and which I then referred, and still refer, intuitively to the Rector.

We had not been five minutes in the drawing-room when Branston entered, to say that the gentlemen I had mentioned were all assembled in the study.

'Come, dear,' said Cousin Monica; and leaning on her arm I reached the study door. I entered, followed by her. The gentlemen arrested their talk and stood up, those who were sitting, and the Rector came forward very gravely, and in low tones, and very kindly, greeted me. There was nothing emotional in this salutation, for though my father never quarrelled, yet an immense distance separated him from all his neighbours, and I do not think there lived a human being who knew him at more than perhaps a point or two of his character.

Considering how entirely he secluded himself, my father was, as many people living remember, wonderfully popular in his county. He was neighbourly in everything except in seeing company and mixing in society. He had magnificent shooting, of which he was extremely liberal. He kept a pack of hounds at Dollerton, with which all his side of the county hunted through the season. He never refused any claim upon his purse which had the slightest show of reason. He subscribed to every fund, social, charitable, sporting, agricultural, no matter what, provided the honest people of his county took an interest in it, and always with

a princely hand; and although he shut himself up, no one could say that he was inaccessible, for he devoted hours daily to answering letters, and his cheque-book contributed largely in those replies. He had taken his turn long ago as High Sheriff; so there was an end of that claim before his oddity and shyness had quite secluded him. He refused the Lord-Lieutenancy of his county; he declined every post of personal distinction connected with it. He could write an able as well as a genial letter when he pleased; and his appearances at public meetings, dinners, and so forth were made in this epistolary fashion, and, when occasion presented, by magnificent contributions from his purse.

If my father had been less goodnatured in the sporting relations of his vast estates, or less magnificent in dealing with his fortune, or even if he had failed to exhibit the intellectual force which always characterised his letters on public matters, I dare say that his oddities would have condemned him to ridicule, and possibly to dislike. But every one of the principal gentlemen of his county, whose judgment was valuable, has told me that he was a remarkably able man, and that his failure in public life was due to his eccentricities, and in no respect to deficiency in those peculiar mental qualities which make men feared and useful in Parliament.

I could not forbear placing on record this testimony to the high mental and the kindly qualities of my beloved father, who might have passed for a misanthrope or a fool. He was a man of generous nature and powerful intellect, but given up to the oddities of a shyness which grew with years and indulgence, and became inflexible with his disappointments and affliction.

There was something even in the Rector's kind and ceremonious greeting which oddly enough reflected the mixed feelings in which awe was not without a place, with which his neighbours had regarded my dear father.

Having done the honours—I am sure looking wofully pale—I had time to glance quietly at the only figure there with which I was not tolerably familiar. This was the junior partner in the firm of Archer and Sleigh who represented my uncle Silas—a fat and pallid man of six-and-thirty, with a sly and evil countenance,

and it has always seemed to me, that ill dispositions show more repulsively in a pale fat face than in any other.

Doctor Bryerly, standing near the window, was talking in a low tone to Mr. Grimston, our attorney.

I heard good Dr. Clay whisper to Mr. Danvers—

'Is not that Doctor Bryerly—the person with the black—the black—it's a wig, I think—in the window, talking to Abel Grimston?'

'Yes; that's he.'

'Odd-looking person—one of the Swedenborg people, is not he?' continued the Rector.

'So I am told.'

'Yes,' said the Rector, quietly; and he crossed one gaitered leg over the other, and, with fingers interlaced, twiddled his thumbs, as he eyed the monstrous sectary under his orthodox old brows with a stern inquisitiveness. I thought he was meditating theologic battle.

But Dr. Bryerly and Mr. Grimston, still talking together, began to walk slowly from the window, and the former said in his peculiar grim tones—

'I beg pardon, Miss Ruthyn; perhaps you would be so good as to show us which of the cabinets in this room your late lamented father pointed out as that to which this key belongs.'

I indicated the oak cabinet.

'Very good, ma'am—very good,' said Doctor Bryerly, as he fumbled the key into the lock.

Cousin Monica could not forbear murmuring—

'Dear! what a brute!'

The junior partner, with his dumpy hands in his pocket, poked his fat face over Mr. Grimston's shoulder, and peered into the cabinet as the door opened.

The search was not long. A handsome white paper enclosure, neatly tied up in pink tape, and sealed with large red seals, was inscribed in my dear father's hand:—'Will of Austin R. Ruthyn, of Knowl.' Then, in smaller characters, the date, and in the corner a note—'This will was drawn from my instructions by Gaunt, Hogg, and Hatchett, Solicitors, Great Woburn Street, London. A. R. R.'

'Let *me* have a squint at that indorsement, please, gentlemen,' half whispered the unpleasant person who represented my uncle Silas.

''*Tisn't* an indorsement. There, look—a memorandum on an envelope,' said Abel Grimston, gruffly.

'Thanks—all right—that will do,' he responded, himself making a pencil-note of it, in a long clasp-book which he drew from his coat-pocket.

The tape was carefully cut, and the envelope removed without tearing the writing, and forth came the will, at sight of which my heart swelled and fluttered up to my lips, and then dropped down dead as it seemed into its place.

'Mr. Grimston, you will please to read it,' said Doctor Bryerly, who took the direction of the process. 'I will sit beside you, and as we go along you will be good enough to help us to understand technicalities, and give us a lift where we want it.'

'It's a short will,' said Mr. Grimston, turning over the sheets '*very*—considering. Here's a codicil.'

'I did not see that,' said Doctor Bryerly.

'Dated only a month ago.'

'Oh!' said Doctor Bryerly, putting on his spectacles. Uncle Silas's ambassador, sitting close behind, had insinuated his face between Doctor Bryerly's and the reader's of the will.

'On behalf of the surviving brother of the testator,' interposed the delegate, just as Abel Grimston had cleared his voice to begin, 'I take leave to apply for a copy of this instrument. It will save a deal of trouble, if the young lady as represents the testator here has no objection.'

'You can have as many copies as you like when the will is proved,' said Mr. Grimston.

'I know that; but supposing as all's right, where's the objection?'

'Just the objection there always is to acting irregular,' replied Mr. Grimston.

'You don't object to act disobliging, it seems.'

'You can do as I told you,' replied Mr Grimston.

'Thank you for nothing,' murmured Mr. Sleigh.

And the reading of the will proceeded, while he made elaborate notes of its contents in his capacious pocket-book.

'I, Austin Aylmer Ruthyn Ruthyn, being, I thank God, of sound mind and perfect recollection,' &c. &c.; and then came a bequest of all his estates real, chattels real, copyrights, leases, chattels, money, rights, interests, reversions, powers, plate, pictures, and estates and possessions whatsoever, to four persons — Lord Ilbury, Mr. Penrose Creswell of Creswell, Sir William Aylmer, Bart., and Hans Emmanuel Bryerly, Doctor of Medicine, to have and to hold,' &c. &c. Whereupon my Cousin Monica ejaculated Eh?' and Doctor Bryerly interposed—

'Four trustees, ma'am. We take little but trouble—you'll see; go on.'

Then it came out that all this multifarious splendour was bequeathed in trust for me, subject to a bequest of 15,000*l.* to his only brother, Silas Aylmer Ruthyn, and 3,500*l.* each to the two children of his said brother; and lest any doubt should arise by reason of his, the testator's decease as to the continuance of the arrangement by way of lease under which he enjoyed his present habitation and farm, he left him the use of the mansion-house and lands of Bartram-Haugh, in the county of Derbyshire, and of the lands of so-and-so and so-and-so, adjoining thereto, in the said county, for the term of his natural life, on payment of a rent of 5*s.* per annum, and subject to the like conditions as to waste, &c., as are expressed in the said lease.

'By your leave, may I ask is them dispositions all the devises to my client, which is his only brother, as it seems to me you've seen the will before?' enquired Mr. Sleigh.

'Nothing more, unless there is something in the codicil,' answered Dr. Bryerly.

But there was no mention of him in the codicil.

Mr. Sleigh threw himself back in his chair, and sneered, with the end of his pencil between his teeth. I hope his disappointment was altogether for his client. Mr. Danvers fancied, he afterwards

said, that he had probably expected legacies which might have involved litigation, or, at all events, law costs, and perhaps a stewardship; but this was very barren; and Mr. Danvers also remarked, that the man was a very low practitioner, and wondered how my uncle Silas could have commissioned such a person to represent him.

So far the will contained nothing of which my most partial friend could have complained. The codicil, too, devised only legacies to servants, and a sum of 1,000*l.*, with a few kind words, to Monica, Lady Knollys, and a further sum of 3,000*l.* to Dr. Bryerly, stating that the legatee had prevailed upon him to erase from the draft of his will a bequest to him to that amount, but that, in consideration of all the trouble devolving upon him as trustee, he made that bequest by his codicil; and with these arrangements the permanent disposition of his property was completed.

But that direction to which he and Doctor Bryerly had darkly alluded, was now to come, and certainly it was a strange one. It appointed my uncle Silas my sole guardian, with full parental authority over me until I should have reached the age of twenty-one, up to which time I was to reside under his care at Bartram-Haugh, and it directed the trustees to pay over to him yearly a sum of 2,000*l.* during the continuance of the guardianship for my suitable maintenance, education, and expenses.

You have now a sufficient outline of my father's will. The only thing I painfully felt in this arrangement was, the break-up—the dismay that accompanies the disappearance of home. Otherwise, there was something rather pleasurable in the idea. As long as I could remember, I had always cherished the same mysterious curiosity about my uncle, and the same longing to behold him. This was about to be gratified. Then there was my cousin Milicent, about my own age. My life had been so lonely, that I had acquired none of those artificial habits that induce the fine-lady nature—a second, and not always a very amiable one. She had lived a solitary life, like me. What rambles and readings we should have together! what confidences and castle-buildings! and then there was a new country and a fine old place, and the

sense of interest and adventure that always accompanies change in our early youth.

There were four letters all alike with large, red seals, addressed respectively to each of the trustees named in the will. There was also one addressed to Silas Aylmer Ruthyn, Esq., Bartram-Haugh Manor, &c. &c., which Mr. Sleigh offered to deliver. But Doctor Bryerly thought the post-office was the more regular channel. Uncle Silas's representative was questioning Doctor Bryerly in an under-tone.

I turned my eyes on my cousin Monica—I felt so inexpressibly relieved — expecting to see a corresponding expression in her countenance. But I was startled. She looked ghastly and angry. I stared in her face, not knowing what to think. Could the will have personally disappointed her? Such doubts, though we fancy in after-life they belong to maturity and experience only, do sometimes cross our minds in youth. But the suggestion wronged Lady Knollys, who neither expected nor wanted anything, being rich, childless, generous, and frank. It was the unexpected character of her countenance that scared me, and for a moment the shock called up corresponding moral images.

Lady Knollys, starting up, raised her head, so as to see over Mr. Sleigh's shoulder, and biting her pale lip, she cleared her voice and demanded—

'Doctor Bryerly, pray, sir, is the reading concluded?'

'Concluded? Quite. Yes, nothing more,' he answered with a nod, and continued his talk with Mr. Danvers and Abel Grimston.

'And to whom,' said Lady Knollys, with an effort, 'will the property belong, in case—in case my little cousin here should die before she comes of age?'

'Eh? Well—wouldn't it go to the heir-at-law and next of kin?' said Doctor Bryerly, turning to Abel Grimston.

'Ay—to be sure,' said the attorney, thoughtfully.

'And who is that?' pursued my cousin.

'Well, her uncle, Mr. Silas Ruthyn. He's both heir-at-law and next of kin,' pursued Abel Grimston.

'Thank you,' said Lady Knollys.

Doctor Clay came forward, bowing very low, in his standing collar and single-breasted coat, and graciously folded my hand in his soft wrinkled grasp—

'Allow me, my dear Miss Ruthyn, while expressing my regret that we are to lose you from among our little flock—though I trust but for a short, a very short time—to say how I rejoice at the particular arrangement indicated by the will we have just heard read. My curate, William Fairfield, resided for some years in the same spiritual capacity in the neighbourhood of your, I will say, admirable uncle, with occasional intercourse with whom he was favoured—may I not say blessed?—a true Christian Churchman—a Christian gentleman. Can I say more? A most happy, happy choice.' A very low bow here, with eyes nearly closed, and a shake of the head. 'Mrs. Clay will do herself the honour of waiting upon you, to pay her respects, before you leave Knowl for your temporary sojourn in another sphere.'

So, with another deep bow—for I had become a great personage all at once—he let go my hand cautiously and delicately, as if he were setting down a curious china tea-cup. And I courtesied low to him, not knowing what to say, and then to the assembly generally, who all bowed. And Cousin Monica whispered, briskly, 'Come away,' and took my hand with a very cold and rather damp one, and led me from the room.

CHAPTER XXV.

I HEAR FROM UNCLE SILAS.

WITHOUT saying a word, Cousin Monica accompanied me to the school-room, and on entering she shut the door, not with a spirited clang, but quietly and determinedly.

'Well, dear,' she said, with the same pale, excited countenance, 'that certainly is a sensible and charitable arrangement. I

could not have believed it possible, had I not heard it with my ears.'

'About my going to Bartram-Haugh?'

'Yes, exactly so, under Silas Ruthyn's guardianship, to spend two—*three*—of the most important years of your education and your life under that roof. Is *that*, my dear, what was in your mind when you were so alarmed about what you were to be called upon to do, or undergo?'

'No, no, indeed. I had no notion what it might be. I was afraid of something serious,' I answered.

'And, my dear Maud, did not your poor father speak to you as if it *was* something serious?' said she. 'And so it *is*, I can tell you, something serious, and *very* serious; and I think it ought tc be prevented, and I certainly *will* prevent it if I possibly can.'

I was puzzled utterly by the intensity of Lady Knollys' protest. I looked at her, expecting an explanation of her meaning; but she was silent, looking steadfastly on the jewels on her right-hand fingers, with which she was drumming a staccata march on the table, very pale, with gleaming eyes, evidently thinking deeply. I began to think she *had* a prejudice against my uncle Silas.

'He is not very rich,' I commenced.

'Who?' said Lady Knollys.

'Uncle Silas,' I replied.

'No, certainly; he's in debt,' she answered.

'But then, how very highly Doctor Clay spoke of him!' I pursued.

'Don't talk of Doctor Clay. I do think that man is the greatest goose I ever heard talk. I have no patience with such men,' she replied.

I tried to remember what particular nonsense Doctor Clay had uttered, and I could recollect nothing, unless his eulogy upon my uncle were to be classed with that sort of declamation

'Danvers is a very proper man and a good accountant, I dare say; but he is either a very deep person, or a fool—*I* believe a fool. As for your attorney, I suppose he knows his business, and also his interest, and I have no doubt he will consult it. I begin

to think the best man among them, the shrewdest and the most reliable, is that vulgar visionary in the black wig. I saw him look at you, Maud, and I liked his face, though it is abominably ugly and vulgar, and cunning, too; but I think he's a just man, and I dare say with right feelings—I'm *sure* he has.'

