



GWEN WYNN



BY
CAPTAIN
MIRYNE REID

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GWEN WYNN:

A Romance of the Wye.

BY CAPTAIN MAYNE REID

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"I THOUGHT AS MUCH!—NO ACCIDENT!—NO SUICIDE!—MURDERED!"

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THE DAUGHTER OF EVAN MORGAN IS DOOMED. ONE MORE STEP WILL BE HER LAST.

A WRENCH IS APPLIED TO THE ROTTEN BAR OF IRON, SOON SNAPPING.

GWEN WYNN:
A Romance of the Wye.

PROLOGUE.

Hail to thee, Wye—famed river of Siluria! Well deserving fame, worthy of warmest salutation! From thy fountain-head on Plinlimmon's far slope, where thou leapest forth, gay as a girl on her skip-rope, through the rugged rocks of Brecon and Radnor, that like rude men would detain thee, snatching but a kiss for their pains—on, as woman grown, with statelier step, amid the wooded hills of Herefordshire, which treat thee with more courtly consideration—still on, and once more rudely assailed by the bold ramparts of Monmouth—through all thou makest way—in despite all, preserving thy purity! If defiled before espousing the ocean, the fault is not thine, but Sabrina's—sister born of thy birth, she too cradled on Plinlimmon's breast, but since childhood's days separated from thee, and straying through other shrines—perchance leading a less reputable life. No blame to thee, beautiful Vaga—from source to Severn pure as the spring that begets thee—fair to the eye, and full of interest to reflect on. Scarce a reach of thy channel, or curve of thy course, but is redolent of romance, and rich in the lore of history. On thy shores, through the long centuries, has been enacted many a scene of gayest pleasure and sternest strife; many an exciting episode, in which love and hate, avarice and ambition—in short, every human passion has had play. Overjoyed were the Roman Legionaries to behold their silver eagles reflected from thy pellucid wave; though they did not succeed in planting them on thy western shore till after many a tough struggle with the gallant, but ill-starred, Caractacus. Long, too, had the Saxons to battle before they could make good their footing on the Silurian side—as witness the Dyke of Offa. Later, the Normans obtained it only through treachery, by the murder of the princely Llewellyn; and, later still, did the bold Glendower make thy banks the scene of patriotic strife; while, last of all, sawest thou conflict in still nobler cause—as of more glorious remembrance—when the earnest soldiers of the Parliament encountered the so-called Cavaliers, and purged thy shores of the ribald rout, making them pure as thy waters.

But, sweet Wye! not all the scenes thou hast witnessed have been of war. Love, too, has stamped thee with many a tender souvenir, many a tale of warm, wild passion. Was it not upon thy banks that the handsome "Harry of Monmouth," hero of Agincourt, first saw the light; there living, till manhood-grown, when he appeared "armed *cap-à-pie*, with beaver on"? And did not thy limpid waters

bathe the feet of Fair Rosamond, in childhood's days, when she herself was pure? In thee, also, was mirrored the comely form of Owen Tudor, which caught the eye of a queen—the stately Catherine—giving to England a race of kings; and by thy side the beauteous Saxon, Ædgytha, bestowed her heart and hand on a Cymric prince.

Nor are such episodes all of the remote past, but passing now; now, as ever, pathetic—as ever impassioned. For still upon thy banks, Vaga, are men brave, and women fair, as when Adalgisa excited the jealousy of the Druid priestess, or the maid of Clifford Castle captured a king's heart, to become the victim of a queen's vengeance.

Not any fairer than the heroine of my tale; and she was born there, there brought up, and there——

Ah! that is the story to be told.



CHAPTER I.

THE HEROINE.

A tourist descending the Wye by boat from the town of Hereford to the ruined Abbey of Tintern, may observe on its banks a small pagoda-like structure; its roof, with a portion of the supporting columns, o'er-topping a spray of evergreens. It is simply a summer-house, of the kiosk or pavilion pattern, standing in the ornamental grounds of a gentleman's residence. Though placed conspicuously on an elevated point, the boat traveller obtains view of it only from a reach of the river above. When opposite he loses sight of it; a spinny of tall poplars drawing curtain-like between him and the higher bank. These stand on an oblong island, which extends several hundred yards down the stream, formed by an old channel, now forsaken. With all its wanderings the Wye is not suddenly capricious; still, in the lapse of long ages it has here and there changed its course, forming *aits*, or *eyots*, of which this is one.

The tourist will not likely take the abandoned channel. He is bound and booked for Tintern—possibly Chepstow—and will not be delayed by lesser "lions." Besides, his hired boatmen would not deviate from their terms of charter, without adding an extra to their fare.

Were he free, and disposed for exploration, entering this unused water-way he would find it tortuous, with scarce any current, save in times of flood; on one side the eyot, a low marshy flat, thickly overgrown with trees; on the other a continuous cliff, rising forty feet sheer, its *façade* grim and grey, with flakes of reddish hue, where the frost has detached pieces from the rock—the old red sandstone of Herefordshire. Near its entrance he would catch a glimpse of the kiosk on its crest; and, proceeding onward, will observe the tops of laurels and other exotic evergreens, mingling their glabrous foliage with that of the indigenous holly, ivy, and ferns; these last trailing over the cliff's brow, and wreathing it with fillets of verdure, as if to conceal its frowning corrugations.

About midway down the old river's bed he will arrive opposite a little embayment in the high bank, partly natural, but in part quarried out of the cliff—as evinced by a flight of steps, leading up at back, chiselled out of the rock *in situ*.

The cove thus contrived is just large enough to give room to a row-boat, and if not out upon the river, one will be in it, riding upon its painter; this attached to a ring in the red sandstone. It is a light, two-oared affair—a pleasure-boat, ornamentally painted, with cushioned thwarts, and tiller ropes of coloured cord athwart its stern, which the tourist will have turned towards him, in gold lettering, "THE GWENDOLINE."

Charmed by this idyllic picture, he may forsake his own craft, and ascend to the top of the stair. If so, he will have before his eyes a lawn of park-like expanse, mottled with clumps of coppice, here and there a grand old tree—oak, elm, or chestnut—standing solitary; at the upper end a shrubbery of glistening evergreens, with gravelled walks, fronting a handsome house; or, in the parlance of the estate agent, a noble mansion. That is Llangorren Court, and there dwells the owner of the pleasure-boat, as also prospective owner of the house, with some two thousand acres of land lying adjacent.

The boat bears her baptismal name, the surname being Wynn, while people, in a familiar way, speak of her as "Gwen Wynn"; this on account of her being a lady of proclivities and habits that make her somewhat of a celebrity in the neighbourhood. She not only goes boating, but hunts, drives a pair of spirited horses, presides over the church choir, plays its organ, looks after the poor of the parish—nearly all of it her own, or soon to be—and has a bright smile, with a pleasant word, for everybody.

