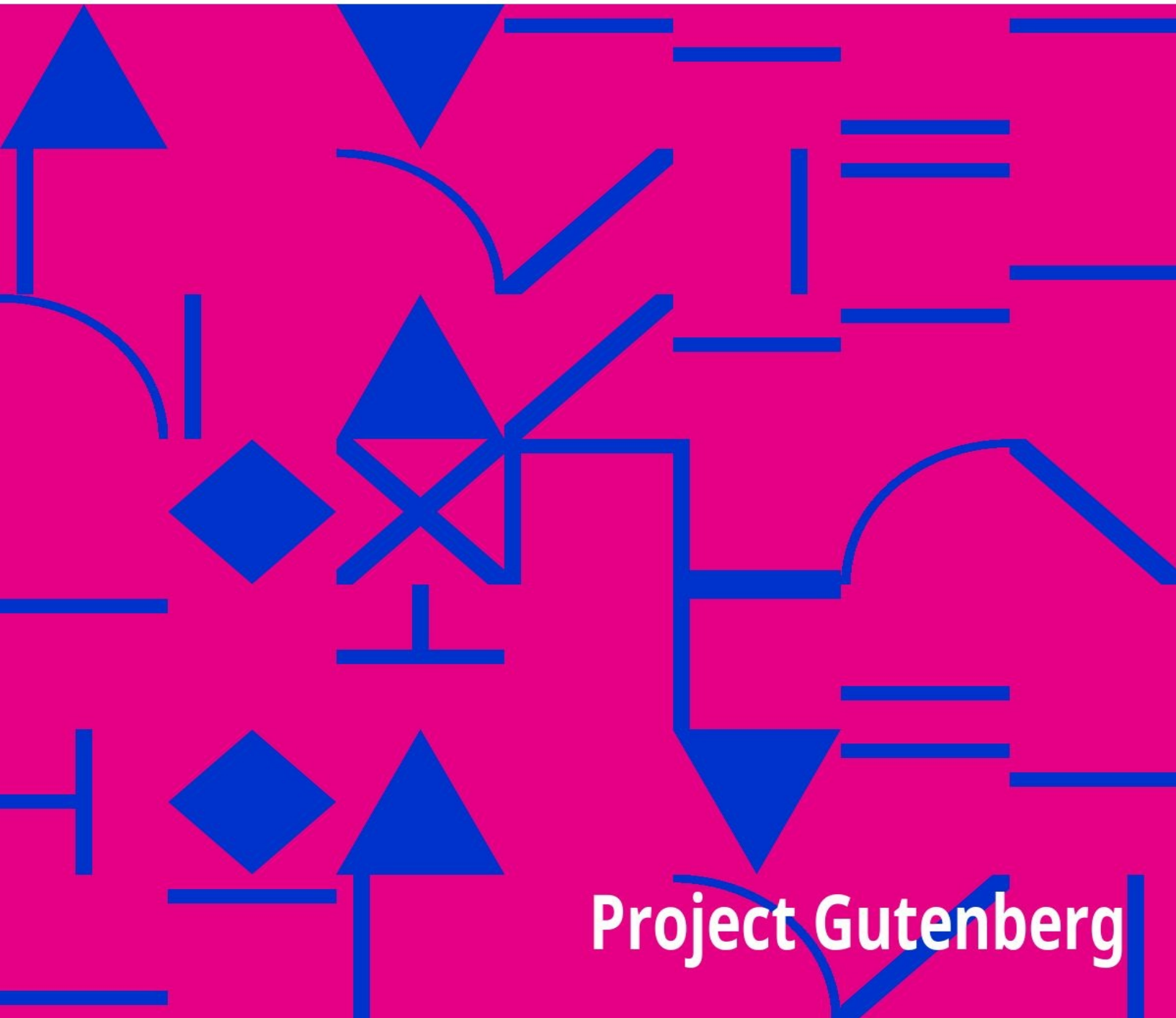
A Secret Inheritance (Volume 1 of 3)

B. L. Farjeon



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Author: B. L. (Benjamin Leopold) Farjeon

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A SECRET INHERITANCE

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SECRET INHERITANCE

BY

B. L. FARJEON,

AUTHOR OF "GREAT PORTER SQUARE," "IN A SILVER SEA," "THE HOUSE OF WHITE SHADOWS," ETC.

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A SECRET INHERITANCE.

BOOK THE FIRST.

THE RECORD OF GABRIEL CAREW.

VOL. I.

CHAPTER I.

My earliest distinct remembrances are of a mean and common home in London, in which I lived with my parents and a servant named Fortress. She was a young woman, her age being twenty-four or five, but her manners were as sedate as those of a matron who had a distaste for frivolity and tittle-tattle. She performed her duties quietly and in silence, and seldom spoke unless she were first addressed. She did not take the trouble to render herself agreeable to me, or to win my affection. This was entirely to my liking, as I was of a retired habit of mind and disposition. It was not unusual for weeks to pass without our exchanging a word.

We were surrounded by squalid thoroughfares, the residents in which were persons occupying the lowest stations of life, human bees whose hives were not over stocked with honey, being indeed, I have no doubt, frequently bare of it. This was not the result of indolence, for they toiled early and late. I saw, and observed. Sometimes I wondered, sometimes I despised, and I always shrank from close contact with these sordid conditions of existence. If I had possessed a store of pocket-money it is not unlikely that a portion of it would have been expended in charity, but I will not affirm that I should have been impelled to liberality by motives of benevolence. We were, however, very poor, and my father seldom gave me a penny. I did not complain; I had no wants which money could gratify. I did not consort with other children; I did not play or associate with them; when they made advances towards me I declined to receive them, and I held myself entirely aloof from their pleasures and occupations. In this respect I instinctively followed the fashion of our home and the example of my parents. They had no friends or intimate acquaintances. During the years we lived thus poorly and meanly, not a man, woman, or child ever entered our doors to partake of our hospitality, or to impart what would possibly have been a healthy variety to our days.

Our dwelling consisted of two rooms at the top of a small house. They were

attics; in one my mother and Mrs. Fortress slept; in the other my father and I. The bed he and I occupied was shut up during the day, and made an impotent pretence of being a chest of drawers. This room was our living room, and we took our meals in it.

In speaking of our servant as Mrs. Fortress I do not intend to convey that she was a married woman. My impression was that she was single, and I should have scouted the idea of her having a sweetheart; but my parents always spoke of and to her as Mrs. Fortress.

From the window of our living-room I could see, at an angle, a bit of the River Thames. The prospect was gloomy and miserable. There was no touch of gaiety in the sluggish panorama of the life on the water. The men on the barges, working with machine-like movement against the tide, were begrimed and joyless; the people on the penny steamers seemed bent on anything but pleasure; the boys who played about the stranded boats when the tide was low were elfish and mischievous. The land life was in keeping. The backs of other poor houses were scarcely a handshake off. On a sill here and there were a few drooping flowers, typical of the residents in the poverty-stricken neighbourhood. Sometimes as I gazed upon these signs an odd impression stole upon me that we had not always lived in this mean condition. I saw dimly the outlines of a beautiful house, with gardens round it, of horses my parents used to ride, of carriages in which we drove, of many servants to wait upon us. But it was more like a dream than reality, and I made no reference to it in my parents' hearing, and did not ask them whether my fancies had any substantial foundation.

When I say that a cloud rested upon us, I mean the figure of speech to bear no partial application. It was dark and palpable; it entered into our lives; it shadowed all our days. On more than one occasion I noticed my parents gazing apprehensively at me, and then piteously at each other; and upon their discovering that I was observing them they would force a smile to their lips, and assume a gaiety in which, young as I was, I detected a false ring. My mother did not always take her meals with us; my father and I frequently sat at the table alone.

"Your mother is not well enough to join us," he would sometimes say to me. If he saw me gazing on the vacant chair.

There were occasions when he and I would go into the country, and I do not

remember that my mother ever accompanied us. There would be no preliminary preparation for these trips, nor was it customary for my father to say to me on the morning or the evening before these departures, "We are going into the country to-morrow, Gabriel." We always seemed to be suddenly called away, and our return was also sudden and, to me, unexpected. These holidays would, in the ordinary course of things, have been joyfully hailed by most poor lads. Not so by me. They were most melancholy affairs, and I was glad to get back from them. My father appeared to be suffering from greater anxiety in the country than in London. The excuse for these sudden departures was that my mother was ill, and needed quiet. We stopped at poor inns, and had no money to spend in junketings.

"I would like to take you to such or such a place," my father would say, "but I cannot afford it."

"It does not matter, father," I would answer. "I should be happy if I only had my books about me."

It was the being separated from my little library that made the country so irksome to me. I was passionately fond of reading, and my store of literature consisted of books which had belonged to my father, and had been well thumbed by him. They were mine; he had given them to me on my birthday. Of their nature it is sufficient to say here that they were mostly classics, and that among them were very few of a light character.

One morning a ray of light shone through the dark spaces of our lives.

We were sitting at breakfast in our lodgings in London when Mrs. Fortress brought in a letter for my father. It was an unusual event, and my father turned it over leisurely in his hand, and examined the writing on the envelope before he opened it. But his manner changed when he read the letter; he was greatly agitated, and my mother asked anxiously:

"Have you bad news?"

"No," he replied, "good."

He was silent for a few moments, and his next words were:

"Mildred, can you bear a shock?"

"Yes," said my mother, "as the news is good."

"We are rich once more," my father said, and then exclaimed, as he gazed around upon the mean walls of our apartment, "Thank God!"

A relative of ours had died in a distant land, and had left his fortune to my father. My father had had no expectations from him, and had, indeed, almost forgotten his existence. The greater was our surprise at this sudden change in our circumstances.

Although there were formalities to be gone through before my father came into possession of the large legacy, and although seven or eight weeks elapsed before we removed from our poor lodgings, the change from poverty to riches was almost immediately apparent. My father presented me with a purse containing money. I do not remember how much, but there were sovereigns in it.

I was not proud; I was not elated. The prospect of living in a better place, with better surroundings, was agreeable to me, but it did not excite me. With my purse in my pocket I went to a shop in which second-hand books were sold, and among them some I desired to possess. I bought what I wished, and carried them away with me. On my way home I noticed a little girl sitting on a doorstep, and there was a wan look in her pale face which attracted me. By her side was a crutch. As I stood looking at her for a moment, the string with which my books were tied became undone, the paper in which they were wrapped burst, and the books fell to the ground. I stooped to pick them up, but the books, being loose and of different sizes, were cumbersome to hold, and I called to the girl that I would give her a shilling if she helped me.

"A shilling!" she exclaimed, and rose upon her feet, but immediately sank to the ground, with a cry of pain.

"What is the matter with you?" I asked. "I haven't hurt you, have I?"

She pointed to her crutch. Thinking that she wished me to hand it to her, I lifted it from the ground, and found that it was broken.

"You are lame," I said.

"Yes," she said, looking at me admiringly from her crouching position; the twitch in her leg had caused her but momentary suffering, "I can't stand without

my crutch, and it's broke."

"But you tried to stand when I called to you."

"Oh, yes; you said you'd give me a shilling, and I didn't think of my leg."

Much virtue in a shilling, thought I, to cause one to forget such an affliction.

"I wouldn't mind buying you a crutch," I said, "if I knew where they were sold."

"There's a shop in the next street," said the girl, "where the master's got the feller one to this. It's a rag and bone shop, and he'll sell it cheap."

"I'll show you the shop, young sir, if you like," said a voice at my elbow.

The tone and the manner of speech were refined, and it surprised me, therefore, when I turned, to behold a figure strangely at variance with this refinement. The man was in rags, and the drunkard's stamp was on his features, but in his kind eyes shone a sadly humorous light. Moreover, he spoke as a gentleman would have spoken.

I accepted his offer to show me the rag and bone shop, and we walked side by side, conversing. To be exact, I should say that he talked and I listened, for he used twenty words to one of mine. This kind of social intercourse was rare in my experiences, and it proved interesting, by reason of my chance companion being an exception to the people who lived in the neighbourhood. Few as were the words I uttered, they, and the books I carried under my arm, served to unlock his tongue, and he regaled me with snatches of personal history. He was familiar with the books I had purchased, and expressed approval of my selection. He had, indeed, been born a gentleman, and had received a liberal education.

"Which has served to convince me," he observed, "that if it is in the nature of a man to swim with the current into which he has drifted or been driven, swim with it he must, wheresoever it may lead him."

"There is the power of resistance," I said.

"There is nothing of the sort," was his comment, "unless it is agreeable to the man to exercise it. We are but straws. It is fortunate that life is short, and that

happiness does not consist in wearing a jewelled crown. Young sir, how came you to live in these parts?"

"I do not know," I replied. "My parents live here."

"But you are not poor."

By this time I had bought the odd crutch, and my companion had seen the gold in my purse when I paid for it.

"We have been," I said, "but are so no longer."

"Shade of Pluto!" he cried. "If I could but say as much! So, being suddenly made rich, you open your heart to pity's call?" I shook my head in doubt, and he touched the crutch. "Don't you think this a fine thing to do?"

"I am not sure," I said.

"Excellent!" he exclaimed. "Praise me not for my virtues; blame me not for my vices. That morality, in respect to the average man, is a knife that cuts both ways. To sinners like myself it is more comforting than otherwise."

He puzzled me, and I told him so, but he made a pretence of disbelieving me, and said,

"There are depths in you, young sir. You may live to discover that you are in the wrong century."

That I did not clearly understand him did not render his conversation less interesting. I gave the girl the crutch and a shilling, and left her and the man together.

I record this incident because it is the only one I remember during the time we lived in that poor neighbourhood in which strangers played a part. So far as my outer life was concerned, it was utterly devoid of colour.

CHAPTER II.

There was but little difference in this respect when we removed to Rosemullion, an old-fashioned, straggling mansion on the outskirts of Rochester, surrounded by stone walls, and secluded from public view by thick clusters of trees. We made no friends, we kept no company. Within half a hundred yards of the great house was a cottage of six rooms, very pretty, embosomed in shrubs and flowers. After a time this cottage became my real home. I was allowed to do pretty much as I liked, within certain unexpressed limitations through which, it appears, I did not break. Before I inhabited this cottage, I spoke, of course, to my father on the subject.

"You have taken a fancy to it, Gabriel?" he said.

"A great fancy," I said; "I wish it were mine."

"You may consider it yours," he said.

I thanked him, and immediately removed my books and papers into it. In a very short time it was ready for occupation, and I took possession of it. I wrote and studied in it, mused in it, slept in it, and lived therein a life of much seclusion. It suited my humour; I was fond of privacy, and I could enjoy it there to my heart's content.

Heaven knows there was no inducement in the great house to render it attractive to me. It was invariably quiet and sad. Whatever else our coming into possession of wealth did for us, it did not improve my mother's health. She became more than ever a confirmed invalid, and frequently kept her chamber for weeks together, during which times I was not permitted to see her. Mrs. Fortress remained with us in attendance on my mother, and exercised absolute control not only over her, but over the whole establishment. My father did not trouble himself in domestic matters; he left everything to Mrs. Fortress. Our only regular

visitor was a doctor, who occasionally, after seeing my mother, would come and chat with me a while. He was a practitioner of fair ability, but apart from his profession, had little in him to attract me to him. I had the knack of gauging men, though I mixed but little with them; I had also the gift of drawing them out, as it were, and of extracting any special knowledge in which they were proficient. Using the doctor in this way, quite unsuspiciously, I am sure, to himself, I gained something from conversing with him; but had his visits to me not been few and far between, I should have found a means of avoiding them. I had already developed a certain masterfulness of spirit, and judged and decided matters for myself. There was, however, one exception, the intercourse between my mother and myself. In this I did not guide, but was guided. When the periods of seclusion of which I have spoken were over, Mrs. Fortress would come to me and say, "Your mother will see you now," and would conduct me to her presence. Only the slightest references to her illness were permitted. There were in our small family unwritten laws which were never transgressed. I have no remembrance of the manner in which they were made known to me, but known they were, and obeyed as though they had been writ in letters of steel, and no thought of rebelling against them entered my mind. The utmost I was allowed to say was,

"You have been ill, mother?"

"Yes, Gabriel," she would reply, "I have been ill."

"You are better now, mother?"

"Yes, I am better now."

That was all.

Mrs. Fortress would stand in silence by the bedside. She ruled chiefly by looks. What peculiar duties were attached to her service I know not, but there cannot be a doubt that she performed them faithfully. I neither liked nor disliked her, but she compelled me to respect her. In her outward bearing she was more like a machine than a human being. Sometimes in thinking of her I recalled words which had been applied to me by the man who had accompanied me to purchase the crutch for the lame girl. "There are depths in you, young sir." There must be depths in every human creature--a hidden life pulsing beneath the one revealed to the world. What depths were hidden in Mrs. Fortress's' nature? Had

she relatives in some faraway corner, of whom she thought with affection? Had she an ambition, an aspiration? Was she working to some coveted end? Had she an idea which was not bounded by the walls of my mother's sick room? Did she love anything in all the wide world? Did she fear anything? Was she capable of an act of devotion and self-sacrifice? Impossible to discover in one so stolid and impassive.

I saw her one day during a great storm standing in the porch of the principal entrance, watching with calm eyes the lightning playing among the trees. She gazed straight and clear before her; there was not a sign of blenching. Loud peals of thunder broke over the district; she made no movement. I could not but admire her, for I myself loved to watch a great storm, and took delight in witnessing a conflict of the elements.

"You enjoy it," I said, going to her side.

She gazed at me, and did not speak. She was evidently surprised at being addressed on any but a domestic subject. I felt an inward sense of satisfaction, which I did not allow to appear in my face. To have surprised a being so cold and impassive was, in its way, an achievement.

"I have heard," I continued, "that most persons are afraid of a storm such as this."

"They are cowards," she said. "What is there to be afraid of?"

"That is what I think. You must be brave."

"Nothing frightens me. There are worse storms."

"Oh, yes," I acquiesced. "There was one last year. It struck down hundreds of trees."

"I don't mean storms of that kind."

I thought a moment. "If not in nature, then," I said, "in human life?" She did not reply; she had already said more than she intended. What came next from me, in the form of a question, was entirely unpremeditated; it escaped from me unaware. "Do you believe in a future world?"

"It does not trouble me," she said; and she walked into the house, and cast not a look behind.

This portion of my life, when I was growing from childhood to manhood, is quite clear to me. The change in my parents' circumstances afforded me advantages for study which I might not otherwise have enjoyed. I was not sent to a private or public school; my education was conducted at home by private tutors, with whom no opportunities offered of becoming intimate. Indeed, it appeared to me that they were too frequently and unnecessarily changed, but I cannot say whether this was from design on my father's part, or because my tutors found their duties distasteful. I think they had no reason to complain of me on the score of attention; I was too fond of learning to close the windows of the mind which they assisted me to open. Perhaps the peculiar rules of our household weighed upon them. We appeared to be cut off from our species, to lead a life apart from theirs. Ordinary amusements and pleasures found no place in Rosemullion. Newspapers and the current literature of the day were not admitted into our home. Although we were in the midst of busy millions, although a feverish, restless life was throbbing all around us, we took no share in it, and seemed to have no interests in common with our fellow-creatures. There was a war which shook the world. Great dynasties were at stake, parliaments were hastily summoned, thousands of men were marching to an untimely death, millions of money were expended, the avenues of cities were thronged with excited crowds, the history of the world was stained with blood, battlefields were charged with sobs and cries of agony, red-hot demagogues fumed and foamed, drums beat, trumpets sounded, gay music, to cast a false sweetness on death, was played through day and night, heroes were made, poets wrote stanzas and immortalised themselves, the whole world was in convulsion. It touched us not. Our sympathies, desires, and aspirations were centred in our own little world. The stone walls which surrounded the estate upon which our house and cottage were built were eight feet in height. Our servants performed their duties almost noiselessly; our gardener was deaf and dumb. These conditions of existence could not have been accidental; they must have been carefully planned and considered. For what reason? We were rich enough to pay for colour and variety, and yet they were not allowed to enter our lives. We were thrown entirely upon ourselves and our own narrow resources.

I cannot truthfully say that I was unhappy during those years. We can scarcely miss that to which we are not accustomed, and I have learned since that the world is too full of wants for happiness. My passion for books grew more

profound and engrossing; I grew passionately endeared to solitude. There were some fine woods near our house, and I was in the habit of wandering in them by day and night. If in the daylight I heard the sound of voices, or was made aware of the proximity of human creatures, I wandered in the opposite direction. It was known that I frequented the woods by day, but my nocturnal ramblings were secretly indulged in. Even my father was not aware that the nights which should have been devoted to repose were spent in the open. When all in the house were sleeping, I would steal out and wander for hours in darkness, which had no terrors for me. Shadows took comprehensive shapes--comprehensive to me, but perhaps not to all men--and that some were weird and monstrous, like nothing that moved and lived upon the sunlit earth, suited my mood and nature. I did not ask myself whether they were or were not creatures of my imagination. I accepted them without question, and I humoured and made sport of them; spoke to them, taunted them; dared them to action; asked them their mission; and walked among them fearlessly. I loved the supernatural in book and fancy, and on rare occasions, when I was in a state of spiritual exaltation, a vague belief would steal upon me that I should one day possess the power of piercing the veil which shuts off the unseen from mortal eyes. In winter the snow-robed trees, standing like white sentinels in a white eternal night, possessed for me an irresistible fascination. I saw wondrous scenes and pictures. The woods were filled with myriad eyes, gleaming with love, with hate, with joy, with despair; grotesque creatures inhabited every cranny; white spirits lurked among the silvered branches; the frosty stars looked down upon me as upon one of their kindred, and I looked up at them, and cried in spiritual ecstasy, "Only to you and to me are these things visible!"

Thus I lived, as it were, the inner life, and became familiar with hidden beauties and hidden horrors.

Was I, then, so wrapped up in my own narrow self that I shut my eyes and ears to the pulsing of other human life? Not entirely. There were occasions when I associated with my fellows.