I was quite at a loss to divine the gist of my cousin's criticism.

'I'll have some talk with Dr. Bryerly; I feel convinced he takes my view, and we must really think what had best be done.'

'Is there anything in the will, Cousin Monica, that does not appear?' I asked, for I was growing very uneasy. 'I wish you would tell me. What view do you mean?'

'No view in particular; the view that a desolate old park, and the house of a *neglected* old man, who is very poor, and has been desperately foolish, is not the right place for you, particularly at your years. It is quite shocking, and I *will* speak to Doctor Bryerly. May I ring the bell, dear?'

'Certainly;' and I rang it.

'When does he leave Knowl?'

I could not tell. Mrs. Rusk, however, was sent for, and she could tell us that he had announced his intention of taking the night train from Drackleton, and was to leave Knowl for that station at half-past six o'clock.

'May Rusk give or send him a message from me, dear?' asked Lady Knollys.

Of course she might.

'Then please let him know that I request he will be so good as to allow me a very few minutes, just to say a word before he goes.'

'You kind cousin!' I said, placing my two hands on her shoulders, and looking earnestly in her face; 'you are anxious about me, more than you say. Won't you tell me why? I am much more unhappy, really, in ignorance, than if I understood the cause.'

'Well, dear, haven't I told you? The two or three years of your life which are to form you are destined to be passed in utter loneliness, and, I am sure, neglect. You can't estimate the disadvan-

tage of such an arrangement. It is full of disadvantages. How it could have entered the head of poor Austin—although I should not say that, for I am sure I do understand it,—but how he could for any purpose have directed such a measure is quite inconceivable. I never heard of anything so foolish and abominable, and I will prevent it if I can.'

At that moment Mrs. Rusk announced that Doctor Bryerly would see Lady Knollys at any time she pleased before his departure.

'It shall be this moment, then,' said the energetic lady, and up she stood, and made that hasty general adjustment before the glass, which, no matter under what circumstances, and before what sort of creature one's appearance is to be made, is a duty that every woman owes to herself. And I heard her a moment after, at the stair-head, directing Branston to let Dr. Bryerly know that she awaited him in the drawing-room.

And now she was gone, and I began to wonder and speculate. Why should my cousin Monica make all this fuss about, after all, a very natural arrangement? My uncle, whatever he might have been, was now a good man—a religious man—perhaps a little severe; and with this thought a dark streak fell across my sky.

A cruel disciplinarian! had I not read of such characters?—lock and key, bread and water, and solitude! To sit locked up all night in a dark out-of-the-way room, in a great, ghosty, old-fashioned house, with no one nearer than the other wing. What years of horror in one such night! Would not this explain my poor father's hesitation, and my cousin Monica's apparently disproportioned opposition? When an idea of terror presents itself to a young person's mind, it transfixes and fills the vision, without respect of probabilities or reason.

My uncle was now a terrible old martinet, with long Bible lessons, lectures, pages of catechism, sermons to be conned by rote, and an awful catalogue of punishments for idleness, and what would seem to him impiety. I was going, then, to a frightful isolated reformatory, where for the first time in my life I should be subjected to a rigorous and perhaps barbarous discipline.

All this was an exhalation of fancy, but it quite overcame me. I threw myself, in my solitude, on the floor, upon my knees, and prayed for deliverance—prayed that Cousin Monica might prevail with Doctor Bryerly, and both on my behalf with the Lord Chancellor, or the High Sheriff, or whoever else my proper deliverer might be; and when my cousin returned, she found me quite in an agony.

'Why, you little fool! what fancy has taken possession of you now?' she cried.

And when my new terror came to light, she actually laughed a little to reassure me, and she said—

'My dear child, your uncle Silas will never put you through your duty to your neighbour; all the time you are under his roof you'll have idleness and liberty enough, and too much, I fear. It is neglect, my dear, not discipline, that I'm afraid of.'

'I think, dear Cousin Monica, you are afraid of something more than neglect,' I said, relieved, however.

'I *am* afraid of more than neglect,' she replied promptly; 'but I hope my fears may turn out illusory, and that possibly they may be avoided. And now, for a few hours at least, let us think of something else. I rather like that Doctor Bryerly. I could not get him to say what I wanted. I don't think he's Scotch, but he is very cautious, and I am sure, though he would not say so, that he thinks of the matter exactly as I do. He says that those fine people, who are named as his co-trustees, won't take any trouble, and will leave everything to him, and I am sure he is right. So we must not quarrel with him, Maud, nor call him hard names, although he certainly is intolerably vulgar and ugly, and at times very nearly impertinent—I suppose without knowing, or indeed very much caring.'

We had a good deal to think of, and talked incessantly. There were bursts and interruptions of grief, and my kind cousin's consolations. I have often since been so lectured for giving way to grief, that I wonder at the patience exercised by her during this irksome visit. Then there was some reading of that book whose claims are always felt in the terrible days of affliction. After that

we had a walk in the yew garden, that quaint little cloistered quadrangle—the most solemn, sad, and antiquated of gardens.

'And now, my dear, I must really leave you for two or three hours. I have ever so many letters to write, and my people must think I'm dead by this time.'

So till tea-time I had poor Mary Quince, with her gushes of simple prattle and her long fits of vacant silence, for my companion. And such a one, who can con over by rote the old friendly gossip about the dead, talk about their ways, and looks, and likings, without much psychologic refinement, but with a simple admiration and liking that never measured them critically, but always with faith and love, is in general about as comfortable a companion as one can find for the common moods of grief.

It is not easy to recall in calm and happy hours the sensations of an acute sorrow that is past. Nothing, by the merciful ordinance of God, is more difficult to remember than pain. One or two great agonies of that time I do remember, and they remain to testify of the rest, and convince me, though I can see it no more, how terrible all that period was.

Next day was the funeral, that appalling necessity; smuggled away in whispers, by black familiars, unresisting, the beloved one leaves home, without a farewell, to darken those doors no more; henceforward to lie outside, far away, and forsaken, through the drowsy heats of summer, through days of snow and nights of tempest, without light or warmth, without a voice near. Oh, Death, king of terrors! The body quakes and the spirit faints before thee. It is vain, with hands clasped over our eyes, to scream our reclamation; the horrible image will not be excluded. We have just the word spoken eighteen hundred years ago, and our trembling faith. And through the broken vault the gleam of the Star of Bethlehem.

I was glad in a sort of agony when it was over. So long as it remained to be done, something of the catastrophe was still suspended. Now it was all over.

The house so strangely empty. No owner—no master! I with my strange momentary liberty, bereft of that irreplaceable love,

never quite prized until it is lost. Most people have experienced the dismay that underlies sorrow under such circumstances.

The apartment of the poor outcast from life is now dismantled. Bed and curtains taken down, and furniture displaced; carpets removed, windows open and doors locked; the bedroom and anteroom were henceforward, for many a day, uninhabited. Every shocking change smote my heart like a reproach.

I saw that day that Cousin Monica had been crying for the first time, I think, since her arrival at Knowl; and I loved her more for it, and felt consoled. My tears have often been arrested by the sight of another person weeping, and I never could explain why. But I believe that many persons experience the same odd reaction.

The funeral was conducted, in obedience to his brief but peremptory direction, very privately and with little expense. But of course there was an attendance, and the tenants of the Knowl estate also followed the hearse to the mausoleum, as it is called, in the park, where he was laid beside my dear mother. And so the repulsive ceremonial of that dreadful day was over. The grief remained, but there was rest from the fatigue of agitation, and a comparative calm supervened.

It was now the stormy equinoctial weather that sounds the wild dirge of autumn, and marches the winter in. I love, and always did, that grand undefinable music, threatening and bewailing, with its strange soul of liberty and desolation.

By this night's mail, as we sat listening to the storm, in the drawing-room at Knowl, there reached me a large letter with a great black seal, and a wonderfully deep-black border, like a widow's crape. I did not recognise the handwriting; but on opening the funereal missive, it proved to be from my uncle Silas, and was thus expressed:—

'My dearest Niece,—This letter will reach you, probably, on the day which consigns the mortal remains of my beloved brother, Austin, your dear father, to the earth. Sad ceremony, from taking my mournful part in which I am excluded by years, distance, and broken health. It will, I trust, at this season of desolation, be not unwelcome to remember that a substitute, imperfect—unworthy—

but most affectionately zealous, for the honoured parent whom you have just lost, has been appointed, in me, your uncle, by his will. I am aware that you were present during the reading of it, but I think it will be for our mutual satisfaction that our new and more affectionate relations should be forthwith entered upon. My conscience and your safety, and I trust convenience, will thereby be consulted. You will, my dear niece, remain at Knowl, until a few simple arrangements shall have been completed for your reception at this place. I will then settle the details of your little journey to us, which shall be performed as comfortably and easily as possible. I humbly pray that this affliction may be sanctified to us all, and that in our new duties we may be supported, comforted, and directed. I need not remind you that I now stand to you *in loco parentis*, which means in the relation of father, and you will not forget that you are to remain at Knowl until you hear further from me.

'I remain, my dear niece, your most affectionate uncle and guardian, 'SILAS RUTHYN.

'P.S.—Pray present my respects to Lady Knollys, who, I understand, is sojourning at Knowl. I would observe that a lady who cherishes, I have reason to fear, unfriendly feelings against your uncle, is not the most desirable companion for his ward. But upon the express condition that I am not made the subject of your discussions—a distinction which could not conduce to your forming a just and respectful estimate of me—I do not interpose my authority to bring your intercourse to an immediate close.'

As I read this postscript, my cheek tingled as if I had received a box on the ear. Uncle Silas was as yet a stranger. The menace of authority was new and sudden, and I felt with a pang of mortification the full force of the position in which my dear father's will had placed me.

I was silent, and handed the letter to my cousin, who read it with a kind of smile until she came, as I supposed, to the postscript, when her countenance, on which my eyes were fixed, changed, and with flushed cheeks she knocked the hand that held the letter on the table before her, and exclaimed—

'Did I ever hear! Well, if this isn't impertinence! *What* an old man that is!'

There was a pause, during which Lady Knollys held her head high with a frown, and sniffed a little.

'I did not intend to talk about him, but now I *will*. I'll talk away just whatever I like; and I'll stay here just as long as you let me, Maud, and you need not be one atom afraid of him. Our intercourse to an "immediate close," indeed! I only wish he were here. He should hear something!'

And Cousin Monica drank off her entire cup of tea at one draught, and then she said, more in her own way—

'I'm better!' and drew a long breath, and then she laughed a little in a waggish defiance. 'I wish we had him here, Maud, and *would* not we give him a bit of our minds! And this before the poor will is so much as proved!'

'I am almost glad he wrote that postscript; for although I don't think he has any authority in that matter while I am under my own roof,' I said, extemporising a legal opinion, 'and, therefore, shan't obey him, it has somehow opened my eyes to my real situation.'

I sighed, I believe, very desolately, for Lady Knollys came over and kissed me very gently and affectionately.

'It really seems, Maud, as if he had a supernatural sense, and heard things through the air over fifty miles of heath and hill. You remember how, just as he was probably writing that very postscript yesterday, I was urging you to come and stay with me, and planning to move Dr. Bryerly in our favour. And so I will, Maud, and to me you *shall* come—my guest, mind—I should be so delighted; and really if Silas is under a cloud, it has been his own doing, and I don't see that it is your business to fight his battles. He can't live very long. The suspicion, whatever it is, dies with him, and what could poor dear Austin prove by his will but what everybody knew quite well before—his own strong belief in Silas's innocence? What an awful storm! The room trembles. Don't you like the sound? What they used to call 'wolving' in the old organ at Dorminster!'

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE STORY OF UNCLE SILAS.

AND so it was like the yelling of phantom hounds and hunters, and the thunder of their coursers in the air—a furious, grand, and supernatural music, which in my fancy made a suitable accompaniment to the discussion of that enigmatical person—martyr—angel—demon—Uncle Silas—with whom my fate was now so strangely linked, and whom I had begun to fear.

'The storm blows from that point,' I said, indicating it with my hand and eye, although the window shutters and curtains were closed. 'I saw all the trees bend that way this evening. That way stands the great lonely wood, where my darling father and mother lie. Oh, how dreadful on nights like this, to think of them—a vault!—damp, and dark, and solitary—under the storm.'

Cousin Monica looked wistfully in the same direction, and with a short sigh she said—

'We think too much of the poor remains, and too little of the spirit which lives for ever. I am sure they are happy.' And she sighed again. 'I wish I dare hope as confidently for myself. Yes, Maud, it is sad. We are such materialists, we can't help feeling so. We forget how well it is for us that our present bodies are not to last always. They are constructed for a time and place of trouble—plainly mere temporary machines that wear out, constantly exhibiting failure and decay, and with such tremendous capacity for pain. The body lies alone, and so it ought, for it is plainly its good Creator's will; it is only the tabernacle, not the person, who is clothed upon after death, Saint Paul says, "with a house which is from heaven." So Maud, darling, although the thought will trouble us again and again, there is nothing in it; and the poor mortal body is only the cold ruin of a habitation which *they* have forsaken before we do. So this great wind, you

say, is blowing toward us from the wood there. If so, Maud, it is blowing from Bartram-Haugh, too, over the trees and chimneys of that old place, and the mysterious old man, who is quite right in thinking I don't like him; and I can fancy him an old enchanter in his castle, waving his familiar spirits on the wind to fetch and carry tidings of our occupations here.'

I lifted up my head and listened to the storm, dying away in the distance sometimes—sometimes swelling and pealing around and above us—and through the dark and solitude my thoughts sped away to Bartram-Haugh and Uncle Silas.

'This letter,' I said at last, 'makes me feel differently. I think he is a stern old man—is he?'

'It is twenty years, now, since I saw him,' answered Lady Knollys. 'I did not choose to visit at his house.'

'Was that before the dreadful occurrence at Bartram-Haugh?'

'Yes—before, dear. He was not a reformed rake, but only a ruined one then. Austin was very good to him. Mr. Danvers says it is quite unaccountable how Silas can have made away with the immense sums he got from his brother from time to time without benefiting himself in the least. But, my dear, he played; and trying to help a man who plays, and is unlucky—and some men are, I believe, habitually unlucky—is like trying to fill a vessel that has no bottom. I think, by-the-by, my hopeful nephew, Charles Oakley, plays. Then Silas went most unjustifiably into all manner of speculations, and your poor father had to pay everything. He lost something quite astounding in that bank that ruined so many country gentlemen—poor Sir Harry Shackleton, in Yorkshire, had to sell half his estate. But your kind father went on helping him, up to his marriage—I mean in that extravagant way which was really totally useless.'

'Has my aunt been long dead?'

'Twelve or fifteen years—more, indeed—she died before your poor mamma. She was very unhappy, and I am sure would have given her right hand she had never married Silas.'

'Did you like her?'

'No, dear; she was a coarse, vulgar woman.'