If she be outside, upon the lawn, the tourist, supposing him a gentleman, will withdraw; for across the grounds of Llangorren Court there is no "right of way," and the presence of a stranger upon them would be deemed an intrusion. Nevertheless, he would go back down the boat-stair reluctantly, and with a sigh of regret, that good manners do not permit his making the acquaintance of Gwen Wynn without further loss of time, or any ceremony of introduction.

But my readers are not thus debarred; and to them I introduce her, as she saunters over this same lawn, on a lovely April morn.

She is not alone; another lady, by name Eleanor Lees, being with her. They are nearly of the same age—both turned twenty—but in all other respects unlike, even to contrast, though there is kinship between them. Gwendoline Wynn is tall of form, fully developed; face of radiant brightness, with blue-grey eyes, and hair of that chrome yellow almost peculiar to the Cymri—said to have made such havoc with the hearts of the Roman soldiers, causing these to deplore the

day when recalled home to protect their seven-hilled city from Goths and Visigoths.

In personal appearance Eleanor Lees is the reverse of all this; being of dark complexion, brown-haired, black-eyed, with a figure slender and *petite*. Witha she is pretty; but it is only prettiness—a word inapplicable to her kinswoman, who is pronouncedly beautiful.

Equally unlike are they in mental characteristics; the first-named being free of speech, courageous, just a trifle fast, and possibly a little imperious. The other of a reserved, timid disposition, and habitually of subdued mien, as befits her station; for in this there is also disparity between them—again a contrast. Both are orphans; but it is an orphanage under widely different circumstances and conditions: the one heiress to an estate worth some ten thousand pounds per annum, the other inheriting nought save an old family name—indeed, left without other means of livelihood than what she may derive from a superior education she has received.

Notwithstanding their inequality of fortune, and the very distant relationship—for they are not even near as cousins—the rich girl behaves towards the poor one as though they were sisters. No one seeing them stroll arm-in-arm through the shrubbery, and hearing them hold converse in familiar, affectionate tones, would suspect the little dark damsel to be the paid "companion" of the lady by her side. Yet in such capacity is she residing at Llangorren Court.

It is just after the hour of breakfast, and they have come forth in morning robes of light muslin—dresses suitable to the day and the season. Two handsome ponies are upon the lawn, its herbage dividing their attention with the horns of a pet stag, which now and then threaten to assail them.

All three, soon as perceiving the ladies, trot towards them; the ponies stretching out their necks to be patted, the cloven-hoofed creature equally courting caresses. They look especially to Miss Wynn, who is more their mistress.

On this particular morning she does not seem in the humour for dallying with them; nor has she brought out their usual allowance of lump sugar; but, after a touch with her delicate fingers, and a kindly exclamation, passes on, leaving them behind, to all appearance disappointed.

"Where are you going, Gwen?" asks the companion, seeing her step out straight, and apparently with thoughts preoccupied. Their arms are now disunited, the

little incident with the animals having separated them.

"To the summer-house," is the response. "I wish to have a look at the river. It should show fine this bright morning."

And so it does; as both perceive after entering the pavilion, which commands a view of the valley, with a reach of the river above—the latter, under the sun, glistening like freshly polished silver.

Gwen views it through a glass—a binocular she has brought out with her; this of itself proclaiming some purpose aforethought, but not confided to the companion. It is only after she has been long holding it steadily to her eye, that the latter fancies there must be some object within its field of view more interesting than the Wye's water, or the greenery on its banks.

"What is it?" she naïvely asks. "You see something?"

"Only a boat," answers Gwen, bringing down the glass with a guilty look, as if conscious of being caught. "Some tourist, I suppose, making down to Tintern Abbey—like as not a London cockney."

The young lady is telling a "white lie." She knows the occupant of that boat is nothing of the kind. From London he may be—she cannot tell—but certainly no sprig of cockneydom—unlike it as Hyperion to the Satyr; at least so she thinks. But she does not give her thought to the companion; instead, concealing it, she adds,—

"How fond those town people are of touring it upon our Wye!"

"Can you wonder at that?" asks Ellen. "Its scenery is so grand—I should say, incomparable; nothing equal to it in England."

"I don't wonder," says Miss Wynn, replying to the question. "I'm only a little bit vexed seeing them there. It's like the desecration of some sacred stream, leaving scraps of newspapers in which they wrap their sandwiches, with other picnicing débris on its banks! To say nought of one's having to encounter the rude fellows that in these degenerate days go a-rowing—shopboys from the towns, farm labourers, colliers, hauliers, all sorts. I've half a mind to set fire to the *Gwendoline*, burn her up, and never again lay hand on an oar."

Ellen Lees laughs incredulously as she makes rejoinder.

"It would be a pity," she says, in serio-comic tone. "Besides, the poor people are entitled to a little recreation. They don't have too much of it."

"Ah, true," rejoins Gwen, who, despite her grandeeism, is neither Tory nor aristocrat. "Well, I've not yet decided on that little bit of incendiarism, and shan't burn the *Gwendoline*—at all events not till we've had another row out of her."

Not for a hundred pounds would she set fire to that boat, and never in her life was she less thinking of such a thing. For just then she has other views regarding the pretty pleasure craft, and intends taking seat on its thwarts within less than twenty minutes' time.

"By the way," she says, as if the thought had suddenly occurred to her, "we may as well have that row now—whether it's to be the last or not."

Cunning creature! She has had it in her mind all the morning; first from her bed-chamber window, then from that of the breakfast-room, looking up the river's reach, with the binocular at her eye too, to note if a certain boat, with a salmon-rod bending over it, passes down. For one of its occupants is an angler.

"The day's superb," she goes on; "sun's not too hot—gentle breeze—just the weather for a row. And the river looks so inviting—seems calling us to come! What say you, Nell?"

"Oh! I've no objections."

"Let us in, then, and make ready. Be quick about it! Remember it's April, and there may be showers. We mustn't miss a moment of that sweet sunshine."

At this the two forsake the summer-house; and, lightly recrossing the lawn, disappear within the dwelling.



While the angler's boat is still opposite the grounds, going on, eyes are observing it from an upper window of the house; again those of Miss Wynn herself, inside her dressing-room, getting ready for the river.

She had only short glimpses of it, over the tops of the trees on the eyot, and now and then through breaks in their thinner spray. Enough, however, to assure her that it contains two men, neither of them cockneys. One at the oars she takes to

be a professional waterman. But he seated in the stern is altogether unknown to her, save by sight—that obtained when twice meeting him out on the river. She knows not whence he comes, or where he is residing; but supposes him a stranger to the neighbourhood, stopping at some hotel. If at the house of any of the neighbouring gentry, she would certainly have heard of it. She is not even acquainted with his name, though longing to learn it. But she is shy to inquire, lest that might betray her interest in him. For such she feels, has felt, ever since setting eyes on his strangely handsome face.