Thus, on a stormy night in September, when the rain came down in torrents, I heard the sounds of loud entreaty proceeding from outside the stone walls of the estate. Had it not been that my sense of hearing was very acute, and that those who were appealing were screaming at the top of their voices, it would have been impossible for me to hear them. The wind assisted them and me; it blew in the direction of the chamber in which I sat reading by the light of a lamp.

"Some people in distress," I thought, and proceeded with my reading.

The sounds of entreaty continued, grew louder, and more deeply imploring.

"They will scream themselves hoarse presently," I thought. "Well, I am comfortable enough."

"Well said, Gabriel, well said!"

Who spoke? Nothing human, for I was the only person awake in house and cottage. Although I was convinced of this I looked around, not in fear but curiosity. Nothing living was in view.

"Is it well?" I asked aloud. "The sounds proceed most likely from poor persons who are benighted, and who have not a roof to cover them."

"That is their affair," said the voice.

"The storm is terrible," I continued. "They may perish in it."

The answer came. "They meet their fate. Leave them to their doom. In the morning their sufferings will be over."

"And I shall live," I said, "guilty and self-condemned. There is no such thing as fate. Human will can save or destroy. They are human, and I will go to them."

The rain and the wind almost blinded me as I walked from my cottage to the gates. All the while the voices continued to beseech despairingly and bitterly, calling upon man, calling upon God.

I heard one say, "Hush! There's somebody coming."

The next moment I opened the gates.

"Ah, master," cried a woman, "for the love of God tell us the way to Purvis's huts! Jump down, Jim; you've pretty nigh broke my blade-bone in."

A tall man jumped from the woman's shoulders to the ground. It was from that elevated position he had seen the light in my room.

"I don't know Purvis or his huts," I said. "What are you?"

"Hoppers, master. We're bound for Purvis's gardens, and we thought we should get to the sleeping huts before night set in; but we missed our way, and have been tramping through the rain for I don't know how many hours. I'm soaked through and through, and am ready to drop."

"Why did you not stop at an inn?" I asked.

"None of that!" growled the man, in a threatening tone.

"Be quiet, Jim!" said the woman. "Why didn't we stop at an inn, master? Because in them places they don't give you nothing for nothing, and that's about as much as we've got to offer. We're dead broke, master."

"We're never nothing else," growled the man.

"Can you help us, master?" asked the woman.

"Ask him if he will," growled the man, "don't ask him if he can."

"Leave it to me, Jim. You're always a-putting your foot into it. Will you, master, will you?"

"Who is that crying?"

"One of the children, master."

"One of them! How many have you?"

"Five, master."

"Curse 'em!" growled the man.

"Shut up, Jim! The gentleman'll help us for the sake of the young 'uns, won't you, sir? They're sopping wet, master, and a-dying of hunger."

"If I allow you to occupy my room," I said, "and give you food and a fire, will you go away quietly when the sun rises?"

"There, Jim; didn't I tell you? We're in luck. Go away quiet when the sun rises, master? Yes, master, yes. Hope I may never see daylight again if we don't!"

"Come in," I said. "Follow me, and make as little noise as possible."

They followed me quietly to my room. Their eyes dilated when they saw the fire, upon which I threw a fresh supply of coals.

"God bless you, sir!" said the woman, drawing the children to the fire, before which the man was already crouching.

True enough, there were seven of them. Man, woman, and five children, the youngest a baby, the eldest not more than seven years of age. A gruesome lot. Starving, cunning, in rags; but there was a soft light in the woman's eyes; she was grateful for the warmth and the prospect of food. The man's eyes were watching me greedily.

"Where is it, master?"

"Where is what?"

"The grub you promised us."

"You shall have it presently."

I noticed that the children's clothes were drying on them, and I suggested to the woman that she should take them off.

"I've nothing to wrap 'em in, master," she said.

I went into my bedroom, and brought back sheets and blankets, which I gave to the woman. She took them in silence, and carried out my suggestion. I then made two or three journeys to the larder, and brought up the food I found there, bread, butter, meat, and the remains of a pie. When I came up for the last time I saw the man standing, looking round the room.

"He ain't took nothing, master," said the woman, "and sha'n't."

I nodded, and the man resumed his recumbent position before the fire. I handed them the food, and they devoured it wolfishly. They ate more like animals than human beings.

"Can't you treat us to a mug of beer, master?" asked the man.

"I have no beer," I replied. "I think I can find some tea, if you would like to have it."

"It's the best thing you could give us, master," said the woman, "and we shall be thankful for it."

"It's better than nothing," said the man, and was pleased to confess, after he had disposed of a couple of cups--which he emptied down his throat rather than drank--that I might have offered him something worse. When they had eaten their fill they lay down to rest, and in less than three minutes the whole party were fast asleep. "Truly," I thought, as I gazed upon them, "nature has its compensations!" They went away, as they had promised, at sunrise, and when I gave the woman a few silver coins, she said gratefully,

"Thank you, master. We're right for four good days, Jim."

I watched them from the gates. They had with them the remains of the food, and were eating it as they walked, and talking in gay tones. I experienced a sensation of pleasure. The world was not devoid of sweetness.

CHAPTER III.

Thus my life went on until I grew to manhood, and then two grave events befell, following close upon each other's heels. First, my father died. He was absent from home at the time, and we had had no forewarning of the loss. I do not know whether his errand when he left us, to be away, he said, for four or five weeks, was one of pleasure or business. Quite suddenly, before the time had elapsed, I was summoned to my mother's room by Mrs. Fortress.

"Your mother has the most serious news to impart to you," said Mrs. Fortress, "and I think it well to warn you not to excite her."

I had not seen my mother for several days, and I inquired of Mrs. Fortress as to the state of her health.

"She is still unwell," said Mrs. Fortress, "and very weak. I am afraid of the consequences of the shock she has received this morning."

"No one has visited us," I observed. "She can have been told nothing."

"The news came by post," said Mrs. Fortress.

"In a letter from my father?" I asked.

"Your father did not write," said Mrs. Fortress.

There was a significance in her tone, usually so cold and impassive, which attracted my attention.

"But the news concerns my father."

"Yes, it concerns your father."

"He is ill."

"He has been seriously ill. You will learn all from your mother."

Before I entered my mother's chamber I divined the truth.

"You sent for me, mother," I said.

"Yes, Gabriel," she replied. "Sit here, by my side."

I obeyed her, and there was a long silence in the room.

"Kiss me, Gabriel."

I kissed her, somewhat in wonder. It is the plain truth that we had grown to be almost strangers to each other.

"Has Mrs. Fortress told you?" she asked.

"She has told me nothing definite," I replied, "except that you have news of my father, and that he is ill."

"His illness is at an end," said my mother. "Can you not guess, Gabriel?"

"Yes, mother," I said, "I think I know."

"It is very sudden, Gabriel. When he went away he was in good health."

She gave me the letter she had received, and I read it without remark. It was from one who was a stranger to us, and was addressed from Wales. The writer said that my father was his friend--which surprised me, as I had never heard my father or mother mention his name--and had died in his house, where my father was staying on a visit.

"He had been ailing for two or three days past," the letter said, "and had complained of his head, but I did not think that anything serious was the matter with him, or I should have written to you at once. It did not appear that he was alarmed; indeed, he said that it was only a slight attack, and that it would soon pass away. Against his wish we called in a doctor, who agreed with him and us that there was no danger. Thus there was nothing to prepare us for the sad event

the news of which it is our painful duty to communicate to you. He kept his room yesterday, and in the evening said that he felt better. At ten o'clock my wife and I wished him goodnight, and thought he would retire at once to rest, but from after indications we learnt that he had not undressed, but had sat in his arm-chair the whole of the night. There was a bell at his elbow, from which I heard a faint ring at five o'clock this morning. It woke me from my sleep, and it also aroused my wife. 'That is Mr. Carew's bell,' my wife said; 'you had better go to him.' I rose immediately, and went to his room. I found our poor friend sitting in the arm-chair, and I at once recognised his grave condition. I roused the servants, and sent for the doctor; then I returned to your husband, and told him what I had done. I cannot say whether he understood me, for he was quite speechless, but I followed the direction of his eyes, and saw a sheet of paper upon which he had written a few words. They were not very legible, but I understand from them that it was his desire that he should be buried from Rosemullion. We shall respect his wish, and you will therefore be prepared for what is to follow. Although he was speechless, and life was surely ebbing away, he was calm and composed. My wife and I sat with him until the doctor arrived. Nothing could be done for him, and at twenty minutes to seven this morning your poor husband passed away in peace. It would doubtless have been a satisfaction to him could he have spoken to us, and have imparted to us his last wishes, but he had not the power. Two or three times he seemed to make an effort, and we inclined our ears to hear what he had to say. No sound, however, proceeded from his lips; he had not the strength to utter a word. The effort over, he seemed to be resigned."

The letter contained the expression of a sincere sympathy for our bereavement.

"He died peacefully," said my mother. "All deaths are not so."

"Madam!" cried Mrs. Fortress, in a warning tone.

Did it spring from my fancy that my mother's remark was uttered in fear, and was intended to bear a personal reference, and that Mrs. Fortress's "Madam!" sounded like a threat? If it were or were not so, my mother quickly recovered herself.

"It is good to know that your father did not suffer," she said.

"Death is not a pleasant subject to talk about," observed Mrs. Fortress.

"What has passed between my mother and myself is quite natural," I retorted; it appeared to me that her remark was unnecessary.

"I beg your pardon," she said, but although her words conveyed an apology, her voice did not.

Shortly afterwards my mother pleaded that she was tired, and I left the room.

Upon the news of my father's death becoming known I had two visitors, the doctor who attended on my mother, and a lawyer. I may mention here that these were the only persons who, with myself, followed my father to the grave. The doctor's visit was one of condolence, and he indulged in the usual platitudes which, but for the occasion, I should not have listened to with patience. He bade me good day with a sigh, and called into his face an expression of dolour which I knew was assumed for my benefit.

The lawyer's visit was upon business. He came to acquaint me with the particulars of my father's Will.

"I have the rough draft in my office," he said; "the Will itself we shall doubtless find among your father's private papers. It was his habit, when he intended to be absent from home for any length of time, to leave the key of his safe in my keeping, I have brought it with me."

We went together to my father's special room, the room in which he wrote and transacted his private business, and which was always kept locked. No person, unbidden, was allowed to enter it but himself. Although I had now been living at Rosemullion for many years I had been but once in this apartment, and then I took no particular notice of it. The key of the room had been found in his portmanteau, which he had taken with him to Wales, and had been delivered up to me with his other effects.

It was plainly furnished. There were two chairs, a couch, and a writing-table--nothing more; not a picture, not an ornament, not a single evidence of luxury. The walls were hung with old tapestry on which battle scenes were worked.

"Rosemullion is not a modern building," said the lawyer, "but perhaps you are already familiar with its history, being a student."

I said, In reply, that I was not aware that Rosemullion was of ancient origin,

nor that it had a history.

"Did your father never speak to you on the subject?" asked the lawyer.

"Never," I replied.

"Perhaps it was not of much interest to him," remarked the lawyer. "The house belonged to a great family once, who owned vast tracts of land hereabout. They ruled here for many generations, I believe, until, as is the case with numberless others who carried it with a high hand in times gone by, they lost their place in the world. If the truth were known we should learn--to judge from my experiences, and supposing them to be worth anything--that there was but one cause why they were wiped out. Spendthrift father, spendthrift heir, followed by another, and perhaps by another; land parted with piecemeal, mortgaged and sold, till heirlooms and stone-walls are called upon, and the wreck is complete. It is an old story, and is being played out now by many inheritors of ancient names."

"The chairs and couch in the room," I said, "are modern. Not so the writing-table."

It was made of stout oak, and bore signs of long service. Its massive legs were wonderfully carved, and were fixed deep in the oaken flooring. The lawyer's remarks had given the place an interest in my eyes, and I gazed around with lively curiosity.

"If these walls could speak," I said, "they would be able to tell strange stories."

"Many of which," said the lawyer, with a dry cough, "are better unrevealed. It is quite as well that dumb memorials cannot rise in witness against us."

"So that we are no better off than our forefathers."

"And no worse," said the lawyer, sententiously. "We are much of a muchness, ancients and moderns. I had no idea till to-day how solid these walls really were."

They were, indeed, of massive thickness, fit depositories of mighty secrets. I lifted the tapestry to examine them, and observed a steel plate fixed in the

portion I had bared. I was searching in vain for a keyhole when the lawyer said,

"The safe your father used is not on that side; it is here to the right. On three sides of the wall you will see these steel plates fixed, and my idea is that the receptacles were used as a hiding-place for jewels and other treasure. In the building of this room special ingenuity was displayed. No one unacquainted with the secret could open the metal doors, the design is so cunning. There were locksmiths before Brahmah. I would defy any but an expert to discover the means, and it would puzzle him for a time."

"They are really doors?"

"Yes; you shall see for yourself."

"How did you discover the secret?" I asked.

"Your father let me into it," he replied.

"How did *he* discover it? Before he bought this little estate I doubt if he had ever heard the name of Rosemullion, or knew of its existence."

"That is very probable, but I cannot enlighten you upon the point. In his conversations with me he never referred to it. It is not unlikely that the agents through whom he purchased the place may have known; or he may have found a clue to it after he came into possession. That, however, is mere speculation, and is not material to us. What is material *is* the Will. Observe. Here before us is a sheet of steel, covered with numberless small knobs with shining round surfaces. There must be some peculiarity about the metal that it does not rust; or perhaps its lustre is due to the dryness of the air. When I say that the knobs are numberless I am inexact. They may be easily counted; they are in regular lines, and are alternately placed. From ceiling to floor there are twenty lines, and each line contains twenty knobs--four hundred in all. If you pressed every one of these four hundred knobs one after another with your thumb, you would find only one that would yield beneath the pressure. That knob is in the bottom line, at the extreme left hand corner. Kneel, and press with your thumb, and you will find that I am right."

I followed his instructions. I knelt, and pressed the knob; it yielded, and upon my removing my thumb, it returned to its former position.

"Still," I said, as I rose from my kneeling posture, "I see no hole in which a key can be inserted."

"Wait," said the lawyer. "By pressing on that knob you have unlocked a second at the extreme end of the right corner in the same line. Press it as you did the other."

I knelt and obeyed; it yielded as the other had done, and returned to its former position. But there was no apparent change in the steel door.

"You have unlocked a third knob," said the lawyer. "You will now have to stand upon one of the chairs; place it here, on the right, and press again on the knob at the extreme right hand. It yields. One more, and the charm is nearly complete. Remove the chair to the left, and repeat the operation on the topmost knob at the extreme left hand. Now descend. Supposing this to be the door of a room, where would the keyhole be situated? Yes, you point to the exact spot. Press there, then, gently. What do we see? The keyhole revealed. The rest is easy."

He inserted the key and turned the lock. Massive as was the door, there was no difficulty now in opening it. With very little exertion on our part it swung upon its hinges. I could not but admire the ingenuity of the device, and I wondered at the same time how my father could have found it out, supposing the secret not to have been imparted to him.

There was a space disclosed of some two feet in depth, divided by stout oaken shelves. On one of the shelves was a cash-box. There was nothing else within the space. The lawyer took out the cash-box, and brought it to the table. It was unlocked, and the lawyer drew from it my father's Will. I was disappointed that it contained no other papers. I cannot say what I expected to discover, but I had a vague hope that I might light upon some explanation of the mystery which had reigned in our home from my earliest remembrance. However, I made no remark on the subject to the lawyer.

The Will was read in my mother's presence, the only other person in attendance, besides my mother, the lawyer, and myself, being Mrs. Fortress. It was very simple; the entire property was bequeathed to my mother; during her lifetime I was to reside at Rosemullion, and there was otherwise no provision made for me; but at her death, with the exception of a legacy to Mrs. Fortress,

"for faithful and confidential service," I became sole heir. The only stipulation was that Rosemullion should not be sold.

"I hope, Gabriel," said my mother, "that you are not dissatisfied."

I replied that I was contented with the disposition my father had made of his property.

"You can have what money you want," she said.

"I shall want very little," I said.

"You will remain here, Gabriel?"

These words which, in her expression of them, were both a question and an entreaty, opened up a new train of thought. I set it aside a while, and said to my mother,

"Is it your wish?"

"Yes, Gabriel, while I live."

"I will obey you, mother."

"Gabriel," she said, "bend your head." Mrs. Fortress came forward as if with the intention of interposing, but I motioned her away, and she retired in silence, but kept her eyes fixed upon us. "You bear no ill-will towards me?" my mother whispered. "You do not hate me?"

"No, mother," I replied, in a tone as low as her own. "What cause have I for ill-will or hatred? It would be monstrous."

"Yes," she muttered, "it would be monstrous, monstrous!"

And she turned from me, and lay with her face to the wall. Her form was shaken with sobs.

Mrs. Fortress beckoned to me and I followed her to the door.

"I will speak to you outside," she said.

We stood in the passage, the door of my mother's bedroom being closed upon us. The lawyer, who had also left the room, stood a few paces from us.

"It comes within my sphere of duty," said Mrs. Fortress, "to warn you that these scenes are dangerous to your mother. Listen."

I heard my mother crying and speaking loudly to herself, but I could not distinguish what she said.

"Remain here a moment," said Mrs. Fortress; "I have something more to say to you."

She left me, and entered the bedroom, and in a short time my mother was quiet. Mrs. Fortress returned.

"She is more composed."

"You have a great power over her, Mrs. Fortress."

"No one else understands her." She held in her hand a letter, which she offered to me. "It was entrusted to me by your father, and I was to give it to you in the event of his dying away from Rosemullion, and before your mother. Perhaps you will read it here."

I did so. It was addressed to me, and was very brief, its contents being simply to the effect that Mrs. Fortress was to hold, during my mother's lifetime, the position she had always held in the household, and that I was, under no consideration, to interfere with her in the exercise of her duties. She was, also, as heretofore, to have the direction of the house.

"Are you acquainted with the contents of this letter?" I asked.

"Yes; your father, before he sealed it gave it to me to read. He gave me at the same time another document, addressed to myself."

"Investing you, I suppose, with the necessary authority." She slightly inclined her head. "I shall not interfere with you in any way," I said.

"I am obliged to you," she said, and then she re-entered my mother's apartment.

The lawyer and I walked to my father's private room. I wished to assure myself that there was nothing else in the safe in which my father had deposited his Will, and which we had left open. There was nothing, not a book, not a scrap of paper, nor article of any kind. Then in the presence of the lawyer, I searched the writing-desk, and found only a few unimportant memoranda and letters. My unsatisfactory search at an end, I remarked to the lawyer that I supposed nothing remained to be done.

"Except to lock the safe," he said.

"How is that accomplished?"

"You have merely to reverse the process by which you opened it. I have seldom seen a more admirable and simple piece of mechanism."

I followed his instructions, and let the tapestry fall over the steel plate. Then the lawyer, saying that he would attend to the necessary formalities with respect to the Will, bade me good-day.

CHAPTER IV.

When I told my mother that I was contented with the disposition my father had made of the property I spoke the truth, but I did not intend to imply that I was contented with the position in which I found myself after my father's death. Not with respect to money--that was the last of my thoughts; indeed, my mother placed at my disposal more than sufficient funds; but that I, who had by this time grown to manhood, should be still confined in leading strings, hurt and galled me. I chafed inwardly at the restraint, and it will be readily understood that my feelings on this matter did not bring my mother and me closer to each other. I did not, however, give expression to them; I schooled myself into a certain philosophical resignation, and took refuge in my books and studies.

Wide as had always been the breach--I can find no other word to express the attitude we held towards each other--between Mrs. Fortress and myself, it grew wider as time progressed. We seldom addressed a word to each other. To do her justice she seemed to desire a more familiar intercourse as little as I did. Her demeanour was consistently respectful, and she did not exercise her authority obtrusively or offensively. Everything went on in the house as usual. My wants were attended to with regularity, and I may even say that they were anticipated. To all outward appearance I had nothing whatever to complain of, but the independence of spirit which develops with our manhood, the consciousness that we are strong enough to depend upon ourselves and to walk alone, the growing pride which imparts a true or false confidence in our maturing powers--all these were in silent rebellion within me, and rendered me at times restless and dissatisfied. What it might have led to is hard to say, but the difficulty was solved without action on my part. Within twelve months of my father's death I was a free man, free to go whither I would, to choose my own mode of life, to visit new lands if I cared. The chains which had bound me fell loose, and I was my own master.

It was in the dead of a hot summer night, and I was sitting alone by the

window in my favourite room. The sultry air scarcely stirred the curtains, and I saw in the sky the signs of a coming storm. I hoped it would burst soon; I knew that I should welcome with gratitude the rain and the cooler air. Such sweet, fresh moments, when an oppressively hot day has drawn to its close, may be accepted--with a certain extravagance of metaphor, I admit--as Nature's purification of sin.

All was still and quiet; only shadows lived and moved about. Midnight struck. That hour to me was always fraught with mysterious significance.

From where I sat I could see the house in which my mother lay. It had happened on that day, as I strolled through the woods, that I had been witness of the love which a mother had for her child. The child was young, the mother was middle-aged, and not pretty, but when she looked at her child, and held out her arms to receive it, as it ran laughing towards her with its fair hair tumbled about its head, her plain face became glorified. Its spiritual beauty smote me with pain; the child's glad voice made me tremble. Some dim sense of what had never been mine forced itself into my soul.

I had the power--which I had no doubt unconsciously cultivated--of raising pictures in the air, and I called up now this picture of the mother and her child. "Are all children like that," I thought, "and are all mothers--except me and mine?" If so, I had been robbed.

The door of the great house slowly opened, and the form of a woman stepped forth. It walked in my direction, and stopped beneath my window.

"Are you up there, Master Gabriel?"

It was Mrs. Fortress who spoke.

"Yes, I am here."