'Coarse and vulgar, and Uncle Silas's wife!' I echoed in extreme surprise, for Uncle Silas was a man of fashion—a beau in his day—and might have married women of good birth and fortune, I had no doubt, and so I expressed myself.

'Yes, dear; so he might, and poor dear Austin was very anxious he should, and would have helped him with a handsome settlement, I dare say, but he chose to marry the daughter of a Denbigh innkeeper.'

'How utterly incredible!' I exclaimed.

'Not the least incredible, dear—a kind of thing not at all so uncommon as you fancy.'

'What!—a gentleman of fashion and refinement marry a person——'

'A barmaid!—just so,' said Lady Knollys. 'I think I could count half a dozen men of fashion who, to my knowledge, have ruined themselves just in a similar way.'

'Well, at all events, it must be allowed that in this he proved himself altogether unworldly.'

'Not a bit unworldly, but very vicious,' replied Cousin Monica, with a careless little laugh. 'She was very beautiful, curiously beautiful, for a person in her station. She was very like that Lady Hamilton who was Nelson's sorceress—elegantly beautiful, but perfectly low and stupid. I believe, to do him justice, he only intended to ruin her; but she was cunning enough to insist upon marriage. Men who have never in all their lives denied themselves the indulgence of a single fancy, cost what it may, will not be baulked even by that condition if the *penchant* be only violent enough.'

I did not half understand this piece of worldly psychology, at which Lady Knollys seemed to laugh.

'Poor Silas, certainly he struggled honestly against the consequences, for he tried after the honeymoon to prove the marriage bad. But the Welsh parson and the innkeeper papa were too strong for him, and the young lady was able to hold her struggling swain fast in that respectable noose—and a pretty prize he proved!'

'And she died, poor thing, broken-hearted, I heard.'

'She died, at all events, about ten years after her marriage; but I really can't say about her heart. She certainly had enough ill-usage, I believe, to kill her; but I don't know that she had feeling enough to die of it, if it had not been that she drank: I am told that Welsh women often do. There was jealousy, of course, and brutal quarrelling, and all sorts of horrid stories. I visited at Bartram-Haugh for a year or two, though no one else would. But when that sort of thing began, of course I gave it up; it was out of the question. I don't think poor Austin ever knew how bad it was. And then came that odious business about wretched Mr. Charke. You know he—he committed suicide at Bartram.'

'I never heard about that,' I said; and we both paused, and she looked sternly at the fire, and the storm roared and ha-ha-ed till the old house shook again.

'But Uncle Silas could not help that,' I said at last.

'No, he could not help it,' she acquiesced unpleasantly.

'And Uncle Silas was'—I paused in a sort of fear.

'He was suspected by some people of having killed him'—she completed the sentence.

There was another long pause here, during which the storm outside bellowed and hooted like an angry mob roaring at the windows for a victim. An intolerable and sickening sensation overpowered me.

'But *you* did not suspect him, Cousin Knollys?' I said, trembling very much.

'No,' she answered very sharply. 'I told you so before Of course I did not.'

There was another silence.

'I wish, Cousin Monica,' I said, drawing close to her, 'you had not said *that* about Uncle Silas being like a wizard, and sending his spirits on the wind to listen. But I'm very glad you never suspected him.' I insinuated my cold hand into hers, and looked into her face I know not with what expression. She looked down into mine with a hard, haughty stare, I thought.

'Of *course* I never suspected him; and *never* ask me *that* question again, Maud Ruthyn.'

Was it family pride, or what was it, that gleamed so fiercely from her eyes as she said this? I was frightened—I was wounded—I burst into tears.

'What is my darling crying for? I did not mean to be cross. *Was* I cross?' said this momentary phantom of a grim Lady Knollys, in an instant translated again into kind, pleasant Cousin Monica, with her arms about my neck.

'No, no, indeed—only I thought I had vexed you; and, I believe, thinking of Uncle Silas makes me nervous, and I can't help thinking of him nearly always.'

'Nor can I, although we might both easily find something better to think of. Suppose we try?' said Lady Knollys.

'But, first, I must know a little more about that Mr. Charke, and what circumstances enabled Uncle Silas's enemies to found on his death that wicked slander, which has done no one any good, and caused some persons so much misery. There is Uncle Silas, I may say, ruined by it; and we all know how it darkened the life of my dear father.'

'People will talk, my dear. Your uncle Silas had injured himself before that in the opinion of the people of his county. He was a black sheep, in fact. Very bad stories were told and believed of him. His marriage certainly was a disadvantage, you know, and the miserable scenes that went on in his disreputable house—all that predisposed people to believe ill of him.'

'How long is it since it happened?'

'Oh, a long time; I think before you were born,' answered she.

'And the injustice still lives—they have not forgotten it yet?' said I, for such a period appeared to me long enough to have consigned anything in its nature perishable to oblivion.

Lady Knollys smiled.

'Tell me, like a darling cousin, the whole story as well as you can recollect it. Who was Mr. Charke?'

'Mr. Charke, my dear, was a gentleman on the turf—that is the phrase, I think—one of those London men, without birth or breeding, who merely in right of their vices and their money are admitted to associate with young dandies who like hounds and

horses, and all that sort of thing. That set knew him very well, but of course no one else. He was at the Matlock races, and your uncle asked him to Bartram-Haugh; and the creature, Jew or Gentile, whatever he was, fancied there was more honour than, perhaps, there really was in a visit to Bartram-Haugh.'

'For the kind of person you describe, it *was*, I think, a rather unusual honour to be invited to stay in the house of a man of Uncle Ruthyn's birth.'

'Well, so it was perhaps; for though they knew him very well on the course, and would ask him to their tavern dinners, they would not, of course, admit him to the houses where ladies were. But Silas's wife was not much regarded at Bartram-Haugh. Indeed, she was very little seen, for she was every evening tipsy in her bedroom, poor woman!'

'How miserable!' I exclaimed.

'I don't think it troubled Silas very much, for she drank gin, they said, poor thing, and the expense was not much; and, on the whole, I really think he was glad she drank, for it kept her out of his way, and was likely to kill her. At this time your poor father, who was thoroughly disgusted at his marriage, had stopped the supplies, you know, and Silas was very poor, and as hungry as a hawk, and they said he pounced upon this rich London gamester, intending to win his money. I am telling you now all that was said afterwards. The races lasted I forget how many days, and Mr. Charke stayed at Bartram-Haugh all this time and for some days after. It was thought that poor Austin would pay all Silas's gambling debts, and so this wretched Mr. Charke made heavy wagers with him on the races, and they played very deep, besides, at Bartram. He and Silas used to sit up at night at cards. All these particulars, as I told you, came out afterwards, for there was an inquest, you know, and then Silas published what he called his "statement," and there was a great deal of most distressing correspondence in the newspapers.'

'And why did Mr. Charke kill himself?' I asked.

'Well, I will tell you first what all are agreed about. The second night after the races, your uncle and Mr. Charke sat up till

between two and three o'clock in the morning, quite by themselves, in the parlour. Mr. Charke's servant was at the Stag's Head Inn at Feltram, and therefore could throw no light upon what occurred at night at Bartram-Haugh; but he was there at six o'clock in the morning, and very early at his master's door by his direction. He had locked it, as was his habit, upon the inside, and the key was in the lock, which turned out afterwards a very important point. On knocking he found that he could not awaken his master, because, as it appeared when the door was forced open, his master was lying dead at his bedside, not in a pool, but a perfect pond of blood, as they described it, with his throat cut.'

'How horrible!' cried I.

'So it was. Your uncle Silas was called up, and greatly shocked of course, and he did what I believe was best. He had everything left as nearly as possible in the exact state in which it had been found, and he sent his own servant forthwith for the coroner, and, being himself a justice of the peace, he took the depositions of Mr. Charke's servant while all the incidents were still fresh in his memory.'

'Could anything be more straightforward, more right and wise?' I said.

'Oh, nothing of course,' answered Lady Knollys, I thought a little drily.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MORE ABOUT TOM CHARKE'S SUICIDE.

So the inquest was held, and Mr. Manwaring, of Wail Forest, was the only juryman who seemed to entertain the idea during the inquiry that Mr. Charke had died by any hand but his own.

'And how *could* he fancy such a thing?' I exclaimed indignantly.

'Well, you will see the result was quite enough to justify them in saying as they did, that he died by his own hand. The window

was found fastened with a screw on the inside, as it had been when the chambermaid had arranged it at nine o'clock; no one could have entered through it. Besides, it was on the third story, and the rooms are lofty, so it stood at a great height from the ground, and there was no ladder long enough to reach it. The house is built in the form of a hollow square, and Mr. Charke's room looked into the narrow court-yard within. There is but one door leading into this, and it did not show any sign of having been open for years. The door was locked upon the inside, and the key in the lock, so that nobody could have made an entrance that way either, for it was impossible, you see, to unlock the door from the outside.'

'And how could they affect to question anything so clear?' I asked.

'There did come, nevertheless, a kind of mist over the subject, which gave those who chose to talk unpleasantly an opportunity of insinuating suspicions, though they could not themselves find the clue of the mystery. In the first place, it appeared that he had gone to bed very tipsy, and that he was heard singing and noisy in his room while getting to bed—not the mood in which men make away with themselves. Then, although his own razor was found in that dreadful blood (it is shocking to have to hear all this) near his right hand, the fingers of his left were cut to the bone. Then the memorandum book in which his bets were noted was nowhere to be found. That, you know, was very odd. His keys were there attached to a chain. He wore a great deal of gold and trinkets. I saw him, wretched man, on the course. They had got off their horses. He and your uncle were walking on the course.'

'Did he look like a gentleman?' I inquired, as, I dare say, other young ladies would.

'He looked like a Jew, my dear. He had a horrid brown coat with a velvet cape, curling black hair over his collar, and great whiskers, very high shoulders, and he was puffing a cigar straight up into the air. I was shocked to see Silas in such company.'

'And did his keys discover anything?' I asked.

'On opening his travelling desk and a small japanned box within it a vast deal less money was found than was expected—in fact, very little. Your uncle said that he had won some of it the night before at play, and that Charke complained to him when tipsy of having had severe losses to counterbalance his gains on the races. Besides, he had been paid but a small part of those gains. About his book it appeared that there were little notes of his bets on the backs of letters, and it was said that he sometimes made no other memorandum of his wagers—but this was disputed—and among those notes there was not one referring to Silas. But, then, there was an omission of all allusion to his transactions with two other well-known gentlemen. So that was not singular.'

'No, certainly; that was quite accounted for,' said I.

'And then came the question,' continued she, 'what motive could Mr. Charke possibly have had for making away with himself.'

'But is not that very difficult to make out in many cases?' I interposed.

'It was said that he had some mysterious troubles in London, at which he used to hint. Some people said that he really was in a scrape, but others that there was no such thing, and that when he talked so he was only jesting. There was no suspicion during the inquest that your uncle Silas was involved, except those questions of Mr. Manwaring's.'

'What were they?' I asked.

'I really forget; but they greatly offended your uncle, and there was a little scene in the room. Mr. Manwaring seemed to think that some one had somehow got into the room. Through the door it could not be, nor down the chimney, for they found an iron bar across the flue, near the top in the masonry. The window looked into a court-yard no bigger than a ball-room. They went down and examined it, but, though the ground beneath was moist, they could not discover the slightest trace of a footprint. So far as they could make out, Mr. Charke had hermetically sealed himself into his room, and then cut his throat with his own razor.'

'Yes,' said I, 'for it was all secured—that is, the window and the door—upon the inside, and no sign of any attempt to get in.'

'Just so; and when the walls were searched, and, as your uncle Silas directed, the wainscoting removed, some months afterwards, when the scandal grew loudest, then it was evident that there was no concealed access to the room.'

'So the answer to all those calumnies was simply that the crime was impossible,' said I. 'How dreadful that such a slander should have required an answer at all!'

'It was an unpleasant affair even then, although I cannot say that anyone supposed Silas guilty; but you know the whole thing was disreputable, that Mr. Charke was a discreditable inmate, the occurrence was horrible, and there was a glare of publicity which brought into relief the scandals of Bartram-Haugh. But in a little time it became, all on a sudden, a great deal worse.'

My cousin paused to recollect exactly.

'There were very disagreeable whispers among the sporting people in London. This person, Charke, had written two letters. Yes—two. They were published about two months after, by the villain to whom they were written; he wanted to extort money. They were first talked of a great deal among that set in town; but the moment they were published they produced a sensation in the country, and a storm of newspaper commentary. The first of these was of no great consequence, but the second was very startling, embarrassing, and even alarming.'

'What was it, Cousin Monica?' I whispered.

'I can only tell you in a general way, it is so very long since I read it; but both were written in the same kind of slang, and parts as hard to understand as a prize fight. I hope you never read those things.'

I satisfied this sudden educational alarm, and Lady Knollys proceeded.

'I am afraid you hardly hear me, the wind makes such an uproar. Well, listen. The letter said distinctly, that he, Mr. Charke, had made a very profitable visit to Bartram-Haugh, and mentioned in exact figures for how much he held your uncle

Silas's I.O.U.s, for he could not pay him. I can't say what the sum was. I only remember that it was quite frightful. It took away my breath when I read it.'

'Uncle Silas had lost it?' I asked.

'Yes, and owed it; and had given him those papers called I.O.U.s, promising to pay, which, of course, Mr. Charke had locked up with his money; and the insinuation was that Silas had made away with him, to get rid of this debt, and that he had also taken a great deal of his money.

'I just recollect these points which were exactly what made the impression,' continued Lady Knollys, after a short pause; 'the letter was written in the evening of the last day of the wretched man's life, so that there had not been much time for your uncle Silas to win back his money; and he stoutly alleged that he did not owe Mr. Charke a guinea. It mentioned an enormous sum as being actually owed by Silas; and it cautioned the man, an agent, to whom he wrote, not to mention the circumstance, as Silas could only pay by getting the money from his wealthy brother, who would have the management; and he distinctly said that he had kept the matter very close at Silas's request. That, you know, was a very awkward letter, and all the worse that it was written in brutally high spirits, and not at all like a man meditating an exit from the world. You can't imagine what a sensation the publication of these letters produced. In a moment the storm was up, and certainly Silas did meet it bravely—yes, with great courage and ability. What a pity he did not early enter upon some career of ambition! Well, well, it is idle regretting. He suggested that the letters were forgeries. He alleged that Charke was in the habit of boasting, and telling enormous falsehoods about his gambling transactions, especially in his letters. He reminded the world how often men affect high animal spirits at the very moment of meditating suicide. He alluded, in a manly and graceful way, to his family and their character. He took a high and menacing tone with his adversaries, and he insisted that what they dared to insinuate against him was physically impossible.'

I asked in what form this vindication appeared.

'It was a letter, printed as a pamphlet; everybody admired its ability, ingenuity, and force, and it was written with immense rapidity.'

'Was it at all in the style of his letters?' I innocently asked.