As the boat again disappears behind the thick foliage she sets, in haste, to affect the proposed change of dress, saying, in soliloquy—for she is now alone,—

"I wonder who, and what he can be? A gentleman, of course. But, then, there are gentlemen and gentlemen; single ones and——"

She has the word "married" on her tongue, but refrains speaking it. Instead, she gives utterance to a sigh, followed by the reflection—

"Ah, me! That would be a pity—a dis——"

Again she checks herself, the thought being enough unpleasant without the words.

Standing before the mirror, and sticking long pins into her hair, to keep its rebellious plaits in their place, she continues soliloquising—

"If one only had a word with that young waterman who rows him! And were it not that my own boatman is such a chatterer, I'd put him up to getting that word. But no! It would never do. He'd tell aunt about it; and then Madame la Chatelaine would be talking all sorts of serious things to me—the which I mightn't relish. Well, in six months more the old lady's trusteeship of this young lady is to terminate—at least legally. Then I'll be my own mistress; and then 'twill be time enough to consider whether I ought to have—a master. Ha, ha, ha!"

So laughing, as she surveys her superb figure in a cheval glass, she completes the adjustment of her dress by setting a hat upon her head, and tightening the elastic, to secure against its being blown off while in the boat. In fine, with a parting glance at the mirror, which shows a satisfied expression upon her features, she trips lightly out of the room, and on down the stairway.

CHAPTER II.

THE HERO.

Than Vivian Ryecroft handsomer man never carried sling-jacket over his shoulder, or sabretasche on his hip. For he is in the Hussars—a captain.

He is not on duty now, nor anywhere near the scene of it. His regiment is at Aldershot, himself rusticating in Herefordshire—whither he has come to spend a few weeks' leave of absence.

Nor is he, at the time of our meeting him, in the saddle, which he sits so gracefully; but in a row-boat on the river Wye—the same just sighted by Gwen Wynn through the double lens of her lorgnette. No more is he wearing the braided uniform and "busby"; but, instead, attired in a suit of light Cheviots, piscator-cut, with a helmet-shaped cap of quilted cotton on his head, its rounded rim of spotless white in striking, but becoming, contrast with his bronzed complexion and dark military moustache.

For Captain Ryecroft is no mere stripling nor beardless youth, but a man turned thirty, browned by exposure to Indian suns, experienced in Indian campaigns, from those of Scinde and the Punjaub to that most memorable of all—the Mutiny.

Still is he personally as attractive as he ever was—to women, possibly more; among these causing a flutter, with *rapprochement* towards him almost instinctive, when and wherever they may meet him. In the present many a bright English lady sighs for him, as in the past many a dark damsel of Hindostan; and without his heaving sigh, or even giving them a thought in return. Not that he is of cold nature, or in any sense austere; instead, warm-hearted, of cheerful disposition, and rather partial to female society. But he is not, and never has been, either man-flirt or frivolous trifler; else he would not be fly-fishing on the Wye—for that is what he is doing there—instead of in London, taking part in the festivities of the "season," by day dawdling in Rotten Row, by night exhibiting himself in opera-box or ball-room. In short, Vivian Ryecroft is one of those rare individuals, to a high degree endowed, physically as mentally, without being aware of it, or appearing so; while to all others it is very perceptible.

He has been about a fortnight in the neighbourhood, stopping at the chief hotel of a riverine town much affected by fly-fishermen and tourists. Still he has made no acquaintance with the resident gentry. He might, if wishing it; which he does not, his purpose upon the Wye not being to seek society, but salmon, or rather the sport of taking it. An ardent disciple of the ancient Izaak, he cares for nought else—at least, in the district where he is for the present sojourning.

Such is his mental condition up to a certain morning; when a change comes over it, sudden as the spring of a salmon at the gaudiest or most tempting of his flies—this brought about by a face, of which he has caught sight by merest accident, and while following his favourite occupation. Thus it has chanced:—

Below the town where he is staying, some four or five miles by the course of the stream, he has discovered one of those places called "catches," where the king of river fish delights to leap at flies, whether natural or artificial—a sport it has oft reason to rue. Several times so at the end of Captain Ryecroft's line and rod; he having there twice hooked a twenty-pounder, and once a still larger specimen, which turned the scale at thirty. In consequence that portion of the stream has become his choicest angling ground, and at least three days in the week he repairs to it. The row is not much going down, but a good deal returning; five miles up stream, most of it strong adverse current. That, however, is less his affair than his oarsman's—a young waterman by name Wingate, whose boat and services the Hussar officer has chartered by the week—indeed, engaged them for so long as he may remain upon the Wye.

On the morning in question, dropping down the river to his accustomed whipping-place, but at a somewhat later hour than usual, he meets another boat coming up—a pleasure craft, as shown by its style of outside ornament and inside furniture. Of neither does the salmon fisher take much note; his eyes all occupied with those upon the thwarts. There are three of them, two being ladies seated in the stern sheets, the third an oarsman on a thwart well forward, to make better balance. And to the latter the Hussar officer gives but a glance—just to observe that he is a serving-man, wearing some of its insignia in the shape of a cockaded hat, and striped sable-waistcoat. And not much more than a glance at one of the former; but a gaze, concentrated and long as good manners will permit, at the other, who is steering; when she passes beyond sight, her face remaining in his memory, vivid as if still before his eyes.

All this at a first encounter; repeated in a second, which occurs on the day succeeding, under similar circumstances, and almost in the self-same spot; then

the face, if possible, seeming fairer, and the impression made by it on Vivian Ryecroft's mind sinking deeper—indeed, promising to be permanent. It is a radiant face, set in a luxuriance of bright amber hair—for it is that of Gwendoline Wynn.

On the second occasion he has a better view of her, the boats passing nearer to one another; still, not so near as he could wish, good manners again interfering. For all, he feels well satisfied—especially with the thought, that his own gaze earnestly given, though under such restraint, has been with earnestness returned. Would that his secret admiration of its owner were in like manner reciprocated!

Such is his reflective wish as the boats widen the distance between; one labouring slowly up, the other gliding swiftly down.

His boatman cannot tell who the lady is, nor where she lives. On the second day he is not asked—the question having been put to him on that preceding. All the added knowledge now obtained is the name of the craft that carries her; which, after passing, the waterman, with face turned towards its stern, makes out to be the *Gwendoline*—just as on his own boat—the *Mary*,—though not in such grand golden letters.

It may assist Captain Ryecroft in his inquiries, already contemplated, and he makes note of it.

Another night passes; another sun shines over the Wye; and he again drops down stream to his usual place of sport—this day only to draw blank, neither catching salmon, nor seeing hair of amber hue; his reflecting on which is, perchance, a cause of the fish not taking to his flies, cast carelessly.

He is not discouraged; but goes again on the day succeeding—that same when his boat is viewed through the binocular. He has already formed a half suspicion that the home of the interesting water nymph is not far from that pagoda-like structure he has frequently noticed on the right bank of the river. For, just below the outlying eyot is where he has met the pleasure-boat, and the old oarsman looked anything but equal to a long pull up stream. Still, between that and the town are several other gentlemen's residences on the river side, with some standing inland. It may be any of them.