"Your mother wishes to see you."

I went down immediately, and joined Mrs. Fortress.

"Did she send you for me?"

"Yes, or I should not be here."

"She is very ill?"

"She is not well."

The grudging words angered me, and I motioned the woman to precede me to the house. She led me to my mother's bedside.

I had never been allowed so free an intercourse with my mother as upon this occasion. Mrs. Fortress did not leave the room, but she retired behind the curtains of the bed, and did not interrupt our conversation.

"You are ill, mother?"

"I am dying, Gabriel."

I was prepared for it, and I had expected to see in her some sign of the shadow of death. When the dread visitant stands by the side of a mortal, there should be some indication of its presence. Here there was none. My mother's face retained the wild beauty which had ever distinguished it. All that I noted was that her eyes occasionally wandered around, with a look in them which expressed a kind of fear and pity for herself.

"You speak of dying, mother," I said. "I hope you will live for many years yet."

"Why do you hope it?" she asked. "Has my life given you joy--has it sweetened the currents of yours?"

There was a strange wistfulness in her voice, a note of wailing against an inexorable fate. Her words brought before me again the picture of the mother and her child I had seen that day in the woods. Joy! Sweetness! No, my mother had given me but little of these. It was so dim as to be scarcely a memory that when I was a little babe she would press me tenderly to her bosom, would sing to me, would coo over me, as must surely be the fashion of loving mothers with their offspring. It is with no idea of casting reproach upon her that I say she bequeathed to me no legacy of motherly tenderness.

We conversed for nearly an hour. Our conversation was intermittent; there were long pauses in it, and wanderings from one subject to another. This was occasioned by my mother's condition; it was not possible for her to keep her

mind upon one theme, and to exhaust it.

"You looked among your father's papers, Gabriel?"

"Yes, mother."

"What did you find?" She seemed to shrink from me as she asked this question.

"Only his Will, and a few unimportant papers."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing."

"Gabriel," she said, presently, "I wish you to promise me that you will make, in years to come, a faithful record of the circumstances of your life, and of your secret thoughts and promptings." She paused, and when she spoke again appeared to lose sight of the promise she wished to exact from me. "You are sure your father left no special papers for you to read after his death?"

"I found none," I said, much moved at this iteration of a mystery which was evidently weighing heavily upon her.

"Perhaps," she murmured, "he thought silence kindest and wisest."

I strove to keep her mind upon this theme, for I was profoundly agitated by her strange words, but I found it impossible. Her hands moved feebly about the coverlet, her eyes wandered still more restlessly around. My cunningest endeavours failed to woo her back to the subject; her speech became so wild and whirling that I was not ungrateful to Mrs. Fortress when she emerged from behind the curtains, and led me firmly out of the room. I turned on the threshold to look at my mother; her face was towards me, but she did not recognise me.

On the evening of the following day I was walking moodily about the grounds between the house and the cottage, thinking of the interview, and reproaching myself for want of feeling. Was it that I was deficient in humanity that I did not find myself overwhelmed with grief by the conviction that my mother was dying? No thought but of her critical condition should have held place in my mind, and the weight of my genuine sorrow should have impressed

itself upon surrounding nature. It was not so; my grief was trivial, artificial, and I bitterly accused myself. But if natural love would not come from the prompting of my heart, I could at least perform a duty. My mother should not be left to draw her last breath with not one of her kin by her bedside.

I entered the house. In the passage which led to my mother's room I was confronted by Mrs. Fortress. She had heard my footsteps, and came out to meet me.

"What do you want, Mr. Gabriel?"

"I must see my mother."

"You cannot; It would hasten her end."

"Has she not asked for me?"

"No; if she wished to see you she would have sent for you."

It was a truthful indication of the position; I had never gone unbidden to my mother's room.

We spoke in low tones. My voice was tremulous, Mrs. Fortress's was cold and firm.

"If not now," I said, "I must see her to-morrow."

"You shall see her," said Mrs. Fortress, "within the next twenty-four hours."

I passed the evening in my cottage, trying to read. I could not fix my mind upon the page. I indulged in weird fancies, and once, putting out the lights, cried:

"If the Angel of Death is near, let him appear!"

There was no sign, and I sat in the dark till I heard a tapping at my door. I opened it, and heard Mrs. Fortress's voice.

"You can see your mother," she said.

I accompanied her to the sick room, the bedside of my mother. She was dead.

"It is a happy release," Mrs. Fortress said.

CHAPTER V.

This event, which set me completely free, caused a repetition of certain formalities. The doctor visited me, and regaled me with doleful words and sighs. In the course of conversation I endeavoured to extract from him some information as to the peculiar form of illness from which my mother had been so long a sufferer, but all the satisfaction I could obtain from him was that she had always been "weak, very weak," and always "low, very low," and that she had for years been "gradually wasting away." She suffered from "sleeplessness," she suffered from "nerves," her pulse was too quick, her heart was too slow, and so on, and so on. His speech was full of feeble medical platitudes, and threw no light whatever upon the subject.

"In such cases," he said, "all we can do is to sustain, to prescribe strengthening things, to stimulate, to invigorate, to give tone to the constitution. I have remarked many times that the poor lady might go off at any moment. She had the best of nurses, the best of nurses! Mrs. Fortress is a most exemplary woman. Between you and me she understood your mother's ailments almost as well as I did."

"If she did not understand them a great deal better," I thought, "she must have known very little indeed."

In my conversations with the lawyer Mrs. Fortress's name also cropped up.

"A most remarkable woman," he said, "strong-minded, self-willed, with iron nerves, and at the same time exceedingly conscientious and attentive to her duties. Your lamented father entertained the highest opinion of her, and always mentioned her name with respect. The kind of woman that ought to have been born a man. Very tenacious, very reserved--a very rare specimen indeed. Altogether an exception. By the way, I saw her a few minutes ago, and she asked me to inform you that she did not consider she had any longer authority in the

house, and that she would soon be leaving."

At my desire the lawyer undertook for a while the supervision of affairs, and sent a married couple to Rosemullion to attend to domestic matters.

Three days after my mother's funeral Mrs. Fortress came to wish me good-bye. Although there had ever been a barrier between us I could not fail to recognise that she had faithfully performed her duties, and I invited her to sit down. She took a seat, and waited for me to speak. She was wonderfully composed and self-possessed, and had such perfect control over herself that I believe she would have sat there in silence for hours had I not been the first to speak.

"You are going away for good, Mrs. Fortress?" I said.

"Yes, sir," she answered, "for good."

It was the first time she had ever called me "sir," and I understood it to be a recognition of my position as Master of Rosemullion.

"Do you intend to seek another service?" I asked.

"No, sir; it is not likely I shall enter service again. You are aware that your father was good enough to provide for me."

"Yes, and I am pleased that he did so. Had he forgotten, I should have been glad to acknowledge in a fitting way your long service in our family."

"You are very kind, sir."

"Where do you go to from here?"

"I have a home in Cornwall, sir."

"Indeed. I do not remember that you have ever visited it."

"It is many years since I saw it, sir."

"Not once, I think, since you have been with us."

"Not once, sir."

"Your duties here have been onerous. Although we are in mourning you must be glad to be released." I pointed to her dress; she, like myself, was dressed in black; but she made no comment on my remark. "Will you give me your address, Mrs. Fortress?"

"Willingly, sir."

She wrote it on an envelope which I placed before her, and I put it into my pocket-book.

"If I wish to communicate with you, this will be certain to find you?"

"Yes, sir, quite certain."

"Circumstances may occur," I said, "which may render it necessary for me to seek information from you."

"Respecting whom, or what, sir?"

"It is hard to say. But, perhaps respecting my mother."

"I am afraid, sir, it will be useless to communicate with me upon that subject."

"Mrs. Fortress," I said, nettled at the decisive tone in which she spoke, "it occurs to me that during the many years you have been with us you have been unobservant of me."

"You are mistaken, sir."

"Outwardly unobservant, perhaps I should have said. When you entered my father's service I must have been a very young child. I am now a man."

"Yes, sir, you will be twenty-two on your next birthday. I wish you a happy life, whether it be a long or a short one."

"And being a man, it is natural that I should desire to know something of what has been hidden from me."

"You are assuming, sir, that something *has* been hidden."

"I have not been quite a machine, Mrs. Fortress. Give me credit for at least an

average amount of intelligence. It is not possible for me to be blind to the fact that there has been a mystery in our family."

"It is you who say so, sir, not I."

"I know, and know, also, that of your own prompting you will say little or nothing. To what can I appeal? To your womanly sympathies, to your sense of justice? Until this moment I have been silent. As a boy I had to submit, and latterly as a man. My parents were living, and their lightest wish was a law to me. But the chains are loosened now; they have fallen from me into my mother's grave. Surely you cannot, in reason or injustice, refuse to answer a few simple questions."

"Upon the subject you have referred to, sir, I have nothing to tell."

"That is to say, you are determined to tell me nothing."

She rose from her chair, and said, "With your permission, sir, I will wish you farewell."

"No, no; sit down again for a few minutes. I will not detain you long, and I will endeavour not to press unwelcome questions upon you. In all human probability this is the last opportunity we shall have of speaking together; for even supposing that at some future time you should yourself desire to volunteer explanations which you now withhold from me, you will not know how to communicate with me."

"Is it your intention to leave Rosemullion, sir?"

"I shall make speedy arrangements to quit it for ever. It has not been so filled with light and love as to become endeared to me. I shall leave it not only willingly but with pleasure, and I shall never again set foot in it."

"There is no saying what may happen in the course of life, sir. Have you made up your mind where you are going to live?"

"In no settled place. I shall travel."

"Change of scene will be good for you, sir. It is altogether the best thing you could do."

"Of that," I said impatiently, "I am the best judge. My future life can be of no interest to you. It is of the past I wish to speak. Have you any objection to inform me for how long you have been in my mother's service?"

"You were but a little over two years of age, sir, at the time I entered it."

"For nearly twenty years, then. You do not look old, Mrs. Fortress."

"I am forty-two, sir."

"Then you were twenty-three when you came to us?"

"Yes, sir."

"We were poor at the time, and were living in common lodgings in London?"

"That is so, sir."

"My father's means were so straitened, if my memory does not betray me, that every shilling of our income had to be reckoned. You did not--excuse me for the question, Mrs. Fortress--you did not serve my parents for love?"

"No, sir; it was purely a matter of business between your father and me."

"You are--again I beg you to excuse me--not the kind of person to work for nothing, or even for small wages."

"Your father paid me liberally, sir."

"And yet we were so poor that until we came suddenly and unexpectedly into a fortune, my father could never afford to give me a shilling. Truly your duties must have been no ordinary ones that you should have been engaged under such circumstances. It is, I suppose, useless for me to ask for an explanation of the nature of those duties?"

"Quite useless, sir."

"Will you tell me nothing, Mrs. Fortress, that will throw light upon the dark spaces of my life?"

"I have nothing to tell, sir."

To a man less under control than myself this iteration of unwillingness would have been intolerable, but I knew that nothing was to be gained by giving way to anger. I should have been the sufferer and the loser by it.

"Looking down, Mrs. Fortress, upon the dead body of my mother, you made the remark that it was a happy release."

"Death is to all a happy release, sir."

"A common platitude, which does not deceive me."

"You cannot forget, sir, that your mother was a great sufferer."

"I forget very little. Mrs. Fortress, in this interview I think you have not behaved graciously--nay, more, that you have not behaved with fairness or justice."

"Upon that point, sir," she said composedly, "you may not be a competent judge."

Her manner was so perfectly respectful that I could not take exception to this retort. She seemed, however, to be aware that she was upon dangerous ground, for she rose, and I made no further attempt to detain her. But now it was she who lingered, unbidden, with something on her mind of which she desired to speak. I raised my head, and wondered whether, of her own free will, she was about to satisfy my curiosity.

"If I thought you were not angry, sir," she said, "and would not take offence, I should like to ask you a question, and if you answer it according to my expectation, one other in connection with it."

"I shall not take offence," I said, "and I promise to exercise less reserve than you have done."

"I thank you, sir," she said, gazing steadily at me, so steadily, indeed, as to cause me to doubt whether, in a combat of will-power between us I should be the victor. "My questions are very simple. Do you ever hear the sounds of music, without being able to account for them?"

The question, simple as it was, startled, and for a moment almost unnerved

me. What she suggested had occurred to me, at intervals perhaps of two or three months, and always when I was alone, and had worked myself into a state of exaltation. I do not exactly know at what period of my life this strange experience commenced, but my impression is that it came to me first in the night when I awoke from sleep, and was lying in the dark. It had occurred at those times within the last two or three years, and had it not been that it had already become somewhat familiar to me in hours of sunshine as well as in hours of darkness, I should probably have decided that it was but the refrain of a dream by which I was haunted. In daylight I frequently searched for the cause, but never with success. Lately I had given up the search, and had argued myself into a half belief that it was a delusion, produced by my dwelling upon the subject, and magnifying it into undue importance. For the most part the mysterious strains were faint, but very sweet and melodious; they seemed to come from afar off, and as I listened to them they gradually died away into a musical whisper, and grew fainter and more faint till they were lost altogether. But it had happened on two or three occasions, instead of their dying softly away and leaving me in a state of calm happiness, that the sweet strains were abruptly broken by what sounded now like a wail, now like a suppressed shriek. This violent and, to my senses, cruel termination of the otherwise melodious sounds set my blood boiling dangerously, and unreasonably infuriated me--so much so that the power I held over myself was ingulfed in a torrent of wild passion which I could not control. The melodious strains were always the same, and the air was strange to me. I had never heard it from a visible musician.

Not to a living soul had I ever spoken of the delusion, and that the subject should now be introduced into our conversation, and not introduced by me, could not but strike me as of singular portent. As Mrs. Fortress asked the question I heard once more the soft spiritual strains, and I involuntarily raised my right hand in the act of listening; I hear them at the present moment as I write, and I lay aside my pen a while, until they shall pass away. So! They are gone--but they will come again.

I answered Mrs. Fortress briefly, but not without agitation.

"Yes, I have heard such sounds as those you mention."

"You hear them now?"

"Yes, I hear them now. Do you?"

"My powers of imagination, sir, are less powerful than yours," she said evasively, and passed on to her second question. "It is not an English air, sir?"

"No, it is not English, so far as I am a judge."

"It comes probably," she suggested, and I was convinced that she spoke with premeditation, "from a foreign source."

"Most probably," I said.

"Perhaps from the mountains in the Tyrol."

A Tyrolean air! I seized upon the suggestion, and accepted it as fact, though I was quite unable to speak with authority. But why to me, who had never been out of England, should come this melody of the Tyrol? I could no more answer this question than I could say why the impassive, undemonstrative woman before me was, as it were, revealing me to myself and probing my soul to its hidden depths.

"It may be so," I said. "Do you seek for any further information from me?"

"No, sir." But there was a slight hesitancy in her voice which proved that this was not the only subject in her mind which bore upon my inner life.

"And now," I said, "I must ask you why you put these questions to me, and by what means you became possessed of my secret, mention of which has never passed my lips?" She shook her head, and turned towards the door, but I imperatively called upon her to stay. "You cannot deal with me upon this subject as you have upon all others. I have a distinct right to demand an explanation."

"I can give you no explanation, sir," she said, with deference and respect.

"You refuse?"

"I *must* refuse," she replied firmly, and then she bowed, and saying, "With my humble duty, sir," was gone.

CHAPTER VI.

Had I yielded to passion, had I not in some small degree exercised wisdom, I should have coined out of this last meeting with Mrs. Fortress a most exquisite torture; but I schooled myself into the acceptance of what was entirely beyond my comprehension, and after an interval of agitated thought I set it down to a trick, the inspiration of which may have been derived from unguarded words escaping me while I slept, or while I was soliloquising--a habit into which I had grown--and she was watching me unobserved. It troubled me a great deal at first, but I was successful in diminishing instead of magnifying it, and it was fortunate for me that I had much to occupy my mind in other ways during the few following weeks. My lawyer demanded my time and attention. I was determined, without question as to whether a favourable market could be found for them, to dispose of the property and securities which my father had left, and which now were mine. I was determined to commence a new life, without any exact definition or idea as to what that life was to be; and to do this it was necessary, according to my view, that I should make a clearance. I was surprised to discover that my father had made a great number of investments, and it was to my advantage that they were mostly good ones. Had I possessed both the moral and the legal power I would have sold Rosemullion, but my father's will was so worded that the lawyer pointed out to me that there would be difficulties in the way, and after listening to his arguments I agreed to retain it as my freehold. But I was determined not to inhabit it, and I gave instructions that a tenant should be sought for it, and that, if one could not be obtained, it should remain untenanted.

"It had been unoccupied a great many years," the lawyer remarked, "when your father purchased it."

"For any particular reason?" I inquired.

"No," replied the lawyer, "except that there was a foolish idea that it was haunted."

"Whoever rents Rosemullion," I said, "must take his own ghosts with him if he wishes for ghostly company."

"We generally do that," said the lawyer, dryly, "wherever we go."

There were legal requirements to be attended to in the drawing up and signing of deeds, but otherwise there was no difficulty in carrying out my intention to the letter, and at the expiration of three months I found myself an absolutely free and unencumbered man, with my large fortune invested in English consols, the fluctuations of which caused me not a moment's uneasiness. During those three months I lived my usual life, read, studied, and often wandered through the adjacent woods at night. I think that the adventure I have elsewhere narrated of the tramps I befriended one stormy night had awakened my sympathies for the class, and I may say, without vanity, that it was not the only occasion on which my sympathies had taken a practical shape. A little while before I bade farewell to Rosemullion I was wandering through the woods an hour or so before the rising of the sun, when I came upon a woman sleeping on the ground. As usual, she had a child in her arms, and moans issued from the breasts of both the woman and the child. It was a pitiful sight, familiar enough in our overcrowded land. The woman was the picture of desolation. Suddenly, as I gazed, a mocking voice whispered that it would be merciful to kill her where she lay. "Do a good deed," said the silent voice, "and hasten home to bed. No one will know." I laughed aloud, and took from my pocket my purse, which was well supplied with money. The woman had an apron on. I wrapped the purse in it, and tied it securely, so that it should not escape her. Then I crept away, but scarcely knew whether to be glad or sorry that I had cheated fate once more.

A few days afterwards I turned my back on Rosemullion.

I had formed no definite plans; all that I had settled was that I would go abroad and see the world. It was open for me, and the flowers were blooming. Was I not rich, and had I not already had experience of the value of riches?

But although I travelled far, and saw the wonders of art and nature in foreign lands, my habits were much the same as they had been in England. What I enjoyed I enjoyed in solitude; the chance acquaintances who offered themselves, many of them travelling alone as I was travelling, received no encouragement from me; I did not respond to their advances. In this I was but repeating my boyish experiences when I was living with my parents in London attics. Truly,

the child is father to the man.

It may appear strange to those who are fond of friendships, and who cling ardently to them, to learn that, despite my loneliness, I had not a dull moment. Nature was very beautiful to my soul, its forms and changes most entrancing. I cared little for the great towns and cities. The modes of life therein, especially those which were exemplified by the absurd lengths and extravagances to which fashion drives its votaries, excited in me a very sincere contempt, and I was amazed that people could be so blind to the sweetest joys of existence. I visited the theatres, but they had, for the most part, no fascination for me. I saw great actresses associated with buffoons, and often themselves buffooning; I followed, at first with interest, the efforts of a be-puffed actress, who rose to the terrors and the beauties of her part in one fine scene, and did not consider the rest of her mimic life, as depicted on the boards, worth the trouble of consistency; I was present at the performance of dramas which were absolutely false in their action and sentiment. What pleased me best were the short poetical episodes, occupying less than an hour in their representation, and in which two or three good actors sustained and preserved the unities in excellent style. But these were side dishes, and only served to bring into stronger relief the larger and grosser fare provided for the intellectual education of the masses. I went to the opera, and could only enjoy it by shutting my eyes, so many absurdities were forced upon my sight: and as this drew unpleasant attention upon me, I was compelled to deprive myself of the enjoyment. I strolled into the gambling saloons, and gazed in amazement upon the faces of men and women in which the lowest passions were depicted. Human nature in those places was degraded and belittled. "Is there some mysterious hidden sweetness in this many-sided frenzy?" I asked myself, and I staked my money, and endeavoured to discover it; but the game did not stir my pulses; I lost or won with indifference. I soon tired of it, and bade adieu to the rooms, with a sigh of compassion and contempt for the slaves who fretted their hearts therein.

My chiefest pleasures were experienced in small villages in mountain and valley, where there was so little attraction for the ordinary tourist that he seldom lingered there. I delighted in primitiveness and simplicity, where human baseness had the fewest opportunities to thrive, and where human goodness was the least likely to be spoilt by publicity. It was in these places that I came to the conclusion that the largest amount of happiness is to be found among small communities.

But although I was consistent, up to a certain period, in declining all offers of intimacy and friendship, it happened that I was to come into contact with a man for whom, in a short space of time, I grew to have a very close regard. His name was Louis, by profession a doctor, by descent a German.

We met in the woods near Nerac, in Gascony. I was fording a watercourse which intersected part of the forest when my foot slipped upon a round stone which I had supposed was fast embedded in the earth, but which proved to be loose. I made a spring upon the stone, and it rolled over, and landed me in the water. A wetting was of no account, but when I attempted to rise I uttered a sharp cry of pain. I had sprained my ankle.

With difficulty I crawled from the water to dry ground, upon which I sat, nursing my ankle, which already was swelling ominously. In a short time the pain became intolerable, and I endeavoured to draw the boot from my foot, and finding this was not possible, I cut it away bit by bit, and then cut my stocking loose. I experienced instant and delicious relief. The pleasure we derive from the relief of pain is the most exquisite of all physical sensations. I bathed my ankle with water from the cold stream, which somewhat reduced the swelling, but the relief was only temporary, for when I endeavoured again to rise, the torture produced by my attempt to sustain the weight of my body upon my foot was so keen that I fell prone to the ground in agony. There were no trees sufficiently near by the aid of which I might manage to walk a short distance, and in the intervals of relief afforded by further applications of cold water, I ruefully contemplated my position.