My cousin laughed.

'Oh, dear, no! Ever since he avowed himself a religious character, he has written nothing but the most vapid and nerveless twaddle. Your poor dear father used to send his letters to me to read, and I sometimes really thought that Silas was losing his faculties; but I believe he was only trying to write in character.'

'I suppose the general feeling was in his favour?' I said.

'I don't think it was, anywhere; but in his own county it was certainly unanimously against him. There is no use in asking why; but so it was, and I think it would have been easier for him with his unaided strength to uproot the Peak than to change the convictions of the Derbyshire gentlemen. They were all against him. Of course there were predisposing causes. Your uncle published a very bitter attack upon them, describing himself as the victim of a political conspiracy: and I recollect he mentioned that from the hour of the shocking catastrophe in his house, he had forsworn the turf and all pursuits and amusements connected with it. People sneered, and said he might as well go as wait to be kicked out.'

'Were there law-suits about all this?' I asked.

'Everybody expected that there would, for there were very savage things printed on both sides, and I think, too, that the persons who thought worst of him expected that evidence would yet turn up to convict Silas of the crime they chose to impute; and so years have glided away, and many of the people who remembered the tragedy of Bartram-Haugh, and took the strongest part in the denunciation, and ostracism that followed, are dead, and no new light has been thrown upon the occurrence, and your uncle Silas remains an outcast. At first he was quite wild with rage, and would have fought the whole county, man by man, if they would have met him. But he has since changed his habits and, as he says, his aspirations altogether.'

'He has become religious.'

'The only occupation remaining to him. He owes money; he is poor; he is isolated; and he says, sick and religious. Your poor father, who was very decided and inflexible, never helped him beyond the limit he had prescribed, after Silas's *mésalliance*. He wanted to get him into Parliament, and would have paid his expenses, and made him an allowance; but either Silas had grown lazy, or he understood his position better than poor Austin, or he distrusted his powers, or possibly he really is in ill-health; but he objected his religious scruples. Your poor papa thought self-assertion possible, where an injured man has right to rely upon; but he had been very long out of the world, and the theory won't do. Nothing is harder than to get a person who has once been effectually slurred, received again. Silas, I think, was right. I don't think it was practicable.

'Dear child, how late it is!' exclaimed Lady Knollys suddenly, looking at the Louis Quatorze clock, that crowned the mantelpiece.

It was near one o'clock. The storm had a little subsided, and I took a less agitated and more confident view of Uncle Silas than I had at an earlier hour of that evening.

'And what do you think of him?' I asked.

Lady Knollys drummed on the table with her finger points as she looked into the fire.

'I don't understand metaphysics, my dear, nor witchcraft. I sometimes believe in the supernatural, and sometimes I don't. Silas Ruthyn is himself alone, and I can't define him, because I don't understand him. Perhaps other souls than human are sometimes born into the world, and clothed in flesh. It is not only about that dreadful occurrence, but nearly always throughout his life; early and late he has puzzled me. I have tried in vain to understand him. But at one time of his life I am sure he was awfully wicked—eccentric indeed in his wickedness—gay, frivolous, secret, and dangerous. At one time I think he could have made poor Austin do almost anything; but his influence vanished with his marriage, never to return again. No; I don't understand him. He always bewildered me, like a shifting face, sometimes smiling, but always sinister, in an unpleasant dream.'

CHAPTER XXVIII.

I AM PERSUADED.

So now at last I had heard the story of Uncle Silas's mysterious disgrace. We sat silent for a while, and I, gazing into vacancy, sent him in a chariot of triumph, chapletted, ringed, and robed through the city of imagination, crying after him, 'Innocent! innocent! martyr and crowned!' All the virtues and honesties, reason and conscience, in myriad shapes—tier above tier of human faces—from the crowded pavement, crowded windows, crowded roofs, joined in the jubilant acclamation, and trumpeters trumpeted, and drums rolled, and great organs and choirs through open cathedral gates, rolled anthems of praise and thanksgiving, and bells rang out, and cannons sounded, and the air trembled with the roaring harmony; and Silas Ruthyn, the full-length portrait, stood in the burnished chariot, with a proud, sad, clouded face, that rejoiced not with the rejoicers, and behind him the slave, thin as a ghost, white-faced, and sneering something in his ear: while I and all the city went on crying 'Innocent! innocent! martyr and crowned!' And now the reverie was ended; and there were only Lady Knollys' stern, thoughtful face, with the pale light of sarcasm on it, and the storm outside thundering and lamenting desolately.

It was very good of Cousin Monica to stay with me so long. It must have been unspeakably tiresome. And now she began to talk of business at home, and plainly to prepare for immediate flight, and my heart sank.

I know that I could not then have defined my feelings and agitations. I am not sure that I even now could. Any misgiving about Uncle Silas was, in my mind, a questioning the foundations of my faith, and in itself an impiety. And yet I am not sure

that some such misgiving, faint, perhaps, and intermittent, may not have been at the bottom of my tribulation.

I was not very well. Lady Knollys had gone out for a walk. She was not easily tired, and sometimes made a long excursion. The sun was setting now, when Mary Quince brought me a letter which had just arrived by the post. My heart throbbed violently. I was afraid to break the broad black seal. It was from Uncle Silas. I ran over in my mind all the unpleasant mandates which it might contain, to try and prepare myself for a shock. At last I opened the letter. It directed me to hold myself in readiness for the journey to Bartram-Haugh. It stated that I might bring two maids with me if I wished so many, and that his next letter would give me the details of my route, and the day of my departure for Derbyshire; and he said that I ought to make arrangements about Knowl during my absence, but that he was hardly the person properly to be consulted on that matter. Then came a prayer that he might be enabled to acquit himself of his trust to the full satisfaction of his conscience, and that I might enter upon my new relations in a spirit of prayer.

I looked round my room, so long familiar, and now so endeared by the idea of parting and change. The old house—dear, dear Knowl, how could I leave you and all your affectionate associations, and kind looks and voices, for a strange land!

With a great sigh I took Uncle Silas's letter, and went down stairs to the drawing-room. From the lobby window, where I loitered for a few moments, I looked out upon the well-known forest-trees. The sun was down. It was already twilight, and the white vapours of coming night were already filming their thinned and yellow foliage. Everything looked melancholy How little did those who envied the young inheritrex of a princely fortune suspect the load that lay at her heart, or, bating the fear of death, how gladly at that moment she would have parted with her life!

Lady Knollys had not yet returned, and it was darkening rapidly; a mass of black clouds stood piled in the west, through the chasms of which was still reflected a pale metallic lustre.

The drawing-room was already very dark; but some streaks of this cold light fell upon a black figure, which would otherwise have been unseen, leaning beside the curtains against the window frame.

It advanced abruptly, with creaking shoes; it was Doctor Bryerly.

I was startled and surprised, not knowing how he had got there. I stood staring at him in the dusk rather awkwardly, I am afraid.

'How do you do, Miss Ruthyn?' said he, extending his hand, long, hard, and brown as a mummy's, and stooping a little so as to approach more nearly, for it was not easy to see in the imperfect light. 'You're surprised, I dare say, to see me here so soon again?'

'I did not know you had arrived. I am glad to see you, Doctor Bryerly. Nothing unpleasant, I hope, has happened?'

'No, nothing unpleasant, Miss. The will has been lodged, and we shall have probate in due course; but there has been something on my mind, and I'm come to ask you two or three questions which you had better answer very considerately. Is Lady Knollys still here?'

'Yes, but she is not returned from her walk.'

'I am glad she is here. I think she takes a sound view, and women understand one another better. As for me, it is plainly my duty to put it before you as it strikes me, and to offer all I can do in accomplishing, should you wish it, a different arrangement. You don't know your uncle, you said the other day?'

'No, I've never seen him.'

'You understand your late father's intention in making you his ward?'

'I suppose he wished to show his high opinion of my uncle's fitness for such a trust.'

'That's quite true; but the nature of the trust in this instance is extraordinary.'

'I don't understand.'

'Why, if you die before you come to the age of twenty-one, the entire of the property will go to him—do you see?—and he has

the custody of your person in the meantime; you are to live in his house, under his care and authority. You see now, I think, how it is; and I did not like it when your father read the will to me, and I said so. Do *you*?'

I hesitated to speak, not sure that I quite comprehended him.

'And the more I think of it, the less I like it, Miss,' said Doctor Bryerly, in a calm, stern tone.

'Merciful Heaven! Doctor Bryerly, you can't suppose that I should not be as safe in my uncle's house as in the Lord Chancellor's?' I ejaculated, looking full in his face.

'But don't you see, Miss, it is not a fair position to put your uncle in,' replied he, after a little hesitation.

'But suppose *he* does not think so. You know, if he does, he may decline it.'

'Well that's true—but he won't. Here is his letter'—and he produced it—'announcing officially that he means to accept the office; but I think he ought to be told it is not *delicate*, under all circumstances. You know, Miss, that your uncle, Mr. Silas Ruthyn, was talked about unpleasantly once.'

'You mean'——I began.

'I mean about the death of Mr. Charke, at Bartram-Haugh.'

'Yes, I have heard that,' I said; he was speaking with a shocking *aplomb*.

'We assume, of course, *unjustly*; but there are many who think quite differently.'

'And possibly, Doctor Bryerly, it was for that very reason that my dear papa made him my guardian.'

'There can be no doubt of that, Miss; it was to purge him of that scandal.'

'And when he has acquitted himself honourably of that trust, don't you think such a proof of confidence so honourably fulfilled must go far to silence his traducers?'

'Why, if all goes well, it may do a little; but a great deal less than you fancy. But take it that you happen to *die*, Miss, during your minority. We are all mortal, and there are three years and some months to go; how will it be then? Don't you see? Just fancy how people will talk.'

'I think you know that my uncle is a religious man?' said I.

'Well, Miss, what of that?' he asked again.

'He is—he has suffered intensely,' I continued. 'He has long retired from the world; he is very religious. Ask our curate, Mr. Fairfield, if you doubt it.'

'But I am not disputing it, Miss; I'm only supposing what may happen—an accident, we'll call it small-pox, diphtheria, *that's* going very much. Three years and three months, you know, is a long time. You proceed to Bartram-Haugh, thinking you have much goods laid up for many years; but your Creator, you know, may say, "Thou fool, this day is thy soul required of thee." You go—and what pray is thought of your uncle, Mr. Silas Ruthyn, who walks in for the entire inheritance, and who has long been abused like a pickpocket, or worse, in his own county, I'm told?'

'You are a religious man, Doctor Bryerly, according to your lights?' I said.

The Swedenborgian smiled.

'Well, knowing that he is so too, and having yourself experienced the power of religion, do not you think him deserving of every confidence? Don't you think it well that he should have this opportunity of exhibiting both his own character and the reliance which my dear papa reposed on it, and that we should leave all consequences and contingencies in the hands of Heaven?'

'It appears to have been the will of Heaven hitherto,' said Doctor Bryerly—I could not see with what expression of face, but he was looking down, and drawing little diagrams with his stick on the dark carpet, and spoke in a very low tone—'that your uncle should suffer under this ill report. In countervailing the appointment of Providence, we must employ our reason, with conscientious diligence, as to the means, and if we find that they are as likely to do mischief as good, we have no right to expect a special interposition to turn our experiment into an ordeal. I think you ought to weigh it well—I am sure there are reasons against it. If you make up your mind that you would rather be placed under the care, say of Lady Knollys, I will endeavour all I can to effect it.'

'That could not be done without his consent, could it?' said I.

'No, but I don't despair of getting that—on terms, of course,' remarked he.

'I don't quite understand,' I said.

'I mean, for instance, if he were allowed to keep the allowance for your maintenance—eh?'

'I mistake my uncle Silas very much,' I said, 'if that allowance is any object whatever to him compared with the moral value of the position. If he were deprived of that, I am sure he would decline the other.'

'We might try him at all events,' said Doctor Bryerly, on whose dark sinewy features, even in this imperfect light, I thought I detected a smile.

'Perhaps,' said I, 'I appear very foolish in supposing him actuated by any but sordid motives; but he is my near relation, and I can't help it, sir.'

'This is a very serious thing, Miss Ruthyn,' he replied. 'You are very young, and cannot see it at present, as you will hereafter He is very religious, you say, and all that, but his house is not a proper place for you. It is a solitude—its master an outcast, and it has been the repeated scene of all sorts of scandals, and of one great crime; and Lady Knollys thinks your having been domesticated there will be an injury to you all the days of your life.'

'So I do, Maud,' said Lady Knollys, who had just entered the room unperceived,—'How do you do, Doctor Bryerly?—a serious injury. You have no idea how entirely that house is condemned and avoided, and the very name of its inmates tabooed.'

'How monstrous—how cruel!' I exclaimed.

'Very unpleasant, my dear, but perfectly natural. You are to recollect that quite independently of the story of Mr. Charke, the house was talked about, and the county people had cut your uncle Silas long before that adventure was dreamed of; and as to the circumstance of your being placed in his charge by his brother, who took, from strong family feeling, a totally one-sided view of the affair from the first, having the slightest effect in restoring his position in the county, you must quite give that up. Except me, if he will allow me, and the clergyman, not a soul in the country

will visit at Bartram-Haugh. They may pity you, and think the whole thing the climax of folly and cruelty; but they won't visit at Bartram, or know Silas, or have anything to do with his household.'

'They will see, at all events, what my dear papa's opinion was.'

'They know that already,' answered she, 'and it has not, and ought not to have, the slightest weight with them. There are people there who think themselves just as great as the Ruthyns, or greater; and your poor father's idea of carrying it by a demonstration was simply the dream of a man who had forgotten the world, and learned to exaggerate himself in his long seclusion. I know he was beginning himself to hesitate; and I think if he had been spared another year that provision of his will would have been struck out.'

Doctor Bryerly nodded, and he said—

'And if he had the power to dictate *now*, would he insist on that direction? It is a mistake every way, injurious to you, his child; and should you happen to die during your sojourn under your uncle's care, it would wofully defeat the testator's object, and raise such a storm of surmise and inquiry as would awaken all England, and send the old scandal on the wing through the world again.'

'Doctor Bryerly will, I have no doubt, arrange it all. In fact, I do not think it would be very difficult to bring Silas to terms; and if you do not consent to his trying, Maud, mark my words, you will live to repent it.'

Here were two persons viewing the question from totally different points; both perfectly disinterested; both in their different ways, I believe, shrewd and even wise; and both honourable, urging me against it, and in a way that undefinably alarmed my imagination, as well as moved my reason. I looked from one to the other—there was a silence. By this time the candles had come, and we could see one another.

'I only wait your decision, Miss Ruthyn,' said the trustee, 'to see your uncle. If his advantage was the chief object contemplated in this arrangement, he will be the best judge whether his interest

is really best consulted by it or no; and I think he will clearly see that it is *not* so, and will answer accordingly.'

