In Trust

by Fred Merrick White, 1859-1935

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Illustrations

Chapter I

The Editor‘s Bag.

FRIDAY is a busy night in Westbury, for upon that evening some thousands of hands draw their weekly wage; Jack and Joe don clean garments, and repair to their favourite hostels, with faces clean, and gleaming with the effects of a cold-water ordeal—some of the younger men even indulge in the luxury of a shave.

There are spinning-mills and iron-foundries in Westbury, to say nothing of a rising shipping trade—for the town aforesaid boasts of one of the finest waterways in the kingdom. All day long it lies under a smoky pall; startling fires blaze up at night, so that travellers on the great northern railways see the glow painted in the sky far away in the open country.

Westbury, even in the dullest of dull times, has a prosperous air; the click-click of wooden shoes never ceases day or night. Past eleven p.m. the editor of the Westbury Chronicle, seated in his office overlooking High Street, wearily correcting proofs and cutting down superabundant „copy,“ sighs for a little quiet to concentrate his thoughts.

The bell of St. Mark‘s booms twelve upon the heavy air; below there is a roar and clatter of rushing machinery; the Chronicle has gone to press some five minutes before—Westbury will expect to find that valuable sheet upon its breakfast-table when the good people come down in the morning—telegrams had been boiled down, the last line of the last leader written, and at length Roland Thornycroft is permitted to call his soul his own.

Bur for the patter of restless feet below, there is a holy calm in the editorial sanctum; the apartment, covered with a thick carpet, its walls lined with portraits of eminent journalists, lies in deep shadow; the whole light is concentrated upon the brass-bound table, literally deluged with printed slips covered with hieroglyphics like the eccentricities of an inky spider, telegrams, and cuttings from exchanges.

With a sigh of relief, Thornycroft swept the whole mass aside, and looked up, weary, but satisfied.

The pallid face, looking more ghastly in the concentrated glow, belonged to a man of some five-and-thirty years; a negatively handsome set of features, the upper lip hidden under a flowing black moustache; the eyes, sparkling with a certain restless fire, were fearless, yet not devoid of a crafty expression, which

might equally have expressed determination or instability of character. There were lines round them, too, deeply-marked lamellae, denoting not only an undue consumption of midnight oil, but also of nervous and physical tissue in hours of relaxation. In short, Roland Thornycroft had the air of a dissipated man who carefully conceals his vices, and, truth to say, appearances were not far wide of the mark.

A locked post-bag lay before him, containing sundry letters of private interest, notes from London editors—for Thornycroft was a journalist in the best sense of the word—which bag he had left till a more convenient season.

As he was about to turn the contents out on the table, there came a tap at the door, and, without waiting for the conventional reply, the intruder entered.

„I have been expecting you," said Thornycroft, coldly. „So like you, so very like you, to worry me just now. You might have had the decency to wait till to-morrow morning."

„You said the first thing on Saturday," re-turned the new-comer, lightly. „It is the first thing on Saturday, being now twenty minutes past twelve. I suppose you have that money ready for me?"

„You suppose wrong, then. I haven't got a tenth part of it!"

The stranger whistled softly, and affected to examine one of the journalistic portraits with consuming interest.

He was little older than his companion, though in his case the ravages of dissipation were more strongly marked. His shabby dress was a ridiculous caricature of fashion; gold studs adorned a fancifully-striped shirt, a pair of dirty white gaiters stood out in vivid contrast to a pair of extremely attenuated boots; the broad nose was mantled with a fine healthy bloom—the bloom upon, or from, the rye. He might have been a travelling agent, a horse-watcher—not to use a harsher expression—inasmuch, like that fraternity, he was clean-shaved. Then you would have remarked a certain jaunty assurance, a bland, artificial self-consciousness, accompanied by much magnificent language, and at once have classed him as a fourth-rate travelling actor, in which you would have been correct.

„This is awkward," said the new-comer, still intent upon the photograph—„for you, that is. So far as I am concerned, now our term here has expired, I can flit, leaving a large and sorrowing circle of acquaintances to mourn my loss. Still, with all respect, Horatio, I must have this coin. Put money in thy purse, says Will of Avon, and, by my halidame, I mean to do it."

„Possibly," Thornycroft returned. „But how, Mr. St. Clair?"

Algernon St. Clair, to give him his high-sounding pseudonym, nodded sagely.

„Thus, my friend. I could a tale unfold, but no matter. You have an employer, one Reuben Vivid, the proprietor of this valuable property. He has money, you have none; moreover, you are a trusted—shall I say trusty?—servant. I want a hundred and twelve pounds, nine shillings, and— But, again, why these sordid details? At present, as Mr. Swiveller remarked on a certain occasion, the watchword is fork."

„But supposing I decline to fork? What then?"

„Then I shall be under the painful necessity of seeking an interview with this Mr. Vivid, and giving him an insight into the private life of a certain editor who shall be nameless. It will be a dramatic scene, heightened by the uniforms, handcuffs, and other properties necessary to ensure the success of the modern

melodrama. ‹Mr. Vivid, you have an editor, you have a faithful servant! He is a forger!› How does that strike you?“

„It doesn‘t strike me at all,“ Thornycroft replied, striking his moustache with a shaking hand. „You will have to prove that.“

„Naturally. Then I proceed to discover the document, a cheque drawn upon Bumfeld‘s Bank here, indorsed by you, and paid over to me. You remember? I was to hold that cheque for three days, which I did. At the end of that time you paid me in notes, and so the cheque was not presented. Still, I hold the cheque at this moment.“

„You shall have your money to-day,“ Thornycroft replied, „though I might repudiate the whole transaction. Give me till the bank closes, at any rate. You know, confound you, how awkward it would be for me to fight the thing at present.“

„You dare not,“ St. Clair returned, coolly, „much as you would like to. There was that little affair over at Sandport, to say nothing of— But I won‘t say any more at present. Adieu, trusty comrade, adieu; and if,“ the speaker continued, more menacingly—„if you play me false, by all that‘s bad, I‘ll transport you!“

So saying, and kissing his blunt fingertips with easy grace, St. Clair left the room and the editor to his own painful thoughts.

He sat there with face buried in his hands, thinking, till the great bell of St. Mark‘s struck the hour of two. Still, think as he would, there was no way out of the difficulty. On all sides was this ghoulish cry for money; cash for this extravagance, threatening letters from irate tradesmen, and certain bills maturing, the ultimate issue of which Thornycroft dared not contemplate.

Supposing those acceptances, bearing Mr. Vivid‘s signature, found their way into his hands? What then? The contemplation was too horrible.

Fortunately, this employer, who was a rich man, lived at a considerable distance, where he devoted his time to high farming, and seldom troubled the office with his presence. Still it wanted but three days till the twenty-fifth of June, and the auditors who examined the Mercury books must discover the deficiency this time.

Only last Christmas, by sheer audacity, he emerged triumphantly from a slough of despond. But he could go through no such ordeal again, of that he felt convinced.

There was but one hope, and that a frail one.

There was in America a gentleman who sent money from time to time to be applied for the benefit of his wife and child, Mrs. and little Ethel Carr, the people with whom Thornycroft lodged.

It all came back to him as he sat thinking there; how, six years ago, Carr, the clever foreman of a great iron factory, had married Lucy Grey, the first singing chambermaid of St. Clair‘s travelling company, who visited Westbury for three months every winter. He remembered Carr‘s restless ambition, his inventions, and one more valuable than the rest, nothing short of an improvement in the process for converting the molten pig-iron into steel direct; how Carr had tried his invention one night alone at the foundry; how the manager had watched him to discover his secret, and how Carr, in a sudden spasm of rage, had struck down the wily spy with a hammer, and left him for dead.

It seemed but yesterday that the distracted murderer had crept into the Mercury office one publishing night, and confided his secret to Thornycroft; but yesterday that he had flown, like a thief in the night, never to be seen again,

though presently letters and money for the forsaken wife came from time to time under cover, and directed to the editor of the Westbury Mercury.

Latterly, some of these remittances—now not only regular, but also of considerable amount—seemed to have fallen on the rank growth of Thornycroft‘s anxiety like dew of Heaven in a dry place. By means of one of these welcome drafts, St. Clair had been repaid many a borrowed sovereign; by the same medium, more than one of these fearful bills kid been been honoured at maturity.

The process was easy enough. As the letters to Mrs. Carr always came to Thornycroft direct, he had only to open the private letter, alter certain figures therein, and substitute for the purloined draft dollar bills, easily obtainable from any Westbury money-changer, minus the amount deducted for the medium‘s private and urgent necessities.

Again, in forwarding communications to America, it was a simple matter to eradicate all incriminatory sentences, and thus give a genuine air to a dishonest transaction.

As a matter of fact, Roland Thornycroft was a born scoundrel; he had taken to criminal practices naturally. Intrigue and conspiracy were as the very air he breathed. A self-educated workhouse lad, he had lived all his life in Westbury, gradually working himself to has present responsible position from lowest rung of the ladder.

Mr. Vivid, his eccentric employer, an amiable old gentleman of sixty, who had a self-appointed mission to regenerate the mistaken tenets of agriculture, fully appreciated his editor‘s ability, and, in spite of many cranks, had sense enough to leave to more competent hands a property yielding him in itself a hand-some income. He was a man to trust, and trust implicitly; but once deceived, as the editor knew, likely to vent his spleen to the bitter end. And the exposure could not be long delayed. Monday would bring the auditors, and another week would see a bill for nearly two hundred pounds at maturity. Oh, for five hundred pounds—five-and-twenty score of sovereigns, and then for a new life, to „eschew sack, and live cleanly.“

Sighing for this impossible manifestation of Providence, Thornycroft unlocked his post-bag, and tumbled the contents upon his table. A returned article or two, three acceptances of matter worth perhaps twenty pounds—the reader smiled grimly as he figured up the amount—some slips of proof, and, lastly, a registered letter with the American stamp, addressed in a handwriting well known to Thornycroft, and welcome as the flowers of spring. With a curious spasm at his heart, he tore open the envelope with feverish haste.

It was a long letter, in a cramped, angular hand, without date or heading, even the State from whence the missive came was not mentioned. Moreover, it commenced abruptly, without the accustomed dedication.

> „I am obliged for your last letter, in which you say my wife and child are well. I thank you, sir, for your kindness through all my misfortunes, and trust that the time is at hand when I shall be able to express my personal gratitude. The time has arrived now when my most precious belongings may come to me without danger, and without suspicion. They have money enough to keep them in comfort—sufficient, in fact, to bring them here as I should like my wife to travel, considering my present prosperous

circumstances. In four years I have forwarded through you a sum equal in English money to three thousand pounds.“

„It does not seem to have been so much,“ the reader murmured, breaking off at this point. „Another blow from fortune! If Mrs. Carr goes out there, I shall naturally pay the penalty of my folly.“

Your genuine rascal never admits anything beyond folly or indiscretion when confronting his own criminal conduct.

Thornycroft read the letter to its end, and taking the enclosure between his fingers, softened the paper with a piece of dump blotting-paper, till at length the cover yielded, and there appeared a pink slip of paper, stamped in one corner, and containing such an array of figures as caused the enterprising thief to discredit the credence of his senses. The form in question was a bank draft for four thousand five hundred pounds.

A fierce thrill of delight shot up in his heart; the blood surged through every vein, until it roared in his ears like a turbulent sea. With hand trembling from this almost painful feeling of relief, he read the second letter slowly, yet not so slowly that he had to peruse it again and again, until every line became familiar.

He was free both from St. Clair and the haunting terror of those bills, that deadly nightmare under which, at times, every tortured nerve throbbed in an agony of apprehension.

„I will have it!“ he whispered, with white, dry lips—he could not have spoken to have saved his soul—„I will have it all! There is enough for that woman for the present. Carr mentioned that there is still more to come—another ten thousand at least—to be invested under my directions. It seems a lot to take, and yet I might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. I might think out some plan worthy of a novelist, which—“

He ceased to speak, for the scheme which flashed with luminous clearness into his brain was not one to be lightly confided even to the empty air. It was a scheme so wily and delicate, and yet so ridiculously simple that he laughed aloud.

Simplicity was scarcely the word for it.

„It is a master-stroke!“ he said, complacently. „One of those inspirations of genius a man has but once in a lifetime. If the place is clear down-stairs, I might try my hand now. I used to be a good compositor; strange, to say nothing of misfortunate, if my hand has forgotten all its cunning.“

He reduced both letters and envelopes to charred fragments over the lamp, and extinguishing the flame, crept silently down-stairs, and thence along a passage into „the gallery.“ Beyond lay the monster machine, still and quiet like a demon resting after labour, everything set for the special edition for the Saturday evening‘s records of sports and pastimes. A little hand-press and a galley of type was in one corner, faintly illuminated by a single gas-jet left by some careless workman.

Approaching a cupboard, Thornycroft selected a sheet of peculiarly rough paper; then, removing his coat, he set to work to produce a column of type, glancing furtively round him from time to time like a thief who fears the light.

Gradually, as he worked on, the feeble gas-jet paled before the coming morn, there was a passing clang of wooden shoes, another and another, until the whole street rang with busy footsteps. The sun, growing bolder, as he climbed

higher, peeped into the bare whitewashed room, where the worker still toiled on, till at length, with a sigh partly of weariness, wholly of contented labour done, Thornycroft pulled the first impression of his skill.

A brief glance was quite sufficient to show the success of his long endeavour. Unlocking the frame, he allowed the letters, great and small, to fall into hopeless confusion, which is known to brethren of the craft by the ominous name of „pie."

The fresh morning air smote pleasantly upon his pale face as he emerged and turned in the direction of home. It was not more than a mile he had to travel before his destination was reached, a pleasant double-fronted cottage, standing in its own garden, which was gay with summer flowers.

Amongst the dewy buds there stood a woman, still in the prime and beauty of early womanhood, though her face was shadowed with the quiet resignation of some great sorrow.

„You are very late, sir," she said, with a pleasant smile, and holding out a rose dripping with dew. „You look tired to death."

„I have heard some bad news, Mrs. Carr," Thornycroft replied, „which does not concern me alone. I am a bad hand at softening the grief of ill-tidings, but—"

He paused, with an air of mournful resignation; his face was filled with a deep, secret sympathy, so pure and unalloyed that the listener felt a sudden sense of uneasiness, a consciousness of something about to happen.

„It concerns me," she answered, meekly. „Come into the house, sir; there can be no secrets hidden from so kind a friend as you. You have heard from America, and you have heard the worst. Speak—oh, for Heaven's sake, speak! See how strong I am—how steeled to bear it all!"

She spoke with sudden passion, her limbs still as marble, the rosy warmth of her lips had faded to a dead, ashen hue. Quietly, almost reverently, Thornycroft approached her, and laid his hands upon her shoulders as a brother might have done. His voice, low and fervid, trembled with emotion.

„Don't force me to speak more plainly," he murmured. „Think the worst!"

„He is dead?" the woman asked, mechanically.

Thornycroft bowed his head, stricken with overwhelming grief.

„Yes, I see that in your eyes. Presently you shall tell me all. Now I shall ask you to leave me. Call my child, and send her to me to help me in the bitterest trial I have ever known."

Illustration:
Thornycroft laid a printer's slip upon the table.

Thornycroft laid a printer's slip upon the table, and nothing loth to escape from a scene so touching and terrible, made his way to his own room.