But it is not, as Captain Ryecroft now feels sure, at sight of some floating drapery in the pavilion, with two female heads showing over its baluster rail; one of them with tresses glistening in the sunlight, bright as sunbeams themselves.

He views it through a telescope—for he, too, has come out provided for distant observation—this confirming his conjectures just in the way he would wish. Now there will be no difficulty in learning who the lady is—for of one only does he care to make inquiry.

He would order Wingate to hold way, but does not relish the idea of letting the waterman into his secret; and so, remaining silent, he is soon carried beyond sight of the summer-house, and along the outer edge of the islet, with its curtain of tall trees coming invidiously between.

Continuing on to his angling ground, he gives way to reflections—at first of a pleasant nature. Satisfactory to think that she, the subject of them, at least lives in a handsome house; for a glimpse got of its upper storey tells it to be this. That she is in social rank a lady, he has hitherto had no doubt. The pretty pleasure craft and its appendages, with the venerable domestic acting as oarsman, are all proofs of something more than mere respectability—rather evidences of style.

Marring these agreeable considerations is the thought he may not to-day meet the pleasure-boat. It is the hour that, from past experience, he might expect it to be out—for he has so timed his own piscatorial excursion. But, seeing the ladies in the summer-house, he doubts getting nearer sight of them—at least for another twenty-four hours. In all likelihood they have been already on the river, and returned home again. Why did he not start earlier?

While thus fretting himself, he catches sight of another boat—of a sort very different from the *Gwendoline*—a heavy barge-like affair, with four men in it; hulking fellows, to whom rowing is evidently a new experience. Notwithstanding this, they do not seem at all frightened at finding themselves upon the water. Instead, they are behaving in a way that shows them either very courageous, or very regardless of a danger—which, possibly, they are not aware of. At short intervals one or other is seen starting to his feet, and rushing fore or aft—as if on an empty coal-waggon, instead of in a boat—and in such fashion, that were the craft at all crank it would certainly be upset!

On drawing nearer them Captain Ryecroft and his oarsman get the explanation of their seemingly eccentric behaviour—its cause made clear by a black bottle, which one of them is holding in his hand, each of the others brandishing tumbler, or teacup. They are drinking; and that they have been so occupied for some time is evident by their loud shouts and grotesque gesturing.

"They look an ugly lot!" observes the young waterman, viewing them over his

shoulder; for, seated at the oars, his back is towards them. "Coal fellows, from the Forest o' Dean, I take it."

Ryecroft, with a cigar between his teeth, dreamily thinking of a boat with people in it so dissimilar, simply signifies assent with a nod.

But soon he is roused from his reverie, at hearing an exclamation louder than common, followed by words whose import concerns himself and his companion. These are:—

"Dang it, lads! le's goo in for a bit o' a lark! Yonner be a boat coomin' down wi' two chaps in 't: some o' them spickspan city gents! S'pose we gie 'em a capsize?"

"Le's do it! Le's duck 'em!" shouted the others assentingly; he with the bottle dropping it into the boat's bottom, and laying hold of an oar instead.

All act likewise, for it is a four-oared craft that carries them; and in a few seconds' time they are rowing it straight for that of the angler's.

With astonishment, and fast gathering indignation, the Hussar officer sees the heavy barge coming bow on for his light fishing skiff, and is thoroughly sensible of the danger; the waterman becoming aware of it at the same instant of time.

"They mean mischief," mutters Wingate; "what'd we best do, Captain? If you like I can keep clear, and shoot the *Mary* past 'em—easy enough."

"Do so," returns the salmon fisher, with the cigar still between his teeth—but now held bitterly tight, almost to biting off the stump. "You can keep on!" he adds, speaking calmly, and with an effort to keep down his temper; "that will be the best way, as things stand now. They look like they'd come up from below; and, if they show any ill manners at meeting, we can call them to account on return. Don't concern yourself about your course. I'll see to the steering. There! hard on the starboard oar!"

This last, as the two boats have arrived within less than three lengths of one another. At the same time Ryecroft, drawing tight the port tiller-cord, changes course suddenly, leaving just sufficient sea-way for his oarsman to shave past, and avoid the threatened collision.

Which is done the instant after—to the discomfiture of the would-be capsizers. As the skiff glides lightly beyond their reach, dancing over the river swell, as if in triumph and to mock them, they drop their oars, and send after it a chorus of

yells, mingled with blasphemous imprecations.

In a lull between, the Hussar officer at length takes the cigar from his lips, and calls back to them—

"You ruffians! You shall rue it! Shout on—till you're hoarse. There's a reckoning for you, perhaps sooner than you expect."

"Yes, ye d—d scoun'rels!" adds the young waterman, himself so enraged as almost to foam at the mouth. "Ye'll have to pay dear for sich a dastartly attemp' to waylay Jack Wingate's boat. That will ye."

"Bah!" jeeringly retorts one of the roughs. "To blazes wi' you, an' yer boat!"

"Ay, to the blazes wi' ye!" echo the others in drunken chorus; and, while their voices are still reverberating along the adjacent cliffs, the fishing skiff drifts round a bend of the river, bearing its owner and his fare out of their sight, as beyond earshot of their profane speech.



CHAPTER III.

A CHARON CORRUPTED.

The lawn of Llangorren Court, for a time abandoned to the dumb quadrupeds, that had returned to their tranquil pasturing, is again enlivened by the presence of the two young ladies; but so transformed, that they are scarce recognisable as the same late seen upon it. Of course, it is their dresses that have caused the change; Miss Wynn now wearing a pea jacket of navy blue, with anchor buttons, and a straw hat set coquettishly on her head, its ribbons of azure hue trailing over, and prettily contrasting with the plaits of her chrome-yellow hair, gathered in a grand coil behind. But for the flowing skirt below, she might be mistaken for a young mid, whose cheeks as yet show only the down—one who would "find sweethearts in every port."

Miss Lees is less nautically attired; having but slipped over her morning dress a paletot of the ordinary kind, and on her head a plumed hat of the Neopolitan pattern. For all, a costume becoming; especially the brigand-like head-gear which sets off her finely-chiselled features and skin, dark as any daughter of the South.

They are about starting towards the boat-dock, when a difficulty presents itself—not to Gwen, but the companion.

"We have forgotten Joseph!" she exclaims.

Joseph is an ancient retainer of the Wynn family, who, in its domestic affairs, plays parts of many kinds—among them the *métier* of boatman. It is his duty to look after the *Gwendoline*, see that she is snug in her dock, with oars and steering apparatus in order; go out with her when his young mistress takes a row on the river, or ferry any one of the family who has occasion to cross it—the last a need by no means rare, since for miles above and below there is nothing in the shape of a bridge.

"No, we haven't," rejoins Joseph's mistress, answering the exclamation of the companion. "I remembered him well enough—too well."