I had walked twenty miles during the day, and I was a stranger in the locality. The time was evening, and no person was in sight to assist me. From inquiries I made on the road earlier in the day I calculated that Nerac must be at least three miles distant from the spot upon which I lay. To crawl that distance was impossible. I looked upward to the sky. Heavy clouds charged with rain, were approaching in my direction, and the prospect before me of having to pass the night in the woods was by no means pleasant. I had learnt from experience that the storms in this region were violent and fierce; and, moreover, I had eaten nothing since the morning. Hunger was making strong demands upon me--all the stronger, as is the way of things, because of helplessness. I called aloud, and only a very fine echo--which I was not in the mood to admire and appreciate--answered me. Again and again I strove to rise, and again and again I sank to the ground, My ankle was getting worse, and had by this time swelled to double its

usual girth. I turned my head in every direction, in eager quest of a human form, but none met my view. A squirrel sprang out of the woods, and stopped suddenly short at sight of me. It remained quite still, at a distance of a few paces gazing at me, and then it darted away, inspiring within me an absurd envy of its active movements. Birds, with cries both shrill and soft, flew to their nests; frogs croaked near the edges of the water. Evening fell, the sun descended; night was my enemy, and was eager to get at me, and soon its darkness fell around me like a shroud. This had ever been an enjoyment to me, but on the present occasion it served but to aggravate the mental disorder produced by my sufferings. The figures I conjured up in the gloom were the reverse of soothing, and I found myself occasionally labouring under a kind of delirium. One of my fancies was so peculiar that I will recall it. I saw on the left of me a deep cave, which as I gazed upon it grew to an enormous size. I had been looking in that direction only a moment before, and had seen nothing; the sudden vision of this great cave in the midst of black space was, therefore, the more surprising. Its roof and sides resembled a huge feathery disk, and deep back in the recess, embedded in the furthermost wall, were two strange-looking globes, surrounded by spots and curved lines of the colours of orange, brown, and soft grey. These globes were instinct with motion, and seemed to shrink and swell, while the coloured spots and curves around them contracted or expanded, in obedience to some mysterious law. The feathery roof and walls seemed also to contract and expand in sympathy, and these wave-like movements made it appear as if the cave were a living monster. I managed to raise myself upon my elbow for a moment, and as I did so I was terror-struck by beholding the monster cave rise and fly past me--in the shape of an owl that had wandered my way in search of food.

Fortunately the storm held off a while, but about midnight, as near as I could judge in an interval of reason, a few heavy drops of rain fell. I really felt as if this were to be my last night on earth. Soon the storm broke over the forest, and in a moment I was drenched to the skin. This, with the pain that was throbbing in every vein, and the hunger that was gnawing at me, completely exhausted me, and I became insensible.

I was awakened by the touch of hands, by the sound of a human voice. I languidly opened my eyes, and saw a man bending over me. The storm had passed away, and the sun was just rising. I had barely strength to note these signs, for my condition was pitiable. The man addressed me first in French, then in German; but although I could speak both languages my senses were so dazed that I had no understanding of them at the moment. I murmured faintly a few

words in my native tongue.

"Ah," said the man, quickly and cheerfully, answering me in my own language, which he spoke well, but with a foreign accent, "you are English?"

I murmured "Yes."

"Of course," he said, "I should have known without asking. You are faint and exhausted. I perceive how it is. You crossed the stream, and fell, and sprained your ankle."

I nodded, dreamily and vacantly. All the time he spoke he was busy binding my ankle with some linen he had taken from a leather bag which hung by a strap from his shoulders.

"How long have you been lying here? But to give me that information just now is not imperative. You wish to tell me. Well?"

"I have been here at least since yesterday--perhaps longer."

"That is bad, very bad; I can judge from the sprain that you must have been here a great many hours. It is a very severe sprain; there is inflammation, great inflammation; you will not be able to walk for weeks. But what does that matter? These are the smallest ills of life. Were you on your way to Nerac? Do not answer me in speech. Nod, or shake your head. Rally your strength--for a few moments only--so that I may know how to deal by you. Come, you are a strong man. Compel yourself not to swoon. Stupid that I am! I have generally a flask with me; but I have forgotten it, and just when it is most needed. It shall not occur again; but that resolve will not help us now, will it? Were you on your way to Nerac? A nod. Yes, then. Have you friends there? A shake. No, then. Travelling for pleasure? Yes. An English gentleman? Yes. It is fortunate for you, friend, that, warned by the signs of a coming storm last night, I delayed my return home till this morning, and that, to prevent my people being for too long a time uneasy about me, I took a short cut, which is seldom used. The path is so little frequented that you might have lain here for another weary day. I am from Nerac; my home is there, and my family. Attend. I am going to lift you upon my horse; I call it, and it comes to me. See, it kneels at my bidding. We are friends, my horse and I; and it understands me; it can do anything but speak. Observe that I shorten the left stirrup, so that your sprained foot may find a fairly easy resting-place, and that I slightly lengthen the right stirrup, In order that leaning

to the right, with your sound foot firmly planted, you may throw all your weight on that side. Now, I place my arm under your left shoulder--thus, and I have a firm hold of you. Do not fear; I am very strong, and my dear dumb brute will keep very still. I place your arm round my neck--thus. Clasp me as closely as your strength will permit. That is right--it is cleverly done. Now, resolve to bear a little sharp pain for a moment, only for a moment. Englishmen are not only proverbially but actually brave and stout-hearted. There--it is accomplished, and my dumb comrade is ready for the journey home. Are you comfortably placed? Here is my shoulder on the right of you, to rest your hand upon. Don't be fearful that you might lean too hard; I am made of iron. What a glorious sunrise! There is a subdued beauty in the colours of the sky after a great shower which is very charming. If you can manage not to faint for a little while it will be of assistance to us. The storm has cooled the air; you must feel it refreshing to your hot skin. We will nurse you well again, never fear. There will be a slight fever to grapple with, in addition to the healing of the ankle. Do not be disturbed by doubts that you may not be in friendly hands. I am a physician, and my name is Louis--Doctor Louis. Nerac is a most lovely spot. When you are well, we will show you its beauties. You are a brave young fellow to smile and keep your eyes open to please your doctor. There--that is a rabbit darting through the sunlight--and the birds, do you hear them? They are singing hymns to the Creator. Yonder, high up in the distance, winging its way to the rosy light, is a skylark. 'Hail to thee, blithe spirit!' It is better for me to take you home in this way than to leave you lying by the stream yonder, while I went to Nerac to fetch assistance. You might have thought I was never coming back, and the torture of suspense would have been added to your other discomforts. Then, we shall reach Nerac a good many minutes earlier by this means. There are times when minutes are of serious importance. We are on an eminence, and are about to descend the valley which leads straight to Nerac. If you were quite yourself you would be just able to catch a glimpse of the roofs of the houses in our pretty village. There are few prettier--none in my opinion. We shall jolt a little going down hill. Bear up bravely; it will soon be over."

With such-like words of encouragement, most kindly and sympathetically uttered, in tones soothing and melodious, did Doctor Louis strive to lighten the weary way, but long before we came to the end of our journey everything faded from my sight.

CHAPTER VII.

When I became conscious of surrounding things I found myself in a large airy room, the pervading characteristics of which were space and light. I was lying in a bed, all the coverings of which were white; there were no curtains to it, and no hangings in the apartment to mar the deliciously cool and refreshing air which flowed in through the open folding windows. These windows, which stretched from ceiling to floor, faced the foot of the bed; my head was almost on a level with my body, and I could not obtain a level view of the gardens which bloomed without. But I had before me in the heights a delightful perspective of flowering trees, stretching upwards into the clouds. These clouds, of various shades of blue and white, filled all the spaces between the lovely network of leaves and branches. It was like gazing upwards instead of downwards into the waters of a clear and placid lake. A sense of blissful repose reigned within my soul. I had not the least desire to move; so perfect and so sweet was the peace in which I lay, as it were, embalmed, that I felt as if I were in a celestial land. There were trees with great clusters of red blossoms hanging in the clouds; a soft breeze was playing among them, and as they swayed gently to and fro fresh peeps of fairyland were continually disclosed to my contented eyes. There were nests in the trees, and the cloud-scapes of fleecy blue and white were beautifully broken now and again by the fluttering flight of birds as they came and went. The pictures I gazed upon, idealised and perfected by my mind's eye, have always abided with me. It is seldom given to man to enjoy what I enjoyed as I lay, then and for some time afterwards, in my white and healthful bed. It was a foretaste of heaven.

So fearful was I that the slightest movement might destroy the lovely pictures that I did not even turn my head at the sound of my bedroom door being softly opened and closed. A light footstep approached the bed, and I beheld a young girl whose form and face I silently and worshipfully greeted as the fairest vision of womanhood in her spring that ever blessed the sight of man. Observing that

my eyes were open, she gazed at me for a moment of two in wondering and glad surprise, and then, with her finger at her smiling lips, trod softly from the room as lightly as she had entered it. I closed my eyes, so that this fair picture, in its dress of pale blue, with lace about the neck and arms, might not be entirely lost to me, and when another sound in the room caused me to open them, in the hope that she had returned, I saw standing at my bedside a grave and kindly man.

"So," he said in a quiet tone, "you are at length in the land of conscious life. You remember me?"

"First enlighten me," I said, and I was surprised to hear my voice so weak and wavering. "I am really awake? I am really in the land of the living?"

"So far as we know," was his reply. "There are those who say this life is but a dream, and that when we yield up our breath it is simply that our dream is ended, and that we are awaking to reality. For myself, I have not the least doubt that life is life, and death death, and that pain and joy are just what those words are intended to convey to our understanding."

"So fair and peaceful is the scene before me," I said, "so calm was my soul when I awoke, that it is difficult to realise that I am in the land of the living."

"You will realise it very vividly," he said gaily, "in an hour or two, when you are hungry. There is nothing so convincing as our grosser passions. You have not answered my question. Do you remember me?"

"Yes, I remember you. I had sprained my ankle in crossing the stream that runs through the woods, and not being able to walk, was doomed to lie there all night with a fine storm playing pranks upon my helpless body. It was a wild night, and I had wild fancies. What would have become of me had you not providentially come to my assistance is easy enough to guess. I should really by this time have been in possession of the grand secret."

"When did this occur?"

"Yesterday."

"My friend," said Doctor Louis, with a light laugh, "what you have so faithfully described took place four weeks ago. If you have any doubt of it, you have only to pass your hand over your beard."

The statement bewildered me. Accepting it as fact--and it was not possible for me to doubt it--I must have lain during those four weeks in a state of delirium. What perplexed me was the consciousness that I had been so well cared for by strangers, and that something more than a friendly interest had been taken in me. The evidences were around and about me. The sweet-smelling room, the beautiful scene through the open folding windows, the entrance of the fair girl, the smile on whose lips seemed to speak of innocent affection, the presence of Doctor Louis, and the friendliness and sympathy with which he was conversing with me--all these might be construed into evidences even of love. Still it would not do to take things too much for granted.

"Am I in an inn?" I asked.

"You are in my house," replied Doctor Louis courteously, "my guest, in whom we are all very much interested."

"All?"

"Myself--who should properly be mentioned last--my wife, who is first, as she deserves to be--and my daughter, who is our Home Rose."

Our Home Rose! The mere utterance of the words conveyed a sense of spiritual sweetness to me, who had never known the meaning of Home.

"It pleases us to call her so," said Doctor Louis.

"The young lady," I said, in a musing tone, "I saw in the room shortly before you entered, and whose appearance so harmonised with the peace and loveliness of the view of cloud and flower I see from my bed, that I should not have been surprised to hear she was spirit or angel."

"An angel in a blue dress," said Doctor Louis, with pleasant nods; "but it is agreeable to me, her father, to hear you speak so of her. She is, as I have said, the rose of our home. If there is an angel in our house, it is her mother. Lauretta, as yet, is but a child; she has to prove herself in life. But I ask your pardon. These details can scarcely interest you."

"They more than interest me," I said earnestly; "they do me good. Although you are a physician, your friendly confidence--which I accept as a privilege--is better than the most potent medicine you could administer to me. Pray continue

to speak of your home and family. I beg of you!

"A wise doctor," said Doctor Louis, "and such, of course, I account myself, occasionally humours his patient. But I must not give you all the credit; the theme is agreeable to me; it is, indeed, closest to my heart. I used to think, when Lauretta was a little child, and we were deriving an exquisite happiness from her pretty ways, that no happier lot could be ours than that she should always remain a child. But that would never do, would it? A world inhabited by children is not in Nature's scheme. Fit theme for a fairy story. It behoves us, however, of necessity, to be to some extent practical. I have no fear for Lauretta. Children who are not violently wrenched from their natural bent inherit and exhibit their parents' qualities. I, we will say, am negative. I have my opinions, strong ones and deeply planted, but there is no positive vice in me, so far as I am aware, and it is pleasing to me to reflect that I have transmitted to my child neither moral nor physical hurt. But Lauretta's mother possesses qualities of goodness which proclaim her to be of a rare type of womanhood. She is not only benevolent, she is wise; she is not only strong, she is tender; and she has taught me lessons, not in words, but by the example of her daily life, which have strengthened my moral nature. You see, I am in love with my wife--of which I am not at all ashamed, though I am an old married man. If Lauretta's life resemble her mother's, if she follow in her footsteps, I shall be more than content--I shall continue to be truly happy. There are so many foolish, vicious children born in the world that it is something to be proud of to add to its millions one who will instinctively tread in the straight path of duty, and who, if it is her lot to suffer, will 'suffer and be strong.' Once more, forgive me for being so garrulous about my household treasures; it is a weakness into which it is not difficult to lead me. A few words concerning yourself, in explanation of what has occurred. Learning from your own lips, on the morning we first met in the forest yonder, that you were a stranger, and perceiving that you were a gentleman, I brought you straight to my house--with no settled intention, I must frankly own, of keeping you here for any length of time. After thoroughly studying your case I saw that you would be ill for weeks, and for a great part of that time that you would be not exactly in your right senses. To tell you the truth, I was puzzled, and while I was debating what to do with you, who should introduce herself into the matter but my estimable wife. She can invariably tell, by a certain puckering of my brows, when I am in a brown study, and she inquired what troubled me. I told her, You--yes, you, my friend. 'He will not be able to get about for a month,' I said. 'Poor young gentleman!' said my wife. 'And in spite of my undoubted skill,' I continued, 'I may not be able to save him!' She clasped her hands, and the tears

gathered in her eyes. She has always a heartful of them ready to shed for those who are in sickness and trouble. A foolish woman, a very foolish woman indeed. 'He may die on our hands,' I said. 'Heaven forbid!' she cried. 'Heaven's forbidding it,' I sagely remarked--occasionally I say a good thing, my friend--'will not save him, if I cannot. There is healing by faith, certainly, but this hapless gentleman is not in a condition to bring faith to bear. I know what I will do. I will take him to an inn, where they will run him up a fine fat bill. His accident shall do some one good. There is the inn of the Three Black Crows. The landlord is a worthy fellow, and has a large family of round bright eyes and small red cheeks. To be sure, his wine is execrable, and he cannot cook a decent meal. But what of that? Our friend here will care little for either, and is not likely to complain of the quality. Yes, to the inn of the Three Black Crows he shall go.' My wife did not interrupt me; she never does; but she kept her eyes fixed earnestly upon my face while I was speaking, and when I had finished, she said, 'Louis, you are not in earnest.' 'Nonsense, nonsense,' said I; 'here, help me to carry this troublesome gentleman to the Three Black Crows.' 'You are not in earnest,' she repeated, and the foolish woman smiled at me through her tears; 'you know well that you have made up your mind that he shall stop here, and that I shall nurse him, with your assistance, into health and strength. His room is ready for him.' My friend, it is a rule with me never to create dissension in my home. Therefore, what could I do? Break through my rule, and cause my wife sorrow? And for you, a stranger? It was not to be thought of. That is how it has happened you have become my guest."

"How can I thank you?" I murmured, much moved. "How can I thank your good wife?"

"Thank me!" exclaimed Doctor Louis. "Have I not told you I had nothing to do with it? As to thanking my wife, she is never so happy as when she is nursing the sick. We really ought to pay you for the pleasure you have afforded us by spraining your ankle in the woods, and falling into a dangerous fever. Heavens, how you raved! What is the meaning of the expression I see in your eyes? Are you going to rave again?"

"No; I am wondering whether the sounds of music I hear are created by my imagination."

"The sounds are real sounds. It is my wife who is playing."

"But the instrument?"

"The zither."

"Its tones are most beautiful."

"It is her favourite instrument. She has sometimes played on it while you were lying unconscious, in the belief that its soft tones would not be a bad medicine for you. My daughter plays also. To conclude my explanation. During your fever your ankle has been attended to, and it is now nearly well. The sprain was so severe that it would have confined you to your bed without the fever, and as you were to have it, the two evils coming together was a piece of positive good fortune. It saved time."

"As I was to have it!" I exclaimed.

"My friend," said Doctor Louis, "do not forget that I am a doctor. Either then, or now, or at some time within the next twelve months, you would have succumbed to the strain which you have lately been putting upon yourself. The fever was lying dormant in your veins, and needed but a chance to assert itself. Whether you are conscious of it or not, there is no doubt that there have been severe demands upon your nervous system. To speak plainly, you have over-taxed yourself, and have treated Nature unfairly. She is long-suffering, but, push her too far, she will turn upon you and exact the penalty. Too late then to repent; the mischief is done, and all that we can do thereafter is to patch up. Have you met with any misfortune lately--have you lost any one who was dear to you?"

"Within a short time," I said, "I have lost both my parents."

"That is sad; but you have brothers, sisters?"

"Not one; nor, so far as I am aware, a relative the wide world over. I am alone."

"I regret to hear it, and sincerely sympathise with you; but you are young, and have all your life before you. There are, however, persons with whom you wish to communicate, friends who will be anxious at your long silence. Now that you are conscious and sensible you will have letters to write. Do not flatter yourself that you are strong enough to write them. It will be another fortnight, at least, before you will be fit even for that slight exertion."

"I have no letters to write," I said, "and none to receive. I am without a friend."

I saw him look in pity at me, and he seemed to be surprised and disturbed.

"I am a new experience to you," I observed.

"I admit it, yes," he said thoughtfully, "but we have talked enough. Sleep, and rest."

As he uttered these words he passed his right hand with a soothing motion across my brows. I was disposed for sleep, and it came to me.

The days passed as in a blissful dream. There was always within me the same sense of perfect repose; there were always before me delightful panoramas of cloudland, moving through graceful foliage and bright blossoms. Sometimes Lauretta's mother came into the room, and sat by my bedside, and spoke a few gentle words. She was the embodiment of Peace; her voice, her movements, her graceful figure, formed a harmony. I did not see Lauretta during those days, nor was her name mentioned again by Doctor Louis. But when her mother was with me, and I heard the sound of the zither, I knew it was Lauretta who was playing. The music, in the knowledge that she was the player, produced upon me the same impression as when her mother played--for which I can find no apter figure of speech than that I was lying in a boat on the peaceful waters of a lake, with a heavenly calm all around me.

Doctor Louis came daily, and we indulged in conversation; and frequently before he left me made similar passes across my forehead, which had the effect of producing slumber. After a time I spoke of this, and we conversed upon the subject. I had read a great deal concerning mesmerism and clairvoyance, and Doctor Louis expressed surprise at the extent of my information on those subjects. He said he was glad to perceive that I was a student, and I replied that my chiefest pleasures had been derived from books.

At length I was convalescent, and, for the first time for many weeks, I enjoyed the open air. We sat in the garden, and I was enchanted with its beauties, which seemed all to radiate from Lauretta. It was she who imparted to surrounding things, to flowers, to trees, to grassy sward and floating cloud, the touch of subtle sweetness which made me feel as if I had found a heaven upon earth. On that day, for the first time, our hands met.

She gathered fruit, and we ate it slowly. Lauretta's mother sat nearest to me, engaged upon a piece of embroidery. Lauretta, waiting upon us, came and went, and my eyes followed the slight figure wherever she moved. When she disappeared into the house I did not remove my eyes from the door through which she had passed until she emerged from it again. Once or twice, meeting my gaze, she smiled upon me, and I was agitated by an exquisite joy. Doctor Louis, wearing a hat which shaded his brows, sat at a little distance, sometimes reading, sometimes contemplating me with attention.

"You must be glad to be well," said Lauretta's mother.

I answered, "No, I regret it."

"Surely not," she said.

"Indeed it is so," I replied. "I am afraid that the happiest dream of my life is drawing to an end."

"The days must not be dreamt away," she said, with grave sweetness; "life has duties. One's ease and pleasure--those are not duties; they are rewards, all the more enjoyable when they have been worthily earned."

"Earned in what way?" I asked.

"In administering to others, in accomplishing one's work in the world."

"How to discover what one's work really is?" I mused.

"That is not difficult, if one's nature is not wedded to sloth."

"And where," I continued, "supposing it to be discovered, should it be properly performed?"

"In one's native land," she said. "He belongs to it, and it to him."

"There have been missionaries who have done great good."

"They could have done as much, perhaps more, if they had devoted themselves to the kindred which was closest to them."

"Not that I have a desire to become a missionary," I said. "I have not within me the spirit of self-sacrifice. I have been travelling for pleasure."

"It is right," she said, quickly, "it is good. Do not think I mean to reproach you. Had I a son, and could afford it, I would bid him travel for a year or two before he settled down to serious labour."

"It was my good fortune that I resolved to see the world, for it has brought me to this happy home."

"It is happy," she said, "because it is home."

I asked Lauretta if she would play.

"In the house?" she inquired.

"No," I replied, "here, where Nature's wondrous works are closest to us."