His eyes, now the mask had fallen, gleamed evilly, his hands trembled, a little warm, damp moisture trickled down the forehead. There was a pier glass before him, but like a detected criminal before the gaze of his cleaner fellows, he could not bring himself to face it.

A low, stifled wail arose from the apartment below; he closed the door to keep out the horrid sound.

„I had no idea it would have been like that!" he whispered, with chattering teeth; „but it is done, and there is no help for it. There is yet another part of the

piece to play, a little more delicate, perhaps, but not so trying to a poor wretch's nerves. It is a splendid plan, splendid, and cannot fail, unless I have extraordinary ill-luck. I don't think I was born to be dishonest, but with such a temptation as that before me— Anyway, out of the nettle, *Danger*, have I plucked the flower, *Safety*."

Chapter II

Drawing Together.

IMAGINE some Giant Blunderbore walking in the dead of night into old Chester, and transporting from thence two of the most picturesque houses there, and setting them down by the side of a country road by way of jest, and you have some faint idea of Ocle Street, parish of Lea, in the county of Gloucester.

These two abodes are some three hundred feet apart, joined by an ancient stone wall, which adds to the legend that once Ocle Street boasted a row of such tenements, a belief strengthened by the fact that the roadway there is formed of round cobble stones; the pavement, worn and sunken by much traffic, is concrete.

Each house is double-pointed, and adorned by a flight of steps; a profusion of beautiful carvings beautify the overhanging galles; the windows are diamond-paned and leaded, the upper portions half-timbered.

Learned authorities dispute over points of architecture, some going so far as to say that the style is that of William of Wickham, others that it shows the handiwork of Michael Angelo Buonarotti, while Inigo Jones has no lack of disciples.

The vicar of Lea swears by Bernini, the proprietor by Vanbrugh; but be the work that of Pugin or Palladio, Adam or Gibbs, the houses are both rare and cunning in point of workmanship.

The house nearest Lea has suspended over its porch a bunch of grapes, this being the village hostel—a cozy, dreamy place, with two long rooms down-stairs, known as the „*Lords and Commons*," a distinction calling for no explanation.

Behind is a noble bowling-green, bounded on one side by the celebrated orchards of Mr. Reuben Vivid—of whom more anon—and on the other side by the nursery gardens of Ambrose Niel, an individual we shall hear of presently.

As Mr. Vivid not only owned the Ocle Street property, but also lived in the adjoining house—which he had purchased on retiring from business some seven years before—he had constructed in the square hew hedge a doorway for the convenience of access to the bowling-green, a game to which he was greatly addicted.

The property had not been a profitable investment, though this was a matter of little moment, as the owner was reputed rich—worth at least a plum, as Martin Dale, the landlord of „*The Grapes*," was wont to declare with pious unction. Indeed, who else would have ventured to dispute with the Squire concerning the veracity of a certain dubious fruit in the Pomona Herefordiensis?

Though Barton Hall was a fine place, the Squire Dangerfield was a poor man, and to a certain extent he and Vivid were rivals. At one time they had been friendly enough, having finally fallen out over an uncertain apple in Knight‘s Pomona.

„A Lady‘s Finger,“ said the amateur.

„A Seek-no-Further,“ the Squire was equally positive.

As a matter of fact, it was neither, being in reality nothing more or less than a Blenheim Orange of unkindly growth.

The discussion had led to a very pretty quarrel, commencing with a learned dissertation concerning root pruning, and ending with an asseveration on the Squire‘s part that any gardener who trained his trees upon the espalier system was an idiot; to which Mr. Vivid, nothing daunted, replied that a mind capable of advocating pyramids revealed the first sign of decaying intellect.

There was no question, however, that the Squire‘s fruit was inferior to that of his antagonist. This was all the more annoying because Vivid was merely a settler—a retired manufacturer and newspaper proprietor, who had learnt everything from books. He fermented his cider, too, and boasted, in vain-glorious moments, that he had revived the old-fashioned „fox whelp“—which, as everybody knows, is absurd, „fox whelp“ being rarer than ‘47 port. Still, there was a certain mixture of „red streak“ and „strawberry-norman,“ very hard to distinguish from the superior vintage.

Nevertheless, the neophyte‘s canvas presses and iron rollers were a failure; they were not to be compared with the old stone mills—a fact that filled the Squire with pure and undiluted joy.

The amateur had a farm, also cultivated upon the latest scientific principles, whereon he grew amazing crops, which, after allowing for rent and labour, cost something like three pounds per acre to grow. Mr. Mechi could have done no more.

An attempt to cultivate hops upon a highly ingenious plan—nothing less than planting in hedgerows, and round the trunks of fruit and other trees—having failed, the new Agricola lost conceit in his farming, devoting himself latterly to cider alone, his efforts being but poorly appreciated by an ungrateful public.

He stood in his orchard one bright October afternoon, fifteen years since Thornycroft had carried that false message to Isabel Carr, presenting a picture as unlike a thriving agriculturalist as need be. A short, pursy individual, with round, shrewd face and pendulous cheeks, folded by nature like superfluous fleshy envelopes, a suit of rusty black, relieved by extremely glossy linen, and set off by a white cravat of amazing size and stiffness, he seemed more like a village shopkeeper than a country gentleman—the ultima thule of his ambition.

There was a smile upon his face—the smile of a victor in argument; he had been instructing his housekeeper, successfully, in the art of curing bacon. From the shoeing of a horse to the building of a barn, Mr. Reuben Vivid was a walking fund of information of the most original and startling kind. To interfere in other people‘s business, to chide Mrs. Giles upon the colour of her butter, or Hodge upon his erratic ploughing, was at once grateful and necessary to his existence.

And had he been asked to show a better way to do these things, he would have had no hesitation in attempting either to churn a mass or plough a furrow.

On a long platform before him lay a gleaming heap of cider fruit, yard upon yard of yellow, waxen globes, streaked and dappled in the mellow sunlight.

There was no sound to break upon his rapt meditation save the click of bowls beyond the thick hew hedge, accompanied by a subdued hum of conversation.

As one voice seemed to strike him more particularly, he turned away from the blushing fruit, and, crossing the orchard, where the dew lay under the russet shade, took out a latchkey, and passed through the little door to the level green beyond.

It was a mild and grateful afternoon; a stagnant, purple mist floated over the distant woodland, where the sycamores and ashes were ablaze; a warm moistness in the air, and a glowing sun hanging westward. Round the smooth sward were fantastic seats and arbours, cut out of thick box and yew, pillars and turrets, and impossible birds—here a peacock, there a chanticleer proclaiming the morn—oaken settles shining with age and wear. In the full sunshine, at a table formed by a fallen elm, three men were seated, watching the game, which the new-comer regarded with approval, tempered by mature criticism. He was not much of a player himself, but had he been seated in that congenial spot, discussing Homer with Parson Adams over a pot of ale, he would have contradicted the pedant in less than five minutes, though he knew no more of Greek than of the integral calculus.

The trio seated there were past the prime of life, heavy in step, and slow of speech, dressed somewhat superior to the workmen of the fields—the one with the silver hair and old clerical waistcoat being the parish clerk and shoemaker, which professions, be it remarked, invariably go together, though cobblers are not usually accounted a pious race. The second man, tall and spare, with broad, thoughtful forehead and steadfast, blue eyes, was Ambrose Niel, the florist and market gardener; and the third, a fat, jolly-looking individual, of rubicund aspect, was, as any disciple of Lavater would have speedily discerned, Martin Dale, the landlord.

Each man had before him an oaken stoop, silver rimmed and handled, rare and curious drinking cups, filled with apple juice. Martin Dale would have nothing common in his house, to disgrace a century of inn-keeping „Dale‘s of *The Grapes*.“

There was on the rustic table a jar of tobacco, and in every mouth a long clay pipe.

„It ent all on us as kips it in the proper condition,“ remarked Prout, the clerk, looking lovingly into his cup. „Three year old, do you say? Ay, and sound as the church bells. And the kernels is there likewise. I ent tasted such cider since young Squire were christened.“

„It ent made,“ Martin Dale replied, with a solemn headshake; „it‘s watered, and mixed, and iron rolled, and what not. As for me, gi‘ me a good stone mill, as brings out the flaviour. Always mek your own millin‘, as my feather and gran‘feather did afore ma.“

„And then place it in a sour cask to spoil,“ observed Mr. Vivid, approaching these bibulous Solons unheard. „Cider, indeed! Bah!“ He took up one of the quaint cups without ceremony, and, placing it to his lips, drank a little with a wry face. „I thought as much. There is your fruit ripe and ready, and what do you do with it? Leave it lying on the grass till it is half rotten? Do you keep the different sorts apart? Oh, no; they are mixed all up together—anyhow. Is it allowed to ferment properly, and make a wine? Nothing of the kind. Is it full

flavoured without sweetness, and lively without acidity? Nothing of the kind again, being hard enough to blacken the purest silver.“

He checked off these questions and answers as if he had been repeating a lesson from some invisible volume of *Magnalls Questions* or *Doctor Brenor‘s Guide to Knowledge*, whose awful wisdom so sweetens childhood‘s happy hours, sternly regarding his class meanwhile, Prout, humble in the presence of so great a parishioner, muttered servile approval of these proper sentiments. Martin Dale, his mind reverting to the ignominious failure of the iron rollers, laughed—a fat, oily, comfortable chuckle.

There was no attempt at argument. The west country mind is slow, if tenacious, and doubt is indicated by paraphrase and head-shakes worthy of Burleigh.

A lazy contentment, born of warm sunshine, and the pleasing sense of ultra-worldliness smoothed away the angles of conflict, besides which, the last speaker had paraded too many points to be grappled in one debate.

The primitive Englishman is always Conservative. The iron rollers had failed, for the present revolution was in check.

„You canna get over nature,“ Dale observed, with the slow ponderousness which gives to platitude the assimilation of wisdom, „anyway. You can tek fruit or flowers—carnations, for instance. You can‘t mek ‘em grow if they hain‘t a mind. Same as monthly roses.“

„What you lack is system,“ Mr. Vivid answered—„what you lack is originality. Where should I be at this moment if I had been contented to stand where my father stood, and his father before him? Look at the possibilities before Niel here, and the little he makes of them. Grub up all your flowers and plant strawberries—“

„And mek ‘em into cider afterwards,“ Prout chuckled. „I dunno as you med your fortune mindin‘ other folkses business, measter.“

„Better than some people who can‘t manage their own,“ Mr. Vivid replied, tartly. „You are an extremely clever fellow, Prout, but you will never pass for a Sheridan. The worst of you people is that you will learn nothing; you won‘t be taught.“

„I dunno as I wants anything more,“ said the clerk, stoutly. „I can give out the hymns with one here and there, and there ain‘t a sprier with the amens in the parish. Not as I wants to boast neither. And as to shoemakin‘ and general repairs, I yield to no man. Therefore, what more? Enough‘s as good as a feast in that station of life, et cetera.“

Mr. Vivid smiled in a superior manner in acknowledgement of the argument and his own ability to sweep away the dogmatism if occasion might arise.

Like most men who aspire to know everything, he professed a toleration for ignorance of all kinds; indeed, he would have cheerfully sat down with Prout, and demonstrated to him the correct way in which to repair a dilapidated shoe.

Ambrose Niel looked on with honest admiration; Martin Dale, still thinking of the rollers, smiling fatuously.

„I holds with no fandangles and flyin‘ in the face of Providence,“ said Niel. „Old fashions and old friends, say I. Fifty-four year, man an‘ boy, I ha‘ lived in Lea, goin‘ to church once a Sunday, and I‘ve prospered, being blessed wi‘ a good wife, and a niece brought up a lady incognito.“

„Some mystery here," Mr. Vivid observed, looking like an amiable Mephistopheles, though the tale was old when he first knew the narrator. „What do you mean by that, Niel?"

„Ten year ago," Niel commenced, solemnly, „I received a communication"—he pronounced the last word with a gravity and seriousness worthy of the occasion, much as if he was about to relate the history of an interview with royalty, at the very least—„a communication from a lawyer gentleman in London. In the epistle aforesaid, I was informed to the effect that a client passin' through the village of Lea had seen my niece—aged nine, as the letter therein stated—and was willin' when the time came to defray the expenses of a continual and general—"

„Continental and general," Vivid corrected.

„Just so, gentlemen," Niel continued, regardless of the interruption given on every occasion on which the story was related. „Such was the offer which me and my good wife, on the advice of our vicar, accepted. At the age of nine she went from uncular control, a child, pretty, but ignorant; she came back a year as was last cherry pickin', still prettier, but learned. The organ, the use of the globes, and the pianoforty was lavished on her like water, as is her very own words. I don't deny its gratifyin' to an uncle's feelings, if embarrassing, consequent of a rooted objection to shirt-sleeves at meals. But Ethel, she never see her bennyfactor in all that time, nothin' but his blessin' and a brand new pianoforty, as I can show you all to prove it."

There was a long silence each meditating upon the mystery which had been repeated, on an average, three times a week for the past ten years. It was the only romance of which Lea could boast, and one not lightly to be laid aside.

The villagers regarded the Niels—especially Ethel Carr, the niece in question—with admiration, not unmixed with awe; the farmer's daughters with a contempt not carefully disguised; while the Squire's family, who could afford to disregard public opinion, made much of Ethel, whose knowledge of French and purity of accent, to quote Mrs. Dangerfield, warranted the acquaintance, a view in which Cyril Dangerfield, the only son and heir, heartily joined.

„In my opinion," Dale observed, disclosing a vein of astonishing romance under a usually transparent nature, „you ent heerd the last on it, Ambrose. Mark my words, if the incognito don't leave the lass a fortun'! It will be a fortun'," he continued, with fresh enthusiasm, „of not less than ten thousand pound, bestowed upon her on condition of marrying a boy as have been trained up special. Incognito and special young gent will put up here; they'll order for dinner a bottle of port and a roast chicken. I seen it once at Gloucester Theyater."

„In a coach and four," Prout returned, dreamily, the sunshine and cider gently stimulating his imaginative faculties; „with a romantic account of the ceremony in the *Chronicle*. That's what they do in books."

The clerk, who, in virtue of his office, invariably acted as whipper-in to all general conversations, knocked the ashes from his pipe, and prepared to go homeward. Niel, warned by a certain crispness in the air of the need of attending to his greenhouse fires, rose also.

At this moment there walked, or rather swaggered, towards the group, a new-comer, evidently a stranger, who, raising an extremely battered white hat with a jaunty air, inquired the whereabouts of a certain Weston Hall.

„I am a friend, or perhaps I had better say an acquaintance, of Mr. Maitland," he said. „It is but a mere chance that I heard of his residence in this neighbourhood. Perhaps some of you good people know him?"

„I've heerd on him, and once I set eyes on him," Dale replied, curtly, the class of customer being by no means to his mind. „A gentleman somewhere about fifty, with a pale face and a great black moustache. Parson says he's a recloos, which is perhaps nat'ral for a gent as writes books."

The seedy individual brightened exceedingly as he listened. Under the white hat brim the glowing, drink-sodden features flushed triumphantly; with an air of deep importance he laid a grimy hand upon the breast of an exceedingly greasy frock coat, the gesture accompanied by a benignant bow of thanks. The nether garments, once apparently of a loud check pattern, had faded to a neutral tint, and were held down to battered boots by undisguised straps, showing under portions where the cloth had frayed away, till an arc was described between the ankles. Linen, if he had any, was conspicuous by its absence, though a gaudy but extremely ill-favoured handkerchief obtruded offensively from the breast-coat pocket of the aforesaid greasy coat. The large features, usually clean shaven, were blue with a dark stubbly growth, as if the jaunty stranger's finances of late were not equal to the strain of an indulgence in the luxury of a razor.