'I cannot answer now—you must allow me to think it over—I will do my best. I am *very* much obliged, my dear Cousin Monica, you are so very good, and you too, Doctor Bryerly.'

Doctor Bryerly by this time was looking into his pocket-book, and did not acknowledge my thanks even by a nod.

'I must be in London the day after to-morrow. Bartram-Haugh is nearly sixty miles from here, and only twenty of that by rail, I find. Forty miles of posting over those Derbyshire mountains is slow work; but if you say *try*, I'll see him to-morrow morning.'

'You must say try—you *must*, my dear Maud.'

'But how can I decide in a moment? Oh, dear Cousin Monica, I am so distracted!'

'But *you* need not decide at all; the decision rests with *him*. Come; he is more competent than you. You *must* say yes.'

Again I looked from her to Doctor Bryerly, and from him to her again. I threw my arms about her neck, and hugging her closely to me, I cried—

'Oh, Cousin Monica, dear Cousin Monica, advise me. I am a wretched creature. You must advise me.'

I did not know till now how irresolute a character was mine.

I knew somehow by the tone of her voice that she was smiling as she answered—

'Why, dear, I have advised you; I *do* advise you;' and then she added, impetuously, 'I entreat and implore, if you really think I love you, that you will *follow* my advice. It is your duty to leave your uncle Silas, whom you believe to be more competent than you are, to decide, after full conference with Doctor Bryerly, who knows more of your poor father's views and intentions in making that appointment than either you or I.'

'Shall I say, yes?' I cried, drawing her close, and kissing her, helplessly. 'Oh, tell me—tell me to say, yes.'

'Yes, of course, *yes*. She agrees, Doctor Bryerly, to your kind proposal.'

'I am to understand so?' he asked.

'Very well—yes, Doctor Bryerly,' I replied.

'You have resolved wisely and well,' said he, briskly, like a man who has got a care off his mind.

'I forgot to say, Doctor Bryerly—it was very rude—that you must stay here to-night.'

'He *can't*, my dear,' interposed Lady Knollys; 'it is a long way.'

'He will dine. Won't you, Doctor Bryerly?'

'No; he can't. You know you can't, sir,' said my cousin, peremptorily. 'You must not worry him, my dear, with civilities he can't accept. He'll bid us good-bye this moment. Good-bye, Doctor Bryerly. You'll write immediately; don't wait till you reach town. Bid him good-bye, Maud. I'll say a word to you in the hall.'

And thus she literally hurried him out of the room, leaving me in a state of amazement and confusion, not able to review my decision—unsatisfied, but still unable to recall it.

I stood where they had left me, looking after them, I suppose, like a fool.

Lady Knollys returned in a few minutes. If I had been a little cooler I was shrewd enough to perceive that she had sent poor Doctor Bryerly away upon his travels, to find board and lodging half-way to Bartram, to remove him forthwith from my presence, and thus to make my decision—if mine it was—irrevocable.

'I applaud you, my dear,' said Cousin Knollys, in her turn embracing me heartily. 'You are a sensible little darling, and have done exactly what you ought to have done.'

'I hope I have,' I faltered.

'Hope? fiddle! stuff! the thing's as plain as a pikestaff.'

And in came Branston to say that dinner was served.

CHAPTER XXIX.

HOW THE AMBASSADOR FARED.

LADY KNOLLYS, I could plainly see, when we got into the brighter lights at the dinner table, was herself a good deal excited; she was relieved and glad, and was garrulous during our meal, and told me all her early recollections of dear papa. Most of them I had heard before; but they could not be told too often.

Notwithstanding my mind sometimes wandered, *often* indeed, to the conference so unexpected, so suddenly decisive, possibly so momentous; and with a dismayed uncertainty, the question—had I done right?—was always before me.

I dare say my cousin understood my character better, perhaps, after all my honest self-study, than I do even now. Irresolute, suddenly reversing my own decisions, impetuous in action as she knew me, she feared, I am sure, a revocation of my commission to Doctor Bryerly, and thought of the countermand I might send galloping after him.

So, kind creature, she laboured to occupy my thoughts, and when one theme was exhausted found another, and had always her parry prepared as often as I directed a reflection or an enquiry to the re-opening of the question which she had taken so much pains to close.

That night I was troubled. I was already upbraiding myself. I could not sleep, and at last sat up in bed, and cried. I lamented my weakness in having assented to Doctor Bryerly's and my cousin's advice. Was I not departing from my engagement to my dear papa? Was I not consenting that my uncle Silas should be induced to second my breach of faith by a corresponding perfidy?

Lady Knollys had done wisely in despatching Doctor Bryerly so promptly; for, most assuredly, had he been at Knowl next

morning when I came down I should have recalled my commission.

That day in the study I found four papers which increased my perturbation. They were in dear papa's handwriting, and had an indorsement in these words—'Copy of my letter addressed to ——, one of the trustees named in my will.' Here, then, were the contents of those four sealed letters which had excited mine and Lady Knollys' curiosity on the agitating day on which the will was read.

It contained these words:—

'I name my oppressed and unhappy brother, Silas Ruthyn, residing at my house of Bartram-Haugh, as guardian of the person of my beloved child, to convince the world if possible, and failing that, to satisfy at least all future generations of our family, that his brother, who knew him best, had implicit confidence in him, and that he deserved it. A cowardly and preposterous slander, originating in political malice, and which would never have been whispered had he not been poor and imprudent, is best silenced by this ordeal of purification. All I possess goes to him if my child dies under age; and the custody of her person I commit meanwhile to him alone, knowing that she is as safe in his as she could have been under my own care. I rely upon your remembrance of our early friendship to make this known wherever an opportunity occurs, and also to say what your sense of justice may warrant.

The other letters were in the same spirit. My heart sank like lead as I read them. I quaked with fear. What had I done? My father's wise and noble vindication of our dishonoured name I had presumed to frustrate. I had, like a coward, receded from my easy share in the task; and, merciful Heaven, I had broken my faith with the dead!

With these letters in my hand, white with fear, I flew like a shadow to the drawing-room where Cousin Monica was, and told her to read them. I saw by her countenance how much alarmed she was by my looks, but she said nothing, only read the letters hurriedly, and then exclaimed—

'Is this all, my dear child? I really fancied you had found a second will, and had lost everything. Why, my dearest Maud we knew all this before. We quite understood poor dear Austin's motive. Why are you so easily disturbed?'

'Oh, Cousin Monica, I think he was right; it all seems quite reasonable now; and I—oh, what a crime!—it must be stopped.'

'My dear Maud, listen to reason. Doctor Bryerly has seen your uncle at Bartram at least two hours ago. You *can't* stop it, and why on earth should you if you could? Don't you think your uncle should be consulted?' said she.

'But he has *decided*. I have his letter speaking of it as settled; and Doctor Bryerly—oh, Cousin Monica, he's gone *to tempt him*.'

'Nonsense, girl! Doctor Bryerly is a good and just man, I do believe, and has, beside, no imaginable motive to pervert either his conscience or his judgment. He's not gone to tempt him—stuff!—but to unfold the facts and invite his consideration; and I say, considering how thoughtlessly such duties are often undertaken, and how long Silas has been living in lazy solitude, shut out from the world, and unused to discuss anything, I do think it only conscientious and honourable that he should have a fair and distinct view of the matter in all its bearings submitted to him before he indolently incurs what may prove the worst danger he was ever involved in.'

So Lady Knollys argued, with feminine energy, and I must confess, with a good deal of the repetition which I have sometimes observed in logicians of my own sex, and she puzzled without satisfying me.

'I don't know why I went to that room,' I said, quite frightened; 'or why I went to that press; how it happened that these papers, which we never saw there before, were the first things to strike my eye to-day.'

'What do you mean, dear?' said Lady Knollys.

'I mean this—I think I was *brought* there, and that *there* is poor papa's appeal to me, as plain as if his hand came and wrote it upon the wall.' I nearly screamed the conclusion of this wild confession.

'You are nervous, my darling; your bad nights have worn you out. Let us go out; the air will do you good; and I do assure you that you will very soon see that we are quite right, and rejoice conscientiously that you have acted as you did.'

But I was not to be satisfied, although my first vehemence was quieted. In my prayers that night my conscience upbraided me. When I lay down in bed my nervousness returned fourfold. Everybody at all nervously excitable has suffered some time or another by the appearance of ghastly features presenting themselves in every variety of contortion, one after another, the moment the eyes are closed. This night my dear father's face troubled me—sometimes white and sharp as ivory, sometimes strangely transparent like glass, sometimes all hanging in cadaverous folds, always with the same unnatural expression of diabolical fury.

From this dreadful vision I could only escape by sitting up and staring at the light. At length, worn out, I dropped asleep, and in a dream I distinctly heard papa's voice say sharply outside the bed-curtain:—'Maud, we shall be late at Bartram-Haugh.'

And I awoke in a horror, the walls, as it seemed, still ringing with the summons, and the speaker, I fancied, standing at the other side of the curtain.

A miserable night I passed. In the morning, looking myself like a ghost, I stood in my night-dress by Lady Knollys' bed.

'I have had my warning,' I said. 'Oh, Cousin Monica, papa has been with me, and ordered me to Bartram-Haugh; and go I will.'

She stared in my face uncomfortably, and then tried to laugh the matter off; but I know she was troubled at the strange state to which agitation and suspense had reduced me.

'You're taking too much for granted, Maud,' said she; 'Silas Ruthyn, most likely, will refuse his consent, and insist on your going to Bartram-Haugh.'

'Heaven grant!' I exclaimed; 'but if he doesn't, it is all the same to me, go I will. He may turn me out, but I'll go, and try to expiate the breach of faith that I fear is so horribly wicked.'

We had several hours still to wait for the arrival of the post.

For both of us the delay was a suspense; for me an almost agonising one. At length, at an unlooked-for moment, Branston did enter the room with the post-bag. There was a large letter, with the Feltram post-mark, addressed to Lady Knollys—it was Doctor Bryerly's despatch; we read it together. It was dated on the day before, and its purport was thus:—

'RESPECTED MADAM,—I this day saw Mr. Silas Ruthyn at Bartram-Haugh, and he peremptorily refuses, on any terms, to vacate the guardianship, or to consent to Miss Ruthyn's residing anywhere but under his own immediate care. As he bases his refusal, first upon a conscientious difficulty, declaring that he has no right, through fear of personal contingencies, to abdicate an office imposed in so solemn a way, and so naturally devolving on him as only brother to the deceased; and secondly upon the effect such a withdrawal, at the instance of the acting trustee, would have upon his own character, amounting to a public self-condemnation; and as he refused to discuss these positions with me, I could make no way whatsoever with him. Finding, therefore, that his mind was quite made up, after a short time I took my leave. He mentioned that preparations for his niece's reception are being completed, and that he will send for her in a few days; so that I think it will be advisable that I should go down to Knowl, to assist Miss Ruthyn with any advice she may require before her departure, to discharge servants, get inventories made, and provide for the care of the place and grounds during her minority.

'I am, respected Madam, yours truly,

'HANS E. BRYERLY.'

I can't describe to you how chapfallen and angry my cousin looked. She sniffed once or twice, and then said, rather bitterly, in a subdued tone:—

'Well, *now*; I hope you are pleased?'

'No, no, no; you *know* I'm not—grieved to the heart, my only friend, my dear Cousin Monica; but my conscience is at rest; you don't know what a sacrifice it is; I am a most unhappy creature.

I feel an indescribable foreboding. I am frightened; but you won't forsake me, Cousin Monica.'

'No, darling, never,' she said, sadly.

'And you'll come and see me, won't you, as often as you can?'

'Yes, dear; that is if Silas allows me; and I'm sure he will,' she added hastily, seeing, I suppose, my terror in my face. 'All I can do, you may be sure I will, and perhaps he will allow you to come to me, now and then, for a short visit. You know I am only six miles away—little more than half an hour's drive, and though I hate Bartram, and detest Silas—Yes, I *detest Silas*,' she repeated in reply to my surprised gaze—'I *will* call at Bartram—that is, I say, if he allows me; for, you know, I haven't been there for a quarter of a century; and though I never understood Silas, I fancy he forgives no sins, whether of omission or commission.'

I wondered what old grudge could make my cousin judge Uncle Silas always so hardly—I could not suppose it was justice. I had seen my hero indeed lately so disrespectfully handled before my eyes, that he had, as idols will, lost something of his sacredness. But as an article of faith, I still cultivated my trust in his divinity, and dismissed every intruding doubt with an exorcism, as a suggestion of the evil one. But I wronged Lady Knollys in suspecting her of pique, or malice, or anything more than that tendency to take strong views which some persons attribute to my sex.

So, then, the little project of Cousin Monica's guardianship, which, had it been poor papa's wish, would have made me so very happy, was quite knocked on the head, to revive no more. I comforted myself, however, with her promise to re-open communications with Bartram-Haugh, and we grew resigned.

I remember, next morning, as we sat at a very late breakfast, Lady Knollys, reading a letter, suddenly made an exclamation and a little laugh, and read on with increased interest for a few minutes, and then, with another little laugh, she looked up, placing her hand, with the open letter in it, beside her tea-cup.

'You'll not guess whom I've been reading about,' said she, with her head the least thing on one side, and an arch smile.

I felt myself blushing—cheeks, forehead, even down to the tips of my fingers. I anticipated the name I was to hear. She looked very much amused. Was it possible that Captain Oakley was married?

'I really have not the least idea,' I replied, with that kind of overdone carelessness which betrays us.

'No, I see quite plainly you have not; but you can't think how prettily you blush,' answered she, very much diverted.

'I really don't care,' I replied, with some little dignity, and blushing deeper and deeper.

'Will you make a guess?' she asked.

'I *can't* guess.'

'Well, shall I tell you?'

'Just as you please.'

'Well, I will—that is, I'll read a page of my letter, which tells it all. Do you know Georgina Fanshawe?' she asked.

'Lady Georgina? No.'

'Well, no matter; she's in Paris now, and this letter is from her, and she says—let me see the place—"Yesterday, what do you think?—quite an apparition!—you shall hear. My brother Craven yesterday insisted on my accompanying him to Le Bas' shop in that odd little antique street near the Grève; it is a wonderful old curiosity shop. I forget what they call them here. When we went into this place it was very nearly deserted, and there were so many curious things to look at all about, that for a minute or two I did not observe a tall woman, in a grey silk and a black velvet mantle, and quite a nice new Parisian bonnet. You will be *charmed*, by-the-by, with the new shape—it is only out three weeks, and is quite *indescribably* elegant, *I* think, at least. They have them, I am sure, by this time at Molnitz's, so I need say no more. And now that I am on this subject of dress, I have got your lace: and I think you will be very ungrateful if you are not *charmed* with it." Well, I need not read all that—here is the rest;' and she read—

'"But you'll ask about my mysterious *dame* in the new bonnet and velvet mantle: she was sitting on a stool at the counter, not

buying, but evidently selling a quantity of stones and trinkets which she had in a card-box, and the man was picking them up one by one, and, I suppose, valuing them. I was near enough to see such a darling little pearl cross, with at least half a dozen really good pearls in it, and had begun to covet them for my set, when the lady glanced over my shoulder, and she knew me—in fact, we knew one another—and who do you think she was? Well—you'll not guess in a week, and I can't wait so long; so I may as well tell you at once—she was that horrid old Mademoiselle Blassemare whom you pointed out to me at Elverston; and I never forgot her face since—nor she, it seems, mine, for she turned away very quickly, and when I next saw her, her veil was down.''