The zithers were brought out, and mother and daughter played. I was not yet strong enough to bear the tension of great excitement, and I leant back in the easy chair they had provided for me, and closed my eyes. Whether I slept or not I should not, at the time, have been able to decide, nor for how long I lay thus, listening to the sweet strains. Awake or asleep, I was in a kind of dreamland, in which there was no discordant note; and even when I heard the music merge into the Tyrolean air which I had so often heard in fancy during my residence in Rosemullion, and concerning which Mrs. Fortress had questioned me, I did not regard it as strange or unusual. It was played by those to whom I had been spiritually drawn. I recognised now the meaning of the mysterious strains I used to hear in the silent woods. The players and I were one; our lives were one, I who had all my life scoffed at fate, suddenly renounced my faith. Chance had not brought us together; it was Destiny.

CHAPTER VIII.

As I lay in this dreamy condition I became conscious that the music had ceased and that the players had departed. But I was not alone; Doctor Louis was with me.

These facts were made apparent by my inner sense, for I did not attempt to open my eyes. Indeed, without a determined effort I should not have succeeded. A wave of cold air passed over my eyelids; another; another. This did not proceed from an uncontrolled natural force; Doctor Louis had risen from his seat, and was now standing in close proximity to me. I did not pause to consider whether he had moved towards me stealthily, in order not to disturb me. I was content to accept certain facts without inquiry as to how they were produced. Again the wave of cold air across my eyelids; again; again.

"To seal them," was the expression of my thought. "So be it--but this learned doctor shall not quite succeed. He is endeavouring to magnetise me to his will, but my power is no less than his; it may be greater. Hidden force shall meet hidden force in friendly and amiable contest. He will not be aware that I am resisting him, and the advantage will be on my side. I will play with him as one skilled in fence plays with an apprentice. My dear doctor's power is the product of cultivation; he has learnt the art he practises. To me it is natural, born in my birth without a doubt. What matter how transmitted? That I am I is the potent fact; and being I, and of and in the world, I am, to myself, supreme. What to me would be the marvels of nature, the genius of centuries, the memorials of time from the first breath of creation, were I not in existence? Therefore am I, to myself, supreme. The present lives; the past is at rest. The future? A grey veil spreads itself before me, shutting out from my view the years of mortal life through which I have yet to pass. But I possess a talisman. I breathe upon the veil the form of a rose, white and most lovely, with just a tinge of creamy pink, and it dissolves into a vision of flowers, amidst which I walk, clasping a hand which, but that it is flesh and blood, might be the hand of an angel. It is an

angel's hand--mine, and no other man's; mine, to gladden my hours, and to be for ever creative of joy, of peace, of beauty. How fair the view! I will have no other.

"I am not fearful that the doctor has evil intentions towards me; and truly I have none towards him. As regards our relations to each other, spiritual and temporal, nothing is yet fixed.

"I see him as he stands by my side waiting his turn. A grave, courteous, and kindly man, whose native instinct it must be to shrink from evil. Goodness and nobility are inherent in his nature. Not that he is devoid of cunning. Indeed, is he not practising it at the present moment? But it is cunning which must always be used to a just or good end. I do not unite the terms 'just' and 'good,' for the reason that they are sometimes at war with each other. What is a blessing to one man is frequently a curse to another. The doctor's cunning is just now weakened by the fact that it is as much the cunning of the heart as of the head that he is bringing to bear upon me. Mixed motives are rarely entirely successful. In enterprises upon which momentous issues hang, one dominant idea must be the supreme guide.

"He is not inimical to me, yet is he secretly disturbed--and I am the cause. Well, doctor, you picked me up in the woods and saved my life. Who, then, is the responsible one--you or I?

"Between us, for sympathy or repulsion, are a being and an influence which soon shall become resolved into a bridge or a chasm. I prefer that it shall be a bridge, but it may be that it will not depend upon me to make it this or that. Only, I will have my way. No power on earth shall mar the dearest wish of my heart.

"What being stands between you and me, dear doctor, to unite or sever? Ah, the fragrant air playing about my face, whispering of spring, of youth, of joy! Lying back in my chair, with eyes fast closed, I see the pink and white blossoms growing upwards into the clouds, kissing heaven. I am lifted heavenward. Delicious and most sweet! If death bear any resemblance to this state of beatitude, it were good to die. But I must live--I must live! A heaven awaits me in mortal life. Dear doctor, whom, unconscious to yourself, I am dominating even as you would dominate me, which is it to be--a bridge to join our hearts, or a chasm to hold them apart? The influence is Love, the being, Lauretta. You cannot quite see into my heart, nor can I quite see into yours, but the secret which includes love and Lauretta is yours for the asking. Also, for the asking,

my resolve to win both love and her.

"But your inquisitiveness may travel beyond this point; you may seek to know too much, and I am armed to resist you. Nothing shall you glean from me that will be to my hurt, that will step between me and Lauretta. You shall obtain from me no pathognomonic sign which will enable you to lay your finger upon the secret of my midnight musings, and of my love for solitude. You shall not make me a witness against myself. True, I have heard silent voices and have seen invisible shapes. You would construe the bare fact to my disadvantage. You would be unable to understand that they are my slaves and have no power over me. All the dark thoughts they have suggested, all the temptings and instigations, will presently be slain by love, and will fall into a deep grave, to lie there for ever still and dead. I am as others are, human; my life, like the lives of other men, is imperfect. The purifying influence is at hand. I thank Thee, Creator of all the harmonies in the wondrous world, that Thou hast sent me Lauretta! Now, doctor, I am ready for you."

He spoke upon the instant.

"You and I have certain beliefs in common--as that we are not entirely creatures of chance. There is in all nature a design, down to its minutest point."

"So far as creation goes," I answered, "so far as this or that is brought into existence. There ends the design."

"Because the work is done," said Doctor Louis.

"Not so," I said. "Rather is it because nature's part is done. Then the true work commences, and man is the master."

"Nature can destroy."

"So can man; and, of the two, he is the more powerful in destruction. His work also is of a higher quality, because of the intelligence which directs it. He can go on or turn back. Nature creates forces which, apart from their creator, produce certain results--some beautiful and harmonious, some frightful and destructive. For these results nature is only indirectly responsible; the forces she creates work independently to their own end. When a great storm is about to burst, it is not in nature's power to will that it shall dissolve into gentleness. Hence, nature, all powerful up to a given point, is powerless beyond it."

"And man?"

"*Is* all powerful. He wills and executes. He aspires to win, and he works to win. He desires, and he schemes to gratify his desire." I paused, and as Doctor Louis did not immediately reply, continued: "If there is not perfect accord between us in large contentious matters upon which the wisest scientists differ, that is no reason why there should not be between us a perfect friendship."

"I am pleased to hear you say so; it means that you desire to retain my friendship."

"I earnestly desire it."

"And would make a sacrifice to retain it?"

"Sacrifice of what?"

"Of some wish that is dear to you," replied Doctor Louis.

"That depends," I said. "In entering upon a serious obligation it behoves a man to be specific. Doctor, we are drifting from the subject which occupies your mind. Concentration would be of advantage to you in any information you wish to obtain from me."

"The flower turns towards the sun," said Doctor Louis, after a pause, during which I knew that he was bringing himself back to the point he was aiming at, "and closes its leaves in the darkness. My view has been that man, though the highest in the scale, is not his own master; he is subject to the influences which affect lower grades of life. At the same time he has within him that with which no other form of life is gifted--discernment, and, as you have said, the power to advance or recede. It sometimes happens that an impulse, as noble as it is merciful, arrests his foot, and he says, 'No, I may bruise that flower,' and turns aside. You follow me?"

"Yes--but you are still generalising. Question me more plainly upon what you desire to know."

"You are a stranger among us?"

"I was; I do not look upon myself as a stranger now. Here have I found peace

and fitness. Do not forget that, out of your goodness and generosity, you have treated me with affection."

"I do not forget it, and I pray that it may not lead to unhappiness."

"It is also my prayer--though you must remember that one man often enjoys at another man's expense."

"You have already told me something of yourself. Again I ask, what are you?"

"An English gentleman."

"Your father?"

"He was the same."

"Your mother?"

"A lady."

"Were you educated at a public school?"

"No; my studies were conducted at home by private tutors. We lived a life of privacy, and did not mix with the world."

"For any particular reason?"

"For none that I am aware of. It suited my parents so to live; it suited me also. Since the death of my parents I have seen much of the world, and derived but small enjoyment from it until destiny led me to Nerac."

"Destiny?"

"It is the only word, doctor, by which I can express myself clearly."

"During your illness you gave utterance to sentiments or ideas which impel me now to inquire whether, in the lives of either of your parents, there was that which would cause an honourable man to pause before he yields to a temptation which may draw an innocent being to destruction?"

"I would perish rather than destroy the flower in my path."

"You adopt my own figure of speech, but you do not answer my question--which proves that I have not complete power over you. Your sense of honour will not allow you to commit yourself to anything distinctly untruthful. Say there is that in your inner life which warns you that to touch would be to wither, would you stoop to gather the flower which it may be awaits your bidding?"

A glow of ineffable delight warmed my heart. "Do you know," I asked, "that it awaits me?"

"I know nothing absolutely. I am striving to perform a duty. An ordinarily wise man, foreseeing a storm, prepares for it; and when that storm threatens one who is dearer to him than life itself, he redoubles his precautions."

"As you are doing."

"As I am doing--though I am sadly conscious that my efforts may be vain."

"You are not my enemy?"

"On the contrary. I recognise in you noble qualities, but there is at the same time a mystery within you which troubles me.

"May you not be in error there?"

"It is possible. I speak from inward prompting, based upon observation and reflection."

"Dear doctor," I said, with a sense of satisfaction at the conviction that I was successfully probing him, "if I thought that my touch would blast the flower you speak of, I would fly the spot, and carry my unhappiness with me, so that only I should be the sufferer. But no need exists. Nothing lies at my door of which I am ashamed. No man, so far as I am aware, is my enemy, and I am no man's. I have never committed an act to another's hurt. You speak of my inner life. Does not every human being live two lives, and is there not in every life something which man should keep to himself. Were we to walk unmasked, we should hate and loathe each other, and saints would be stoned to death. We are maculate, and it is given to no man to probe the mystery of existence. There are pretenders, and you and I agree upon an estimate of them. If in private intercourse we were absolutely frank in our confession of temptations, gross thoughts, and uncommitted sins, it would inspire horror. The joys of life are destroyed by

seeking too far. We are here, with all our imperfections. The wisest and truest philosophy is to make the best of them and of surrounding circumstances. Therefore when I see before me a path which leads to human happiness, I should be mad to turn from it. Will you not now ask questions to which I can return explicit answers?"

"You love?"

"Yes."

"Whom?"

"Lauretta."

"In honour?"

"In perfect honour. So pure a being could inspire none but a pure passion."

"You would make a sacrifice to render her happy?"

"I can make her happy without a sacrifice."

"But should the need arise?"

"If I were convinced of it, I would sacrifice my life for her. It would be valueless to me without her; it would be valueless with her did not her heart respond to the beating of mine."

"You have not spoken to her?"

"Of love? No."

"You will not, without my consent?"

"I cannot promise."

"You believe yourself worthy of her?"

"No man can be worthy of her, but I as much as any man."

"She is young for love."

"Those words should be addressed to nature not to me."

"Aspiring to win her, you would win her worthily?"

"It shall be my endeavour."

"I do not say she is easily swayed, but she is simple and confiding. She must have time to question her heart."

"What is it you demand of me?"

"That you should not woo her hastily. I am her father and her natural guardian. It would not be difficult for me to keep you and her apart."

"Do you contemplate an act so cruel?"

"Not at the present moment seriously, but it has suggested itself to me as the best safeguard I could adopt to save an inexperienced child from possible unhappiness."

"She would suffer."

"Less now than at some future time, when what is at present a transient feeling may become a faith, from which to tear her then would be to tear her heartstrings. You are, or would be, her lover; I am her father. Were you in my place and I in yours, you would act towards me as I am acting towards you. I repeat, you are a stranger among us; you must give us time to know more of you before I can take you by the hand and welcome you as a son. You must give my daughter time to know more of you before you ask her to take the most important step in a woman's life. It is in my power to-day to make my conditions absolute, and I intend to use my power.

"You require a guarantee from me?" I said.

"Yes."

"And if I give it, will it be the means of separating me from Lauretta?"

"No."

The fears which had begun to agitate me vanished. What guarantee could Doctor Louis demand which I would refuse to give, so long as I was permitted to enjoy Lauretta's society?

"State what you require," I said.

"I require a sacred promise from you, to be repeated when you are in full possession of your faculties, that, until the expiration of twelve months from this day, you will not seek to obtain from my daughter any direct or indirect pledge of love by which she will be likely to deem herself bound."

"On the understanding that I am a free agent to stay in Nerac or leave it, and that you will not, directly or indirectly, do anything to cause Lauretta and me to be separated, I give you the promise you demand."

"I am satisfied," said Doctor Louis.

"A moment," I said, a sudden vague suspicion disturbing me; "there is something forgotten."

"Name it."

"You will bind yourself not to use your parental authority over Lauretta to induce her to enter into an engagement with, or to marry, any other man than me."

"I willingly bind myself; my desire is that she shall be free to choose."

Those were the last words which passed between us on that occasion; and soon afterwards Doctor Louis left me to my musings. They were not entirely of a rosy hue. At first I was in a glow of happiness at what it seemed to me I had learnt from between the lines of Doctor Louis's utterances. If he had not had good reason to suppose that Lauretta loved me, he would not have sought the interview. What had been said was like a question asked and answered, a question upon which the happiness of my life depended. And it had been answered in my favour. Lauretta loved me! What other joys did the world contain for me? What others were needed? None. Blessed with Lauretta's love, all sources and founts of bliss were mine. It did not immediately occur to me that the probation of twelve months' delay before heart was joined to heart was a penance, or that there was danger in it. But certain words which Doctor Louis

had uttered presently recurred to me with ominous significance: "My desire is that she shall be free to choose." To choose! Were there, then, others who aspired to win Lauretta? The thought was torture.

To debate the matter with myself in hot blood I felt would be unwise; therefore I schooled my mind to a calmer mood, and then proceeded to review the position in which I stood with respect to the being who was all the world to me.

It was not to be supposed that Lauretta had grown to womanhood without forming friendships and acquaintances, but I had seen nothing to lead to the belief that her heart had responded to love's call before I appeared. She was sweet and tender to all, but that it was in her nature to be, and I had allowed myself to be strangely self-deceived if the hope and the belief were false that in her bearing towards me there was a deeper, sweeter tenderness than she exhibited to others. That she was unconscious of this was cause for stronger hope. But did it exist, or was it simply the outcome of my own feelings which led the word of promise to my ear?

To arrive at a correct conclusion it was necessary that I should become better informed with respect to the social habits of Doctor Louis's family. I had been until this day confined to a sick room, but I was growing strong, and I had looked forward with tranquil satisfaction to the prospect of recovering my usual health by slow stages. This was no longer my desire. I must get well quickly; I would will myself into health and strength. I was sure that even now I could walk unaided. By a determined effort I rose to my feet, and advancing three or four steps forward, stood upright and unsupported. But I had overtaxed myself; nature asserted her power; I strove to retrace my steps to the chair, staggered, and would have fallen to the ground had it not been that a light form glided to my side and held me up. Lauretta's arm was round me.

"Shall I call my father?" she asked in alarm.

"No, no; do not speak, do not move; call no one; I shall be well in a moment. I was trying my strength."

"It was wrong of you," she said, in a tone of sweetest chiding. "Strength! You have none. Why, *I* could vanquish you!"

"You have done so, Lauretta."

She gazed at me in innocent surprise, and I equivocated by asking,

"You are not angry at my calling you Lauretta?"

"No, indeed," she replied; "I should feel strange if you called me by any other name. Lean on me, and I will guide you to your chair. You will not hurt me; I am stronger than you think."

Her touch, her voice with its note of exquisite sympathy, made me faint with happiness, I sank into the chair, and still retained her hand, which she did not withdraw from me.

"Do you feel better?"

"Much better, Lauretta, thanks to your sweet help. Remain with me a little while."

"Yes, I will. It was fortunate my father sent me to you, or you might have fallen to the ground with your rash experiment."

"Your father sent you to me, Lauretta?"

"Yes."

This proof of confidence, after what had passed between us, did wonders for me. A weight was lifted from my heart, a cloud from my eyes. I would prove myself worthy of his confidence.

"The colour has come back to your face," said Lauretta. "You are better."

"I am almost quite well, Lauretta. I have been so great a burden to you and your good parents that I thought it was time to give up my idle ways and show I was capable of waiting upon myself."

"It was very, very wrong of you," she repeated. "And as wrong to say you are a burden to us. It is almost as if you believed we thought you were. I must tell my dear mother to scold you."

"No, do not tell her, Lauretta; it might pain her. I did not mean what I said. Let it be a secret between us."

"A secret!" she exclaimed, raising her eyes to my face. "I never had one; but there is no harm in this."

"You have no secrets, Lauretta?"

"Not one," she replied, with guileless frankness; "and I will promise that my mother shall not chide you if you will promise not to try to force yourself into strength. The wisest and cleverest man cannot do that. But perhaps you are weary of us, and wish to run away?"

"I should be content to remain here for ever, Lauretta."

"Well, then," she said gaily, "be patient for a few days, and, as my dear father would say, do not be inconsistent." She uttered the last four words in playful imitation of her father's voice, and I was enchanted with this revealment of innocent lightness in her nature. "But I am losing sight of his admonition."

"He bade you do something?"

"Yes; he said you might like me to read or play for you. Which shall I do?"

"Neither, Lauretta."

"Can I do nothing?"

"Yes; talk to me, Lauretta."

I was never tired of uttering her name. It was the sweetest word in all the languages.

"Well, then," she said, clasping her hands in her lap, she had gently withdrawn the hand I held, "what shall I talk about?"

"About your friends. When I am strong, I shall want to know them. Introduce me to them beforehand."

"I introduce you, then," she said with tender gravity, without losing touch of her lighter mood, "to everybody."

"Is everybody your friend, Lauretta?"

"Yes, everybody--truly! and it makes me very glad to know it."

"But there are special ones, Lauretta."

"Of course there are special ones. First, my dearest."

"Your parents?"

"Yes, they are the first, the best, the dearest. It is well known; my mother is an angel."

"I honour them, Lauretta."

"All do. That is why people like me; because I belong to them, and they to me."

"You are loved for yourself, Lauretta."

"No," she said, with pretty wilfulness, "because of them. Then there is Father Daniel, a saint, my mother says; then Eric and Emilius--and that is all, I think, who can be called special."

"Eric and Emilius?" I said, in the form of a question.

"Yes, they are brothers, handsome, brave, and strong. You will like them, I am sure you will."

Handsome, brave, and strong! I gave Lauretta a searching look, and she returned it smilingly. There was no blush, no self-consciousness. Why, then, should I feel disturbed? Why should Eric and Emilius become established in my mind as barriers to the happiness for which I yearned. I did not dare to trust myself to ask for information of these friends of Lauretta, so handsome, brave, and strong--I was fearful that my voice might betray me; and as I could converse on no other topic with ease, I remained silent while Lauretta chatted on sweetly and artlessly.

CHAPTER IX.

I was quite well; the fever had entirely departed, and my ankle was as strong and sound as ever. I moved about freely, with a keen enjoyment of life, an enjoyment intensified by the happiness which I believed to be in store for me. Four weeks had passed since Lauretta had uttered the names of Eric and Emilius, and I had seen nothing of them. Not only had they not visited the house, but I was convinced they were not in the village. My jealous fears were dead. The hopes in which I indulged were strengthened by Doctor Louis's behavior towards me. There had been a short conversation between us on the subject of what had passed while he was endeavouring to mesmerise me on the first day of my convalescence. It was I who, to his manifest relief, broached the subject.

"I remember everything perfectly," I said, "every phase of my sensations, every word that was spoken, every thought that occurred to me. Although my eyes were sealed, I saw you plainly, and it seemed to me that I could *see* what was passing through your mind."

"It is frank of you," said Doctor Louis, "to say so much. Was I in error in supposing that you were resisting me?"

"Not entirely in error," I replied. "I was aware of your design, and I strove to exercise over you, to some extent, a power similar to that you were exercising over me. If I did nothing else, I gave you pause."

"Yes," he said, "you compelled me to wait your pleasure, and now and then, instead of being dictated to, dictated. That, to me, was a new condition of a psychic force at present in its infancy, but which, at some not too distant time, will be the means of producing marvellous revealments."

"What brought us into harmony," I observed, "was the fact that the subject was one which commanded our entire and undivided sympathies."

"My daughter."

"Yes, your daughter Lauretta."

"You obtained a promise from me which was to be confirmed I infer in such a conversation as we are holding now. I confirm it. And you, on your part, will abide by the engagement into which you entered with me respecting Lauretta."

"Assuredly."

We clasped hands, and directed our conversation into another channel. The agreement we had made necessitated certain action with respect to my residence in Nerac during the period of probation. I felt that it would be scarcely right for me to continue to live in the doctor's house; even were a closer tie not in contemplation, it would have been indelicate on my part to encroach upon the hospitality of these generous friends. It was for me to make the first move in the matter, and I did so when we were sitting together after the evening meal.

"I have had it for some time in my mind," I said, "to endeavour to express my heartfelt thanks for all the kindness you have shown me; but although I am not usually at a loss for words, I am at a loss to carry out my wish in a fitting manner."

"It is enough," said Lauretta's mother, with a gentle inclination of her head. "Having said so much, there is no need for anything more. Do not distress yourself. What has been done has been cheerfully and willingly done, and your restoration to health is the best return you could make for the slight service we have been able to render you."

"There was a time," I remarked, "when I myself might have regarded the saving of my life a slight service; that was when I deemed life of little value, when I thought there was little in the world worth caring for. But it is different now; my life is precious to me, and the world is very beautiful."