„You can't mistake the house," Prout interposed. „Kep to the main road towards Gloucester for a matter o' three mile, till you comes to Lea Bailey. If you ax there, anybody'll point out Weston Hall."

„My best thanks, worthy thane," returned the voluble stranger. „Though I am under a temporary cloud, there are times when the humble individual who now addresses you is properly appreciated by lovers of the legitimate drama. If I were to disclose my name, which pride forbids me to do, I should, I flatter myself, ahem, create a sensation!"

As he spoke, he looked towards Vivid with mingled cunning and audacity. There was a gleam of recognition in his watery eye for a moment. The latter gentleman turned away in serio-comic disgust.

„You have got your information," he said. „And having got it, go."

„Sir," replied the blighted Roscius, „never turn a hard heart to the unfortunate. I am not what I seem, but what I am. When a man's wardrobe is seized by soulless myrmidons for—for rent, it is not to be expected that he should present the same immaculate appearance as a d'Orsay. Sir, I thank you for your courtesy, and retire as only a true actor can."

He swaggered away as he had come, his face, as he reached the solitude of the road, blazing with mingled malice and cunning. His feet were sore and weary, but an inward glow, born of passion and the expectation of gratified spleen, spurred him on.

„What luck," he murmured, sobbing with a fierce delight, „what luck! Mr. Maitland! Ah, ah, Mr. Maitland! Wonder what he will say when I have the honour of presenting him to his dear old pal, Algernon St. Clair."

„Up to no good," said Dale, curtly. „He's no friend of that exclusive novel-writing gent at the Hall, I'll go bail. Though he do keep himself to hisself, they say he's a perfect gentleman."

„An old model, perhaps," Prout suggested. „I read somewhere as they writers allus copies their characters from life."

„Certainly," replied Mr. Vivid oracularly. „How otherwise? I have never seen this Mr. Maitland, much as I admire his books, and much as I should like to make his acquaintance. He has some faults of construction upon which I should be willing to set him right."

Chapter III

An Unexpected Welcome.

IN happier times—before the apple of discord had been thrown down—a shady lime-walk had connected Reuben Vivid's orchard with the Barton Hall shrubberies. The avenue in question still existed, though it was no longer used as a means of communication between the rival houses. A public footway, leading to Lea Bailey, adjoined the private road, terminating in a rising track across the meadows, and skirting some of Mr. Dangerfield's pet preserves.

Along this shady retreat St. Clair toiled painfully. He had abandoned the turnpike at the suggestion of a passing waggoner he had accosted after leaving „*The Grapes*", with the hope of discovering a shorter and pleasanter cut to Weston Hall.

The crisp, clear air fanned his bloated face, a purple sheen crowned the blazing woods, where the lace-like ashes burnt in saffron fires, a beautiful and peaceful scene filled with silent grace and loveliness; though, sooth to say, nature in her sweetest mood appealed not to the blighted tragedian, whose hungry soul yearned for more material comforts—such, for instance, as tobacco—to say nothing of its twin-sister, beer.

The jaunty swagger was still in evidence, the self-satisfied roll survived the weariness of travel and the faintness produced by long fasting.

Hope, blessed stimulant of suffering genius, lighted up his breast, for your adventurer is ever of a sanguine temperament. He cocked the battered white hat to a knowing angle as he brushed through the dewy lawn.

Back in the thick hazel hedge was a dry mass of barley straw, which had been, some days before, filled with grain as food for the pheasants, and there Algernon St. Clair sat down to refresh exhausted nature upon some scraps of bread and broken meats gathered earlier in the day's wanderings.

Talent suffering from fortune's frowns is ever entitled to the respect of a sympathetic heart, for be it remembered that many famous members of the profession have frequently been reduced to sorer straits.

He ate the sumptuous banquet with the theatrical air which suited him so well, and as he did so, there came a sound of voices from the adjacent path.

Rising from the friendly shelter of a clump of ferns, the adventurer peeped and listened. This he did, not from any pardonable curiosity, but rather that his natural disposition prompted him towards any meanness, great or small, which presented itself for the moment.

Warped by adversity, the originally pure mind of Algernon St. Clair naturally inclined, like the Heathen Chinee, to „ways that are dark, and tricks that are vain," being, also like Ah Lin, in his dealings „peculiar."

He saw a tall, fair youth, gun in hand, brushing his way through the clover. He was clad in homespun shooting-coat and knickerbockers, a cap of the like

material rested upon his crisp brown hair. Handsome and stalwart, with a blithe whistle on his lips, he approached the wayfarer‘s hiding-place, near to which was a stile, overhung by a veritable arbour of hazel and dog-rose, blushing under a perfect glory of scarlet berries.

There was upon his lips a peculiar smile, partly welcome, partly masterful superiority, the reason of which expression the watcher was unable to determine. Had he been in a position to see beyond the stile, he would have noticed another intruder—a beautiful girl, who regarded the sportsman with shy embarrassment.

She was clad from head to foot in pale gray, a large Rubens‘ hat shaded her delicate features and dreamy gray eyes. The clear pearly complexion flushed like the petals of a damask rose as she looked half boldly, half shyly into the admiring dark eyes bent on her own.

But if the listener was unconscious of this bewildering woodland vision, he had at least the advantage of oral demonstration. He was doing an underhanded action, and his spirits rose accordingly.

„You have not been to see us for months,“ said the sportsman, with a dangerous smile. Cyril Dangerfield marked the sheeny wreath of briars and autumn leaves she carried; he marked the sun behind her making a golden mesh of her shining hair. It was a fair picture, as the listening tragedian would have allowed. „Miss Ethel Carr, have you any excuse to urge for this nefarious conduct?“

Her eyes fell with the consciousness of slight confusion. A little stain of scarlet crept into the wind-swept cheeks.

„Is it so long?“ she asked. „I did not know.“

„So like a woman, to answer one question with another,“ Cyril Dangerfield laughed, laying his gun aside, and barring the way. „Come—shall I give you absolution, or do you wish to pass, you maid of ice?“

A new zest and brightness seemed to have flooded the afternoon; the orange fires in the woods gleamed with new radiance; above all, there was a delightful sense of freedom from care, an indifference to the flight of time. The scarlet berries of the nightshade, the shining bouquet of leaves were forgotten.

„What excuse shall I offer?“ Ethel Carr replied. „Or do I need one?“

„Of course you do! Think of my disconsolate relations watching for your coming from the turret like so many Sisters Anne. To say nothing of myself.“

„And your mother; she has been very anxious, doubtless?“

„The pride of some people!“ Cyril laughed, a little awkwardly. „Still,“ he continued, more gravely, „there must be some reason why you avoid us! I—I am treading on dangerous ground, but I cannot allow any estrangement to come between us when a word may be sufficient to dispel—“

Across the stile Ethel laid a hand upon his arm—a hand trembling, in spite of her attempt at firmness. The shadowy trouble in her eyes checked the ready flow of words on Cyril‘s lips.

„I had better be candid with you,“ she said, quietly. „I—I think it will be better for me not to come to Barton any more. You see, when we were younger, and, in fact, more innocent of—“

„The feelings we entertain to one another,“ Cyril interposed. „My mother, with the best intentions, has been wounding you, Ethel. We are not rich, as you know, but there is enough, and to spare. Come, confess! Has not the dear old mater confided to you her plans for my future welfare? Has she not hinted at

some impossible heiress whom I am to espouse, and thus restore the fallen greatness of a once proud house? And you, knowing the feelings I have not troubled to disguise—“

„I did not intend to convey that. But, with all the kindness extended to me by your people, I cannot forget the gulf between us.“

„Be as little of the *Housemaid‘s Companion* heroine as possible,“ Cyril implored. „Ignore my sentiments, if you will, but spare me that!“

„Don‘t make it any harder for me, Cyril,“ Ethel asked, appealingly, two round tears trembling on her eyelids. „You know I am right. Perhaps I ought not to complain, though it seems as if fate had dealt hardly with me. It is a mistake to educate people, women especially, above their station.“

„Your station,“ said Cyril, „is as it finds you.“

„You think so? But consider my birth and surroundings. My mother of respectable birth, but reduced to earn her own living by playing minor characters in a travelling theatre; my father, a clever, self-educated man, who had to fly the country with a criminal charge hanging over him. He is dead. And my mother, where is she? Whether dead or alive is a mystery. Since she sent me, a little child, to my dear friends here, we have never heard a word. And I should have grown up a simple country girl, have become a servant, probably, had it not been for this mysterious benefactor of mine, of whose very name I am ignorant. Think of that Mr. Dangerfield. Oh, your mother was kind and considerate. And she was right.“

„From your point of view,“ Cyril returned. „We are all fond of you.“

„I am afraid that latterly it is the absence which makes the heart grow fonder.“

Ethel smiled tearfully.

„I should be blind to ignore the hints thrown out touching your future, for, humble as I am, I have my share of pride.“

„They told you I was going to marry money, and free the family estates.“

„Not in so many words. Still, I concluded that was so.“

There was barely room for two against the stile, and as the impetuous young man stretched out his arm, it was not strange that it should rest at length upon Ethel‘s slender waist.

„They told you wrong,“ he said, his voice perilously low and sweet. „They told you wrong, sweetheart. I am going to marry someone, and that someone is yourself. Don‘t you know I have always loved you!“

„Always!“ Ethel murmured. „And you have known me a bare twelve months.“

She said no more. Sooth to say, there was no more to be said. In the golden age, before the generous teens give place to more sordid and earthly tens, heart is apt to go out to heart, and no sordid consideration lies like a bar sinister across the glowing shield of love‘s young dream.

In that blissful moment there was no thought for the future of Barton Hall and its fair but encumbered acres.

The sun had dropped lower in the saffron west, a deeper haze had fallen upon the silent woods, before the lovers passed onward.

Like a snake in the grass, St. Clair rose from his cramped position, and looked around with a smile of gratified self-satisfaction. It was cold, his teeth chattered a little, but there was a warmth keen, if not generous, within.

„Algernon, my beauty!“—he thus apostrophized his pleasing charms—„my fairest daisy, you are in luck! Time was when such a little comedy as I have just

witnessed would have touched my sensitive nature. But misfortune renders one sordid; trouble blunts the edge of the finest sensibilities.“

He strode on upon the grateful turf, infinitely soft and yielding to his tired feet; the aggressive hat—tilted back before this flow of generous sentiment—fixed over one eye as he continued, in a more worldly strain, „This is a rum universe—a conglomeration of paradoxes! This morning I was penniless, wanting even the price of a meal—me, who has delighted thousands by my matchless impersonation of Shaksperian character! To-night I shall sleep in clover. Fancy that girl being the daughter of my erstwhile first singing chambermaid!—fancy finding that old crank, Vivid, living in the same parish!—and, best of all, fancy finding Maitland—ah, ah!—within a stone‘s throw of them all! He won‘t care about seeing me—not that that matters much. He shall give me a dinner—some soup and sherry, followed by a pheasant and a bottle of champagne. Ah, if I hurry up, I shall be just in time to order it for six-thirty—the hour for a gentleman to dine!“

His cunning, bloodshot eyes lighted with an evil glow; a noiseless laugh shook his whole frame, rendering the red, pendulous cheeks a deeper crimson. The swagger became more obtrusive; the neutral-tinted legs moved with a poor imitation of a military strut.

At this point the path trended suddenly down to the main road, on the other side of which was a high, laurel-crowned stone wall, flanked at either end by a pair of handsome gates.

A cowherd, passing by with his white-faced, milky herd, paused to contemplate the extraordinary spectacle before him, wondering in his simple way what manner of man this stranger might be.

„I am seeking for information,“ St. Clair began, volubly. „Perhaps you can assist me, my good friend. Whereabouts here shall I find the residence of Mr. Maitland, who lives, I think, at Weston Hall?“

The rustic turned slowly to the gates, and indicated the drive beyond with a jerk of his forefinger. Verbal reply he made none; the astounding specimen of the genus man before him was, so far as he was concerned, a distinct and novel variety.

He gazed wonderingly at the white hat, jerked his thumb towards the gates again, and passed mechanically along the road.

No peri at the gates of Paradise ever looked more longingly through the glowing barrier than Algernon St. Clair down the drive at Weston Hall.

Behind one barred entrance he saw a long, neatly-gravelled sweep, shaded by hanging foliage, myrtle, and acacia, and drooping cedar, with the glimpse of a pleasant white house beyond.

Behind the other an arched walk, terminating in an old stone wall, golden and ruddy with dappled fruit, ripening ribstone and luscious pears.

It was a fair and stately domain, so severely immaculate that for a moment the wanderer hesitated to make known his presence, even when stimulated by rapt contemplation of the hearty welcome awaiting him within.

He strode down the drive with all the self-assurance he could muster, and rang the bell, which gave out a lordly and sonorous clang, startling contrast to the severe silence of the place.

A trim maid-servant, with a cool contempt she took no pains to conceal, received his name, bidding him wait in the hall till she knew her master‘s pleasure.

After a long delay, during which the unwelcome guest had ample time to contemplate his own grim contrast with oak and armour, and such elegant surroundings, the maid returned with a message that Mr. Maitland would see the gentleman if he would be good enough to step into the library.

A small and somewhat sombre apartment, lined with books from floor to ceiling, met the adventurer‘s gaze. Its solitary occupant rose as the door closed behind, and regarded the new-comer with blank politeness. With a silent gesture he motioned the other to a chair, and waited for him to speak.

„This,“ said St. Clair, in an injured tone, „is not the welcome I anticipated. Time was, ere misfortune, unsought and undeserved, overtook me, when my presence was hailed with a flattering fervour. Mr. Maitland—or, to come to the point, Mr. Thornycroft—is it peace or war?“

No muscle moved in the listener‘s face as he continued to contemplate the speaker with the air of a man who studies the habits of some eccentric and not particularly desirable animal.

Thornycroft—for he it was—had changed but little in fifteen years, save that his hair was thinner on the temples, and the furtive, hunted look had disappeared from his keen, glittering eyes.

„Really, I am at a loss to understand you, sir,“ he replied. „There is some mistake here, apparently. Unfortunately, I have not the honour of your acquaintance; and as I happen to be particularly engaged just now—“

„Don‘t put yourself out on my account, pray,“ St. Clair returned, lightly. „Hurry, my dear friend, there is none. You novelists, living in a world of your own, are apt to soar above mundane matters, a temporary abberation of memory natural under the circumstances. You do not remember me; I had almost forgotten you, when by chance one of your popular romances fell into my hands. There I recognised the master-hand of Thornycroft—there, which is more to the point, I recognised, in the lurid description of a rascally scene, an incident in the joint lives of two gentlemen who shall be nameless. It did not take me long to discover that the gentleman who wrote those popular romances under the name of Maitland was some time editor of the Westbury Mercury. Drop the mask, friend Thornycroft, the farce is played out.“

„This is an extraordinary hallucination,“ the novelist returned, gently; „a mistake on your part. I do not know you, my good fellow.“

The cowardly, truculent spirit within the rascally intruder began to fail him. He had anticipated disgust, surprise, contempt even, but this icy coldness fell like a cold veil upon the glowing coals of expectation. Certain as he was, he almost began to doubt the evidence of his senses.