'Did not you tell me, Maud, that you had lost your pearl cross while that dreadful Madame de la Rougierre was here?'

'Yes; but——'

'I know; but what has she to do with Mademoiselle de Blassemare, you were going to say—they are one and the same person.'

'Oh, I perceive,' answered I, with that dim sense of danger and dismay with which one hears suddenly of an enemy of whom one has lost sight for a time.

'I'll write and tell Georgie to buy that cross. I wager my life it is yours,' said Lady Knollys, firmly.

The servants, indeed, made no secret of their opinion of Madame de la Rougierre, and frankly charged her with a long list of larcenies. Even Anne Wixted, who had enjoyed her barren favour while the gouvernante was here, hinted privately that she had bartered a missing piece of lace belonging to me with a gipsy pedlar, for French gloves and an Irish poplin.

'And so surely as I find it is yours, I'll set the police in pursuit.'

'But you must not bring me into court,' said I, half amused and half alarmed.

'No occasion, my dear; Mary Quince and Mrs. Rusk can prove it perfectly.'

'And why do you dislike her so very much?' I asked

Cousin Monica leaned back in her chair, and searched the

cornice from corner to corner with upturned eyes for the reason, and at last laughed a little, amused at herself.

'Well, really, it is not easy to define, and, perhaps, it is not quite charitable; but I know I hate her, and I know, you little hypocrite, you hate her as much as I;' and we both laughed a little.

'But you must tell me all you know of her history.'

'Her history?' echoed she. 'I really know next to nothing about it; only that I used to see her sometimes about the place that Georgina mentions, and there were some unpleasant things said about her; but you know they may be all lies. The worst I *know* of her is her treatment of you, and her robbing the desk'—(Cousin Monica always called it her *robbery*)—'and I think that's enough to hang her. Suppose we go out for a walk?'

So together we went, and I resumed about Madame; but no more could I extract—perhaps there was not much more to hear.

CHAPTER XXX.

ON THE ROAD.

ALL at Knowl was indicative of the break-up that was so near at hand. Doctor Bryerly arrived according to promise. He was in a whirl of business all the time. He and Mr. Danvers conferred about the management of the estate. It was agreed that the grounds and gardens should be let, but not the house, of which Mrs. Rusk was to take the care. The gamekeeper remained in office, and some other out-door servants. But the rest were to go, except Mary Quince, who was to accompany me to Bartram-Haugh as my maid.

'Don't part with Quince,' said Lady Knollys, peremptorily 'they'll want you, but *don't*.'

She kept harping on this point, and recurred to it half a dozen times every day

'They'll say, you know, that she is not fit for a lady's maid, as she certainly is *not*, if it in the least signified in such a wilderness as Bartram-Haugh; but she is attached, trustworthy, and honest; and those are qualities valuable everywhere, especially in a solitude. Don't allow them to get you a wicked young French milliner in her stead.'

Sometimes she said things that jarred unpleasantly on my nerves, and left an undefined sense of danger. Such as:—

'I know she's true to you, and a good creature; but is she shrewd enough?'

Or, with an anxious look:—

'I hope Mary Quince is not easily frightened.'

Or, suddenly:—

'Can Mary Quince write, in case you were ill?'

Or,

'Can she take a message exactly?'

Or,

'Is she a person of any enterprise and resource, and cool in an emergency?'

Now, these questions did not come all in a string, as I write them down here, but at long intervals, and were followed quickly by ordinary talk; but they generally escaped from my companion after silence and gloomy thought; and though I could extract nothing more defined than these questions, yet they seemed to me to point at some possible danger contemplated in my good cousin's dismal ruminations.

Another topic that occupied my cousin's mind a good deal was obviously the larceny of my pearl cross. She made a note of the description furnished by the recollection, respectively, of Mary Quince, Mrs. Rusk, and myself. I had fancied her little vision of the police was no more than the result of a momentary impulse; but really, to judge by her methodical examinations of us, I should have fancied that she had taken it up in downright earnest.

Having learned that my departure from Knowl was to be so very soon, she resolved not to leave me before the day of my journey to Bartram-Haugh; and as day after day passed by, and

the hour of our leave-taking approached, she became more and more kind and affectionate. A feverish and sorrowful interval it was to me.

Of Doctor Bryerly, though staying in the house, we saw almost nothing, except for an hour or so at tea-time. He breakfasted very early, and dined solitarily, and at uncertain hours, as business permitted.

The second evening of his visit, Cousin Monica took occasion tc introduce the subject of his visit to Bartram-Haugh.

'You saw him, of course?' said Lady Knollys.

'Yes, he saw me; he was not well. On hearing who I was, he asked me to go to his room, where he sat in a silk dressing-gown and slippers.'

'About business principally,' said Cousin Monica, laconically.

'That was despatched in very few words; for he was quite resolved, and placed his refusal upon grounds which it was difficult to dispute. But difficult or no, mind you, he intimated that he would hear nothing more on the subject—so that was closed.'

'Well; and what is his religion now?' inquired she, irreverently.

'We had some interesting conversation on the subject. He leans much to what we call the doctrine of correspondents. He is read rather deeply in the writings of Swedenborg, and seemed anxious to discuss some points with one who professes to be his follower. To say truth, I did not expect to find him either so well read or so deeply interested in the subject.'

'Was he angry when it was proposed that he should vacate the guardianship?'

'Not at all. Contrariwise, he said he had at first been so minded himself. His years, his habits, and something of the unfitness of the situation, the remoteness of Bartram-Haugh from good teachers, and all that, had struck him, and nearly determined him against accepting the office. But then came the views which I stated in my letter, and they governed him; and nothing could shake them, he said, or induce him to re-open the question in his own mind.'

All the time Doctor Bryerly was relating his conference with the head of the family at Bartram-Haugh my cousin commented on the narrative with a variety of little 'pishes' and sneers, which I thought showed more of vexation than contempt.

I was glad to hear all that Doctor Bryerly related. It gave me a kind of confidence; and I experienced a momentary reaction. After all, could Bartram-Haugh be more lonely than I had found Knowl? Was I not sure of the society of my Cousin Millicent, who was about my own age? Was it not quite possible that my sojourn in Derbyshire might turn out a happy though very quiet remembrance through all my after-life? Why should it not? What time or place would be happy if we gave ourselves over to dismal imaginations?

So the summons reached me from Uncle Silas. The hours at Knowl were numbered.

The evening before I departed I visited the full-length portrait of Uncle Silas, and studied it for the last time carefully, with deep interest, for many minutes; but with results vaguer than ever.

With a brother so generous and so wealthy, always ready to help him forward; with his talents; with his lithe and gorgeous beauty, the shadow of which hung on that canvas—what might he not have accomplished? whom might he not have captivated? And yet where and what was he? A poor and shunned old man, occupying a lonely house and place that did not belong to him, married to degradation, with a few years of suspected and solitary life before him, and then swift oblivion his best portion.

I gazed on the picture, to fix it well and vividly in my remembrance. I might still trace some of its outlines and tints in its living original, whom I was next day to see for the first time in my life.

So the morning came—my last for many a day at Knowl—a day of partings, a day of novelty and regrets. The travelling carriage and post horses were at the door. Cousin Monica's carriage had just carried her away to the railway. We had embraced with tears; and her kind face was still before me, and her words of comfort and promise in my ears. The early sharp-

ness of morning was still in the air; the frosty dew still glistened on the window-panes. We had made a hasty breakfast, my share of which was a single cup of tea. The aspect of the house how strange! Uncarpeted, uninhabited, doors for the most part locked, all the servants but Mrs. Rusk and Branston departed. The drawing-room door stood open, and a charwoman was washing the bare floor. I was looking my last—for who could say how long?—on the old house, and lingered. The luggage was all up. I made Mary Quince get in first, for every delay was precious; and now the moment was come. I hugged and kissed Mrs. Rusk in the hall.

'God bless you, Miss Maud, darling. You must not fret; mind, the time won't be long going over—*no* time at all; and you'll be bringing back a fine young gentleman—who knows? as great as the Duke of Wellington, for your husband; and I'll take the best of care of everything, and the birds and dogs, till you come back; and I'll go and see you and Mary, if you'll allow, in Derbyshire;' and so forth.

I got into the carriage, and bid Branston, who shut the door, good-bye, and kissed hands to Mrs. Rusk, who was smiling and drying her eyes and courtesying on the hall-door steps. The dogs, who had started gleefully with the carriage, were called back by Branston, and driven home, wondering and wistful, looking back with ears oddly cocked and tails dejected. My heart thanked them for their kindness, and I felt like a stranger, and very desolate.

It was a bright, clear morning. It had been settled that it was not worth the trouble changing from the carriage to the railway for sake of five-and-twenty miles, and so the entire journey of sixty miles was to be made by the post road—the pleasantest travelling, if the mind were free. The grander and more distant features of the landscape we may see well enough from the window of the railway-carriage; but it is the foreground that interests and instructs us, like a pleasant gossiping history; and *that* we had, in old days, from the post-chaise window. It was more than travelling picquet. Something of all conditions of life

—luxury and misery—high spirits and low;—all sorts of costume, livery, rags, millinery; faces buxom, faces wrinkled, faces kind, faces wicked;—no end of interest and suggestion, passing in a procession silent and vivid, and all in their proper scenery. The golden corn-sheafs—the old dark-alleyed orchards, and the high streets of antique towns. There were few dreams brighter, few books so pleasant.

We drove by the dark wood—it always looked dark to me—where the 'mausoleum' stands—where my dear parents both lay now. I gazed on its sombre masses not with a softened feeling, but a peculiar sense of pain, and was glad when it was quite past.

All the morning I had not shed a tear. Good Mary Quince cried at leaving Knowl; Lady Knollys' eyes were not dry as she kissed and blessed me, and promised an early visit; and the dark, lean, energetic face of the housekeeper was quivering, and her cheeks wet, as I drove away. But I, whose grief was sorest, never shed a tear. I only looked about from one familiar object to another, pale, excited, not quite apprehending my departure, and wondering at my own composure.

But when we reached the old bridge, with the tall osiers standing by the buttress, and looked back at poor Knowl—the places we love and are leaving look so fairy-like and so sad in the clear distance, and this is the finest view of the gabled old house, with its slanting meadow-lands and noble timber reposing in solemn groups—I gazed at the receding vision, and the tears came at last, and I wept in silence long after the fair picture was hidden from view by the intervening uplands.

I was relieved, and when we had made our next change of horses, and got into a country that was unknown to me, the new scenery and the sense of progress worked their accustomned effects on a young traveller who had lived a particularly secluded life, and I began to experience, on the whole, a not unpleasurable excitement.

Mary Quince and I, with the hopefulness of inexperienced travellers, began already to speculate about our proximity to Bartram-Haugh, and were sorely disappointed when we heard from

the nondescript courier—more like an ostler than a servant, who sat behind in charge of us and the luggage, and represented my guardian's special care—at nearly one o'clock, that we had still forty miles to go, a considerable portion of which was across the high Derbyshire mountains, before we reached Bartram-Haugh.

The fact was, we had driven at a pace accommodated rather to the convenience of the horses than to our impatience; and finding, at the quaint little inn where we now halted, that we must wait for a nail or two in a loose shoe of one of our relay, we consulted, and being both hungry, agreed to beguile the time with an early dinner, which we enjoyed very sociably in a queer little parlour with a bow window, and commanding, with a little garden for foreground, a very pretty landscape.

Good Mary Quince, like myself, had quite dried her tears by this time, and we were both highly interested, and I a little nervous, too, about our arrival and reception at Bartram. Some time, of course, was lost in this pleasant little parlour, before we found ourselves once more pursuing our way.

The slowest part of our journey was the pull up the long mountain road, ascending zig-zag, as sailors make way against a head-wind, by tacking. I forget the name of the pretty little group of houses—it did not amount to a village—buried in trees, where we got our *four* horses and two postilions, for the work was severe. I can only designate it as the place where Mary Quince and I had our tea, very comfortably, and bought some gingerbread, very curious to look upon, but quite uneatable.

The greater portion of the ascent, when we were fairly upon the mountain, was accomplished at a walk, and at some particularly steep points we had to get out and go on foot. But this to me was quite delightful. I had never scaled a mountain before, and the ferns and heath, the pure boisterous air, and above all the magnificent view of the rich country we were leaving behind, now gorgeous and misty in sunset tints, stretching in gentle undulations far beneath us, quite enchanted me.

We had just reached the summit when the sun went down. The low grounds at the other side were already lying in cold grey

shadow, and I got the man who sat behind to point out as well as he could the site of Bartram-Haugh. But mist was gathering over all by this time. The filmy disk of the moon which was to light us on, so soon as twilight faded into night, hung high in air. I tried to see the sable mass of wood which he described. But it was vain, and to acquire a clear idea of the place, as of its master, I must only wait that nearer view which an hour or two more would afford me.

And now we rapidly descended the mountain side. The scenery was wilder and bolder than I was accustomed to. Our road skirted the edge of a great heathy moor. The silvery light of the moon began to glimmer, and we passed a gipsy bivouac with fires alight and caldrons hanging over them. It was the first I had seen. Two or three low tents; a couple of dark, withered crones, veritable witches; a graceful girl standing behind, gazing after us; and men in odd-shaped hats, with gaudy waistcoats and bright-coloured neck-handkerchiefs and gaitered legs, stood lazily in front. They had all a wild tawdry display of colour; and a group of alders in the rear made a background of shade for tents, fires, and figures.

I opened a front window of the chariot, and called to the post-boys to stop. The groom from behind came to the window.

'Are not those gipsies?' I enquired.

'Yes, please'm, them's gipsies, sure, Miss,' he answered, glancing with that odd smile, half contemptuous, half superstitious, with which I have since often observed the peasants of Derbyshire eyeing those thievish and uncanny neighbours.

CHAPTER XXXI.

BARTRAM-HAUGH.

In a moment a tall, lithe girl, black-haired, black-eyed, and, as I thought, inexpressibly handsome, was smiling, with such beautiful

rings of pearly teeth, at the window; and in her peculiar accent, with a suspicion of something foreign in it, proposing with many courtesies to tell the lady her fortune.

I had never seen this wild tribe of the human race before—children of mystery and liberty. Such vagabondism and beauty in the figure before me! I looked at their hovels and thought of the night, and wondered at their independence, and felt my inferiority. I could not resist. She held up her slim oriental hand.

'Yes, I'll hear my fortune,' I said, returning the sibyl's smile instinctively.