"Why too well?" asks the other, looking a little puzzled.

"Because we don't want him."

"But surely, Gwen, you wouldn't think of our going alone."

"Surely I would, and do. Why not?"

"We've never done so before."

"Is that any reason we shouldn't now?"

"But Miss Linton will be displeased, if not very angry. Besides, as you know, there may be danger on the river."

For a short while Gwen is silent, as if pondering on what the other has said. Not on the suggested danger. She is far from being daunted by that. But Miss Linton is her aunt—as already hinted, her legal guardian till of age—head of the house, and still holding authority, though exercising it in the mildest manner. And just on this account it would not be right to outrage it, nor is Miss Wynn the one to do so. Instead, she prefers a little subterfuge, which is in her mind as she makes rejoinder—

"I suppose we must take him along; though it's very vexatious, and for various reasons."

"What are they? May I know them?"

"You're welcome. For one, I can pull a boat just as well as he, if not better. And for another, we can't have a word of conversation without his hearing it—which isn't at all nice, besides being inconvenient. As I've reason to know, the old curmudgeon is an incorrigible gossip, and tattles all over the parish; I only wish we'd someone else. What a pity I haven't a brother to go with us! *But not to-day.*"

The reserving clause, despite its earnestness, is not spoken aloud. In the aquatic excursion intended, she wants no companion of the male kind—above all, no brother. Nor will she take Joseph, though she signifies her consent to it, by desiring the companion to summon him.

As the latter starts off for the stable-yard, where the ferryman is usually to be found, Gwen says, in soliloquy—

"I'll take old Joe as far as the boat stairs, but not a yard beyond. I know what will stay him there—steady as a pointer with a partridge six feet from its nose. By the way, have I got my purse with me?"

She plunges her hand into one of her pea-jacket pockets; and, there feeling the thing sought for, is satisfied.

By this Miss Lees has got back, bringing with her the versatile Joseph—a tough old servitor of the respectable family type, who has seen some sixty summers, more or less.

After a short colloquy, with some questions as to the condition of the pleasure-boat, its oars, and steering gear, the three proceed in the direction of the dock.

Arrived at the bottom of the boat stairs, Joseph's mistress, turning to him, says—

"Joe, old boy, Miss Lees and I are going for a row; but, as the day's fine, and the water smooth as glass, there's no need for our having you along with us. So you can stay here till we return."

The venerable retainer is taken aback by the proposal. He has never listened to the like before; for never before has the pleasure-boat gone to river without his being aboard. True, it is no business of his; still, as an ancient upholder of the family, with its honour and safety, he cannot assent to this strange innovation without entering protest. He does so, asking:

"But, Miss Gwen, what will your aunt say to it? She mayent like you young ladies to go rowin' by yourselves? Besides, miss, ye know there be some not werry nice people as moat meet ye on the river. 'Deed some v' the roughest and worst o' blaggarts."

"Nonsense, Joseph! The Wye isn't the Niger, where we might expect the fate of Mungo Park. Why, man, we'll be as safe on it as upon our own carriage drive, or the little fishpond. As for aunt, she won't say anything, because she won't know. Shan't, can't, unless you peach on us. The which, my amiable Joseph, you'll not do—I'm sure you will not."

"How'm I to help it, Miss Gwen? When you've goed off, some o' the house sarvints 'll see me here, an', hows'ever I keep my tongue in check——"

"Check it now!" abruptly breaks in the heiress, "and stop palavering, Joe. The house servants won't see you—not one of them. When we're off on the river, you'll be lying at anchor in those laurel bushes above. And to keep you to your anchorage, here's some shining metal."

Saying which, she slips several shillings into his hand, adding, as she notes the

effect—

"Do you think it sufficiently heavy? If not—but never mind now. In our absence you can amuse yourself weighing and counting the coins. I fancy they'll do."

She is sure of it, knowing the man's weakness to be money, as it now proves.

Her argument is too powerful for his resistance, and he does not resist. Despite his solicitude for the welfare of the Wynn family, with his habitual regard of duty, the ancient servitor, refraining from further protest, proceeds to undo the knot of the *Gwendoline's* painter.

Stepping into the boat, the other Gwendoline takes the oars, Miss Lees seating herself to steer.

"All right! Now, Joe, give us a push off."

Joseph, having let all loose, does as directed, which sends the light craft clear out of its dock. Then, standing on the bottom step, with an adroit twirl of the thumb, he spreads the silver pieces over his palm—so that he may see how many—and, after counting and contemplating with pleased expression, slips them into his pocket, muttering to himself—

"I dar say it'll be all right. Miss Gwen's a oner to take care o' herself; an' the old lady neen't a know anythin' about it."

To make his last words good, he mounts briskly back up the boat stairs, and ensconces himself in the heart of a thick-leaved laurestinus—to the great discomfort of a pair of missel-thrushes, which have there made nest, and commenced incubation.



CHAPTER IV.

ON THE RIVER.

The fair rower, vigorously bending to the oars, soon brings through the bye-way, and out into the main channel of the river.

Once in mid-stream she suspends her stroke, permitting the boat to drift down with the current; which, for a mile below Llangorren, flows gently through meadow land but a few feet above its own level, and flush with it in times of flood.

On this particular day there is none such—no rain having fallen for a week—and the Wye's water is pure and clear. Smooth, too, as the surface of a mirror; only where, now and then, a light zephyr, playing upon it, stirs up the tiniest of ripples; a swallow dips its scimitar wings; or a salmon in bolder dash causes a purl, with circling eddies, whose wavelets extend wider and wider as they subside. So, with the trace of their boat's keel; the furrow made by it instantly closing up, and the current resuming its tranquillity; while their reflected forms—too bright to be spoken of as shadows—now fall on one side, now on the other, as the capricious curving of the river makes necessary a change of course.

Never went boat down the Wye carrying freight more fair. Both girls are beautiful, though of opposite types, and in a different degree; while with one—Gwendolyn Wynn—no water Nymph, or Naiad, could compare; her warm beauty in its real embodiment far excelling any conception of fancy, or flight of the most romantic imagination.

She is not thinking of herself now; nor, indeed, does she much at any time—least of all in this wise. She is anything but vain; instead, like Vivian Rycroft, rather underrates herself. And possibly more than ever this morning; for it is with him her thoughts are occupied—surmising whether his may be with her, but not in the most sanguine hope. Such a man must have looked on many a form fair as hers, won smiles of many a woman beautiful as she. How can she expect him to have resisted, or that his heart is still whole?

While thus conjecturing, she sits half turned on the thwart, with oars out of water, her eyes directed down the river, as though in search of something there.

And they are; that something a white helmet hat.

She sees it not; and as the last thought has caused her some pain, she lets down the oars with a plunge, and recommences pulling; now, and as in spite, at each dip of the blades breaking her own bright image!