„It‘s no use!“ he retorted, doggedly. „Pretty, dramatic, and all that kind of thing, only it won‘t wash, Roland Thornycroft! Shall I play another card?“

„Play the whole pack,“ Thornycroft smiled; „if you feel disposed that way.“

„Ah, ah! so, then, you defy me? This morning, not four miles from here, I encountered Reuben Vivid. So that does not stir you? Fortune also threw in my way a certain Ethel Carr, the daughter of Richard Carr, who, with your assistance, fled the country rather than face a charge of murder. You laugh. Do you imagine for a moment that I am ignorant as to the relationship subsisting between that innocent, defrauded girl and yourself?“

With true histrionic fervour, with clenched teeth, significant gestures, and marked pauses, the actor hurled this tremendous charge at the head of his whilom friend and boon companion.

„Many years ago I was acquainted with a dissolute, idle scoundrel, who had the honour of bearing your name," Thornycroft responded slowly, but with no change from his icy calm. „I owed that rascal money, and I paid him. On that occasion I told him that if he ever dared speak to me again I would break every bone in his body. I meant it then, and I mean it now. If you have any connection with that desirable individual don't hesitate to mention it."

„Not mention it!" St. Clair laughed uneasily. „Not mention it to you? And this to me, who hold your fortunes in my right hand!"

„What, dirt and all!" Thornycroft laughed. „Surely, it is a large handful. And now, you truculent, bullying, blackmailing rascal, follow me. See, this window is open; it will be better to depart this way than troubling my servants. After you, sir, and remember my time is limited."

„I don't leave these premises till I get something!" cried St. Clair, in the desperation of defeated hope. „A hundred pounds—fifty—well, twenty-five? And not much either, for a man who can work your social ruin?"

With a menacing gesture Thornycroft passed on to the garden, the now thoroughly cowed vapourer following till at length the gate was reached. Pausing to see that no curious passer-by was observing them, the owner of Weston Hall took his antagonist by the collar and waistband, and without further ceremony, pitched him over the gate into a damp and not to cleanly ditch.

„There, you rascal!" he cried, with flashing eyes and heaving chest. „Dare to put your foot on my premises again, and I will thrash you like a dog. Go your own way, and leave me to follow mine. And take that!"

Contemptuously enough, he pitched a sovereign to the frightened rascal, and without another word, turned on his heel and disappeared.

St. Clair, trembling in every limb, cowed, tattered, and mud-stained, crept from his foul bath, and shook his fist at the retreating figure with a frightful imprecation.

„You think you have done with me," he said, crying with mingled rage, and hate, and bitter disappointment, hurt in mind and body. „You might have waited, Roland Thornycroft, till I told you all I know."

His eyes fell upon the glittering coin; he spurned it scornfully with his foot—hollow, false, and theatrical to the last.

„Take your paltry gold!" he cried, wiping the tears from his eyes with the dirty pocket-handkerchief. „I would die rather than touch your money!" Here he sighed dolefully. „I would rot in a ditch, first! And yet it seems a pity to leave it there, and so— I wonder if there is a decent pub in the neighbourhood where one could get a drink and a bit of bread and cheese?"

He placed the coin in his pocket, and shuffled on, sobbing half-hysterically. The disappointment was too deep for aught but tears.

Chapter IV

Brought Together.

BEHIND Weston Hall, and trending up from a narrow gulch in which the railway runs, is Lea Bailey itself, the boundary of that once dense mass of oaks known as the Forest of Dean.

Lea Bailey, clad to its summit in foliage, has a broad shoulder, and beyond this shoulder, in startling contrast to the peaceful sylvan scene, is the Stenders Colliery and Iron Foundry, a quasi-prosperous property, purchased some years before by Reuben Vivid, with a view to establishing a revolution in the steel industry.

The attempt was, naturally, a failure. A deal of money had been sunk in those black shafts and melted in those glowing furnaces, out of which, in fortunate years, some five per cent. upon capital had been wrung.

From the summit of this hill, turning one way, could be seen a vast tract of fertile country, stretching away to a faint streak on the horizon, which was popularly supposed to be the Bristol Channel.

Looking in another direction, Mitcheldean caught the eye, the rustic landscape marked here and there by tall chimneys, and belching columns of smoke, with intervening country. At night, there was presented a picture as of a rural plain, where an invading enemy had set fire to the hamlets.

In walking from point to point, one suddenly emerges from bosky shade and moss-clad avenue into towns, grimy with smoke, and trembling with the roar of machinery; the pedestrian blunders upon them suddenly and unexpectedly. It is a land of startling contrasts, rustic and artisan living side by side, each indifferent to the pursuits of the other.

The scenery is wild and beautiful, unless you chance to lose your way by night, and then you are apt to entertain another opinion.

As I have said, the Stenders Colliery is just beyond the shoulder of Lea Bailey. It lies in a hollow basin, some seven hundred feet above Dean Road Station, on the Great Western Railway. It is belted by Scotch pines, almost surrounded by an artificial lake, filled by the never-ceasing pumps, and is, by night or in winter time, as dreary a spot as it is possible to imagine.

Such coal as is obtained is conveyed to the station below by a peculiar kind of railway, a curiosity meriting a somewhat elaborate description.

It runs straight down the hill-side, and is supported upon timber baulks, some forty feet above the foundation. The trucks are small iron boxes, connected by two endless chains, running upon steel rollers, one line up and the other line down, so that the full carriages, running down by their own impetus when released, pull the empty ones up again. The elaborate affair is controlled at the summit by an arrangement of winches and pulley-blocks, so that the motion, being necessarily slow, allows the workmen at the base ample time to empty the carriages, which is done by withdrawing a pin, and thus allowing the contents to fall into a disused quarry, from whence it is removed to the trains at Dean Road Station.

Accidents happen sometimes—a chain will break, and lives are frequently lost; occasionally, a workman, taking a short cut into Lea village, will climb down the eccentric line in preference to wending his way by the tortuous and winding path to the hamlet. This is also frequently accomplished by youthful adventurers in the daytime, but only the older and more accustomed hands dare venture after dark.

There were no houses round the Stenders for some distance, most of the hands preferring to reside in the village; while the foreman, Richard Steel, who

rarely left the immediate neighbourhood, quartered himself in a solitary building, once an engine-house, and now containing two rooms, where he cooked his own meals, and employed himself in leisure moments in working out such improvements as suggested themselves to him; for Steel, laconic and self-contained, was a born mechanical genius, who, under happier circumstances, would have made his way to the front rank of mechanical engineers.

In winter evenings, when workmen had departed, and all was silent, there came on the still air the clank of his hammer and the roar of his bellows as, in the great, still foundry, he toiled on at some fresh discovery. It seemed to be the whole end and aim of his existence; he dreamt of rushing wheels and flying bands. Snow, wind, and rain, dreary solitude, and companionless quiet all came alike to the clever, sombre workman, who, in the whole ten years of his servitude, was never known to say a superfluous word or smile over his toil, as his more open-hearted workmen were wont to do.

There was a mystery hanging over Richard Steel, they said; he was suffering from some bitter disappointment or some lingering remorse. No more was known of him now than was known the day he had arrived at the Lea, with a basket of tools upon his shoulder and a reference from a great American firm in his pocket.

He might have been an American, so far as the quidnuncs were concerned.

He stood at the door of his hut, watching the last departing workman, a great coal fire in the room behind throwing up his close-knit, powerful figure in high relief.

It was perfectly dark, save for the flashing flames glowing from point to point; a breeze moaned in the pines before a storm brewing over the distant Channel; the perfect after-noon had not fulfilled its promise, for it was the same day of St. Clair‘s bitter disappointment, and the golden noon had changed to a wild winter‘s evening. A drenching, rain stinging like whip lashes, dashed against the watcher‘s face, driving him, hardened as he was, to shelter, and, as he closed the door, the gale burst in pitiless fury.

By the fire-light and a lamp burning upon the plain deal table, the man standing there appeared to be in age some fifty years; his face, dark and sombre, was full of shrewd intelligence; his square, massive head, and equally square jaw, spoke of latent power of the ambitious type. There was a nervous force in the very way he handled the delicate tools with which the table was strewn, and upon which was placed also a delicate model in machinery. The dark eyes lighted a little as they fell upon this pretty toy.

„A bitter night!“ he said, as another furious blast shook the building, and another drenching spray poured against the windows like musketry—„a bitter night for those out of doors! Just such another night as this that I made the one great mistake of my lifetime! I might have waited—I might have been more patient, and then she would not have incurred this disgrace! She does not know now; please Heaven, she never shall!“

A look of infinite tenderness crept into the speaker‘s face; sadness and love mingled strangely as he drew from his pocket a photograph, and laid it upon the table. With this shining pasteboard by his side, he turned to his model, and, with a deep sigh, commenced to work thereon.

Rain and wind, tossing in tempestuous glee outside, moved him not, for all he knew it might have been the calmness of a fair midsummer eve. He stood playing with the nuts and screws of his pretty toy, almost aimlessly an

unobserving stranger would have said, not knowing that that dreamy quietude is the inspired nepenthe in which great ideas and great things germinate. In the same unconscious way he stood there, heedless of the flight of time. An hour, two hours passed, and there he remained, patiently, almost motionless, an embodiment of that genius which is the „infinite capacity of taking pains."

Presently, with an impatient movement, he took a file from his bench, and, as if fired by a new idea, commenced to work upon his model. As he proceeded slowly at first, but more rapidly as knowledge came to him, a great light, almost of inspiration, illuminated his features, the tool was plied until one tiny steel bar became fine almost as a needle.

With an agitation the self-contained man was barely able to control, he turned a wheel with trembling forefinger, and immediately the whole machinery leapt into life.

There was a sound, a faint click, and action of delicate cogs and wheels; a triumphant cry burst from the workman's lips; then, throwing himself into a chair, he locked his fingers together in a convulsive grip.

For the moment he was Columbus within sight of land, Arkwright before his loom, Stevenson contemplating his engine, a thousand and one great mentors who have revolutionized the world with great discoveries.

„I knew it!" he cried—„I knew it was there—though they laughed at me for a dreamer. What a discovery—what a fortune for anyone but a poor wretch such as I! But the secret is mine; they can never rob me of my due!"

A laugh almost hysterical burst from his lips. He had been so self-contained for so many years that his own mirth startled him. It seemed as if there was an invisible spirit in the room, mocking his vain endeavour.

He placed the photograph upon the model, contemplating it with eyes filled with a deep and passionate longing.

It was only the picture of a child, a little girl of tender years, but it might have been some precious treasure, dear as the miser's gold or my lady's priceless diamonds.

„All for her!" he continued, more quietly—„all for her, though she will never know to whom she owes every little comfort. And yet there are moments when I almost forget myself—when I feel the madness upon me. I would approach her—I would speak to her, but I dare not trust myself. My child! How strangely it sounds! My child! That beautiful girl, a lady from the crown of her head to the sole of her dainty feet! Man, you are dreaming! As likely as not she would repel you with disgust; as like as not you would find her colder than the wind tearing out yonder, and chilling as that cruel rain."

As he spoke another fresh blast struck the house, another torrent of rain dashed in angry tears against the window. Above the roar, there was a faint articulate cry, like some creature in distress, then another, more feeble, but unmistakably a woman's voice.

As Steel threw back the door, a gust of wind, bursting in, scattered the books and papers, sending a shower of sparks up the chimney; the rain beat upon his breast and face, hurtling with a roar that almost drowned the crashing scream of the pinewoods.

Darkness obtruded itself like a blow; it seemed as if a sudden blindness had overtaken the listener.

Fortunately he knew every trick and turn of the ground, so that when the cry came again, still more faintly, he was able to locate the sound, and to move without hesitation in its direction.

„Who is there?“ he shouted. „Speak, for it is too dark to see!“

A feeble moan arose at his feet; there was the faintest outline of some black mass huddled upon the sopping grass.

Steel stooped, and raising the frail figure in his arms, hastily returned to the hut, and, depositing his burden in the solitary arm-chair, barred the door.

It was a woman of uncertain age, dressed in some shabby black material, her long iron-gray hair floating round a face of deathly whiteness. The features, which were not exactly those of a daughter of the soil, were pinched and careworn, but not sufficiently to disguise a certain air of refinement—an air more retrospective than present.

As the grateful warmth circulated through her limbs, she opened her eyes with a shudder, and looked around.

„Where am I?“ she asked, faintly. „I was lost.“

„Drink this,“ Steel replied, not unkindly, as he held a glass of tempered spirit to her lips. „It is brandy, and will do you no harm. Don‘t talk till you feel equal to the exertion.“

With a certain rugged delicacy of feeling, he turned to his model, ignoring the stranger‘s protestations of gratitude and incoherent thanks.

There was a silence for some time, during which the cordial did its work; then the man, clearing away his impedimenta, set out food, consisting of cold meat and bread and butter, of which he invited his visitor to partake.

„I was very hungry,“ she answered, when at length she had eaten sparingly of this refreshment; „I have touched nothing since morning. They told me there was a short cut this way, and in the storm I lost my bearings. Can I get on as far as Ross to-night?“

„You might; but I shall certainly not hear of such a thing,“ Steel replied. „The attempt would be little short of madness.“

„It has been a terrible journey,“ the woman returned, seeing that some reply was expected of her. „I—I am by profession an actress, travelling with an itinerant company. The proprietor of the Hall at Coleford took our properties for rent, and the troupe was broken up. The manager disappeared, taking with him all our available capital, leaving us to shift as best we might.“

Steel looked up at the speaker with sudden interest. There was upon his face an expression as if her words had touched some hidden chord that jangled somewhat unharmoniously for want of tuning.

„I, indirectly, was interested in such things years, many years, ago,“ he said, with the deliberation of retrospection. The fire-light dancing on his face revealed a momentary gleam of sadness, tempered with regret. „Once I knew something of these travelling companies. Perhaps I may know yours.“

„Perhaps. It was a celebrated one in times gone by. The name of our manager—the professional name, I should say—is Algernon St. Clair.“

Steel looked up again, the interest had deepened, the expression had changed to one of more practical shape.

„I knew him once,“ he said. „My—a very dear friend of mine once performed under the direction of that gentleman. You have, pardon me, the look of one who is not unacquainted with the miseries of a travelling stage. Tell me—how long have you been in the profession?“

„Seventeen years, more or less—indeed, with a slight interval“—here she sighed, as one does in looking back upon a lost happiness—„some many years ago.“

„Ah, then you can remember all that happened in that time? Tell me. Do you recollect Gertrude Thorne—she who married a Westbury engineer more years since than I care to count? She was one of you.“

„She was,“ the woman replied, quietly. „I am Gertrude Thorne herself.“

„You Gertrude Carr? Great Heaven, am I dreaming? You?“

He half started from his seat, then controlled himself with an effort that caused great beads of perspiration to stand out upon his forehead. Turning his face away, and shading it with his hand, he signified to Mrs. Carr, as she had called herself, to proceed.