'Give me some money, Mary Quince. No, *not* that,' I said, rejecting the thrifty sixpence she tendered, for I had heard that the revelations of this weird sisterhood were bright in proportion to the kindness of their clients, and was resolved to approach Bartram with cheerful auguries. 'That five-shilling piece,' I insisted; and honest Mary reluctantly surrendered the coin.

So the feline beauty took it, with courtesies and 'thankees,' smiling still, and hid it away as if she stole it, and looked on my open palm still smiling; and told me, to my surprise, that there was *somebody* I liked very much, and I was almost afraid she would name Captain Oakley; that he would grow very rich, and that I should marry him; that I should move about from place to place a great deal for a good while to come. That I had some enemies, who should be sometimes so near as to be in the same room with me, and yet they should not be able to hurt me. That I should see blood spilt and yet not my own, and finally be very happy and splendid, like the heroine of a fairy tale.

Did this strange, girlish charlatan see in my face some signs of shrinking when she spoke of enemies, and set me down for a coward whose weakness might be profitable? Very likely. At all events she plucked a long brass pin, with a round bead for a head, from some part of her dress, and holding the point in her fingers, and exhibiting the treasure before my eyes, she told me that I must get a charmed pin like that, which her grandmother had given to her, and she ran glibly through a story of all the magic expended on it, and told me she could not part with it; but

its virtue was that you were to stick it through the blanket, and while it was there neither rat, nor cat, nor snake—and then came two more terms in the catalogue, which I suppose belonged to the gipsy dialect, and which she explained to mean, as well as I could understand, the first, a malevolent spirit, and the second 'a cove to cut your throat,' could approach or hurt you.

A charm like that, she gave me to understand, I must by hook or by crook obtain. She had not a second. None of her people in the camp over there possessed one. I am ashamed to confess that I actually paid her a pound for this brass pin! The purchase was partly an indication of my temperament, which could never let an opportunity pass away irrevocably without a struggle, and always apprehended 'some day or other I'll reproach myself for having neglected it!' and partly a record of the trepidations of that period of my life. At all events I had her pin, and she my pound, and I venture to say I was the gladder of the two.

She stood on the road-side bank courtseying and smiling, the first enchantress I had encountered, and I watched the receding picture, with its patches of firelight, its dusky groups and donkey carts, white as skeletons in the moonlight, as we drove rapidly away.

They, I suppose, had a wild sneer and a merry laugh over my purchase, as they sat and ate their supper of stolen poultry, about their fire, and were duly proud of belonging to the superior race.

Mary Quince, shocked at my prodigality, hinted a remonstrance.

'It went to my heart, Miss, it did. They're such a lot, young and old, all alike thieves and vagabonds, and many a poor body wanting.'

'Tut, Mary, never mind. Everyone has her fortune told some time in her life, and you can't have a good one without paying. I think, Mary, we must be near Bartram now.'

The road now traversed the side of a steep hill, parallel to which, along the opposite side of a winding river, rose the dark steeps of a corresponding upland, covered with forest that looked awful and dim in the deep shadow, while the moonlight rippled fitfully upon the stream beneath.

'It seems to be a beautiful country,' I said to Mary Quince, who was munching a sandwich in the corner, and thus appealed to, adjusted her bonnet, and made an inspection from *her* window, which, however, commanded nothing but the heathy slope of the hill whose side we were traversing.

'Well, Miss, I suppose it is; but there's a deal o' mountains—is not there?'

And so saying, honest Mary leaned back again, and went on with her sandwich.

We were now descending at a great pace. I knew we were coming near. I stood up as well as I could in the carriage, to see over the postilions' heads. I was eager, but frightened too; agitated as the crisis of the arrival and meeting approached. At last, a long stretch of comparatively level country below us, with masses of wood as well as I could see irregularly overspreading it, became visible as the narrow valley through which we were speeding made a sudden bend.

Down we drove, and now I did perceive a change. A great grass-grown park-wall, overtopped with mighty trees; but still on and on we came at a canter that seemed almost a gallop. The old grey park wall flanking us at one side, and a pretty pastoral hedgerow of ash-trees, irregularly on the other.

At last the postilions began to draw bridle, and at a slight angle, the moon shining full upon them, we wheeled into a wide semicircle formed by the receding park walls, and halted before a great fantastic iron gate, and a pair of tall fluted piers, of white stone, all grass-grown and ivy-bound, with great cornices, surmounted with shields and supporters, the Ruthyn bearings washed by the rains of Derbyshire for many a generation of Ruthyns, almost smooth by this time, and looking bleached and phantasmal, like giant sentinels, with each a hand clasped in his comrade's, to bar our passage to the enchanted castle—the florid tracery of the iron gate showing like the draperies of white robes hanging from their extended arms to the earth.

Our courier got down and shoved the great gate open, and we entered, between sombre files of magnificent forest trees, one of

those very broad straight avenues whose width measures the front of the house. This was all built of white stone, resembling that of Caen, which parts of Derbyshire produce in such abundance.

So this was Bartram, and here was Uncle Silas. I was almost breathless as I approached. The bright moon shining full on the white front of the old house revealed not only its highly decorated style, its fluted pillars and doorway, rich and florid carving, and balustraded summit, but also its stained and moss-grown front. Two giant trees, overthrown at last by the recent storm, lay with their upturned roots, and their yellow foliage still flickering on the sprays that were to bloom no more, where they had fallen, at the right side of the court-yard, which, like the avenue, was studded with tufted weeds and grass.

All this gave to the aspect of Bartram a forlorn character of desertion and decay, contrasting almost awfully with the grandeur of its proportions and richness of its architecture.

There was a ruddy glow from a broad window in the second row, and I thought I saw some one peep from it and disappear; at the same moment there was a furious barking of dogs, some of whom ran scampering into the court-yard from a half-closed side door; and amid their uproar, the bawling of the man in the back seat, who jumped down to drive them off, and the crack of the postilions' whips, who struck at them, we drew up before the lordly door-steps of this melancholy mansion.

Just as our attendant had his hand on the knocker the door opened, and we saw, by a not very brilliant candle-light, three figures—a shabby little old man, thin, and very much stooped, with a white cravat, and looking as if his black clothes were too large, and made for some one else, stood with his hand upon the door; a young, plump, but very pretty female figure, in unusually short petticoats, with fattish legs, and nice ankles, in boots, stood in the centre; and a dowdy maid, like an old charwoman, behind her.

The household paraded for welcome was not certainly very brilliant. Amid the riot the trunks were deliberately put down by our attendant, who kept shouting to the old man at the door.

and to the dogs in turn; and the old man was talking and pointing stiffly and tremulously, but I could not hear what he said.

'Was it possible—could that mean-looking old man be Uncle Silas?'

The idea stunned me; but I almost instantly perceived that he was much too small, and I was relieved, and even grateful. It was certainly an odd mode of procedure to devote primary attention to the trunks and boxes, leaving the travellers still shut up in the carriage, of which they were by this time pretty well tired. I was not sorry for the reprieve, however: being nervous about first impressions, and willing to defer mine, I sate shyly back, peeping at the candle and moonlight picture before me, myself unseen.

'Will you tell—yes or no—is my cousin in the coach?' screamed the plump young lady, stamping her stout black boot, in a momentary lull.

Yes, I was there, sure.

'And why the puck don't you let her out, you stupe, you?'

'Run down, Giblets, you never do nout without driving, and let Cousin Maud out. You're very welcome to Bartram.' This greeting was screamed at an amazing pitch, and repeated before I had time to drop the window, and say 'thank you.' 'I'd a let you out myself—there's a good dog, you would na' bite Cousin' (the parenthesis was to a huge mastiff, who thrust himself beside her, by this time quite pacified)—'only I daren't go down the steps, for the governor said I shouldn't.'

The venerable person who went by the name of Giblets had by this time opened the carriage door, and our courier, or 'boots'—he looked more like the latter functionary—had lowered the steps, and in greater trepidation than I experienced when in after-days I was presented to my sovereign, I glided down, to offer myself to the greeting and inspection of the plain-spoken young lady who stood at the top of the steps to receive me.

She welcomed me with a hug and a hearty buss, as she called that salutation, on each cheek, and pulled me into the hall, and was evidently glad to see me.

'And you're tired a bit, I warrant; and who 's the old 'un, who?' she asked eagerly, in a stage whisper, which made my ear numb for five minutes after. 'Oh, oh, the maid! and a precious old 'un—ha, ha, ha! But lawk! how grand she is, with her black silk cloak and crape, and I only in twilled cotton, and rotten old Coburg for Sundays. Odds! it's a shame; but you'll be tired, you will. It's a smartish pull, they do say, from Knowl. I know a spell of it, only so far as the "Cat and Fiddle," near the Lunnon-road. Come up, will you? Would you like to come in first and talk a bit wi' the governor? Father, you know, he's a bit silly, he is, this while.' I found that the phrase meant only *bodily* infirmity. 'He took a pain o' Friday, newralgie—something or other he calls it—rheumatics it is when it takes old "Giblets" there; and he's sitting in his own room; or maybe you'd like better to come to your bedroom first, for it is dirty work travelling, they do say.'

Yes; I preferred the preliminary adjustment. Mary Quince was standing behind me; and as my voluble kinswoman talked on, we had each ample time and opportunity to observe the personnel of the other; and she made no scruple of letting me perceive that she was improving it, for she stared me full in the face, taking in evidently feature after feature; and she felt the material of my mantle pretty carefully between her finger and thumb, and manually examined my chain and trinkets, and picked up my hand as she might a glove, to con over my rings.

I can't say, of course, exactly what impression I may have produced on her. But in my cousin Milly I saw a girl who looked younger than her years, plump, but with a slender waist, with light hair, lighter than mine, and very blue eyes, rather round; on the whole very good-looking. She had an odd swaggering walk, a toss of her head, and a saucy and imperious, but rather good-natured and honest countenance. She talked rather loud, with a good ringing voice, and a boisterous laugh when it came.

If *I* was behind the fashion, what would Cousin Monica have thought of her? She was arrayed, as she had stated, in black twilled cotton expressive of her affliction; but it was made almost

as short in the skirt as that of the prints of the Bavarian broom girls. She had white cotton stockings, and a pair of black leather boots, with leather buttons, and, for a lady, prodigiously thick soles, which reminded me of the navvy boots I had so often admired in *Punch*. I must add that the hands with which she assisted her scrutiny of my dress, though pretty, were very much sunburnt indeed.

'And what's *her* name?' she demanded, nodding to Mary Quince, who was gazing on her awfully, with round eyes, as an inland spinster might upon a whale beheld for the first time.

Mary courtesied, and I answered.

'Mary Quince,' she repeated. 'You're welcome, Quince. What shall I call her? I've a name for all o' them. Old Giles there, is Giblets. He did not like it first, but he answers quick enough now; and Old Lucy Wyat there,' nodding toward the old woman, 'is Lucia de l'Amour.' A slightly erroneous reading of Lammermoor, for my cousin sometimes made mistakes, and was not much versed in the Italian opera. 'You know it's a play, and I call her L'Amour for shortness;' and she laughed hilariously, and I could not forbear joining; and, winking at me, she called aloud, 'L'Amour.'

To which the crone, with a high-cauled cap, resembling Mother Hubbard, responded with a courtesy and 'Yes, 'm.'

'Are all the trunks and boxes took up?'

They were.

'Well, we'll come now; and what shall I call you, Quince? Let me see.'

'According to your pleasure, Miss,' answered Mary, with dignity, and a dry courtesy.

'Why, you're as hoarse as a frog, Quince. We'll call you Quinzy for the present. That'll do. Come along, Quinzy.'

So my Cousin Milly took me under the arm, and pulled me forward; but as we ascended, she let me go, leaning back to make inspection of my attire from a new point of view.

'Hallo, cousin,' she cried, giving my dress a smack with her

open hand. 'What a plague do you want of all that bustle; you'll leave it behind, lass, the first bush you jump over.'

I was a good deal astounded. I was also very near laughing, for there was a sort of importance in her plump countenance, and an indescribable grotesqueness in the fashion of her garments, which heightened the outlandishness of her talk, in a way which I cannot at all describe.

What palatial wide stairs those were which we ascended, with their prodigious carved banisters of oak, and each huge pillar on the landing-place crowned with a shield and carved heraldic supporters; florid oak panelling covered the walls. But of the house I could form no estimate, for Uncle Silas's housekeeping did not provide light for hall and passages, and we were dependent on the glimmer of a single candle; but there would be quite enough of this kind of exploration in the daylight.

So along dark oak flooring we advanced to my room, and I had now an opportunity of admiring, at my leisure, the lordly proportions of the building. Two great windows, with dark and tarnished curtains, rose half as high again as the windows of Knowl; and yet Knowl, in its own style, is a fine house. The door-frames, like the window-frames, were richly carved; the fireplace was in the same massive style, and the mantelpiece projected with a mass of very rich carving. On the whole I was surprised. I had never slept in so noble a room before.

The furniture, I must confess, was by no means on a par with the architectural pretensions of the apartment. A French bed, a piece of carpet about three yards square, a small table, two chairs, a toilet table—no wardrobe—no chest of drawers. The furniture painted white, and of the light and diminutive kind, was particularly ill adapted to the scale and style of the apartment, one end only of which it occupied, and that but sparsely, leaving the rest of the chamber in the nakedness of a stately desolation. My cousin Milly ran away to report progress to 'the Governor,' as she termed Uncle Silas.

'Well, Miss Maud, I never did expect to see the like o' that! exclaimed honest Mary Quince. 'Did you ever see such a young

lady? She's no more like one o' the family than I am Law bless us! and what's she dressed like? Well, well, well!' And Mary, with a rueful shake of her head, clicked her tongue pathetically to the back of her teeth, while I could not forbear laughing.

'And such a scrap o' furniture! Well, well, well!' and the same ticking of the tongue followed.

But, in a few minutes, back came Cousin Milly, and, with a barbarous sort of curiosity, assisted in unpacking my trunks, and stowing away the treasures, on which she ventured a variety of admiring criticisms, in the presses which, like cupboards, filled recesses in the walls, with great oak doors, the keys of which were in them.

As I was making my hurried toilet, she entertained me now and then with more strictly personal criticisms.

'Your hair's a shade darker than mine—it's none the better o' that though—is it? Mine's said to be the right shade. I don't know—what do you say?'

I conceded the point with a good grace.

'I wish my hands was as white though—you do lick me there; but it's all gloves, and I never could abide 'em. I think I'll try though—they *are* very white, sure.'

'I wonder which is the prettiest, you or me? *I* don't know, *I*'m sure—which do *you* think?'

I laughed outright at this challenge, and she blushed a little. and for the first time seemed for a moment a little shy.

'Well, you *are* a half an inch longer than me, I think—don't you?'

I was fully an inch taller, so I had no difficulty in making the proposed admission.

'Well, you do look handsome! doesn't she, Quinzy, lass? but your frock comes down almost to your heels—it does.'