During all this while Ellen Lees is otherwise occupied; her attention partly taken up with the steering, but as much given to the shores on each side—to the green pasture-land, of which, at intervals, she has a view, with the white-faced "Herefords" straying over it, or standing grouped in the shade of some spreading trees, forming pastoral pictures worthy the pencil of a Morland or Cuyp. In clumps, or apart, tower up old poplars, through whose leaves, yet but half unfolded, can be seen the rounded burrs of the mistletoe, looking like nests of rooks. Here and there one overhangs the river's bank, shadowing still deep pools, where the ravenous pike lies in ambush for "salmon pink" and such small fry; while on a bare branch above may be observed another of their persecutors, the kingfisher, its brilliant azure plumage in strong contrast with everything on the earth around, and like a bit of sky fallen from above. At intervals it is seen darting from side to side, or in longer flight following the bend of the stream, and causing scamper among the minnows—itsself startled and scared by the intrusion of the boat upon its normally peaceful domain.

Miss Lees, who is somewhat of a naturalist, and has been out with the District Field Club on more than one "ladies' day," makes note of all these things. As the *Gwendoline* glides on, she observes beds of the water ranunculus, whose snow-white corollas, bending to the current, are oft rudely dragged beneath; while on the banks above, their cousins of golden sheen, mingling with the petals of yellow and purple loose-strife—for both grow here—with anemones, and pale, lemon-coloured daffodils—are but kissed, and gently fanned, by the balmy breath of spring.

Easily guiding the craft down the slow-flowing stream, she has a fine opportunity of observing Nature in its unrestrained action, and takes advantage of it. She looks with delighted eye at the freshly-opened flowers, and listens with charmed ear to the warbling of the birds—a chorus, on the Wye, sweet and varied as anywhere on earth. From many a deep-lying dell in the adjacent hills she can hear the song of the thrush, as if endeavouring to outdo, and cause one to forget, the matchless strain of its nocturnal rival, the nightingale; or making music for its own mate, now on the nest, and occupied with the cares of incubation. She hears, too, the bold whistling carol of the blackbird, the trill of

the lark soaring aloft, the soft sonorous note of the cuckoo, blending with the harsh scream of the jay, and the laughing cackle of the green woodpecker—the last loud beyond all proportion to the size of the bird, and bearing close resemblance to the cry of an eagle. Strange coincidence besides, in the woodpecker being commonly called "eekol"—a name, on the Wye, pronounced with striking similarity to that of the royal bird!

Pondering upon this very theme, Ellen has taken no note of how her companion is employing herself. Nor is Miss Wynn thinking of either flowers, or birds. Only when a large one of the latter, a kite, shooting out from the summit of a wooded hill, stays awhile soaring overhead, does she give thought to what so interests the other.

"A pretty sight!" observes Ellen, as they sit looking up at the sharp, slender wings, and long bifurcated tail, cut clear as a cameo against the cloudless sky. "Isn't it a beautiful creature?"

"Beautiful, but bad," rejoins Gwen, "like many other animated things—too like, and too many of them. I suppose it's on the look-out for some innocent victim, and will soon be swooping down at it. Ah, me! it's a wicked world, Nell, with all its sweetness! One creature preying upon another, the strong seeking to devour the weak—these ever needing protection! Is it any wonder we poor women, weakest of all, should wish to——"

She stays her interrogatory, and sits in silence, abstractedly toying with the handles of the oars, which she is balancing above water.

"Wish to do what?" asked the other.

"Get married!" answers the heiress of Llangorren, elevating her arms, and letting the blades fall with a plash, as if to drown a speech so bold; withal, watching its effect upon her companion, as she repeats the question in a changed form. "Is it strange, Ellen?"

"I suppose not," Ellen timidly replies; blushing too, for she knows how nearly the subject concerns herself, and half believes the interrogatory aimed at her. "Not at all strange," she adds, more affirmatively. "Indeed very natural, I should say—that is, for women who *are* poor and weak, and really need a protector. But you, Gwen, who are neither one nor the other, but instead rich and strong, have no such need."

"I'm not so sure of that. With all my riches and strength—for I am a strong creature; as you see, can row this boat almost as ably as a man"—she gives a vigorous pull or two, as proof, then continuing, "Yes, and I think I've got great courage too. Yet, would you believe it, Nelly, notwithstanding all, I sometimes have a strange fear upon me?"

"Fear of what?"

"I can't tell. That's the strangest part of it; for I know of no actual danger. Some sort of vague apprehension that now and then oppresses me—lies on my heart, making it heavy as lead—sad and dark as the shadow of that wicked bird upon the water. Ugh!" she exclaims, taking her eyes off it, as if the sight, suggestive of evil, had brought on one of the fear spells she is speaking of.

"If it were a magpie," observes Ellen laughingly, "you might view it with suspicion. Most people do—even some who deny being superstitious. But a kite—I never heard of that being ominous of evil. No more its shadow; which as you see it there is but a small speck compared with the wide bright surface around. If your future sorrows be only in like proportion to your joys, they won't signify much. See! Both the bird and its shadow are passing away—as will your troubles, if you ever have any."

"Passing—perhaps, soon to return. Ha! look there. As I've said!"

This, as the kite swoops down upon a wood-quest, and strikes at it with outstretched talons. Missing it, nevertheless; for the strong-winged pigeon, forewarned by the other's shadow, has made a quick double in its flight, and so shunned the deadly clutch. Still, it is not yet safe; its tree covert is far off on the wooded slope, and the tyrant continues the chase. But the hawk has its enemy too, in a gamekeeper with his gun. Suddenly it is seen to suspend the stroke of its wings, and go whirling downward; while a shot rings out on the air, and the cushat, unharmed, flies on for the hill.

"Good!" exclaims Gwen, resting the oars across her knees, and clapping her hands in an ecstasy of delight. "The innocent has escaped!"

"And for that *you* ought to be assured, as well as gratified," puts in the companion, "taking it as a symbol of yourself, and those imaginary dangers you've been dreaming about."

"True," assents Miss Wynn musingly; "but, as you see, the bird found a protector

—just by chance, and in the nick of time."

"So will you; without any chance, and at such time as may please you."

"Oh!" exclaims Gwen, as if endowed with fresh courage. "I don't want one—not I! I'm strong to stand alone." Another tug at the oars to show it. "No," she continues, speaking between the plunges, "I want no protector—at least not yet: nor for a long while."

"But there's one wants you," says the companion, accompanying her words with an interrogative glance. "And soon—soon as he can have you."

"Indeed! I suppose you mean Master George Shenstone. Have I hit the nail upon the head?"

"You have."

"Well; what of him?"

"Only that everybody observes his attentions to you."

"Everybody is a very busy body. Being so observant, I wonder if this everybody has also observed how I receive them?"

"Indeed, yes."

"How then?"

"With favour. 'Tis said you think highly of him."

"And so I do. There are worse men in the world than George Shenstone—possibly few better. And many a good woman would, and might, be glad to become his wife. For all, I know one of a very indifferent sort who wouldn't—that's Gwen Wynn."