„You seem surprised,“ she continued, in the same even tones—„you seem surprised; but what I say is true. You appear to know my husband.“ Steel inclined his head. „Perhaps you know also the unhappy incident, owing to which he had to fly the country. If you are acquainted with these details—“

„I know them all,“ Steel interrupted, hoarsely. „Proceed.“

„He left me with my little child, and fled to America. Still, he did not forget me; he sent me money from time to time—hundreds of pounds in all.“

„Hundreds of pounds! Are you sure it was not more?“

„Nine hundred and forty pounds in all, paid to me through the hands of a trusty friend, who carefully tended my interests until my husband died. You seem to have known him, sir. Strange as it appears, indeed, I could not have told you so much had he been alive.“

„He is dead, then? That I did not know,“ Steel replied, calmly. „That you also heard from Mr. ---- from the trusty friend who so nobly cared for the wife and child of a hunted criminal? But how do you explain that Mrs. Carr, knowing her husband‘s wishes, persistently refused to join him in America?“

„Because he never asked me,“ the woman eagerly exclaimed. „No letter to that effect reached me. Do you think I would not have hastened to him had he asked me, if it had been to the furthermost end of the world?—for he was a good husband, and I loved him dearly. Sir, if you know anything of him, if you have ever been his friend, I implore you to tell me—“

„How did he die?“ Steel interrupted, ignoring this outburst of feeling. „In time I will answer all your questions.“

„He was crushed to death in a mine. Yes, that is true, for I saw it in print. Mr. ---- our mutual friend—brought me a cutting from a paper, in which a full account of the accident was given.“

„Let us call this mutual friend Thornycroft,“ Steel replied, still speaking with his face turned from the light. „He was editor of a paper called, I believe, the Westbury Mercury. Madam, you seem to have loved this worthless—“

„Not worthless. No; he was a good and kind husband to me.“

„This worthless man. That being so, and you, being a faithful woman, will doubtless remember the date of that catastrophe.“

In answer, Gertrude Carr drew from the pocket of her dress a pocket-book, and, choosing from its contents a slip of printed paper, handed it to her companion. It contained, as she had said, a graphic account of the death of one Richard Carr, who was killed on May 31, 1866, by the falling of a mass of rock—fifteen years ago, as the date at the head of the paper testified.

„A genuine document, with truth stamped upon the face of it,“ Steel replied, when at length he had perused it to its conclusion. „And then, madam?“

„And then my little savings were invested by the same good friend.“

„Estimable friend,“ Steel murmured, his eyes glowing with something more than the reflection of the fire. „Dear, kind friend, best of men, if I only had you here with me face to face at this moment!“

„But misfortune overtook me, and the money was lost in a disastrous speculation. My child I sent to her friends, who live not far from here—good, worthy people, who were only too willing to accept her as a daughter. I returned to my old life. I have remained dead to my child, rather than disgrace her amongst people who regard the stage as a sink of iniquity. And yet, if my husband had only returned, as he might, when he knew that the man he had left for dead was merely injured, somewhat seriously it is true, but—“

„Mr. Standish only injured! Am I dreaming again?“

„It is no dream, sir,“ Gertrude Carr returned, recoiling aghast from the concentrated fury blazing in the face turned upon her. „Mr. Standish, the manager of my husband‘s old factory, is alive and well at this moment, as I am prepared to testify.“

„Alive and well! Alive and well!“ Steel slowly repeated.

He clenched his teeth together, the words dropped from his lips with a hissing sound. Like a caged beast which has broken his prison bars, he seemed to be looking round for something upon which to vent a long-hoarded vengeance.

„So there has been more than one ruined and betrayed. And I have lived by him, seen him daily, taken his hand with grateful thanks, and yet I had never thought of this! I have skulked as an outlaw, when I might have faced the world as a free man; I have touched the hem of my child‘s garment, when I might have taken her to my arms. Oh, if I only had him here!“

Pale and trembling, Gertrude Carr rose to her feet. In the new and strange emotions thrilling her very soul, fatigue, and such bodily ailments had fallen away, as great sorrows swallow up smaller ones.

„Who are you?“ she cried—„who are you who talks like this?“

Illustration:
„Who are you that talks like this?“

„The hand of Nemesis is slow, but it is sure. The day has come, and I am free to take my own vengeance! Free, free! Gertrude, I am your swindled and deluded husband, Richard Carr!“

Chapter V

In Trouble.

„THE greatest gale,“ said Prout, oracularly, „we‘ve had for forty year; since Farmer Jefferys had his barn blown down. Do you mind that, Martin?“

Martin Dale nodded ruefully. A branch of one of the great elms had fallen across his beloved bowling-green, cutting up that sacred turf in all directions;

the grass had browned in a single night; quarter upon quarter of seared yellow leaves lay upon the borders.

The polish on the oak settles had faded to a mouldy bloom, chanticleer proclaiming the morn had lost his tail, his crested head had a comical twist, very much as if he, too, had been testing the merits of „*The Grapes*“ cider.

„Happen you‘ve heard tell of that woman bein‘ found agen the Stenders?“ Dale replied. „She were one of the play-actors from Coleford a-tryin‘ to get to Ross across the Bailey. Let‘s get into the house, Mr. Prout, the sight of this ‘ere is too much for a feelin‘ man.“

Prout agreed readily enough. It was a melancholy sight, and the wind, moreover, was keen. Again, he had an astounding piece of news to convey to his friend, but not on that chilly lawn, where dramatic effect must necessarily be lost, in consequence of the keenness of the morning breeze.

News of such tremendous import in a country place is not lightly to be scattered abroad in the lavish way peculiar to large towns, where each morning brings it own daily budget of information.

„Hast heerd anything, Martin?“ he asked, mysteriously, when at length the twain were seated before the kitchen fire. „You hain‘t heerd nothin‘ about two people as lives not a hundred mile from here?“

Martin Dale shook his head solemnly, at the same time fixing his features in the proper mould of interested attention. It was not for him to ask abruptly the meaning of this sphynx-like utterance, expectation is always a much more superior emotion than realization.

As a connoisseur rolls a vintage wine round his tongue, loth to part with the exquisite flavour, so these quidnuncs played with the great climax preceding the intoxication of Prout‘s final announcement.

„Anyone I know?“ asked Dale, with a fine assumption of carelessness. „Folks live in the parish, I reckon.“

„Of course they live in this parish, and equally, of course, everyone knows the secret by this time. I am going to spoil your enjoyment, Prout; I am going to tell Dale that the young Squire is determined to marry Miss Carr, and the Barton people are all up in arms against it.“

Mr. Vivid stood behind the cronies, his face blazing with indignation, his eye in a fine frenzy rolling.

Prout, forgetful of his great undertaking, rose to his feet in astonishment.

„You don‘t mean that, sir,“ he exclaimed. „Well, well, young people will be young people, and you can‘t make ‘em anything to the contrary. Not as I‘m astonished, sir, for only last night I says to Dale, says I—“

„Do you mean to say you didn‘t know?“ Vivid asked, blankly.

„Indeed I didn‘t, sir, much as I might ha‘ guessed.“

„You didn‘t guess anything of the sort,“ Vivid returned, the picture of dismay; the very ends of his enormous cravat seemed to droop with unhappy limpness. „You didn‘t, Prout? And I‘m an ass—the most unmitigated ass in the county.“

Prout and the landlord bowed—it was not for them to traverse this personal statement—while, under cover of his hand, Dale winked solemnly at the clerk, whose face expressed a not unnatural sympathy.

„I‘ve done it,“ Mr. Vivid continued. „Prout, you irritating old rascal, if you had only told Dale what you had to tell him—“

„As young Jim Lane ‘as run away to sea, consequent of his mother-in-law a-weltin‘ he wi‘ a strap something audacious,“ Prout said, parenthetically.

„What you had to tell him without all this mystery, I should have been saved this unpleasant exposure. Not that the young people haven‘t my sympathy. Egad, if he only sticks to her, as I think he will, I‘ll leave that girl the best part of my money.“

„Money can do anything,“ Dale observed, sagely. „I don‘t know as even Squire ’ud object to an arrangement like that; no, sir, not even if you was to go to him, and say that ’ere apple—“

„Don‘t be funny, Martin,“ snapped Vivid, „it doesn‘t suit you. A man must have brains to be really funny.“

„So they must to make cider,“ Dale replied. „Not as it‘s necessary, accordin‘ to some folks's account—not to mention names.“

Any further discussion upon this vexed question was terminated by the appearance of no less a person than Cyril Dangerfield himself.

The young man had lost his accustomed sweetness of expression; there was a determination of purpose written on his face, tending to increase Vivid‘s respect for a youth whom he had previously regarded as an amiable butterfly.

There was an awkward silence for a few moments, which any ordinary individual, not enduring the pangs of an unfortunate love affair, would have immediately comprehended.

„This is a nice state of things,“ he commenced, abruptly, when the diplomatic Vivid had enveigled him outside. „Of course, you have heard everything? No chance of keeping anything quiet here.“

„I have heard some idle rumour,“ replied the other, „touching yourself and a certain lady. But, of course, there is nothing in it.“

„There is a great deal in it. Vivid, I believe I am the most miserable man under the sun. Here am I, nursed in the lap of luxury, as the old novelists say, everything I want in reason I have; and now, when the whole happiness of my life depends upon my father‘s sanction to this engagement, that dear girl, whose lightest—“

„You can spare the details,“ Vivid returned, dryly. „I had a Dulcinea once myself; she threw me over for a—“

„Pshaw, Vivid! You don‘t compare anyone you ever knew to Ethel Carr. But, of course, if you are going to make light of a fellow‘s feelings, the best thing I can do is to say no more.“

„There you go—there you go; so like a young man who imagines his own little minnow to be a veritable salmon. And you are by no means the most miserable young man in the world. I thought myself the most persecuted of mortals when Dulcinea—real name, Eliza—discarded me for an obese grocer. I had a bad attack of toothache at the time, I remember. The best cure for toothache I know is to—“

Cyril laughed, in spite of his perplexity. Not suffering from that dread malady, he took no particular interest in Vivid‘s practical application of the „*British Materia Medica*,“ unless it had been a remedy such as Macbeth required for a mind diseased.

„There would not be so much objection,“ Cyril pursued, hurriedly, „if there was a little more— Ah, in short, if I was not so poorly endowed with this world‘s goods.“

„In other words, she hasn‘t any money. In that case, you will declare that you can never desert her, and end by marrying some plain heiress who is desirous to exchange her money for a little social advantage.“

„In which you are altogether wrong," Cyril replied. „I shall marry Ethel, if it costs me the succession of Barton Hall. No use to remind you of the fact that we are poor, and that Barton is heavily mortgaged?"

Vivid paused on his own doorstep with a peculiar chuckle, his pendulous cheeks shook with laughter. He hesitated for a moment, with the air of a man who desires to make a confession.

„I believe you are in earnest," he said; „I do indeed."

„I was never more in earnest in my life, Mr. Vivid."

„Very well. Then listen to me. You say Barton is mortgaged, but you have not told me that the principal mortgagee has called in his money, and unless another comes forward—which is unlikely—Barton Hall must go. How do I know that? Well, as I intend to be this successive mortgagee, I should have a little information. Now, if you have your fair share of brains, you can benefit by this knowledge."

„I don't see it, Mr. Vivid. How much better off shall I be then?"

„Come inside," Vivid answered, shortly; „I may delay you some time."

It was fully an hour before Cyril left Ocle Street, carrying with him a certain sunshiny aspect, which was scarcely compatible with the wobegone, love-lorn youth who entered those hospitable portals some time before. His face was not only triumphant, but also filled with a certain glow of anticipation. He laughed aloud as he walked down the road, as if well pleased with the recent interview.

As he passed along, he almost failed to notice a figure seated upon a heap of stones—a figure in a palpable state of intoxication, the red face crowned by a white hat in the last stage of dilapidation.

„You will pardon the intrusion," said St. Clair, rising to his feet, and surveying Cyril through a watery haze, and with the vacant stare peculiar to the partially inebriated, „but I am a stranger in these parts. I seek, sir, for information. Will you be kind enough to direct me to the house of a certain Mr. Vivid, who"—here he became slightly incoherent—„lives in this neighbourhood."

Cyril, contemptuously enough, indicated the house in question. The stamp of man before him was fortunately no common local type. The tightly-strapped trousers and greasy frock-coat had a certain fascination for the spectator, who tarried for a moment.

„You are a gentleman," St. Clair continued, incoherently. „Instinct, sir, tells me that I am one myself."

„Slightly out of repair," Cyril murmured, sotto voce.

„And what of that, sir, what of that? Misfortune, young man, comes to rich and poor alike. I came into this neighbourhood expecting to find a welcome from an old friend who has prospered better than the obscure individual you see before you. Does he kill the fatted calf, and bring out the best in his cellar? By no means. He turns me out, me who can ruin him. I shall have revenge!"

His watery eyes flashed for a moment with malevolence, every shaking limb was quivering with passion nursed in retrospection and warmed by the potations which he had been imbibing.

For three days he had brooded upon Thornycroft's reception of his advances, alternately lachrymose or vain-glorious, according to the state of inebriation.

In his cunning, drink-sodden brain, a scheme had gradually formulated itself, in which Thornycroft was to be humbled, and he—St. Clair—to derive not only personal satisfaction, but a little pecuniary benefit besides.

„I can prove that man to be a rascal," he cried, shaking his fist in the hollow theatrical manner. „I can prove he had the girl's money. I can crush Thornycroft, which I shall do, not so much for my own benefit as yours. You, my dear friend, shall be my ally; henceforth we are partners."

„Much obliged," Cyril laughed. „But the honour is declined."

„You may smile, young man," St. Clair responded, with much dignity. „But as one who has performed before the crowned heads of Europe—no, I don't mean that—as one who takes an interest in your welfare, as a friend who loves you for yourself alone, you will not, I am sure, refuse me when I ask the loan of a paltry shilling."

Cyril carelessly threw down the coin demanded, and passed on.

St. Clair, who, like other struggling geniuses, had no pride, placed it in his pocket, and assuming as sober an air as possible, balanced himself in the direction of Mr. Vivid's residence, where he celebrated his advent by a thundering knock and a loud tocsin on the bell. Like most feeble vapourers, he derived a certain sense of power from the gentle stimulants he had been imbibing. Mr. Vivid, who chanced to reply in person, regarded his fatuously smiling visitor with an eye of extreme disfavour.

„Nothing to dispose of," he said, curtly. „Don't want any books. Haven't any old clothes, because I wear them all myself."

„You mistake my vocation, sir," St. Clair returned, with an injured air; „and you touch me on a tender spot. I have not come to waste your time in idle converse, but rather in reference to a man named Thornycroft."

„Come inside," Vivid replied. „Anything concerning that individual I shall hear with—I was going to say pleasure."

Steering clear of the hall furniture with some degree of dexterity, St. Clair followed his guide into the dining-room, where, by dint of some exertion, he found his way at length to an arm-chair.

He wanted no inducement to speak of the wrongs with which he was burning, and after a brief but an imploring glance at a decanter of sherry on the sideboard, commenced with much volubility.

„A man, sir, who is without a heart—a man, sir, I helped to make. In the cant phraseology of the day we were friends, he shared my bed and board. I am alluding to my more prosperous days when Westbury appreciated the legitimate drama. Still, as far as Thornycroft was concerned—"

He broke off abruptly. The mention of that name seemed to fill him with a sudden and overwhelming rage.

„A scoundrel—a black-hearted rascal—who robbed the widow and fatherless in the garb of friendship itself; a canting, cringing cur to those whom he was indebted to, a hard rogue to others. Ah, you did not know Roland Thornycroft as I knew him, the smug, quiet editor, who, in the cloak of respectability, lived the worst of lives."

„He was a friend of yours," Mr. Vivid replied, dryly. „Proceed."

„Proceed, sir? I could fill a book with that man's perfidy! But enough of this; you have found him out; we despise him, as two honest men should. And now I approach the thrilling part of my narrative. Cast your memory back, if you please, for fifteen years."