"It is," said Doctor Louis, "all a question of the liver. The world is bright or dark according to the state of our digestions."

He often interjected these pleasant discordances, upon which we placed their proper value, knowing that they were introduced chiefly for the purpose of giving a healthy turn to the conversation. This did not, however, detract from the

wisdom of his utterances, which were nuts with sound kernels within.

"Therefore," I continued, smiling at the doctor, and becoming grave immediately afterwards, "what you have done for me is of inestimable value, and cannot be priced. There is only one way of showing my gratitude, and that way lies in the future, not in the present. It shall be my endeavour to prove to you that your precious kindness has not been wasted."

Lauretta's mother nodded and looked kindly at me, and then turned her eyes of full love upon her daughter, who was sitting by her side. Between me and Lauretta's mother no words had been exchanged with reference to the dear wish of my heart, but without being told I knew that Doctor Louis had imparted to his wife all the particulars of what had passed between us, and that she was aware that I stood in the position of one who desired to win their Home Rose for my wife. There was a new tenderness and solicitude in the mother's looks which deeply moved me.

"Then there is another matter," I said, "upon which I hope we shall be in accord. I am mustering up courage to leave you."

"I feared, mother," said Lauretta, and it delighted me to note that her voice was tremulous, "that he was growing weary of us. I told him so a little while since, I think."

"And my reply was," I said, "that I should be content to remain here for ever; but that can scarcely be. I have no intention of leaving Nerac, however."

"Of course not, of course not," said Doctor Louis; "the air here is so fine, so much finer than it is anywhere else--"

"Very much finer," I said.

"And the fruit is so delicious, so much more delicious than it is anywhere else--"

"Much more delicious," I said.

"And the skies are so bright, so much brighter than they are anywhere else--"

"Much brighter."

"And the flowers are so much lovelier, and the stars are so much more brilliant--"

"The doctor and I," I said, entering into his mood, and addressing his wife and daughter, "so perfectly agree."

They smiled, but in Lauretta's smile there was a tender wistfulness.

"Then the people," continued Doctor Louis; "they are so much superior, so much more refined, so much higher--"

"Indeed," I said, with a touch of earnestness, "that has been truly proved to me."

"No, no," said Doctor Louis, "I am not to be turned from the track by sentiment. It has been left to our young friend to discover--all honour to him--that, taking us altogether, we in the little village of Nerac here are a very exceptional lot. Now, I have only to make this public to bring us an inch nearer to the sun. The least we can do for him is to present him with a testimonial."

"Which he is ready to accept," I said gaily; "but, doctor, you omitted to mention one important thing."

"What is it?"

"My health; it will take a considerable time to establish it, and it cannot be established elsewhere."

"A poor compliment to my skill," observed Doctor Louis, quizzically. "Ah, I always thought I was a pretender, but until this moment no one has had the courage to tell me so to my face."

"Be serious, Louis," said his wife.

"I am dumb," he rejoined, with a comical look.

I then unfolded my plan. It was my desire to take a house in Nerac, not at too great a distance from the house of Doctor Louis, in which I could reside, with two or three servants to attend to it and me. I had seen such a house on the borders of a forest about a mile and a half away, which appeared to me to have

been long uninhabited. The grounds in which it was built and the gardens by which it was surrounded had been neglected by man, but there was much wild beauty in them, and a little care and attention would soon bring them into order. The place had attracted me, and I had spent an hour in wandering through the grounds, and had attempted, also, to enter the house to examine it, but the doors were locked. Attached to the house was a cottage, which I supposed had been the gardener's cottage. This little dwelling was literally imbedded in climbing wild roses, which had grown in wonderful luxuriance upon all its walls. There were stables also, which I judged would afford accommodation for half a dozen horses.

In some respects the estate reminded me of Rosemullion, which, considering the kind of life I had passed therein, might not have been considered an attraction; nevertheless, I found myself insensibly drawn towards it. Its points of resemblance were that the house stood alone, and could not be overlooked; that it was at some distance from other habitations; and that it was on the borders of a wood. In one respect it was pleasantly dissimilar. No stone walls surrounded it; there was not even a fence; the fine trees around it had been so arranged by man or nature as to form an intelligible barrier, which, however, any person was at liberty to pass. The gloom of Rosemullion did not, therefore, pervade it, and, living there, I should not feel as if I were cut off from communion with my fellows.

I had visited it on a bright day; the sun was shining, the birds were singing in the trees; and when I visited it, and as I wandered through the grounds, I was thinking of Lauretta. But when, indeed, was I not thinking of her? She was my sun, my light, my life. All aspects of nature were rendered beautiful by thought of her; she was to me the essence of joy; through her, and through her only, my heart was a garden. Through her I discovered beauties even in nature's sad moods; her spiritual presence was never absent from me. She moved by my side when I strolled unaccompanied through the quaint little thoroughfares of the village and the sweet and solemn woods in the valleys of which it lay; alone in my chamber she was ever with me; she was not only life of my life, she was my religion--I who had had no religion, and to whom the sacred peace of church or chapel had never come. My father had never taken me by the hand and led me to a place of worship; I had read the Bible, not as a religious study, but for the most part as a collection of amusing, improbable romances. There was certainly one character in it which had deeply impressed me--the character of Isaiah, for whose wild prophetic life I entertained a profound admiration. Otherwise, the

book simply entertained me. It was different now. Not that I read the Bible in a newer light, or indeed that I read it at all, but that, through Lauretta, I became amenable to certain influences of a religious nature. I sat with her in the pretty chapel of the village in which Father Daniel officiated, and the hushed air within the building, and the voices of the choir of children, and the tender, sacred music, had upon me a purifying influence. The music was Lauretta's; the angel voices were Lauretta's; the tender peace was Lauretta's; the priest's consoling, compassionate admonitions were Lauretta's. What mystic thoughts of a higher future state these matters brought dimly to my mind were inspired by Lauretta. It was she for whose sweet sake I gave Father Daniel money for his poor. Through her I saw "good in everything;" through her I inhaled it.

The money I gave to Father Daniel was given privately, but I did not think of laying an injunction of secrecy upon him, and it became known. I was guiltless of any wish to earn praise for my actions in that or in any other respect, but a reward most disproportionate, but most sweet, was bestowed upon me by words and looks from Lauretta and her mother.

"It is good of you," said Lauretta's mother.

"You almost make me ashamed," I said.

"Why?" asked Lauretta's mother. "It gladdens us. I am learning not only to know you but to love you."

Precious were those words from her lips; but afterwards, when I offered my contributions to Father Daniel I asked him not to speak of them. I think he respected my wish, but nevertheless I gained a reputation for charity in Nerac which did me no harm.

To return to the conversation respecting the house I desired to take.

It was well known to Doctor Louis and his family, and of course to all in the village, and one reason why it had remained for so long a time uninhabited was that it was a gentleman's house, and no person rich enough had desired to become its tenant.

"It is filled with old furniture," said Doctor Louis, "and a man with a large family could be tolerably comfortable there, no doubt. There were gay doings in it once upon a time. A nobleman inhabited it for many years, and entertained

shoals of visitors. He was not a favourite in Nerac, and took no pains to make himself one, looking down upon us as somewhat too common for intimate association; and as we have a pride of our own, we returned his scornful opinion of us in kind. He died there, and his affairs were found to be hopelessly involved. Since then the house has been empty. The agents, a firm of lawyers, live a hundred miles away, but there will be no difficulty in communicating with them if you are really serious in wishing to occupy it."

"I am quite serious," I said.

"You will be lonely there," said Lauretta's mother.

"You must remember," I said, "that until I came here I have lived a life of solitude."

"Have we not cured you of that?" she asked.

"Of the desire for a life of solitude? Yes. It is only that I am accustomed to it, and that it is not so irksome to me as it would be to others. But why talk of my being lonely unless you have decided to banish me from your society?"

"We shall be happy to have you here as often as you care to come," said Lauretta's mother. "Meanwhile you will remain with us, and we can be of assistance to you in settling yourself. Left to your own devices in arranging matters, you would make, I am afraid, a sad bungle of them."

It was settled so, and in a few days the keys of the house arrived, and we all set out together to inspect it. We found it charming, but very musty. Some of the rooms were spacious, some small and cosy. Of bedrooms there were at least a dozen, all amply furnished; but Lauretta's mother shook her head when she examined the linen, and declared that it would occupy some time and much labour to put it in order. I asked her to take direction of the affair, and she consented to do so. We decided which rooms were to be locked up and which used, and in which way the furniture was to be disposed of. The agents, in reply to my letter, had sent an inventory, which I would have taken for granted, but Lauretta's mother would not have it so, and chided me for my easiness.

"What would you have?" said Doctor Louis. "It was his misfortune to be born a man, and what does he knows of sheets and curtains and footstools?"

"He will not want footstools," said Lauretta's mother.

"Indeed I shall," I declared, "and everything feminine. Am I to be shut up here alone, without ever a visit from my friends?"

"Oh," said Lauretta's mother, "we will come and see you if you invite us."

"Therefore, footstools," said I gravely.

There was, indeed, a great deal to be done, and it did not surprise me to discover that Lauretta's mother was thoroughly practical in all household matters. Lauretta herself gave her opinion and advice, timidly and shyly, and not a word she said was lost upon me. Subsequently, when the work was done and I was duly installed in my new residence, she was delighted to see that every hint she had given had been acted upon.

"The first necessary thing," said Lauretta's mother, "is to hire some one to take care of the place and look after it while the workmen are employed. It should be a gardener, who could usefully employ his time, and who, perhaps, might afterwards be permanently engaged, if he gives satisfaction."

"I know the very man," said Doctor Louis. "Martin Hartog, who is seeking employment. A faithful fellow, and capable."

"He has a daughter, too," said Lauretta's mother, "who could look after--"

"The footstools," said Doctor Louis.

"His character is excellent," said Lauretta's mother; "it is a pity he is so eccentric."

"His eccentricity," said Doctor Louis to me, "consists in his having opinions. For instance, he does not believe in kings and queens; he believes in the universal equality of man. For another instance, he is supposed to be a materialist; yet I never heard of his doing wrong to a fellowman, and I am sure he would scorn to rob even the rich. For my part, I have a respect for Martin Hartog, and so has my wife, whose only sorrow with respect to him is that she cannot convert him."

"He is a conscientious man," said Lauretta's mother, "and will faithfully

perform any duty he undertakes."

"As good an epitaph," said Doctor Louts, "as could be graven upon any tombstone."

The next day Martin Hartog was engaged, but when I spoke to him about his daughter he declined to allow her to enter service. He had always maintained her, and he hoped to be always able to do so. She could live with him in the gardener's cottage attached to the house, and he promised that I should never find her in my way. If I objected to her living with him in the cottage he would remain where he was, and come to his work every morning, and if that would not do, why, he could not accept the employment I offered him. What particularly struck me in him was the tender tones in which he spoke of his daughter; she was evidently the treasure of his life. In the course of a day or two, when I saw her--for Martin was engaged upon his own conditions, which were quite suitable to me--I was not surprised at this, for she was a maiden of singular beauty.

I pass over all further details with respect to the house of which I became the tenant. It will be sufficient to say that the work proceeded satisfactorily, though its complete execution occupied a longer time than I expected. I spared no money, and insisted upon the appointments, within and without, being of such an order as to be worthy of the dear friends whom I hoped to receive often as my guests. The association between me and the members of Doctor Louis's family grew closer and more binding in its intimate relationship; perfect confidence was established between us, and it made me glad to think that they regarded me almost as one of themselves. I faithfully observed the contract into which I had entered with Doctor Louis; nearly three months of the twelve belonged to the past, and nothing had occurred to disturb my tranquillity.

Before the end of the week I expected to remove from Doctor Louis's house. He and I were frequently together when he went to visit those of his patients who lived at a distance, and on one occasion at this period we had arranged to ride in company to a village situated sixteen miles from Nerac, and on our return to dine at an inn, and visit some caves which had just been discovered, and which were said to contain, among other relics of the past, bones and skeletons of animals now strange to the district.

On our way out of Nerac we met the village postman, who gave Doctor Louis

a letter. He glanced at it, and saying "Ah, a letter from Emilius," opened and read it as we ambled along the soft forest track.

CHAPTER X.

A letter from Emilius! The words seemed to burn themselves on my brain. The tone in which they were uttered denoted satisfaction. It was unreasonable, I knew, to torture myself about such a trifle, but my love for Lauretta was so absorbing that the least thing was sufficient to prick it into misery. I felt that I might as well be jealous of the air that kissed her cheek as of a man whom I had never seen, and who had given me absolutely no cause for jealousy. I do not attempt to justify myself; I simply record the fact.

After reading the letter Doctor Louis put it in his pocket, and to my great comfort presently spoke upon the subject that occupied my mind. Had he not done so I should myself have managed to approach it, and in so doing might have betrayed myself, as I feared would be the case when Lauretta had mentioned the names of Eric and Emilius. The doctor commenced by asking whether in any of our conversations he had ever referred to two young friends of his, Eric and Emilius, from one of whom he had just received a letter. I answered No, but that once Lauretta had spoken of them in a tone which made me curious about them.

"They are brothers, I believe," I observed.

"Yes," said Doctor Louis, "twin brothers, who commenced life with a strange history--which," he added, "somewhat reverses the order of things."

"Are they young?" I asked.

"Within a year or two of your own age. In all likelihood you and they will meet. If I thought the story would interest you I would relate it."

"It would be certain to interest me," I said, with a successful attempt at calmness, "if only for the reason that Lauretta first spoke to me of the brothers.

She said they were handsome, brave, and strong, and that she was sure I should like them."

"Did she say so much?" said Doctor Louis. "But, after all, that is not strange, for they and she were playmates together when they were quite young children. It is, however, a long time since they met. Eric and Emilius left Nerac three years ago, for the purpose of travelling and seeing something of the world."

"Lauretta spoke of them as special friends."

"Yes, yes; women of her and her mother's stamp are very constant in their friendships and affections. The esteem of such is worth the winning; and you, Gabriel, have won it.

"It has rejoiced me to believe so; it rejoices me still more to hear you confirm my belief."

"Let what I tell you of these young men be in confidence between us."

"It shall be, sir."

"My wife is familiar with the story, but I doubt whether Lauretta has ever heard it. There is, in truth, a mystery in it."

"Which will make it all the more interesting."

"Perhaps, perhaps. There is in the human mind a strange leaning towards the weird and fantastic."

Before we returned to Nerac on the evening of this day Doctor Louis fulfilled his promise, and told me the story of these brothers, which, however, so far as they were concerned, proved to be but an epilogue to the play.

"It will serve our purpose," commenced Doctor Louis, "and will tend to brevity and simplicity, if in what I am about to narrate I use only Christian names. Silvain was the father of Eric and Emilius; and strangely enough, these young fellows being twins, their father was twin brother to Kristel. With Silvain I was well acquainted, and what I learned and knew of him was admirable. Kristel I knew less intimately, having fewer opportunities. My first meeting with Silvain took place in England, long before I met my wife. On the continent it is

the practice of many fathers to send their sons to foreign countries for a few years, to see something of other customs than their own before they settle down to the serious business of life. My father did so by me, and I travelled through most of Europe, and profited I hope. However that may be, when I was two and twenty years of age I found myself in England, and in that wonderland, London. I do not know whether I should have liked to become a resident in that turbulent city; we grow accustomed to things, and I have grown accustomed to the quiet peaceful life I am living and have lived for many happy years in our lovely village. It presents itself to me in the form in which I feel it, as a phase of human happiness which is not to be excelled. Doubtless it would not do for all to think as I do; but each man for himself, so long as he is living a life that, to a fair extent, is useful to others.

"Well do I remember the evening on which I first met Silvain. He was standing at the money office of an opera house; between him and the money-taker some difficulty had arisen with respect to the payment, and Silvain, being but imperfectly acquainted with the language, had a difficulty in understanding and in making himself understood. I put the matter straight for them, and Silvain and I entered the opera house together, and sat next to each other during the performance. Being foreigners we naturally conversed, and the foundation of a friendship was laid which was as sincere on his side as it was on mine. We made an appointment to meet on the following day, and thereafter for a long while travelled in company, and were seldom apart. Confidences, of course, were exchanged, and we became familiar with each other's personal history. Mine was simple, and was soon told; his had an element of strange mystery in it. In the relation of his story I noted what was to me very touching and pathetic, and what to him had been the cause of a great sorrow. He had, as I have informed you, a twin brother, Kristel, from whom, until he set out for his travels, he had never been separated. But their father, for some reason which I failed to discover, and which also was not understood by Silvain, had resolved that his sons should not travel in company, and had mapped out their separate routes in so cunning a manner that, without violating his instructions, they could not meet. This was a heavy grief to them. Born within a few minutes of each other, they had lived, as it were, wedded lives; side by side and hand in hand they had grown from boyhood to manhood, shared troubles and pleasures, and were in rare and perfect harmony. When one rejoiced the other rejoiced, when one was sad the other was sad. The severance of two such natures was therefore no common severance, and the scene of their last meeting and parting, as described to me by Silvain, must have been heartrending.

"'I felt,' said Silvain, 'as if I had lost the better part of myself--nay, as if I had lost my very self. But that I was conscious, and amenable to ordinary human sensations, I should have doubted that I lived. It is impossible for me to describe my despair; and my brother suffered as I suffered. I gathered this from his letters, as he must have gathered the knowledge of my sufferings from mine. Happily we were not debarred from the consolation of corresponding with each other. Not only routes but dates had been carefully prepared by our father, and I knew from day to day where Kristel was, and where he would be to-morrow. One night--I was in Spain at the time--I had a vivid dream, in which Kristel played the principal part. It was, as most dreams are, panoramic, phantasmagoric. There was a lake; upon it a pleasure boat; in the boat six persons, two boatmen, two ladies, and two gentlemen. One of the gentlemen was Kristel; the faces of the others were strange to me. They were laughing and singing and conversing gaily. The sails were set, and the boat was ploughing its way swiftly onwards. Suddenly the clouds which had been fair, became overcast; the boatmen were busy with the sails. A lurch, and one of the ladies was in the water, struggling for life. Her white arms were upraised, her face was blanched with terror; in a moment she sank. Then my brother stood upright in the boat, and plunged into the lake. All was confusion. A whirl of clouds, of human faces, of troubled waters, upon the surface of which Kristel appeared, supporting the insensible form of the lady. They were pulled into the boat, and my dream ended. I awoke, much agitated, and when the violent beating of my heart abated, I wrote an account of my dream, omitting no detail. In my next letter to Kristel, I said nothing of my dream, but on the fifth day I received one from him In which he gave me an account of the perilous adventure, his description tallying exactly with all the particulars of my dream. In this way I discovered that there was between me and Kristel a strange, mysterious link of sympathy, through which each was made acquainted with any danger or peril which threatened the other.'"

CHAPTER XI.

"Silvain's revelations," continued Doctor Louis, "aroused within me the keenest interest. The mysterious influences to which certain natures are susceptible, and which in these twin brothers found practical development, had always strongly attracted me, and it was at this period of my life that I commenced the serious study of those hidden forces which, now only dimly understood, will in the near future become a recognised science. In this statement of my belief I do not lose sight of the impostors who, trading upon credulity, creep into the battle raging between those who have religious faith and those who are groping in dark labyrinths. Their presence does not lessen the importance of the subject; there always have been and there always will be such.

"I endeavoured to draw Silvain into discussion, but he declined to argue. He was content to accept without question the existence of the mysterious chain of sympathy by which he and Kristel were bound, and his theory was that unless such sympathies were born in men all endeavours to acquire them must be futile.

"'You do not dispute,' I said, 'that there are secrets in nature which, revealed, would throw a new light upon existence?'

"'No,' said Silvain, 'I do not dispute it.'

"'Nor that,' I continued, 'by study and research, the discovery of these secrets is open to mankind.'

"'Undoubtedly,' he said, 'you may gain some knowledge of them; as you may gain knowledge concerning the growth of flowers. But however profound your application and however assiduous your pursuit, you can never acquire a power which is intuitive in those who are born with it. At the present time, for instance, you are attracted to the study of animal magnetism, and you may become a master in its tricks. You will reach no higher point. The true spiritual gift is

bestowed by nature only.'

"I need not say that my opinions were not in harmony with his, and had there not been an entire absence of arrogance in his utterances, I might have been nettled by the idea that he was asserting a superiority over me. Although he declined to seriously discuss the subject he was too amiable to refuse to converse upon it, and I extracted from him a promise that, if it were in his power, he would afford me the opportunity of testing and verifying any incident of which he might become forewarned through his sympathy with Kristel. He faithfully kept this promise, which, as you will presently learn, was the forerunner of strange results.

"Meanwhile Silvain and I continued to travel together. I pursued my studies assiduously, and did not allow myself to be discouraged by the instances of charlatanism which met me at every turn. Silvain was in the habit of relating his dreams to me, so far as he was able to recall them, and during the first three months of our intimacy nothing occurred to disturb him with respect to Kristel, whose letters he always handed to me for perusal. These letters were most affectionately written, but I gathered from them an impression that Silvain's love was the more profound of the two. It was at the expiration of three months that Silvain said, 'Louis, I am beginning to dream about you.'

"'That is because we are constantly together,' I said.

"'I am dreaming also of another whom I have never seen,' said Silvain.

"'Man or woman?'I asked.

"'Woman,' he replied.

"'Young or old?'

"'Young.'

"I smiled and said, 'You also are young, Silvain.'

"'Well?' was his inquiry.

"'Love comes to the young,' I said, with the kind wisdom which youth is fond of parading. 'It may come one day to me.'

"'Do *you* dream,' said Silvain, 'of a young woman whom you have never beheld?'

"'I dream of many such, no doubt,' I said, still preserving my light tone.

"'Ah, yes, of many such--but of one who constantly appears, and whom you can in certain particulars vividly describe? Is this among your experiences?'