"But he's very good-looking!" Ellen urges; "the handsomest gentleman in the neighbourhood. Everybody says so."

"There your everybody would be wrong again—if they thought as they say. But they don't. I know one who thinks somebody else much handsomer than he."

"Who?" asks Miss Lees, looking puzzled; for she has never heard of Gwendoline having a preference, save that spoken of.

"The Rev. William Musgrave," replies Gwen, in turn bending inquisitive eyes on her companion, to whose cheeks the answer has brought a flush of colour, with a spasm of pain at the heart. Is it possible her rich relative—the heiress of Llangorren Court—can have set her eyes upon the poor curate of Llangorren Church, where her own thoughts have been secretly straying? With an effort to conceal them now, as the pain caused her, she rejoins interrogatively, but in faltering tone,—

"You think Mr. Musgrave handsomer than Mr. Shenstone?"

"Indeed I don't! Who says I do?"

"Oh—I thought," stammers out the other, relieved—too pleased just then to stand up for the superiority of the curate's personal appearance—"I thought you meant it that way."

"But I didn't. All I said was, that somebody thinks so; and that isn't I. Shall I tell you who it is?"

Ellen's heart is again quiet; she does not need to be told, already divining who it is—herself.

"You may as well let me," pursues Gwen, in a bantering way. "Do you suppose, Miss Lees, I haven't penetrated your secret long ago? Why, I knew it last Christmas, when you were assisting his demure reverence to decorate the church! Who could fail to observe that pretty hand play, when you two were twining the ivy around the altar-rail? And the holly, you were both so careless in handling, I wonder it didn't prick your fingers to the bone! Why, Nell, 'twas as plain to me, as if I'd been at it myself. Besides, I've seen the same thing scores of times, so has everybody in the parish. Ha! you see, I'm not the only one with whose name this everybody has been busy; the difference being, that about me they've been mistaken, while concerning yourself they haven't; instead, speaking pretty near the truth. Come, now, confess! Am I not right? Don't have any fear; you can trust me."

She does confess; though not in words. Her silence is equally eloquent; drooping eyelids, and blushing cheeks, making that eloquence emphatic. She loves Mr. Musgrave.

"Enough!" says Gwendoline, taking it in this sense; "and, since you have been candid with me, I'll repay you in the same coin. But, mind you, it mustn't go

further."

"Oh! certainly not," assents the other, in her restored confidence about the curate willing to promise anything in the world.

"As I've said," proceeds Miss Wynn, "there are worse men in the world than George Shenstone, and but few better. Certainly none behind hounds, and I'm told he's the crack shot of the county, and the best billiard player of his club—all accomplishments that have weight with us women—some of us. More still; he's deemed good-looking, and is, as you say, known to be of good family and fortune. For all, he lacks one thing that's wanted by——"

She stays her speech till dipping the oars—their splash, simultaneous with, and half-drowning, the words, "Gwen Wynn."

"What is it?" asks Ellen, referring to the deficiency thus hinted at.

"On my word, I can't tell—for the life of me I cannot. It's something undefinable; which one feels without seeing or being able to explain—just as ether, or electricity. Possibly it is the last. At all events, it's the thing that makes us women fall in love; as no doubt you've found when your fingers were—were—well, so near being pricked by that holly. Ha, ha, ha!"

With a merry peal she once more sets to rowing; and for a time no speech passes between them, the only sounds heard being the songs of the birds, in sweet symphony with the rush of the water along the boat's sides, and the rumbling of the oars in their rowlocks.

But for a brief interval is their silence between them, Miss Wynn again breaking it by a startled exclamation:—

"See!"

"Where? where?"

"Up yonder! We've been talking of kites and magpies. Behold, two birds of worse augury than either!"

They are passing the mouth of a little influent stream, up which at some distance are seen two men, one of them seated in a small boat, the other standing on the bank talking down to him. He in the boat is a stout, thick-set fellow in velveteens and coarse fur cap, the one above a spare thin man, habited in a suit of black—of

clerical, or rather sacerdotal, cut. Though both are partially screened by the foliage, the little stream running between wooded banks, Miss Wynn has recognised them. So, too, does the companion; who rejoins, as if speaking to herself—

"One's the French priest who has a chapel up the river, on the opposite side; the other's that fellow who's said to be such an incorrigible poacher."

"Priest and poacher it is! An oddly-assorted pair; though in a sense not so ill-matched either. I wonder what they're about up there, with their heads so close together. They appeared as if not wishing we should see them. Didn't it strike you so, Nelly?"

The men are now out of sight, the boat having passed the rivulet's mouth.

"Indeed, yes," answered Miss Lees; "the priest, at all events. He drew back among the bushes on seeing us."

"I'm sure his reverence is welcome. I've no desire ever to set eyes on him—quite the contrary."

"I often meet him on the roads."

"I too—and off them. He seems to be about everywhere skulking and prying into people's affairs. I noticed him the last day of our hunting, among the rabble—on foot, of course. He was close to my horse, and kept watching me out of his owlish eyes all the time; so impertinently I could have laid the whip over his shoulders. There's something repulsive about the man; I can't bear the sight of him."

"He's said to be a great friend and very intimate associate of your worthy cousin, Mr.——."

"Don't name *him*, Nell! I'd rather not think, much less talk of him. Almost the last words my father ever spoke—never to let Lewin Murdock cross the threshold of Llangorren. No doubt, he had his reasons. My word! this day with all its sunny brightness seems to abound in dark omens. Birds of prey, priests, and poachers! It's enough to bring on one of my fear fits. I now rather regret leaving Joseph behind. Well, we must make haste and get home again."

"Shall I turn the boat back?" asks the steerer.

"No; not just yet. I don't wish to repass those two uncanny creatures. Better leave them awhile, so that on returning we mayn't see them, to disturb the priest's equanimity—more like his conscience."

The reason is not exactly as assigned; but Miss Lees, accepting it without suspicion, holds the tiller cords so as to keep the course on down stream.



CHAPTER V.

DANGERS AHEAD.

For another half-mile, or so, the *Gwendoline* is propelled onward, though not running trimly; the fault being in her at the oars. With thoughts still preoccupied, she now and then forgets her stroke, or gives it unequally—so that the boat zig-zags from side to side, and, but for a more careful hand at the tiller, would bring up against the bank.

Observing her abstraction, as also her frequent turning to look down the river—but without suspicion of what is causing it—Miss Lees at length inquires,—

"What's the matter with you, Gwen?"

"Oh, nothing," she evasively answers, bringing back her eyes to the boat, and once more giving attention to the oars.

"But why are you looking so often below? I've noticed you do so at least a score of times."

If the questioner could but divine the thoughts at that moment in the other's mind, she would have no need thus to interrogate, but would know that below there is another boat, with a man in it who possesses that unseen something, like ether or electricity, and to catch sight of whom Miss Wynn has been so oft straining her eyes. She has not given all her confidence to the companion.