„That is easily done," said the listener. „You are alluding to the time when Mr. Thornycroft edited my paper?"

„I am," said St. Clair, more naturally. Under the grim calmness of Mr. Vivid's manner his cool assurance was fast departing. „About that time Thornycroft was in considerable money difficulties. He was, as I am prepared to prove, in the habit of forging your signature to certain bills, and trusting to luck to meet them at maturity."

„And knowing that, you discounted more than one, which part of the story seems to have escaped your recollection." Mr. Vivid took up the parable. „My good fellow, I am quite aware of that. Perhaps you wonder why I didn't prosecute? Well, partly because I have a horror of legal proceedings, and partly because Thornycroft was an extremely valuable editor. Again proceed."

Again St. Clair glanced towards the sherry decanter, really feeling as if he required a little mild stimulant to mitigate the severe disappointment caused by the extreme flatness of his narrative. Still there was more to come, and he did not yet despair of creating the desired sensation.

„You always were a kind gentleman," he continued, „still I have yet another dark transaction to disclose. You will doubtless remember a man named Carr, who disappeared from Westbury after committing a murderous assault upon the foreman of the works where he was employed. Now I happen to know that Carr was frequently in the habit of sending money to his wife through Thornycroft. Remember, she had been a member of my company, and we were on fairly intimate terms. On one occasion, Carr paid me a large sum of money, and I was curious enough to ascertain where it came from. Accidentally I discovered that he had changed an American draft for a considerable amount on a certain Saturday immediately before he paid me. That money was sent by Carr to his wife, that money she never received. And why? Because Thornycroft informed the wife that same day that her husband had been killed in an accident. That was done so that he might keep that large amount himself."

„But how do you know," asked Vivid, interested in spite of himself, „that he was not killed as aforesaid."

St. Clair smiled with conscious importance. He had at last succeeded in moving his listener, and he expanded accordingly. Had it not been for the shabby hat and equally obtrusive coat, his manner would have amounted almost to one of bland and benignant patronage.

„That, sir, is my secret for the present. Later on, when we come to terms, it will be my duty to reveal to you the inner workings of Thornycroft's mind. For a few days, and until—"

„Until you have succeeded in drawing some money," Mr. Vivid put in. „I thought we should come to this eventually. And now, you wily rascal, what do you want?"

„Sir," retorted the comedian, taken aback by this unexpected rejoinder, „you touch me on my tenderest point. Knowing the disinterestedness of my motives, I fling back your insinuation with scorn—not defiant scorn, but scorn of the dignified kind, that is. But while on the topic of money, I may mention that there is a certain slip of paper, jocosely termed a fiver, in current circulation. Verbum sat."

„Which you will not get for the present," Vivid replied, grimly. „Certainly not until I can see my way to value received."

„Indeed! And suppose I tell you that I am acquainted with the fact that Miss Ethel Carr is the daughter of the Robert Carr who—"

„Pshaw, man!" the other interrupted, „do you think I don't know that?"

The face of Mr. St. Clair fell once more; his roseate hopes were dashed to the ground. But, like the fox in the fable, he had many ways, and again returned to the charge.

„Let me play another card, sir, and then I have concluded. Supposing—I merely say supposing—that I could prove the fact that Richard Carr was alive, and in this very neighbourhood?“

„That,“ said Mr. Vivid, „would be quite another thing.“

St. Clair rose like a triumphant but dilapidated Wellington who regards his Waterloo as won.

He bowed with winning grace, pressing the seedy white hat to his breast after the good old stage fashion.

„Then the thing is done,“ he said. „I saw Robert Carr alive and well in this very neighbourhood yesterday. And now, sir, as there must be honour between gentlemen, can you lend me that fiver, to be punctually returned on Wednesday?“

Chapter VI

The Benefactor.

FOR some days the Squire‘s opposition to Cyril‘s choice continued to be more passive than active. Mr. Dangerfield was disposed to be somewhat easy-going in these matters, possessing, like Micawber, an easy belief in the possibilities of future emancipation from trouble.

As a matter of fact, his pride suffered a keener pang than his self-interest; with such men as Mr. Dangerfield, to-morrow, whatever its burden may be, is but a light and airy trouble.

Still, on the other hand, there was more than a probability that Ethel‘s mystic benefactor would again make himself felt, and Mr. Vivid himself, without kith or kin, was known to be favourably disposed towards the young lady.

Cyril would have been less than human had he not hinted something of this to his afflicted parent as he assumed the sorrowfully-dignified role with ludicrous effect. To quarrel over an apple is one thing, but to quarrel with the friendly possessor of a large fortune is quite different; and so, according to his wont, Squire Dangerfield put off all discussion till a more fitting time should arrive.

St. Clair‘s frequent visits to Ocle Street could not, of course, be allowed to pass without exciting much curiosity. He had not as yet succeeded in obtaining the desired sum, Mr. Vivid being a man of business, who declined to part with his money without value received for the same.

Latterly, Martin Dale had noticed he had become somewhat moody and abstracted. There was something on his mind, so the knowing ones said; in which they were not far wrong, for he had seen Richard Steel, alias Carr, and his wife, and as yet could not see his way clear to bring child and parent together without raising the scandal and gossip he was so anxious to avoid.

„But it must be done, sir,“ Carr insisted—„it must be done without delay! Consider how long I have waited—consider how long I have watched her, without daring to proclaim the fact that I am her father! Why this cruel delay?“

Mr. Vivid shook his head, utterly at a loss for reply. It was a curiously-involved problem. Opposite to him sat Carr, his stern features quivering with anxiety; by his side, Gertrude Carr, equally anxious, but more patient, as women usually are.

A little care and attention, the assuming of a more becoming garb, has changed her appearance wonderfully. Though displaying the unmistakable signs of a hard and bitter struggle, there yet remained a softness of manner and an innate refinement of feature such as no hardship could eradicate.

Her dark eyes followed every movement of the man by her side, and whose earnestness from time to time moved her strangely.

„It is a long time," she said, slowly—„a long, long time."

Mr. Vivid nodded again. Beneath the surface the situation was sensational enough, as many fierce dramas are played unseen by the careless spectator.

They were in the Ocle Street dining-room, looking out upon the level orchard, with its heaps of shining fruit, and beyond, half in the dewy shadows, there walked two figures, those of Ethel and Cyril Dangerfield, talking earnestly.

It was characteristic of Carr that he watched the couple with deep-knitted brows; it was characteristic of his wife that she regarded them with a patient, hopeful smile.

„We must not be precipitate," Vivid observed, diplomatically. „Besides, in the first place, I understand you desire to bring Thornycroft to account."

„Yes," Carr replied; „I do."

„Very good. Then we have to elucidate the plot by which he obtained possession of your money. Now, will you kindly go over all the facts so that I may perfectly understand the position."

By way of reply Carr drew from his pocket a metal case, and taking therefrom a mass of papers, laid them on the table.

„I had better explain that I sent my wife money for four years, made up of the following sums:—£72, £185, £445, £915, £100, £290, and in June, 1875, £4,500. In December of that year I forwarded £11,000, and that is all."

„So much!" Vivid cried. „Where on earth did it come from?"

„I was fortunate—very fortunate, out there!" Carr replied, jerking his thumb over his left shoulder. „Never mind for the present how or where—what mostly concerns us now is how I was robbed of my earnings. Wife, will you kindly continue?"

„Of those sums," Mrs. Carr explained, „I received less than six hundred pounds. My husband's original letters I have, most of them carefully altered to fit the amount paid me by Mr. Thornycroft. Now, sir, I will ask you to follow me carefully. Take that paper, and note the date upon which the four thousand five hundred pounds was sent. The day it arrived here, forwarded to Thornycroft, I was informed that my husband had been killed—a printed cutting from an American paper proved the fact. There, sir, is the cutting. What do you make of it?"

Mr. Vivid shook his head again as he examined the printed slip with great attention.

It certainly looked plausible enough; it would have been sufficient to convince him under ordinary circumstances. Then a sudden thought illuminated the darkness.

„I think I have it," he said, at length. „Thornycroft appropriated the whole of this sum, and having the run of the Chronicle office, with his peculiar technical

skill, set up that paragraph himself, as an extra evidence of your husband's death."

Carr responded with grim satisfaction. Taking the paper in his hands, he held it up to the light so that his companions might see the water mark, „Egham Mills, North Shore, Surrey."

„"Now it is my turn to speak again," he said. „You know that after Gertrude here received that, she lost the little money remaining, and, after sending our daughter to her relations, returned to her old vocation. Then, to a certain extent, Thornycroft was free. Remember, he had told me that my antagonist was dead, and that there was a warrant out for my arrest. Well, he was free, he had my money, he had separated my dear wife and myself, but this was not enough. I had trusted him thoroughly; he was a wily, specious scoundrel."

The speaker paused a moment, his face dark and scowling, till he glanced out into the orchard, and as his eyes fell upon the young couple there the black look gradually faded.

„This was not enough for Thornycroft. He wanted more, and he had it to the tune of eleven thousand pounds. I heard nothing from him or my wife for a year after that; and then, when I contemplated a visit to England, I got this. Read that, sir, and say if you do not think that Roland Thornycroft is not the greatest rascal unhanged."

Taking from the tin case another closely-folded paper, the speaker opened it, and laid the sheet upon the table.

It was a copy of the *Westbury Chronicle*, dated 17th July, 1867, and on the fourth page, marked with blue pencil, was a paragraph, headed „*A Local Romance*."

Mr. Vivid donned his gold-rimmed spectacles, and read the matter carefully from beginning to end. Briefly, it ran as follows:

> „Many of our readers will remember the case of Richard Carr, who, having in a fit of passion taken the life of a fellow workman, fled to America, leaving no trace behind. Carr, it will be recollected, was a clever, industrious fellow, the inventor of several valuable patents. It now appears that his wife alone was cognizant of his whereabouts, and had for years been in regular communication with her husband. From the first, says our correspondent, Carr was highly successful in the country of his adoption, and he is reported to have forwarded large sums of money to his wife. These (amounting to nearly twenty thousand pounds) she invested in certain stock, notably Eli Brown and Co., of this town, which was, till lately, an apparently flourishing concern. And now comes the strange part of our story. Messrs. Brown and Co. failed for a large amount—the firm had been for years in a hopeless condition—the details of which are familiar to all our readers. When the list of shareholders came to be published, it was seen that Mrs. Carr was a creditor for the sum above mentioned. Apparently, she had been suffering from a weak heart for some time, for, immediately upon hearing of her loss, she fainted, and taking to her bed, died in the course of the following day. She leaves one child to mourn her loss."

„That," Carr continued, „purports to be a copy of that day's *Chronicle*. Now, sir, if you happen to possess a copy of the paper, you will find this paragraph is

nowhere to be found in the issue under date. Again mark the fiendishness of this plot. Here is another cutting of an issue about the same time, containing a full list of Messrs. Brown‘s creditors, and in this cutting I find my wife‘s name down for shares to the amount of sixteen thousand pounds. The real imprint contains no such statement.“

There was a heavy silence for a few moments, during which Vivid looked from one to the other in blank astonishment. Slowly—very slowly—the finely-drawn scheme dawned upon his understanding.

„A plot worthy of a Machiavel!“ he exclaimed. „I can see it more clearly now. Thornycroft, as you know, worked his way up to the editorial chair from being an apprentice in the compositor‘s room. He must have set up that himself, and, after the papers were printed, altered the formes and taken off the impressions, afterwards restoring them to their original state. And mark the cleverness of it all—disguising from you the truth that your antagonist was still alive; using the name of Brown and Co., a bona fide firm who really failed about that time. Really, Mr. Carr, I can‘t help admiring the rascal!“

„You can scarcely expect me to view his conduct in the same light,“ Carr returned, grimly. „I suppose you know where he is now?“

„That I learnt a day or two ago. But you have told me nothing of your subsequent history?“

„There is not much to tell. When these papers came to hand, I seemed to lose all zest in life. I grew careless, and my business fell away. I—I drank a great deal about that time; and then a great longing for home came upon me—for, you see, I was reckless and desperate—and I returned. I came down here, and in the course of time Thornycroft came too. We met, and recognised each other; and I was fool enough to feel grateful to him—to regard him with affection and esteem.

„For years he has duped and tricked me!“ Carr continued, bringing his clenched hand down upon the table with a resounding crash. The great veins upon his forehead stood out, purple and enlarged with a sudden flood of passion. „It was he who held the terror over me, and prevented me from acknowledging my identity to my own child!—it was to him that I went for advice in time of trouble! And I never knew—I never thought when we were alone together, as we have been many a night up yonder—what a scoundrel I trusted! Perhaps it was as well that I did not know, or—“

The speaker paused abruptly, the vengeful malevolence faded from his face, his dark eyes grew luminous. Ethel stood in the doorway, with Cyril Dangerfield behind her, regarding the group in mild surprise.

„I did not know you were engaged,“ she said, addressing Vivid. „We thought you were alone, and—“

„Don‘t go,“ Carr cried, rising to his feet—„don‘t go! I have something to say to you, and the sooner it is said the better.“

The faltering earnestness conveyed an impression of rough ill-temper, before which the girl fell back, looking meanwhile towards her host for an explanation.

„It must come,“ he said, „and why not now?“

„I am going to tell you a story,“ Carr continued; „I am going to tell the tale of a great wrong. You, sir, had better listen, for my history concerns you as it concerns all of us,“ he proceeded, as Dangerfield turned to leave. „I say this because that—that young lady by your side is about to learn the secret of her birth.“

„There is no mystery about that," Cyril observed, coldly.

„There is not, sir, and I honour you for those words. But there is a romance—the romance of an unknown benefactor, and it is touching this individual about whom I have to speak."

Ethel drew a long breath and advanced into the room. There was something in Carr's eyes that attracted while it repelled her.

„Many years ago, more than I care to count, there dwelt in the town of Westbury a man and his wife named Carr. This couple had a daughter who bore your name. This you know. You know that misfortune came upon these people—misfortune, perhaps, not altogether undeserved—whereby the husband was compelled to fly the country, believing himself to be guilty of murder. You were told that this man died? Well, you were misinformed, for he is alive and well at this moment."

„My father!" Ethel exclaimed. „Is this really true?"

„Time was when he tired of a roving life and returned to England," Carr continued, and explained at length the whole plot as related so recently for Vivid's delectation. „This man knew where his daughter was, and he yearned to see her once again. He came into the neighbourhood, and there, unknown and unrecognised, found his child."

He paused again, his great chest heaving with the emotion he found it almost impossible to repress. The tears had gathered in Ethel's eyes, while the woman seated at the table turned her face away, so that her own streaming eyes might not be seen.

„This man, I say, believing himself to be a murderer, came, so that he might be with one to whom his love might be devoted, though he dared not speak. He obtained a situation near at hand, and, being a clever workman, earned more money than he required for his own simple wants. The only joy he had was to watch this child, as he had done many an hour, as a bashful lover watches his mistress unseen. But that was not enough for this man. He confided part of his secret to a clever lawyer, and arranged so that the child's friends might imagine her to have attracted the attention of a rich and eccentric benefactor. And all these years, dear child, your benefactor has been your own father."

„Is it possible?" Ethel cried—„is it possible that in all these years— Oh, why did he not speak to me? Does he think that I should have betrayed his secret—I, whose earliest recollection of him shows me the best and dearest of parents?"

„It was the disgrace, my dear!" Carr pursued, huskily. „Not but what he had his reward as he watched you grow to womanhood, the refined and educated lady he always hoped to make you. You must pardon him, for he has suffered terribly."