"'No,' I said, 'it certainly is not.'

"'Then,' continued Silvain, 'she seldom appears alone. My brother Kristel is there; occasionally, also, you.'

"His earnest voice made me serious.

"'Describe this woman, Silvain, as she appears to you in your dreams.'

"'I cannot,' he said, after a momentary pause, 'describe her face except that I know it is beautiful, nor her form except that I know it is graceful. She has black hair, which tumbles in thick luxuriance over her shoulders below her waist, and upon her head is a scarlet covering, loosely tied, which flutters in the wind which is sweeping around her. Her figure is nearly always in this position, standing upright, with her left hand raised to her forehead, and her eyes looking eagerly forward.'

"'As though searching for some one, Silvain?'

"'Yes, as though searching for some one. For whom? For me? It is a question I seem to have asked of myself, I know not why. Her lips are parted, and I see her white teeth gleaming. The wild waves are dashing up to her feet, and surging all around her while the wind whistles and shrieks.'

"'A storm is raging,' I suggested.

"'An invisible storm, of which she appears utterly regardless.'

"'And I am there?'

"'And you are there,' said Silvain, 'and Kristel, and myself and this young girl, whose face I have never seen, but whose beauty spiritually impresses me, is

always looking forward in the position I have described.'

"'Towards us?' I asked.

"'I cannot say,' he replied, 'but we seem to be moving in her direction.'

"'Moving!' I exclaimed. 'How? By what means? Walking, riding, or flying?'

"'We are on the water, it seems,' he said; 'but truly there is nothing clear except the figure of the young girl standing in the midst of the storm.'

"'You dream this constantly?'

"'Constantly.'

"'Has Kristel ever spoken to you of such a girl?'

"'Never.'

"'It is possible,' I suggested, 'that since you and he parted he has met with her.'

"'Ah,' cried Silvain, with animation, 'you have hit the mark. It is through Kristel that she comes to me in my dreams.'

"My suggestion had been lightly made, and the readiness with which he accepted it astonished me. Thinking over it afterwards in cool blood it appeared to me incredible that, in his dreams, Silvain should thus become acquainted with a being whom he had never seen, and of whose existence he had never heard. But Silvain entertained no doubt on the matter.

"'Shall I ever see her in my waking life?' he asked, in a musing tone.

"'You believe she lives?'

"'As surely as I live. If I knew where she is to be found I would go and seek her.'

"In other men's judgment the calm manner in which he spoke of this mystic episode would have been accounted a species of madness; but I knew that he was perfectly sane, and that his brain was as clear and well balanced as my own.

"'For what reason would you seek her?' I asked.

"'I do not know,' he replied, and added, with a grave smile, 'perhaps because she is beautiful.'

"'You have fallen in love with a shadow, Silvain.'

"'It may be,' he said; 'I cannot say how it is--only that I think of her by day and dream of her by night. I wonder whether we shall ever meet!'

"'Cannot you tell?'

"'No, I cannot see into the future. All that comes to me in my dreams of and through Kristel belongs to the past and the present. There is no foreshadowing of what is to be. The picture I have seen of this beautiful girl is a reflex of what Kristel has seen in actual embodiment.'

"It would have been both unkind and ungenerous to throw ridicule upon these statements. To no man would Silvain have spoken as he spoke to me; he had, as it were, opened his soul to my gaze, and I should have been unworthy of friendship had I not received his confidences with respect. Nevertheless I could not bring myself to believe as he believed. I was soon to become a convert.

"About a month after this conversation I was aroused from sleep early in the morning by Silvain. The sun had scarcely risen, and he was fully dressed. I observed signs of agitation in his face.

"'Kristel is in danger,' he said.

"These simple words acted upon me as a charm. I divined instantly that Silvain had dreamt of his brother being in peril. Here, then, to my hand, was a means of verifying a mystery which might assist me in my studies. I questioned Silvain, and he answered me frankly. Yes, he had dreamt of Kristel, and it was his dream which had driven him from his bed. I determined to be precise, and, for my own satisfaction, to extract from Silvain all the details at his command.

"'Kristel,' he said, 'was one of a company of tourists who had set out to traverse a difficult pass, from the summit of which a view of cloud and water, and distant lowlands of great beauty, was to be obtained.'

"'How do you know this?' I asked.

"'Kristel reached the summit,' replied Silvain, 'shortly before sunset, and stood enjoying the prospect.'

"'You saw him there?'

"'I saw him there, with his friends. Near the spot upon which they were gathered was a hut, which in all likelihood was built to accommodate large parties of tourists, such as that of which Kristel formed one. It was spacious, with many bedrooms in it, and one large apartment in which meals were taken. Kristel and his companions retired to this hut after sunset. Then night set in, and my dream ended.'

"'There is nothing very alarming in that,' I observed.

"'I do not think I awoke,' continued Silvain, 'and I cannot say whether the interval between this dream and the dream that followed was one of hours or minutes. Kristel and a companion are exploring a cavern, the opening into which is on the summit of the mountain. They bear torches. The walls and roof of the cavern are of glittering spar and crystal, and the light from the torches is a thousand-fold reflected. They emerge from the cavern through a fissure in the rocks some hundreds of feet below the summit. There is an overhanging ledge of stone, by springing upon which readier access to the hut is gained. Kristel's companion makes the spring, and reaches the ledge in safety. Kristel follows, fails in the attempt, and falls back, bleeding. His companion, standing far above him, cannot reach him by bending over, and, being without ropes, is powerless to assist Kristel, who lies there, badly hurt.'

"'Nothing further, Silvain?'

"'Nothing further.'

"'Do you know from evidence in your dream where this occurred?"

"'No; but Kristel is in Bavaria. I know that by his letters, and by the scheme of travel mapped out by my father.'

"'What do you intend to do?'

"'To go to Kristel. To go to Bavaria.'

"'But by the time you arrive there, he may be gone.'

"'You forget that I told you he is badly hurt. It will be some days, perhaps some weeks, before he is able to resume his travels. I shall arrive in time.'

"'Is it your intention to start to-day?'

"'Yes, I shall start immediately. I must not lose an hour. I am sorry to part from you, Louis, but you see it cannot be helped. I shall miss you sadly.'

"'And I you, Silvain. But, after all, why should we part? My time is my own; I have no arbitrary plan of travel mapped out. I will accompany you to Bavaria, and gain another friend in Kristel.'

"Silvain was delighted at the proposal, and eagerly accepted it. For my own part, although I did not confess it to Silvain, I was not entirely ingenuous in my offer. It was not prompted solely by friendship; an insatiable curiosity possessed me to ascertain the real facts of the case, and, as I have already said, to verify them in detail.

"'Kristel lives?' I said to Silvain.

"'As nearly,' he replied, 'as a man can be convinced of anything, the knowledge of which is acquired by spiritual means, so am I convinced that Kristel lives.'

"'And will recover?'

"'That is beyond me,' said Silvain gravely. 'I hope so--I pray so. You inspire strange thoughts, Louis. Though parted from Kristel by great distances, I hold communion with him while he lives. Were he to die, should I still hold communion with him?'

"The question startled me, holding out, but it did, an illimitable prospect of mysterious knowledge stretching as far as the portals of immortality."

Here Dr. Louis broke off in his narrative, and said, addressing himself immediately to me,

"In recalling these incidents of my youthful days, and of my connection with Silvain and Kristel, I am drawn insensibly into a fairly faithful depiction of the visionary ideas and speculations which sprang within me from time to time, and which afforded me food for thought. During a brief space I foolishly believed that the very question and truth of the immortality of the soul were involved in my studies of animal magnetism. Had I accepted this, had I allowed it to root itself firmly in my mind, I should have been profoundly unhappy. I can imagine no such grounds for misery to the intellectual man as lack of faith in a future state. I care not what shape or form it takes, so long as it is there. And this faith must of necessity be a blind faith. I have already expressed to you my conviction that a recognised science will arise out of the better knowledge which will be gained by certain hidden forces, but there are immortal secrets which will never be revealed to mankind. It appears to me to be necessary to make this clear to you, in order that you may not suppose that I am still wedded to the wild chimeras of youth."

I knew why Doctor Louis made this statement to me. The reminiscences he was recalling had rendered him for a little while oblivious of the present. His youth rose before him, in which his daughter Lauretta had no share. Suddenly he had remembered that I loved Lauretta, and the Father's heart spoke to the man whose most earnest desire it was to wed the cherished child.

"I understand you, sir," I said, humbly; the confidences which he was imparting to me, had drawn us closer together, and this fact seemed to be an assurance of my happiness. In the light of this prospect my spirit was humbly grateful. "I understand you," I repeated. "Perhaps also to me will come the wisdom in which the most perfect human and divine comfort is to be found."

He pressed my hand, and regarded me with glistening eyes.

"It is a wisdom," he said, "which not only comforts, but purifies."

Then he resumed his story.

CHAPTER XII.

"I must not forget one question I asked Silvain.

"'In the company of tourists who traversed the pass with Kristel, was the young girl present, of whom you have so frequently dreamt?'

"'No. There seemed to me to be no females among them.'

"On the morning of that day we started for Bavaria, Silvain having first despatched a letter to his father, informing him that he was about to join his brother, and explaining the reason. It would prolong my story to an undue length were I to dwell upon the record of travel and experience, which does not bear directly upon the history of Silvain and Kristel. Suffice it, therefore, to say that we arrived in Bavaria, and, after necessary inquiry, proceeded straight to the mountain pass on which Silvain believed his brother to have met with the accident. Some time afterwards I reflected with interest upon the singular contrast in our demeanour while we were pursuing our search. I, who should have been calm, inasmuch as no being dear to me was in danger, was restless and excited. Silvain, who should have been anxious and disturbed, was composed. He believed in the truth of his vision; I doubted it. But no room was left for doubt when we came to the end of our journey. It terminated at the mountain hut, where Kristel was lying slowly recovering from the injuries he had received in his fall. Everything was as Silvain had described it. The hut with its many small bedrooms, and the larger apartment in which the meals were taken; the mount with its cavern of glittering spar and crystal, with its entrance from the summit of the pass, and its mode of egress at the side lower down; the overhanging ledge of rock which could only be reached by a daring leap. I recognised, with feelings of amazement, the faithfulness of the detail. The mystery of this spiritual sympathy which found practical expression in a form so strange, was beyond my comprehension, and I accepted it, as Silvain accepted it, but the wonder never left me.

"Kristel was affectionately and unfeignedly glad to see his brother.

"'Did you expect me?' asked Silvain.

"'No,' replied Kristel, 'but I hoped you would come.'

"He listened attentively while Silvain related his dream. Although he had received no forewarning that Silvain was coming to him, he expressed no surprise; he regarded it, also, as perfectly natural.

"Before I saw Kristel I had pictured him in my mind as resembling his twin-brother--dark, like Silvain, with black hair, and brown, melancholy eyes. I had said to myself, 'I shall know Kristel, if I meet him for the first time when his brother is not present.' Another surprise awaited me. There was no resemblance between Silvain and Kristel; there was scarcely a brotherly likeness. Kristel was fair, his hair was light, his eyes were blue, and his frame was larger and more powerful.

"They had much to relate to each other of their travels and adventures, and I frequently left them alone, in order that they might indulge freely in brotherly communion. I heard, however, from Kristel's lips the particulars of his accident, which tallied exactly with the account I had received from Silvain.

"'You must have dreamt of it,' he said to Silvain, 'at the precise moment of its occurrence.'

"Silvain nodded and smiled. He was happy because he was with Kristel, and because Kristel was recovering strength, slowly it was true, but surely.

"'Has Kristel,' I said to Silvain, 'ever spoken to you of the beautiful girl who presented herself to you in your dreams?'

"'No,' replied Silvain, 'he has not mentioned her.'

"'Is that not strange?' I asked.

"Silvain did not reply, and, gazing at him, I saw that he was lost in reverie. I had recalled the image of the girl, and he was musing upon it.

"At another time I asked Silvain whether he himself had referred to her in his

conversations with his brother. He confessed that he had not. There was, then, a secret which these brothers held close in their hearts. I was not wise enough to fix instantly upon the correct solution of this secret which each was keeping from the other. It required, in a third party, a riper experience than was at my command, to read the riddle aright.

"Two months passed by, and Kristel hoped in a few days to be able to move out of the hut in which he had been so long confined, Silvain was in the habit of going to the post-office in the village, which lay at the foot of the mountain. He went one morning as usual for letters, and I was left with Kristel. We conversed freely, and Kristel asked me to bring his desk, which was on a table at a little distance from the couch upon which he was lying. I brought the desk, and he opened it. He took letters from it which he did not read, and then some drawings in water-colours, an art in which he was proficient. He glanced at them, and laid them singly aside, retaining one, upon which he gazed long and earnestly.

"'You are an artist,' I said, for, seeing that I had moved my chair from the bed, so that I should not intrude upon his private matters, he had called me closer, and invited me by a gesture to examine the sketches.

"'But a poor one,' he said, still gazing at the drawing in his hand. 'Still, this is not bad, I think.' And he held it out to me.

"He did not notice the start I gave when my eyes fell upon the sketch. It was that of a young girl, with most wonderful black hair which hung loosely down. She was standing on the upper gallery of a lighthouse, and the silver spray of wild waves was dashing upon the stone edifice. Her left hand was arched above her brows, and a scarlet kerchief was wound gracefully round her lovely head.

"I examined it in silence. The likeness to the description given by Silvain was unmistakable, and it was only by an effort of self-restraint that I prevented myself from disclosing that the figure was familiar to me. The right was not mine; the secret was not mine. A confidence had been reposed in me by Silvain, and, if he and Kristel had not spoken to each other of the girl, it was not for me to betray my knowledge of her.

"'A fancy sketch?' I asked.

"'No,' replied Kristel, 'from the life. Is she not beautiful?'

"'Very beautiful,' I said, with a sinking heart.

"I have spoken of the physical dissimilarity of Kristel and Silvain; but although, from the evidence of sight, a stranger would not have taken them for brothers, he could not have doubted of the close kinship, had he depended for his judgment upon his sense of hearing. Their voices were as one voice, In tone and inflection, so that, closing one's eyes, one could not with absolute certainty decide whether Kristel or Silvain were speaking. It was this that caused my heart to sink when Kristel asked me if the girl was not beautiful. In exactly the same tone had Silvain spoken of her, with fervid warmth and enthusiasm. My vague fears--which at that moment I should have felt a difficulty in explaining--were not dispelled by the action of Kristel, immediately following my reply. Silvain's footsteps were heard without, and Kristel, swiftly and hurriedly, took the sketch from my hand, and placed it in his desk, which he closed and locked.

"Silvain brought grave news to the hut. His head drooped, his features were suffused with sadness.

"'Kristel,' he said, in a tone of melancholy significance.

"'Silvain,' said Kristel, in a tone of indifference. The sorrowful note in his brother's voice had not reached his heart. He was thinking of the beautiful girl, with the wild waves dashing up to her feet.

"'Our father'--faltered Silvain, and stopped, unable to proceed.

"Even this did not arouse Kristel. He was lying now with his head on the pillow, and his hands, the fingers of which were interlaced, clasped behind it. Silvain came close to his brother's side, gently disengaged the clasped hands, and held one within his own. Kristel was awakened to reality by this action; and I, who had guessed the truth, stole softly from the room.

"When they called me in I found them both with tears in their eyes. The letters which Silvain had received at the post-office made them acquainted with the death of their father. Their grief was genuine, and they mourned with sincerity. Kristel was the first to recover his natural tone, and he drew Silvain to speak of the future. Silvain's desire was to return home immediately Kristel was strong enough to travel, but Kristel would not have it so.

"'No duty of instantly returning,' he said, 'devolves upon us, and by our

remaining abroad a while, it will not be thought that we are wanting in affection. Our letters inform us that the last sad offices have been performed over the grave of our father; our affairs are in good hands, and no mother or sister awaits us to relieve her sorrow. We are alone, you and I, Silvain, with no ties beyond us to weaken or strengthen the affection which unites us and makes our hearts as one.'

"Silvain looked up with a loving light in his eyes; his nature was ever responsive to the call of affection.

"'Yes, Kristel,' he said, 'nothing can weaken the ties which unite us. They are perfect, complete. Our hearts truly are one.'

"'Then you will be guided by me, Silvain?'

"'Yes.'

"'Good! We will continue our travels, and nothing shall ever part us.'

"'Nothing *can* ever part us, Kristel,' said Silvain.

"Alas! If, upon the enthusiasm of the present, when men are indulging in dreams, the presentiment of what was to happen in the future were to intrude, how quickly the glowing embers would grow white and cold! When I heard the brothers exchange these professions of love, even I, who had some reasons for uneasiness respecting them, saw not the dread shadows which attended them and beckoned them onwards to their fate.

"The days passed slowly now until Kristel was sufficiently recovered to travel. He would have started long before he was fit, but Silvain would not allow him; and Kristel must have had some doubts of his strength, or he would not have allowed himself to be prevailed upon, so great was his impatience to start. At length the day was fixed, and we left the mountain and the village. I had solicited to be permitted to accompany them and they had readily consented. Their society was agreeable to me, and I loved Silvain. I looked upon Kristel, also, with affection, but my feelings towards him were weaker than those I entertained for his brother. Silvain appealed more closely to me; we had been longer in association, and our natures, in impulsive warmth and unreserve, were in unison. Kristel was colder, and sometimes suddenly checked himself when about to open his heart. I do not say that this should tell against a man, and I have no doubt that, in the telling of my story, I am influenced in my remarks by

the strange events of which you will presently hear.

"At this point I am again silently reminded to be thoroughly sincere. Not alone because I was happy in the society of the brothers and loved Silvain was I desirous to accompany them. I had thought long and seriously over the beautiful girl by the sea whose picture Kristel kept concealed in his desk, and who held a place in the hearts of the brothers, and I was haunted by a foreboding that she was destined to play a part in their lives. By remaining with them I should perhaps make her acquaintance, and might help, for good, either one or the other. Of course, all this was but vaguely in my mind, and probably the most truthful explanation would be that I was prompted by curiosity pure and simple.

"Kristel had extracted a promise from Silvain, to the effect that Kristel was to assume the position of director of the route we were to take. I, also, was bound. We were to ask no questions, to offer no advice, but to go blindly wherever Kristel willed and wished.

"'It suits my humour exactly," said Silvain, merrily, 'and relieves us of responsibility. Eh, Louis?'

"'Yes,' I said, 'I am entirely agreeable.' But I wondered why Kristel had insisted upon this stipulation. That he had a distinct motive I was convinced. But what motive--and whither was he about to lead us?

"'Oh, I will take the responsibility,' said Kristel, 'and you shall find me the best of guides and couriers.'

"So we started gaily, and in a few days left Bavaria far behind us.

"In pursuance of the necessary scheme of brevity I had laid down for myself, I shall not pause in my story to give you an account of the places we visited under Kristel's guidance and direction. I will but say that I subsequently held the opinion--and I have no doubt it was correct--that, although Kristel had one distinct goal in view from the moment we started from the mountain-hut, It was a preconceived part of his plan that we should arrive at it by a devious route, and should, to a certain extent, be supposed to come to it by accident. Therefore we lingered here and there, and shared in the ordinary pleasures of a tour in the holiday of life. Between us existed a most agreeable amity and complaisance, and I inwardly confessed it to be a wise proceeding that one, whose word was law, should be elected captain of our wanderings. By land, and lake, and sea,

over valley and mountain, we made pleasant progress, picking intellectual flowers by the waysides, until at length Kristel's design was unfolded to my view.

"We arrived at a village on the southwest coast of France, and there remained for several days. It was a village inhabited by fishermen, and on one pretext and another, Kristel kept us there. In pursuance of our promise of obedience we did not demur; and indeed there was much to interest us in the life of simplicity led by the good-hearted inhabitants. Their ancestors, for innumerable generations, had lived there before them, and the quaint and sweet crust of primitiveness lay upon the natures of the simple people, and invested them with a peculiar charm. They received us hospitably, and gave us of their best, freely and willingly. The weather was tempestuous and stormy when we arrived, and for a week there was no change in it. Fierce winds swept across the stormy sea, and roared and shrieked along the coast. This prevented the fishermen from following their usual avocation, but they were by no means idle. Sails were mended, boats were caulked and pitched and made sound; then there were the curing and smoking of fish, the repairing of huts, and all the industry of a busy leisure. To such as they inaction was worse than death; work, cheerfully performed, formed the greater part of the pleasure of life. Often and often have I thought of the sweetness of existence as it presented itself to me in that ancient village by the sea.

"A dangerous coast it was; and in the distance a lighthouse. Beyond the lighthouse treacherous silver sands, in which lurked sudden death when Nature was convulsed with passionate throes; at other times fairly safe, bathed in peace and beauty. Within the radius of a few miles many ships had been wrecked, and many a crew engulfed.

"We were young, strong, and in good health, and could afford to laugh at wind and rain. Wrapped in oilskins lent to us by the fishermen, we scaled high rocks, round the base of which the waves dashed furiously, and watched the wondrous effects of the raging tempest. At such times a man's soul is lifted up as it were. The littleness of the human life we live assumes its proper and just proportion, and we become sensible of the divine grandeur of Nature.

"At the end of a week the storm abated, and the sea became calm. When we arose in the morning the sun was shining upon a scene of loveliness and peace.

"'We are going to visit the lighthouse,' said Kristel.

"There was a glad and eager light in his eyes, and he was full of excitement.

"He had made arrangements with a party of boatmen, and after breakfast we went down to the shore, and took our seats in the boat. It was a long pull--six miles the boatmen said. From the village this watch-dog of the sea was only partially visible, the reason being that it stood on the other side of a promontory, which we now skirted. A gray, stately mass of stone, it reared beneficently to the clouds, an angel of warning to the toilers of the sea. Calm as was the day, the waves, broken up and lashed into anger by hidden rocks, were wild and turbulent around the edifice. Nearer and nearer we approached, and saw, but imperfectly as yet, the figure of a woman watching us from the topmost gallery.