And she glanced from mine to hers, and made a little kick up with the heel of the navvy boot to assist her in measuring the comparative distance.

'Maybe mine's a thought too short?' she suggested. 'Who's

there? Oh! it's you, is it?' she cried, as Mother Hubbard appeared at the door. 'Come in, L'Amour—don't you know, lass, you're always welcome?'

She had come to let us know that Uncle Silas would be happy to see me whenever I was ready; and that my cousin Millicent would conduct me to the room where he awaited me.

In an instant all the comic sensations awakened by my singular cousin's eccentricities vanished, and I was thrilled with awe. I was about to see in the flesh—faded, broken, aged, but still identical—that being who had been the vision and the problem of so many years of my short life.

CHAPTER XXXII.

UNCLE SILAS.

I THOUGHT my odd cousin was also impressed with a kind of awe, though different in degree from mine, for a shade overcast her face, and she was silent as we walked side by side along the gallery, accompanied by the crone who carried the candle which lighted us to the door of that apartment which I may call Uncle Silas's presence chamber.

Milly whispered to me as we approached—

'Mind how you make a noise; the governor's as sharp as a weasel, and nothing vexes him like that.'

She was herself toppling along on tiptoe. We paused at a door near the head of the great staircase, and L'Amour knocked timidly with her rheumatic knuckes.

A voice, clear and penetrating, from within summoned us to enter. The old woman opened the door, and the next moment I was in the presence of Uncle Silas.

At the far end of a handsome wainscoted room, near the hearth in which a low fire was burning, beside a small table on which stood four waxlights, in tall silver candlesticks, sat a singular-looking old man.

The dark wainscoting behind him, and the vastness of the room, in the remoter parts of which the light which fell strongly upon his face and figure expended itself with hardly any effect, exhibited him with the forcible and strange relief of a finely painted Dutch portrait. For some time I saw nothing but him.

A face like marble, with a fearful monumental look, and, for an old man, singularly vivid strange eyes, the singularity of which rather grew upon me as I looked; for his eyebrows were still black, though his hair descended from his temples in long locks of the purest silver and fine as silk, nearly to his shoulders.

He rose, tall and slight, a little stooped, all in black, with an ample black velvet tunic, which was rather a gown than a coat, with loose sleeves, showing his snowy shirt some way up the arm, and a pair of wrist buttons, then quite out of fashion, which glimmered aristocratically with diamonds.

I know I can't convey in words an idea of this apparition, drawn as it seemed in black and white, venerable, bloodless, fiery-eyed, with its singular look of power, and an expression so bewildering—was it derision, or anguish, or cruelty, or patience?

The wild eyes of this strange old man were fixed upon me as he rose; an habitual contraction, which in certain lights took the character of a scowl, did not relax as he advanced toward me with his thin-lipped smile. He said something in his clear, gentle, but cold voice, the import of which I was too much agitated to catch, and he took both my hands in his, welcomed me with a courtly grace which belonged to another age, and led me affectionately, with many inquiries which I only half comprehended, to a chair near his own.

'I need not introduce my daughter; she has saved me that mortification. You'll find her, I believe, good-natured and affectionate; *au reste*, I fear a very rustic Miranda, and fitted rather for the society of Caliban than of a sick old Prospero. Is it not so, Millicent?'

The old man paused sarcastically for an answer, with his eyes fixed severely on my odd cousin, who blushed and looked uneasily to me for a hint.

'I don't know who they be—neither one nor t'other.'

'Very good, my dear,' he replied, with a little mocking bow 'You see, my dear Maud, what a Shakspearean you have got for a cousin. It's plain, however, she has made acquaintance with some of our dramatists: she has studied the rôle of *Miss Hoyden* so perfectly.'

It was not a reasonable peculiarity of my uncle that he resented, with a good deal of playful acrimony, my poor cousin's want of education, for which, if he were not to blame, certainly neither was she.

'You see her, poor thing, a result of all the combined disadvantages of want of refined education, refined companionship, and, I fear, naturally, of refined tastes; but a sojourn at a good French conventual school will do wonders, and that I hope to manage by-and-by. In the meantime we jest at our misfortunes, and love one another, I hope, cordially.'

He extended his thin, white hand with a chilly smile towards Milly, who bounced up, and took it with a frightened look; and he repeated, holding her hand rather slightly I thought, 'Yes, I hope, very cordially,' and then turning again to me, he put it over the arm of his chair, and let it go, as a man might drop something he did not want from a carriage window.

Having made this apology for poor Milly, who was plainly bewildered, he passed on, to her and my relief, to other topics, every now and then expressing his fears that I was fatigued, and his anxiety that I should partake of some supper or tea; but these solicitudes somehow seemed to escape his remembrance almost as soon as uttered; and he maintained the conversation, which soon degenerated into a close, and to me a painful examination, respecting my dear father's illness and its symptoms, upon which I could give no information, and his habits, upon which I could.

Perhaps he fancied that there might be some family predisposition to the organic disease of which his brother died, and that his questions were directed rather to the prolonging of his own life than to the better understanding of my dear father's death.

How little was there left to this old man to make life desirable, and yet how keenly, I afterwards found, he clung to it. Have we not all of us seen those to whom life was not only *undesirable*, but positively painful—a mere series of bodily torments, yet hold to it with a desperate and pitiable tenacity—old children or young, it is all the same.

See how a sleepy child will put off the inevitable departure for bed. The little creature's eyes blink and stare, and it needs constant jogging to prevent his nodding off into the slumber which nature craves. His waking is a pain; he is quite worn out, and peevish, and stupid, and yet he implores a respite, and deprecates repose, and vows he is not sleepy, even to the moment when his mother takes him in her arms, and carries him, in a sweet slumber, to the nursery. So it is with us old children of earth and the great sleep of death, and nature our kind mother. Just so reluctantly we part with consciousness, the picture is, even to the last, so interesting; the bird in the hand, though sick and moulting, so inestimably better than all the brilliant tenants of the bush. We sit up, yawning, and blinking, and stupid, the whole scene swimming before us, and the stories and music humming off into the sound of distant winds and waters. It is not time yet; we are not fatigued; we are good for another hour still, and so protesting against bed, we falter and drop into the dreamless sleep which nature assigns to fatigue and satiety.

He then spoke a little eulogy of his brother, very polished, and, indeed, in a kind of way, eloquent. He possessed in a high degree that accomplishment, too little cultivated, I think, by the present generation, of expressing himself with perfect precision and fluency. There was, too, a good deal of slight illustrative quotation, and a sprinkling of French flowers, over his conversation, which gave to it a character at once elegant and artificial. It was all easy, light, and pointed, and being quite new to me, had a wonderful fascination.

He then told me that Bartram was the temple of liberty, that the health of a whole life was founded in a few years of youth, air, and exercise, and that accomplishments, at least, if not edu-

cation, should wait upon health. Therefore, while at Bartram, I should dispose of my time quite as I pleased, and the more I plundered the garden and gipsied in the woodlands, the better.

Then he told me what a miserable invalid he was, and how the doctors interfered with his frugal tastes. A glass of beer and a mutton chop—his ideal of a dinner—he dared not touch. They made him drink light wines, which he detested, and live upon those artificial abominations all liking for which vanishes with youth.

There stood on a side-table, in its silver coaster, a long-necked Rhenish bottle, and beside it a thin pink glass, and he quivered his fingers in a peevish way toward them.

But unless he found himself better very soon, he would take his case into his own hands, and try the dietary to which nature pointed.

He waved his fingers toward his bookcases, and told me his books were altogether at my service during my stay; but this promise ended, I must confess, disappointingly. At last, remarking that I must be fatigued, he rose, and kissed me with a solemn tenderness, placed his hand upon what I now perceived to be a large Bible, with two broad silk markers, red and gold, folded in it—the one, I might conjecture, indicating the place in the Old, the other in the New Testament. It stood on the small table that supported the waxlights, with a handsome cut bottle of eau-de-cologne, his gold and jewelled pencil-case, and his chased repeater, chain, and seals, beside it. There certainly were no indications of poverty in Uncle Silas's room; and he said impressively—

'Remember that book; in it your father placed his trust, in it he found his reward, in it lives my only hope; consult it, my beloved niece, day and night, as the oracle of life.'

Then he laid his thin hand on my head, and blessed me, and then kissed my forehead.

'No—a!' exclaimed Cousin Milly's lusty voice. I had quite forgotten her presence, and looked at her with a little start. She was seated on a very high old-fashioned chair; she had palpably

been asleep; her round eyes were blinking and staring glassily at us; and her white legs and navvy boots were dangling in the air.

'Have you anything to remark about Noah?' enquired her father, with a polite inclination and an ironical interest.

'No—a,' she repeated in the same blunt accents; 'I didn't snore; did I? No—a.'

The old man smiled and shrugged a little at me—it was the smile of disgust.

'Good night, my dear Maud;' and turning to her, he said, with a peculiar gentle sharpness, 'Had not you better wake, my dear, and try whether your cousin would like some supper?'

So he accompanied us to the door, outside which we found L'Amour's candle awaiting us.

'I'm awful afraid of the Governor, I am. Did I snore that time?'

'No, dear; at least, I did not hear it,' I said, unable to repress a smile.

'Well, if I didn't, I was awful near it,' she said, reflectively.

We found poor Mary Quince dozing over the fire; but we soon had tea and other good things, of which Milly partook with a wonderful appetite.

'I *was* in a qualm about it,' said Milly, who by this time was quite herself again. 'When he spies me a-napping, maybe he don't fetch me a prod with his pencil-case over the head. Odd! girl, it *is* sore.'

When I contrasted the refined and fluent old gentleman whom I had just left, with this amazing specimen of young ladyhood, I grew sceptical almost as to the possibility of her being his child.

I was to learn, however, how little she had, I won't say of his society, but even of his presence—that she had no domestic companion of the least pretensions to education—that she ran wild about the place—never, except in church, so much as saw a person of that rank to which she was born—and that the little she knew of reading and writing had been picked up, in desultory half-hours, from a person who did not care a pin about her manners or decorum, and perhaps rather enjoyed her grotesqueness—

and that no one who was willing to take the least trouble about her was competent to make her a particle more refined than I saw her—the wonder ceased. We don't know how little is heritable, and how much simply training, until we encounter some such spectacle as that of my poor cousin Milly.

When I lay down in my bed and reviewed the day, it seemed like a month of wonders. Uncle Silas was always before me; the voice so silvery for an old man—so preternaturally soft; the manners so sweet, so gentle; the aspect, smiling, suffering, spectral. It was no longer a shadow; I had now seen him in the flesh. But, after all, was he more than a shadow to me? When I closed my eyes I saw him before me still, in necromantic black, ashy with a pallor on which I looked with fear and pain, a face so dazzlingly pale, and those hollow, fiery, awful eyes! It sometimes seemed as if the curtain opened, and I had seen a ghost.

I had seen him; but he was still an enigma and a marvel. The living face did not expound the past, any more than the portrait portended the future. He was still a mystery and a vision; and thinking of these things I fell asleep.

Mary Quince, who slept in the dressing-room, the door of which was close to my bed, and lay open to secure me against ghosts, called me up; and the moment I knew where I was I jumped up, and peeped eagerly from the window. It commanded the avenue and court-yard; but we were many windows removed from that over the hall-door, and immediately beneath ours lay the two giant lime trees, prostrate and uprooted, which I had observed as we drove up the night before.

I saw more clearly in the bright light of morning the signs of neglect and almost of dilapidation which had struck me as I approached. The court-yard was tufted over with grass, seldom from year to year crushed by the carriage-wheels, or trodden by the feet of visitors. This melancholy verdure thickened where the area was more remote from the centre; and under the windows, and skirting the walls to the left, was reinforced by a thick grove of nettles. The avenue was all grass-grown, except in the very centre, where a narrow track still showed the roadway. The handsome carved balustrade of the court-yard was discoloured

with lichens, and in two places gapped and broken; and the air of decay was heightened by the fallen trees, among whose sprays and yellow leaves the small birds were hopping.

Before my toilet was completed, in marched my cousin Milly. We were to breakfast alone that morning, 'and so much the better,' she told me. Sometimes the Governor ordered her to breakfast with him, and 'never left off chaffing her' till his newspaper came, and 'sometimes he said such things he made her cry,' and then he only 'boshed her more,' and packed her away to her room; but she was by chalks nicer than him, talk as he might. '*Was* not she nicer? was not she? was not she?' Upon this point she was so strong and urgent that I was obliged to reply by a protest against awarding the palm of elegance between parent and child, and declaring I liked her very much, which I attested by a kiss.

'I know right well which of us you do think's the nicest, and no mistake, only you're afraid of him; and he had no business boshing me last night before you. I knew he was at it, though I couldn't twig him altogether; but wasn't he a sneak, now, wasn't he?'

This was a still more awkward question; so I kissed her again, and said she must never ask me to say of my uncle in his absence anything I could not say to his face.

At which speech she stared at me for a while, and then treated me to one of her hearty laughs, after which she seemed happier, and gradually grew into better humour with her father.

'Sometimes, when the curate calls, he has me up—for he's as religious as six, he is—and they read Bible and prays, ho—don't they? You'll have that, lass, like me, to go through; and maybe I don't hate it; oh, no!'

We breakfasted in a small room, almost a closet, off the great parlour, which was evidently quite disused. Nothing could be homelier than our equipage, or more shabby than the furniture of the little apartment. Still, somehow, I liked it. It was a total change; but one likes 'roughing it' a little at first.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE WINDMILL WOOD.

I HAD not time to explore this noble old house as my curiosity prompted; for Milly was in such a fuss to set out for the 'blackberry dell' that I saw little more than just so much as I necessarily traversed in making my way to and from my room.

The actual decay of the house had been prevented by my dear father; and the roof, windows, masonry, and carpentry had all been kept in repair. But short of indications of actual ruin, there are many manifestations of poverty and neglect which impress with a feeling of desolation. It was plain that not nearly a tithe of this great house was inhabited; long corridors and galleries stretched away in dust and silence, and were crossed by others, whose dark arches inspired me in the distance with an awful sort of sadness. It was plainly one of those great structures in which you might easily lose yourself, and with a pleasing terror it reminded me of that delightful old abbey in Mrs. Radcliffe's romance, among whose silent staircases, dim passages, and long suites of lordly, but forsaken chambers, begirt without by the sombre forest, the family of La Mote secured a gloomy asylum.

My cousin Milly and I, however, were bent upon an open-air ramble, and traversing several passages, she conducted me to a door which led us out upon a terrace overgrown with weeds, and by a broad flight of steps we descended to the level of the grounds beneath. Then on, over the short grass, under the noble trees, we walked; Milly in high good-humour, and talking away volubly, in her short garment, navvy boots, and a weather-beaten hat. She carried a stick in her gloveless hand. Her conversation was quite new to me, and resembled very much what I would have fancied the holiday recollections of a schoolboy; and the language in which