„And this man of whom you speak!" Cyril exclaimed, as a light dawned upon him. „Surely this is not all you have to tell?"

„All! I have only just commenced! The rest, sir, remains in your hands. It is for you to say whether I shall speak or not."

„For me! Why hesitate upon my account?"

„Not so much on yours, sir, as hers," Carr continued. „I have watched this coming. I have seen your young hearts drawn together. I believe you to be a gentleman in thought and deed! And supposing that this mysterious benefactor can be found, which would get the best in the struggle—the Dangerfield pride, or the lover's heart?"

„That," said Cyril, „is a strange question, but one which, under the circumstances, I have no hesitation in answering. I do not know, I do not care, so long as I gain the heart which I have chosen."

„A good speech," Vivid exclaimed, with a flourish of his huge silk handkerchief, „and the speech I had expected; and worth," he continued, sotto voce, „at least twenty thousand pounds!"

Carr rose to his feet, a triumphant look in his eyes. The victory was won, and the first taste was sweet in his nostrils. Taking his wife by the hand, he advanced towards Ethel, and, speaking in a voice broken with emotion, he said, „You have given me the right to speak, and I will do so. Ethel, my child, your benefactor stands before you. I am your father and this—this is—"

„My mother!" Ethel cried, with a great burst of feeling. „Oh, mother, mother! Surely—surely this is a happy meeting!"

„We are de trop, my young friend," Vivid remarked, as Cyril and himself found themselves in the cool, dim hall. „That room must be more chilly than I thought, or I have caught cold recently. Anyone to look at me, would think I had been crying."

„They would," Cyril replied, not unconscious of a moistness of vision himself. „What a marvellous—"

„A gentleman waiting to see you," the housekeeper interrupted. „I told him you were engaged, sir, but he preferred to wait in the drawing-room till you had time to see him."

Somewhat glad of this digression, Vivid, with a gesture to Cyril that he might wait, crossed over to the drawing-room with suspicious alacrity, and entered that apartment. The dim light fell upon a tall, powerful-looking individual, who advanced as his host approached.

„You do not know me," he said, "but—"

„Indeed, I do!" Vivid responded, dryly. „You are my old servant, Thornycroft."

Chapter VII

No Hesitation.

THORNYCROFT paused for a moment, taken aback by the abruptness of his erstwhile employer's remark. The cold mask fell for an instant, but long enough for the older man to perceive that he had taken the right course, an advantage which he decided to follow up without delay.

„I never make mistakes," he continued. „It suits you to be living here under a new name—which reminds me that I have to congratulate you upon a wonderful change of fortune. Times have altered, Mr. Thornycroft, since you learned the mysteries of *comping* on the *Westbury Chronicle*."

„This," said Thornycroft, „is all Greek to me."

„Yes," Vivid returned, cheerfully, his face assuming a playfully diplomatic expression; „I recognise you, and I shall force you to recognise me. Let us be friendly, and pardon the weakness that impels me to call you Thornycroft. And now, what is your business? It must be something important to bring you here."

„It is important to me, though trivial enough to the outsider—yourself, for instance. We will not discuss at present the fancied likeness you see between me and—“

„Your alter ego—yes. But to insist upon my point, does it not strike you as a strange thing that Richard Carr should have found his way into this neighbourhood?“

„Carr is dead,“ Thornycroft exclaimed; „he died in America.“

Mr. Vivid smiled the superior smile of one whose rapier has found a weak joint on his opponent‘s armour. The latter saw the false pass he had made, and hastened to repair it.

„It was a blunder on your part,“ Vivid returned, lightly. „And now I am going to give you another home-thrust. You have played your cards badly of late. Surely it would have been worth your while to keep an eye on Mrs. Carr‘s movements, knowing, as a novelist must, what strange things happen in this world of ours. You must have become extremely têtê montee to allow that woman to come into the neighbourhood of Lea Bailey—in fact, within a stone‘s throw of the very spot where her husband is employed.“

Thornycroft smiled grimly. Astute rascal as he was, he could thoroughly appreciate astuteness in others; the cutting irony of his own nature forced him to admire a kindred trait in his foe.

„We will admit your first premises,“ he said; „we will admit, for the sake of argument, the fact that I am the individual you take me for.“

„A great admission,“ Vivid responded, gravely. „It is a great point gained when we begin to see ourselves as others see us.“

„That is one to you,“ responded the first speaker, nothing moved. „And if Richard Carr is in this neighbourhood, surely you must understand why his identity has been kept a profound secret.“

„Certainly. It was in the interest of all parties—yourself included. He wished people to think he was dead—so did you. But suppose I go on to tell you that the wife has found her way into the neighbourhood, that she and Carr have met, and, in short, that you formed the most interesting subject for conversation?“

„And then? Really, Mr. Vivid, I do not see how this concerns me.“

„No? Strange how people differ upon these little matters. To go further, suppose that you are accused of appropriating to your own use certain money entrusted to you for the benefit of Mrs. Carr, and that proofs of your rascality are forthcoming.“

„Rascality is a hard word,“ Thornycroft responded, no feature of his iron face relaxing. „And these proofs?“

„The proofs to which you refer consist almost entirely of newspapers. I have in my possession two copies of the *Westbury Chronicle*, both bearing the same date, and yet, singularly enough, they are different. That doubtless is owing to some fault in the machinery. Ah!“

A swift and terrible change passed over the listener, and for a time, at least, his original errand was forgotten. His little scheme for summary vengeance upon St. Clair, which had solely dictated his present bold step, faded away before the contemplation of the personal danger with which he was confronted. It was no longer a case of thrust and parry; it was a duel to the death.

„This is a serious accusation,“ he said, „and one to be carefully made.“

„Nevertheless, I make it," Vivid replied. „I charge you with stealing a sum of money amounting to sixteen thousand pounds."

The time was at hand, the man was ready. For years, like the memory of a recurring dream, the thought of such an exposure had troubled Thornycroft. It had not been a great trouble, for the passing years blunt the consciences of good and bad men alike. Still, it was always there, awakening at times like an old remorse.

„Another serious accusation," he replied. „Go on."

„I admire your audacity," Vivid replied, grimly, the corners of his mouth hardening as he proceeded. „I like a man to be thorough, even if it is as a thorough rascal. Still, there is no occasion for me to waste words telling you what you know better than I know myself."

„Candid as ever," Thornycroft observed, meeting his antagonist's eyes steadily. „Now, perhaps, you will be good enough to hear my side of the case? For the sake of argument, I give a total denial to the charge. This man Carr, whose friend and confidant I have been for some years, suddenly turns upon me and accuses me of robbing him to a considerable extent. In this, he is supported by his wife, a strolling player, who puts in a dramatic appearance at a strangely opportune moment—from her point, that is. The law calls this a conspiracy, and the law deals with this class of crime severely. However, I will waive that. The point is, your proof." He rapped his knuckles on the table before him with a cool decision which fairly startled the listener. „It is merely one man's word against another, and that one man I might have arrested for murderous assault by—"

„By the very individual who favoured his escape from justice. You ask for proofs, and you shall have them."

Without waiting for reply, Vivid opened the door, and strode across to the dining-room, where Thornycroft's quick eye discerned Carr and his wife, with Ethel, in earnest conversation. A ray of light fell upon the injured man's face, and, strong as he was, the expression he read there sent a cold shiver through the watcher's frame.

„I shall see him to-night." The words came distinctly enough. „He is coming to meet me alone. And, once I get him there—"

The door closed, and nothing save a confused murmur of conversation was audible to the strained ears.

A terrible thought, uncalled for and unbidden, rose to Thornycroft's brain. He was not afraid—a man of iron will, and iron frame, temper, &c., and hardened by an active outdoor life—he was conscious of no extra heartbeat till that terrible thought rose in his mind, and set his head whirling. Accidents had happened at the Lea Bailey before, and might again.

Carr's usual mode of transit was by way of the chain tramway, and if the chain should happen to break—

„My proofs," Vivid interrupted, as he laid a pile of papers on the table. „Look through those, and my meaning will be clear enough."

More by way of gaining time than anything else, Thornycroft turned the papers over, the faintest smile touching his lips as he perused the record of his own perfidy.

The case was clear enough—even his somewhat confused mind grasped that fact; and he inwardly congratulated himself upon his good fortune in visiting

Ocle Street—far better than Ocle Street, in the shape of a servant of the law, visiting him.

„It looks plausible enough," he replied, at length; „at any rate, to a casual observer. And now that Carr and his wife have come together, as you say they have—"

„I did not say so," Vivid interrupted, with a touch of his dry manner. „I merely suggested that such might be the case."

Thornycroft, with the remembrance of that panoramic view of the dining-room fresh in his recollection, smiled furtively. „What do you wish me to do?" he asked.

„In the first place, to make a clean breast of your crime, and also to restore the money you have stolen."

„A modest request truly. En après, my friend."

„En après, you throw yourself on our mercy for us to decide whether or not we shall prosecute you. We are wasting each other's time. I will give ten minutes to decide."

„That, I presume, is an ultimatum," Thornycroft replied, with no visible change of manner. „Let me put it another way. Supposing that I am prepared to meet you, supposing that you give me twenty-four hours to consider my position?"

„It is not exactly in my hands," Vivid returned. „Still, I don't know why I should not give you that much law."

„The less law the better," Thornycroft replied, as he rose and made his way to the door. „Come to me in the morning, and I will do anything you require in reason. Good morning, Mr. Vivid. And," continued the speaker, sotto voce, „my unfortunate visit may not turn out so unfortunate after all."

As he walked down the road he was conscious of a feeling of strength, a feeling almost of exultation, such as a strong, self-controlled man experiences in the face of danger. The game was not lost yet, he would strike a bold blow for freedom. He even felt a kind of sentimental regret at Carr's ingratitude in demanding his own back again.

The brain of a novelist is, or should be, teeming with mental „situations," strong tableaux in which the thinker plays many parts, from that of the tender lover to that of the abandoned scoundrel.

A strong situation flashed across Thornycroft's mind as he strode homeward.

In his mind's eye he saw the lonely Lea Bailey black under the winter darkness, and a figure, that of Richard Carr, climbing upwards. There was a whirring of cranks and chains, a whistle to the engineer as the railway was set in motion, and Carr moved slowly up the incline.

Then the chain burst, there was a hideous shriek, followed by the dull thud of a falling body. It might happen; it had happened before, and why not that very night?

Carr had an enemy who, in the friendly gloom, had filed the chain in a certain place so cunningly that when it commenced to move the strain had been sufficient to snap it in twain. Supposing— And here the full force of the situation burst upon the schemer till his steady heart commenced to beat like a thousand hammers.

It was getting dark now, and Carr must be on duty at eight o'clock. He would be there certainly, for had he not, in the overheard fragment of conversation, rejoiced fiercely at the prospect of meeting his false enemy?

A step coming along the road fell unheeded upon Thornycroft's ears; it was not until the passer-by had paused with a flourish of his hat, that he recognised St. Clair.

„The man I once revered," exclaimed the latter, sorrowfully; „the man to whom in childhood's sunny hour—"

„Stand aside," Thornycroft interrupted, fiercely—„stand aside, man, or I shall do you a mischief! You must be mad or drunk to face me now, knowing all you do, and knowing that I know too!"

St. Clair bowed gracefully, the spiteful malice bubbling up within as he contemplated Thornycroft's white, stern face. Sodden and bemazed as he was, this dilapidated citizen of the world read something there which set the remnants of his wits to work. It was not fear or fright he saw dancing in his opponent's sombre eyes, it was the brooding resolution of murder.

„'Tis true," pursued the tragedian, „that I have done you a mischief, 'tis true you deserved that Nemesis at my hands. Pass on, sir, pass on, and remember that he who crosses the path of a St. Clair lives to see his temerity. Aha!"

Thornycroft turned scornfully on his heel, and pursued his way through the gathering darkness.

With the theatrical instinct strong upon him, St. Clair paused in an intense listening attitude, such as one sees upon the boards of a fifth-rate travelling theatre.

„'Tis well," he murmured, grandiloquently—„'tis well that I dissembled. What the mischief is he up to now. I never was a spy, and I never was a thief; still, in the sacred name of revenge, I have a great mind to follow him. I shall witness his downfall, and I, ahem, shall benefit by the transaction. It is ungentlemanly, deuced low, in fact, but still here goes."

So saying, the spy retraced his steps, and picking his way with extreme caution, for Thornycroft was a powerful man, walked quietly along the grassy side way, taking care to keep the shadowy figure in sight.

It was a long and weary journey, for Thornycroft knew his way, and was, moreover, a swift walker; while the watcher, on his side, had the additional disadvantage of unsound limb and stony pathway.

But stumbling on, muttering and cursing, he kept the figure in sight till at length Weston Hall was reached, and here Thornycroft paused, as if in doubt.

He merely hesitated for a moment; then, creeping into his own grounds like a thief, arrived at length at an outhouse, the door of which he opened, and from whence he quickly reappeared, armed with a dark lantern and a file.

The light flashed for a moment upon the cowering spy; as Thornycroft looked to the wick, a ray fell upon his own pallid features.

„Something more here than mischief!" muttered the spy, with chattering teeth. „Heavens, a face like that would be a fortune on the stage! If he were to discover me now!"

But the contemplation of this catastrophe was too unpleasant for further reflection. Out into the night they went, would-be murderer, with cowardly spy tracking him like the shade of Nemesis, and up the rising ground where the Lea Bailey works loomed faintly against the gloom, and the mechanical roadway crawled upwards like a hideous snake.

With heaving chest and fitful breath, St. Clair followed, devoutly thankful when Thornycroft paused at length, and glancing cautiously around, climbed out onto the tramway, and lying on one of the grimy trucks, leant over, and

after carefully adjusting his lantern, commenced filing at the link below as if dear life depended upon his labour.

In the pallid light the bright tool gleamed like silver; a faint rasping sound hung on the stagnant air. Muddled and terrorized as he was, the watcher‘s wits had not entirely deserted him.

Like a flash the whole horror of the plot burst upon him.

„Carr will come this way!“ he whispered, hoarsely. „He will give the signal to his mate above, and then— Great heavens! scoundrel as I am, I could not do that! No, Mr. Thornycroft, if I can only warn him, and catch you red-handed, it will not be such a bad day‘s work for Algernon St. Clair, after all!“

Cautiously enough, he started downward, his whole frame trembling now with something besides fatigue. The distant chimes of Lea rang out the hour of eight; time for Carr to resume duty; time enough yet, if only the road were a little smoother, and the traveller‘s limbs a little less trammelled by excess.

He reached the base at last, worn and breathless, just in the nick of time; Carr was already upon the parapet, and, with his fingers to his lips, was preparing to give the signal.

„Silence, as you hope for salvation!“ St. Clair cried. „Come down, man—come down, as you value life itself!“

Slowly enough Carr climbed down; he was not put out even when he recognised St. Clair, and demanded with undisguised contempt the meaning of this interruption.

But gradually, as he listened to the broken, incoherent tale, his face hardened; a merciless expression crept into his eyes, and without deigning a reply, he sped upwards with rapid stride, leaving the fatigued St. Clair far behind.