"'Avicia,' said one of the rowers to his comrades.

"They nodded, and looked in her direction, and said, 'Yes, Avicia.'

"Avicia! A sufficiently attractive and unusual name. But it was not the name which compelled my breathless attention and observation; it was a simple bit of colour on her head, worn as a covering.

"What colour? Scarlet.

"I closed my eyes and became lost in reflection.

"First, of the description given to me by Silvain of a beautiful girl with raven hair, with parted lips and white teeth gleaming, and with a scarlet covering upon her head, looking out towards us, who were moving towards her upon the water.

"Next, of a coloured sketch of this beautiful girl, upon which Kristel was gazing, as he and I sat together in the mountain hut, with love in his eyes and in his heart. 'Is she not beautiful?' Kristel had asked; and when he heard the footsteps of his brother without, he had hurriedly and jealously hidden the sketch, so that Silvain should not see it. And Silvain had never set eyes upon it, neither at that nor at any other time. Of this I was convinced, although I had no positive knowledge of the fact.

"'Shall I ever see her in my waking life?' were Silvain's words. And when I asked him if he believed she lived, he answered, 'As surely as I live. If I knew where she is to be found I would go and seek her.' Well, without seeking her he was moving towards her; and Kristel and I were with him; and Avicia was

watching and waiting for us.

"I opened my eyes and looked forward, in dumb amazement and apprehension. She had not moved from her point of observation. I turned towards Silvain and Kristel. They were both gazing at her like men entranced. For a moment I felt as if an enchantment had fallen upon us.

"'What name did you say?' I asked of the boatmen.

"A foolish and unnecessary question, for I had heard it distinctly, and it was already deeply rooted in my mind.

"'Avicia,' they replied.

"Silvain drew a long breath.

"'Kristel,' he said to his brother.

"'Yes,' said Kristel, in a dreamy tone.

"'She is no shadow.'

"'No, she lives.'

"'I have dreamt of her exactly as she is, exactly as she stands at the present moment.'

"'You have dreamt of her, Silvain!' exclaimed Kristel, in the same soft dreamy tone. 'Impossible.'

"'It is true. I described her to Louis.'

"'Yes,' I said, 'it is true.'

"Presently, after a pause, Silvain said, 'You knew she was here, Kristel?'

"'Yes,' replied Kristel, 'I knew she was here.'

"No further words were spoken till we reached the lighthouse, entrance to which was obtained by means of stone steps, on each side of which hung ropes and chains to guide and steady us. In a few moments we stood in the presence of

Avicia.

"'I told you I would come, Avicia,' said Kristel. 'This is my brother Silvain.'"

XIII.

"How Kristel and Avicia first met is soon explained. Her aunt, who was the only sister of her father, the keeper of the lighthouse, lay dying, as she believed, in a small hamlet in the Tyrol, and had written to her brother to allow Avicia to come to her. Avicia's father, a morose, avaricious man, had the idea that his sister possessed some treasure in money which, upon her death, should be his, and which would be lost were he or Avicia not with her when she died. His duties would not permit him to leave the lighthouse, therefore he sent Avicia to his sister, with careful instructions how to act. In no other circumstances would he have consented that his daughter should leave him, even for a short time, but the temptation was too strong to be resisted. To Avicia it was a trial to quit the strange place in which she had been born, and in which she had passed her life, but she obeyed her father's commands, and it was in the Tyrol that Kristel first came across her. Fascinated by her beauty he paid her marked attentions, and during the three weeks she remained with her aunt (who, instead of dying, recovered her health almost immediately upon the arrival of her niece) the young people were constantly together. What kind of encouragement Avicia gave Kristel I am not in a position to say. That he loved her with all the strength of his heart and soul is certain, and it could not but be that she was flattered by the adulation of a young man so handsome and well-born as Kristel. Despite the difference in their stations he wooed her honourably, and she, simple and unsophisticated, knew not how to reply. Kristel could not marry without his father's consent, and so he told her; and she, enlightened by this avowal as to the right course for her to pursue, told him that she could not marry without *her* father's consent.

"'Then write to him,' said Kristel, 'and when he replies, and you promise to be my wife, I will write home and avow my love.'

"She wrote as he desired, and at the same time informed her father that her aunt had recovered her health and needed her no longer. It is my opinion that

Avicia must have written in such terms concerning Kristel as to have inspired in the father's heart a doubt whether the young gentleman's wooing was prompted by honourable intentions. There are two other possible interpretations of the course he pursued: one, that he had no desire to part from his daughter; the other, that he believed it likely he might make some sort of bargain, to his own advantage, with a man presumably rich who had become enamoured of Avicia's beauty.

"'Come back instantly,' the keeper of the lighthouse wrote to Avicia, in reply to her letter, 'come back within an hour of your reading these lines. Sleep not another night in your false aunt's house; she only sent for you to fool you. As for this young gallant of whom you write, if he is honest, and rich, and reasonable, let him seek you in your father's home. Beware that he is not also fooling you. I doubt my wisdom in sending one so simple as yourself into a false world. Obey me. Come back without an hour's delay.'

"Frank and unsuspicious, Avicia showed this letter to Kristel.

"'Your father suspects me,' he said. 'I will come and seek you the moment I am free.'

"Being set free by his father's death, he redeemed his promise. Thus it was that they met again.

"I set myself to the study of Avicia's character; I wished to ascertain whether she was a coquette. What I learned filled me with admiration. She was a child of nature; ingenuous and modest, with no desire to make a traffic of her beauty in the way of winning men's hearts. She did not win mine as a lover, but she won my esteem as a friend.

"Needless to say we did not leave the village; indeed, we took up permanent quarters there. Observing Kristel and Silvain when they were with Avicia, I foresaw a storm--a storm all the more terrible and significant because of the peculiar ties of sympathy by which the brothers were bound to each other. They bought a boat, and took into their service two men of the village, to row them to and fro. Not a fine day passed without their visiting the lighthouse, and after a time they seldom went empty-handed. At first they were unsuspicious of each other, but presently I intercepted glances, the meaning of which it was impossible to me--an observer who wished them well and was not likely to

interfere with their heart's dearest wish--to misunderstand. Love had found its place--and jealousy also. As for Avicia she made no conspicuous sign. How was it to end. With fear I asked this question of myself.

"Of the two I distrusted Kristel the more. Of the two I had more dread of him than of Silvain. Not divining to which of the brothers Avicia's heart was truly drawn, believing that her faithful love could be won by either were the other away, I devised a plan--which proved to be a trap into which I myself was to fall.

"I intercept the course of my narrative at this point by mentioning something which should have been mentioned earlier. Baldwin was the name by which Avicia's father was known. I have told you he was an avaricious man. He was something more than this--he was a designing man, and he played one brother against the other. They grew, as I have said, into the habit of taking presents with them when they visited the lighthouse, presents of wine and food and flowers. The wine and food were acceptable to Avicia's father, the flowers he despised.

"'But,' said Kristel to him, 'the flowers are for Avicia.'

"'Exactly,' said Baldwin, 'but were I a young man, and rich, and made presents to a young girl, they should not always be flowers which fade in a day, and are flung into the sea. I should think of things more substantial, things that would last and would always retain their value.'

"Upon this hint they were not slow to act. They sent letters to distant towns; they made secret visits to places not so far away as to necessitate their absence for not longer than twenty-four hours, and armed with ornaments and jewels they made their appearance at the lighthouse, and presented them to Avicia. She wore none of them; her father took possession of them, with the remark, 'It would be unbecoming for a single girl to display these gewgaws upon her neck and arms. By and by, when she is a married woman, then will be the time, if other things are in keeping. Meanwhile, I am a safe custodian--and mark you,' he added, with an emphasis which caused me to regard him with abhorrence (for I was present when he said it), 'my daughter has been taught to obey me. My will is her law.'

"They saw not the meaning of the cunning words; I, cooler and more collected, with no blinding, passionate thrills in my pulses, was gifted with a keener insight. I made one slight, impotent attempt to open their eyes, but the

manner in which I was met warned me not to repeat it if I wished to be of service to them, and to avert a calamity. He was Avicia's father, and, as such, incapable in their judgment of a mean or sordid act.

"Now for the trap I set, into which I was the only one to fall. I had really, with the best wisdom at my command, reviewed and studied the lamentable position of affairs, and it appeared to me a necessity that one of the brothers must suffer. If he suffered without guilt upon his soul, it would be the be-all and the end-all of the torture. His suffering would be his own, and would not bring misery upon others. And in the light of the inevitable, his honourable feelings and the promptings of conscience--to which I believed both Silvain and Kristel to be amenable--would assist him to bear it in silence, however bitter and poignant it might be. I decided that Silvain was the better able, upon moral grounds, to bear the suffering, although, had it devolved upon me to deliberately contribute to the happiness of only one of the brothers, my choice would have fallen upon Silvain. My scheme was to endeavour to take him from this scene of silent, agonising contention of love. Upon his return he would find matters so far advanced that he would be deterred from advancing another step towards Avicia.

"I opened the matter privately with Silvain.

"'I am called away from you,' I said to him, 'and shall be absent for three or four months.'

"'I am sorry to hear it,' said Silvain. 'Is it imperative?'

"'Yes,' I said, 'it is imperative.'

"'I do not ask you upon what errand you are compelled to leave us,' said Silvain, 'because if the matter were not as private as it is urgent, I think you would confide in me voluntarily. Unhappily,' he added, with a sigh, 'we all have secrets which it is incumbent upon us to conceal even from our dearest friends.'

"I understood the allusion, and my heart bled for him.

"'Silvain,' I said, 'I have grown so accustomed to your society, and if you will forgive me the confession, have grown so to love you, that I shall feel inexpressibly lonely and unhappy without you. Why not accompany me?'

"There was a sad surprise in his eyes as he answered,

"'If it were possible, it would afford me great pleasure. But it is not possible.'

"'Why not?'

"'Do not ask me; you would not understand.'

"'Is it really necessary you should stay here?'

"'Vitally necessary. To leave would snap my heart-strings. I should die.'

"'Silvain,' I said, with all my earnestness, 'sometimes in a man's life there comes a crisis----'

"He stopped me with a firmness and decision which were unanswerable.

"'I do not, I must not seek to know your meaning. Surely you can see that I am suffering. All would be dark, but for the light of one star which illumines the world for me. Not another word. You say you love me. If your love is sincere, you will spare me.'

"'It is because my love is sincere,' I urged, 'that I would give much if I could prevail upon you.'

"But he broke from me and would listen no further.

"'Next I tried Kristel, and found him, as I feared and expected, obdurate and violent. In the interval which elapsed between my speaking to Silvain and Kristel, all the village knew that I was about to leave, and the fishermen, and their wives and children, with whom I had become a general favourite, freely expressed their regret at the prospect of losing me.

"'But I am coming back,' I said with an attempt at gaiety.

"They expressed their joy at hearing this. There was no retreat open to me. Had I manufactured an excuse for staying, I felt that I should have been looked upon with suspicion by Kristel and Silvain. In that case, my possible usefulness would be destroyed, and I could never regain the position of confidence I had gained with them. Therefore I bade them farewell, and much distressed and disturbed took my departure.

"I returned at the end of three weeks, the shortest limit I had set upon my absence. I had written to Kristel and Silvain, announcing my return and expected to be greeted by them upon my arrival. To my disappointment I saw nothing of them, and upon inquiring for them, I was informed that they had gone from the village.

"'Gone!' I cried.

"'Yes,' was the answer, 'disappeared.'

"That was all the satisfaction I obtained from the men in the village, my inquiries being at first confined to them. As a rule, they were not given to tittle-tattle, and accounted it a virtue to hold their tongues. Most of the women followed the lead of the men in this respect, but there were a few gossips among them, and I sought out the most garrulous of the class, who was generously discursive and communicative. She was an old woman whose name I have forgotten, and she tardily enlightened me--to my sorrow and dismay. She commenced in a roundabout fashion.

"'You see, sir,' the old soul said, 'there's no telling what there is in man or woman till they are set loose. Tie a young girl up, keep her from mixing with folk, and prevent her from making friends, and frolicking a bit in a harmless way, with girls and boys of her own age, and likely as not mischief will come of it. Not that I believe there's any harm in her.'

"'In her!' I exclaimed. 'In whom?'

"'In Avicia, of course. I don't say it's her fault, but beauty's a snare. You see, sir, she was brought up wrong. 'Twas not her fault but her misfortune that her mother died when she was a little one--too little to remember anything of her who suckled her. Then said we to her father, the keeper of the lighthouse, "You and a babe are not a match. Being a man, you are an ignoramus in the ways of a child, who hasn't yet learnt to prattle. Let her come among us, and we will rear her for you, and make a bright woman of her." For even then, young as she was, we women knew that she was going to grow up beautiful. Men think all babes alike, but we know better. Avicia's father would not have it so. "My child shall not leave my side," said he. "She will be better off without a parcel of women about her." We settled it among ourselves that he was too mean and stingy to do as we wanted, thinking it would cost him something. He's a rare close-fisted man

is Baldwin, and fairly dotes on gold--though, as he declares he will live and die on the lighthouse, it's hard to say what good all the gold in the world could do him. We offered to take the babe for nothing, but even that he wouldn't listen to, being suspicious that we had designs on him. So Avicia was left with him, and he brought her up in his lonely home, in which no child but his own has ever set foot. Give the devil his due--which isn't saying much, for if you don't give it him he'll be quick enough in taking it, and a bit over if he's got the chance--Baldwin didn't let Avicia grow in ignorance; he taught her useless things, such as reading and writing, and perhaps the child didn't miss much, in her own reckoning, by not mixing with us. Anyhow, there she was, a maid as beautiful as can be found, sea-born and sea-bred, fit for a lighthouse and for nothing else. That didn't stand in the way of the young men in the village falling in love with her, but she would have nothing to say to one of them, and as they received no encouragement from her father to woo her, they let her alone. Our men are not of the sort to go puking and sighing over a woman. It's a fair match when they come together, and the men don't always get the best of it. We take care of that. But when you and your gentlemen friends came among us--and you're likely men the three of you--we saw how the cat jumped. There was a fat fish to hook, and Baldwin set about it. Let him alone for setting a line--but it can't be denied that he'd a rare bait at the end of it. "Which one is it?" asked we of one another when we were talking about it. None of us could decide. We had only two to guess one from, for we saw that *you* weren't being fished for, and still we couldn't decide whether it was Master Silvain or Master Kristel. They were both mad in love with her pretty face, and, being brothers, we thought it a pity, for love is like a poison. However, it was for them to settle it, and settled it is, one way or another.'

"'How?' I asked, in a whirl of apprehension.

"'That,' replied the old woman, 'is what we're waiting to find out.'

"'It is true that my friends have left the village, is it not?'

"'There's nothing truer.'

"I saw that she had not imparted to me all she knew, and that she was enjoying herself at my expense by doling it slowly out. My mood was too impatient for crumbs, and I said, if she were not more swiftly communicative, that I would go immediately to the lighthouse, where I could doubtless obtain from Avicia information of the movements of Silvain and Kristel. The old

woman laughed, and said I must seek elsewhere for Avicia.

"'I thought I told you,' she said, 'that Avicia had also disappeared. Be a little patient, and you will know everything. You're lucky, for I'm the only one in the village that can tell you things.'

"I had no choice; I was compelled to be patient, and, related in my own words, this is what I learnt:

"After my departure the wooing of Kristel and Silvain had become more fierce, and they were aware that they were rivals. It may or may not have been that Avicia had given and confessed her love to one of the brothers, but upon this point there was not even the evidence of hearsay, and my perplexity and distress were the greater because of my ignorance. Avicia came more frequently from the lighthouse to the village, and always in the company of both Kristel and Silvain. These visits were made during the day, and in the evening the brothers, having dispensed with the service of the boatmen they had engaged, were in the habit of rowing Avicia home. One night, upon the return of Silvain and Kristel to the village, the old woman from whom I obtained these particulars overheard them conversing. She was unable to fix the identity of each speaker, for the night was dark, and she could not distinguish the voices as coming from either the one or the other. I could well excuse her for this, because, if I had been in her place, and concealed as she was, I myself should have been in doubt of the particular speaker who, for the moment, engaged my attention. This is what she overheard:

"'It is time to put an end to this. I have suffered in silence too long, and I can no longer bear my sufferings. Why do you bar my path to happiness?'

"'Why do you bar mine? I love Avicia.'

"'I also love her.'

"'You have concealed it from me.'

"'Have you not done the same by me?'

"'How, then, could I suspect that you were my rival?'

"'How could I?'

"'You madden me by your retorts. Can you not understand that you are driving me to desperation? She is the light of my life!'

"'And of mine!'

"That was all she heard. They moved away out of sight, and she was afraid to follow.

"Two days before my return to the village, Avicia, Kristel, and Silvain rowed, as usual, from the lighthouse to the shore. They were accompanied on this occasion by Avicia's father, who had engaged an experienced man to take his place on the lighthouse during his absence. It was a breach of duty, but he risked it. The sea was calm and the weather fine, and likely to remain so. The risk, therefore, was not great.

"How they passed the day was not known. They did not mingle with the inhabitants of the village, who, without invitation, were not likely to obtrude upon them, their own concerns being quite sufficient to occupy their attention. What *was* known was, that the father, daughter, and the twin-brothers passed out of the village, and that there appeared to be some kind of awkwardness and constraint upon them, the precise nature of which was not discernible; and that at sunset Avicia's father came back alone, and rowed himself to the lighthouse. From that moment nothing more had been seen of the young people.

"What had become of them? Whither had they gone? It appeared to me that Avicia's father was the only person who could allay my anxiety, and to him I went on the following day. He received me civilly enough, but I learnt little from him.

"'If you come to me,' he said, 'to pry into my daughter's concerns--which are mine--I say they are none of yours. You are little more than a stranger to me, and I have no business with you, and desire none. If you come to ascertain where you can find your friends, you will learn nothing from me. As to one, perhaps it is in my power to tell you, but I do not choose to gratify you. As to the other, perhaps you are as likely to light upon him as I am.'

"During my visit I kept myself on the alert to discover some trace of Avicia, for it might be that the villagers were mistaken in their idea that she had disappeared at the same time as Silvain and Kristel. She might have returned in the middle of the night when all the village was asleep. I saw no signs of her,

however, and when I left the lighthouse I was confident that she was not there.

"I was at a loss what to do. There was absolutely no clue to direct me to my friends, and my anxiety became almost unbearable. I made inquiries in neighbouring villages and towns, and I employed men to search for them--but all was of no avail. At the end of a couple of months I was not a whit the wiser. To remain any longer in the village would have been folly, and it was with pain and reluctance that I bade the simple inhabitants farewell. They expressed a hope that they would see me again, and I promised to pay them another visit before twelve months had passed. It was a promise not lightly given, and it was my intention to perform it. I argued with myself that Avicia was certain to return at some time within the period I have mentioned, and that, directly or indirectly, I should succeed in renewing my acquaintance with Silvain. That she was married to one of the brothers was in my view an established fact, but I found it impossible to decide upon which of them her choice had fallen. Bearing in mind the absorbing love which both had entertained for her, I shuddered to think of the consequences that might ensue from despair and jealousy.

"Before I left the village to resume my travels I went to the lighthouse to see Avicia's father, to acquaint him with my impending departure. He seemed to me restless and uneasy, and threw out vague hints of having been deceived, and of promises broken by those who owed him love and duty. Taking advantage of these hints I pressed him closely, but he surlily refused to give me the least information.

"'It can surely do you no harm,' I urged, 'to tell me to whom your daughter is married.'

"'If I come face to face with the man who says the contrary,' he cried, 'he will not live to repeat the lie.'

"He had misunderstood my question, and thought I intended to cast a doubt upon his daughter's good name. Having assured him that I had no such intention, and pacified him, I repeated my question.

"'Find out for yourself,' he said morosely, 'for the fortieth time, you will learn nothing from me.'

"Why he should have been so persistently and unnecessarily brutal puzzled me. Suddenly a bright idea occurred to me. Baldwin was avaricious and a miser.

He loved gold; it was as precious to him as his life's blood.

"I took my purse from my pocket, and emptied several gold pieces into the palm of my hand. A hissing sound escaped from between his closed teeth, and his eyes were fixed upon the money greedily, and then upon me ferociously.

"I laughed lightly and disdainfully. I made a motion of my head towards the boat which was moored to a staple in the outer wall of the lighthouse. Two fishermen were in the boat, waiting to row me back to the village.

"'If I do not go to them soon,' I said, 'they will come and seek me.'

"'What do you mean by that?' he asked, with a dark frown on his face.

"'You decline to answer my questions,' I replied, 'and I decline to answer yours. But I can do what you would be unwilling to do.'

"'What is that?'

"'I can pay for information. Ten of these gold pieces are yours, if you tell me truly to whom your daughter is married.'

"'Give me the money.'

"I gave him the gold, and he bit the coins singly with his strong teeth. Then he said, 'She is married to Silvain.'

"'Heaven pity him,' I said, preparing to descend, 'for such a father-in-law.'

"'He needs no pity,' retorted Baldwin, 'he has Avicia.'

"As we rowed to land I kept my face towards the lighthouse, and saw, with my mind's eye, the image of the beautiful girl, as I had seen her for the first time, standing on the topmost gallery, with her luxuriant hair hanging loose, and the scarlet covering on her head. In the lives of Kristel and Silvain the lovely vision was the embodiment of a terrible fate. Red lips parted, white teeth gleaming, wistful eyes gazing, a face of bewitching beauty and innocence---- And suddenly the vision grew indistinct in a mass of whirling clouds, which in my fevered fancy became pregnant with angry passions. I dashed my hand across my eyes.

"'Steady, sir,' said the rowers, as their boat grated on the beach.

"Before night fell I was far away."

END OF VOL. I.

RICHARD CLAY AND SONS, LONDON AND BUNGAY.

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