„The scoundrel!“ he panted; „the cowardly scoundrel! And to think that I should have trusted him. Ah!“

Suddenly the light of Thornycroft‘s lantern loomed through the darkness, his bent figure plainly visible as he stood over his toil. Creeping cautiously onward, Carr could see the great beads of perspiration standing on the worker‘s forehead; he could see that one flange of the huge link was worn to the thickness of a fine wire. It might stand there for hours, but once set the trucks in motion, and ten minutes would sever the connection, and throw any traveller down to instant death.

Still more slowly and cautiously he climbed on to the rails, and from thence on to the truck behind Thornycroft, where he stood, every nerve absolutely thrilling with suppressed rage and hatred.

„It is enough!“ Thornycroft murmured to himself. „It is all done.“

Carr jumped forward, and twisting his arms round the speaker‘s neck, thrust his fingers into the collar till every vein stood out on Thornycroft‘s forehead like knotted cords.

„It is well done!“ the assailant gasped. „It is well done, you murderer—and I am here to complete the work.“

Chapter VIII

Paid in Full.

THORNYCROFT, dazed and half-strangled for the moment, cowered and trembled, feeling as if some savage beast had suddenly launched upon him, a parallel which, indeed, might have been less appropriate. Shaken from its place by the sudden impetus, the lantern fell like a falling star; the light died with a sharp hiss as it struck the water; there was a faint suspended sense like an uneasy dream. Throwing off the mortal terror, Thornycroft struggled till every muscle ached with the exertion; for all effect it had, he might have been a child, struggling from the confinement of a steel vice. With a sigh, half-savage, half-regretful, he abandoned himself to fate.

„Do you know what I am going to do with you?“ Carr asked, without the slightest semblance of passion. His cold, icy manner was more ominous than the wildest paroxysm of rage. „I am going to wing a confession from you. And when that is done, I shall give the signal to my mate above, and then—“

„Then we shall be dashed to pieces!“ Thornycroft gasped, painfully.

„We shall, you and I together. That is exactly what I mean. Life is sweet to you. You have everything—name, fame, and wealth—to make it smooth and pleasant. I have nothing but my revenge. Look down, man, it is forty feet sheer to that black water. Can‘t you hear it dripping and gurgling into the pool? Can‘t you?“

Involuntarily Thornycroft dropped his eyes downwards to the murky mists. In the intense silence he could hear the plash, plash of that murky flood. A startled bird whirled overhead. Away in the village there arose the sound of a shrill, cheerful whistle, as some belated labourer trudged homeward.

„As you hope for mercy,“ Thornycroft cried, „let me go!“

„I will let you go soon enough—too soon!“ was the grim reply. „Look you! I know every chain and link of this line. Dark as it is, I can find my way to the bank in safety. I can give the signal, and wait till it moves ere I start. And when I am secure on the bank, and you commence to move—“

„Man can only die once,“ said Thornycroft, sullenly, a reckless courage springing up within him—the courage of despair.

„Ay, more‘s the pity,“ Carr retorted, fiercely, „else I could find it in my heart to kill you a score of times; for what have I to lose? Nothing. And what have you to sacrifice? Everything. I am a haunted, hunted wretch, wrecked and ruined by the man whom I trusted. You are rich and famous. You thought nothing of my miserable existence out yonder; you never hesitated, though at this moment you would have been a common working drudge but for me. And yet, man of fine feelings as you are, a sentimentalist, a mock philanthropist, you have seen me suffer—great Heaven, how much have you seen me suffer!—and yet never held out a hand to help me. You man of iron; why, out of your own creative faculty you might have invented something to ease my troubled mind, and—But words, weak words, what are they to you?“

He paused, and raised his fingers to his lips.

With eyes grown accustomed to the gloom, Thornycroft saw this, and, with chattering teeth, bade him hesitate, if only for a moment.

„So you are but a coward, after all,“ Carr replied, contemptuously. „No, I am not ready yet. How long have we been here? A few moments it seems to me, and yet I hear the clock striking nine. Come, I will give you ten minutes more while you tell your story. Make it interesting, make it the most thrilling chapter ever composed in your lifetime, for everything you have to say means another

moment of precious existence. Begin from the commencement. I want to know how you inaugurated your rascally career.“

Thornycroft, peering into the inky darkness, sighed hopelessly.

Truly, every moment was precious, and something might yet transpire to free him from this perilous position. Scenes of thrilling adventure by flood and field rose unbidden to his mind in confused, painful medley, and, with a faint touch of comfort, he remembered the famous maxim that it is the unexpected which always happens; a strange epigram under the circumstances, but returning again and again with haunting force.

„Your daughter‘s happiness,“ he hazarded, „is your only thought, and yet you have a strange method of showing it.“

Carr shook the speaker in a sudden gust of passion.

Thornycroft had touched upon a false chord, as he quickly realized.

For a moment they struggled to and fro, till the chains rattled with ghostly clamour. Almost exhausted by his paroxysm of rage, Carr continued more quietly, but still with the same determined ring in his voice.

„Do you want me to end it now, that you dare mention her name? Come, I am waiting for your story.“

„There is not much to tell, since you must hear it. You accuse me of stealing your money and forging your name. It is true. You accuse me of manufacturing false evidence to prove your death, and also with manufacturing false testimony to prove that your wife was no longer living. I admit that also. You are also, perhaps, curious to know whether I have felt any remorse for so doing? Not a whit. Sometimes, indeed, I have been haunted by a fear of your return, and then I have occasionally repented my rashness, but not my crime. And when you came into this neighbourhood, and we came unexpectedly together, I made up my mind to tell you everything, for I am rich now, and money, so far as the amount I owe you is concerned, is nothing. This I intended to do.“

„Is this Thornycroft who speaks?“ Carr, interrupted, grimly, „or the novelist constructing the traditional penitent of fiction? My esteemed friend, surely you don‘t intend me to believe that?“

„I care not how you take it, but it is true all the same. I watched you, I traded upon your fatherly affection. I tried to discern a germ of forgiving spirit, but I found none in your iron nature. And, perforce, I had to remain silent.“

„No difficult task,“ Carr remarked, „after a practice of nearly twenty years. Pray continue. You were going to do this out of consideration for my feelings, to say nothing of the promptings of conscience.“

„From both motives,“ Thornycroft pursued, more hopefully, entirely deceived by the listener‘s calm manner. „Out of consideration for you, and as a necessary stroke of policy for my own salvation. But your reception of my advances was not encouraging, and therefore I preferred to let sleeping dogs lie, or else years ago—“

„You would have told me. What a story, what a plot for your next novel, which will never be written. And that is all.“

„"And that,“ Thornycroft echoed, „is all. I have nothing more to say.“

With an involuntary sigh, he ceased to speak; a faint breeze stirred the leafless trees hanging overhead, a dog barked somewhere in the distance, afar off there was a confused murmur of voices coming gradually nearer, and, as it increased in volume, Thornycroft‘s heart gave a sudden flutter of relief.

Above the startled silence the piercing scream of Carr‘s whistle arose, only to be followed by a resounding echo, again the call was repeated, and again there came no answering cry.

„Fortune seems to favour you,“ Carr exclaimed. „What is that?“

The confused voices came nearer, far below lights began to gleam, flashing upwards with eccentric motion as if their bearers were hurrying along in breathless haste. Then Thornycroft, with a sudden desire for life, a sudden inspiration of relief at hand, clutched his antagonist in one last long struggle for bare existence.

Silently, like two tigers fighting in the dark, they swayed to and fro, now one uppermost, now the other, hands locked convulsively, a faint steam rising as breath commenced to come and go fitfully. Anon they were upon the chains, again within the grimy trucks, slipping and staggering, bruised and blood-stained, but unconscious of pain as if the combat had been some deadly nightmare.

„We are not too late, thank Heaven!“ a voice exclaimed.

St. Clair, hot, weary, and mud-stained, flashed into the light, followed by a little knot of people, bearing lanterns.

„Speak to them, some of you. I can say no more.“

„Hold, you madman, hold!“ cried Dangerfield, as he stepped upon the rails as Thornycroft was in the act of falling forward. „What new insanity is this? Murder, murder!“

„For the love of Heaven, Carr, hold your hand!“ came the shrill tones of Vivid, as he tottered into sight, Ethel Carr beside him. „Is this what you promised me? Is this the way you regard this poor child‘s happiness?“

„Father, father!“ was all that she could say, as she clung to Vivid, sobbing with mingled fright, sorrow, and relief. „Father, father, and we were going to be so happy, after all these years.“

As a voice wakes one from a dream so Carr awoke from the sleep of madness.

Dazed and trembling he rose to his feet, and motioned Thornycroft to rise also, and thus they reached the bank in safety.

„You came in time!“ he said, almost mechanically. „Thank Heaven!—thank Heaven! You find me in the wrong, as I always am—you find me. My child, you know everything, if you can forgive him!“—he pointed to Thornycroft, who, with pale, blood-stained face, was leaning, dazed and faint, against a fallen tree—„if you can forgive him—“

„It is done,“ Ethel said—„it is done a thousand times!“

„That was well said,“ Thornycroft murmured. „I owe you a debt which shall be paid in full.“

He staggered forward, and raising Ethel‘s hand to his lips, kissed her fingers; then, turning away, he disappeared into the darkness, pale and white, like a man stricken with a mortal sickness.

Gradually the others followed, St. Clair bringing up the rear. He had recovered his jaunty step, the shabby white hat was inclined at its accustomed angle; he walked with the proud air of a conqueror.

„A fine situation,“ he muttered—„a remarkable tableau, and I flatter myself, remarkably well rehearsed. I do not complain of having to play a subordinate part for once, especially as it promises to command the highest salary of any performer in the bills.“

* * * * *

Three years is not a long period in a lifetime, though it suffices with many of us to see ambitions gratified and promises fulfilled; it suffices also with many of us to see those ambitions fade and perish, and to see those blooming promises produce a plentiful crop of Dead Sea fruit. But under the Lea time seems to stand still, for Martin Dale still flourishes at „*The Grapes*," and Mr. Vivid, jaunty as of yore, discourses upon his crops and his cider, which latter he now manufactures by an entirely new process, with eminent satisfaction to himself, notwithstanding the Squire's protest that the system is ridiculous and costly.

They have long since made up their quarrel over the apple of discord, and have agreed to differ over its merits, while the vexed question of espaliers and pyramids are rigidly excluded from conversation.

Martin Dale has grown a little grayer, and Prout has become somewhat hard of hearing; there is a stoop in Ambrose Niel's shoulders, not solely due to the occupation of tending roses and lilies.

They are seated on this fine July evening in the old garden, and their conversation has turned upon a certain local event, nothing less than the birth of a son and heir to Cyril Dangerfield.

Ambrose has the latest information, as is only natural. Ambrose, too, is regarded as a greater authority than of yore, which is only as it should be, considering that he no longer occupies the cottage under the hill, but resides in a neat little villa down the road, and is, in fact, looked upon as a gentleman.

„She came down to see me this morning," he says, with conscious pride, „an' a-brought the little 'un along. ‹A fine child,› says the wife, ‹an' a real Dangerfield, every inch on him.› And so I says, too."

„Changes, changes, Mr. Niel," Prout remarks, with his old air of wisdom. „It only seems yesterday as I said *Amen!* when parson joined them together; and it's three year agone—three year all but four months this very night as that Thornycroft shot hisself, arter leaving all his money to young Mrs. Dangerfield. It makes one feel old a'most."

„And three year since we heard tell of her father," Dale observes, lighting his pipe, and looking speculatively into his silver-rimmed tankard. „I suppose there ain't nothing new of him now, Mr. Niel?"

„Nothing particular, Martin. You know as well as I do as he took a wrong fit when Ethel's mother died two year and more ago. Thought he was on the way like, and went to foreign parts, where they do say as how he's rolling in gold. And to think that my girl—for I calls her that, mind you, still—shouldn't ha' had a patron after all, but only a common father, giving her education and pianoforty, and everything spicy. But he'll come home again, you see; he'll get precious tired of living amongst heathen savages; and there'll be a welcome for him, too, as you all knows as well as I do."

„Which welcome, my friend, may not be long deferred," put in a slightly theatrical voice at this moment. „Life is comedy or life is tragedy, alternated like the fat and lean on the common hog of commerce."

St. Clair, in propria persona, cleaner, less florid and shaky, more decently clad, but St. Clair all the same, with somewhat extravagant garments, and a hat of fashionable shape inclined to the familiar angle. The actor has turned over a new leaf, and become a respectable member of society, in witness of which fact, his company is not unwelcome at „*The Grapes*" on summer evenings, when the thrilling pastime of bowls is in full swing. St. Clair has become factotum and servant of Mr. Vivid, and gracefully deigns to accept from

that gentleman a cottage, together with a yearly stipend of one hundred pounds, in grateful acknowledgment of a certain signal service rendered one eventful night. St. Clair has—such is the force of genius—become the oracle par excellence at „*The Grapes*,“ and St. Clair is accompanied now by a short, powerful-looking individual, with a keen black eye and iron-gray hair, before whose glance Martin Dale quails and cries, „Bless my soul!“ as he seeks for inspiration in the silver-rimmed tankard.

„Not so long delayed!“ St. Clair repeats, as, with a condescending wink, he leads the way to the wicket gate, and from thence into Mr. Vivid‘s orchard, where a group is standing, admiring the fair promise for the coming autumn—Squire Dangerfield and the owner himself, Cyril and his young wife clinging to his arm, pale and fair in the sunlight, but beautiful as ever.

„You are wrong, Squire, utterly wrong!“ Vivid is saying. „The theory is simply ridiculous! What you must do is syringe the trees every spring with a strong solution of paraffin and water. Don‘t tell me the grubs lie in the trunk!“

„But, my dear sir, science has proved it beyond the shadow of a doubt,“ argues the Squire, slightly red in the face with something more than the heat of the afternoon. „Come, Vivid, you can‘t teach me anything concerning pomona culture. If you neglect to smear the trunks with some oily substance up to the forks, you cannot expect to have fruit the next year. Besides—“

Ethel and Cyril have moved a little apart from the rest; they are talking earnestly; a little ray of light falls upon her upturned face, into which Cyril looks with lover-like approval.

„He seems happy enough,“ she says, referring to a letter in her hand; „only I can trace here and there a longing to be at home again. I blame myself, Cyril, that we allowed him to go.“

„Your father is a man of iron determination,“ Cyril replies. „Depend upon it, if he thought he was right to go, no influence would change him. But he will return in good time.“

„I hope so—I hope so,“ says Ethel, softly. „He has had a sad, lonely life. And now above all other times—“

Illustration:
St. Clair approached, closely followed by his companion.

„A natural wish naturally expressed; the sentence left unfinished which is the true art concealing nature,“ says St. Clair, who has approached with true theatrical stealth upon the mossy turf, closely followed by his companion. „Behold the heroine—Act Three—sighing for the one thing needful to complete her happiness. Enter reformed villain and his mysterious companion, R.U.E., and overheard the conversation. Mysterious companion advances to heroine, and she falls into his arms, with a startled cry of *Father, I*—“

„It is,“ Ethel cries, following out this direction to the letter, and thus cutting off the deux ex machina in the full tide of his eloquence—„it is! Mr. Dangerfield, Mr. Vivid, my father has come home! Oh, father—oh, Cyril!“ she cries, in a glorious burst of happiness, „this is the best, most perfect day of my life!“

„Slow music, lights half down,“ St. Clair murmurs, half theatrically, half regretfully. „‹Night‘s candles are burnt out, and jocund day stands tiptoe on the misty mountain, tops.› The play is finished, and the orchestra has gone home. Curtain, Mr. Prompter, if you please.“