Not receiving immediate answer, Ellen again asked—

"Is there any danger you fear?"

"None that I know of—at least, for a long way down. Then there are some rough places."

"But you are pulling so unsteadily! It takes all my strength to keep in the middle of the river."

"Then you pull, and let me do the steering," returns Miss Wynn, pretending to be in a pout; as she speaks starting up from the thwart, and leaving the oars in their

thole pins.

Of course, the other does not object; and soon they have changed places.

But Gwen in the stern behaves no better than when seated amidships. The boat still keeps going astray, the fault now in the steerer.

Soon something more than a crooked course calls the attention of both, for a time engrossing it. They have rounded an abrupt bend, and got into a reach where the river runs with troubled surface and great velocity—so swift there is no need to use oars down stream, while upward 'twill take stronger arms than theirs. Caught in its current, and rapidly, yet smoothly, borne on, for a while they do not think of this. Only a short while; then the thought comes to them in the shape of a dilemma—Miss Lees being the first to perceive it.

"Gracious goodness!" she exclaims, "what are we to do? We can never row back up this rough water—it runs so strong here!"

"That's true," says Gwen, preserving her composure. "I don't think we could."

"But what's to be the upshot? Joseph will be waiting for us, and auntie sure to know all, if we shouldn't get back in time."

"That's true also," again observes Miss Wynn assentingly, and with an admirable *sang froid*, which causes surprise to the companion.

Then succeeds a short interval of silence, broken by an exclamatory phrase of three short words from the lips of Miss Wynn.

They are—"I have it!"

"What have you?" joyfully asks Ellen.

"The way to get back—without much trouble, and without disturbing the arrangements we've made with old Joe the least bit."

"Explain yourself!"

"We'll keep on down the river to Rock Weir. There we can leave the boat, and walk across the neck to Llangorren. It isn't over a mile, though it's five times that by the course of the stream. At the Weir we can engage some water fellow to take back the *Gwendoline* to her moorings. Meanwhile, we'll make all haste, slip into the grounds unobserved, get to the boat-dock in good time, and give Joseph

the cue to hold his tongue about what's happened. Another half-crown will tie it firm and fast, I know."

"I suppose there's no help for it," says the companion, assenting, "and we must do as you say."

"Of course we must. As you see, without thinking of it, we've drifted into a very cascade, and are now a long way down it. Only a regular waterman could pull up again. Ah! 'twould take the toughest of them, I should say. So—*nolens volens*—we'll have to go on to Rock Weir, which can't be more than a mile now. You may feather your oars, and float a bit. But, by the way, I must look more carefully to the steering. Now, that I remember, there are some awkward bars and eddies about here, and we can't be far from them. I think they're just below the next bend."

So saying, she sets herself square in the stern sheets, and closes her fingers firmly upon the tiller cords.

They glide on, but now in silence; the little flurry, with the prospect of peril ahead, making speech inopportune.

Soon they are round the bend spoken of, discovering to their view a fresh reach of the river; when again the steerer becomes neglectful of her duty, the expression upon her features, late a little troubled, suddenly changing to cheerfulness—almost joy. Nor is it that the dangerous places have been passed; they are still ahead, and at some distance below. But there is something else ahead to account for the quick transformation—a row-boat drawn up by the river's edge, with men upon the bank beside.

Over Gwen Wynn's countenance comes another change, sudden as before, and as before, its expression reversed. She has mistaken the boat; it is not that of the handsome fisherman! Instead, a four-oared craft, manned by four men, for there is this number on the bank. The angler's skiff had in it only two—himself and his oarsman.

But she has no need to count heads, nor scrutinise faces. Those now before her eyes are all strange, and far from well favoured; not any of them in the least like the one which has so prepossessed her. And while making this observation another is forced upon her—that their natural plainness is not improved by what they have been doing, and are still—drinking.

Just as the young ladies made this observation, the four men, hearing oars, face towards them. For a moment there is silence, while they in the *Gwendoline* are being scanned by the quartette on the shore. Through maudlin eyes, possibly, the fellows mistake them for ordinary country lasses, with whom they may take liberties. Whether or not one cries out—

"Petticoats, by gee—ingo!"

"Ay!" exclaims another, "a pair o' them. An' sweet wenches they be, too. Look at she wi' the gooldy hair—bright as the sun itself. Lord, meeats! if we had she down in the pit, that head o' her ud gi'e as much light as a dozen Davy's lamps. An't she a bewty? I'm boun' to have a smack fra them red lips o' hers."

"No," protests the first speaker, "she be myen. First spoke soonest sarved. That's Forest law."

"Never mind, Rob," rejoins the other, surrendering his claim, "she may be the grandest to look at, but not the goodiest to go. I'll lay odds the black 'un beats her at kissin'. Le's get grup o' 'em an' see! Coom on, meeats!"

Down go the drinking vessels, all four making for their boat, into which they scramble, each laying hold of an oar.

Up to this time the ladies have not felt actual alarm. The strange men being evidently intoxicated, they might expect—were, indeed, half-prepared for—coarse speech; perhaps indelicate, but nothing beyond. Within a mile of their own home, and still within the boundary of the Llangorren land, how could they think of danger such as is threatening? For that there is danger they are now sensible—becoming convinced of it as they draw nearer to the four fellows, and get a better view of them. Impossible to mistake the men—roughs from the Forest of Dean, or some other mining district, their but half-washed faces showing it; characters not very gentle at any time, but very rude, even dangerous, when drunk. This known from many a tale told, many a Petty and Quarter Sessions report read in the county newspapers. But it is visible in their countenances, too intelligible in their speech—part of which the ladies have overheard—as in the action they are taking.

They in the pleasure-boat no longer fear, or think of bars and eddies below. No whirlpool, not Maelstrom itself, could fright them as those four men. For it is fear of a something more to be dreaded than drowning.

Withal, Gwendoline Wynn is not so much dismayed as to lose presence of mind. Nor is she at all excited, but cool as when caught in the rapid current. Her feats in the hunting field, and dashing drives down the steep "pitches" of the Herefordshire roads, have given her strength of nerve to face any danger; and, as her timid companion trembles with affright, muttering her fears, she but says—

"Keep quiet, Nell! Don't let them see you're scared. It's not the way to treat such as they, and will only encourage them to come at us."

This counsel, before the men have moved, fails in effect; for as they are seen rushing down the bank and into their boat, Ellen Lees utters a terrified shriek, scarcely leaving her breath to add the words—

"Dear Gwen! what shall we do?"

"Change places," is the reply, calmly but hurriedly made. "Give me the oars! Quick!"

While speaking she has started up from the stern, and is making for 'midships. The other, comprehending, has risen at the same instant, leaving the oars to trail.

By this the roughs has shoved off from the bank, and are making for mid-stream, their purpose evident—to intercept the *Gwendoline*. But the other Gwendoline has now got settled to the oars; and pulling with all her might, has still a chance to shoot past them.

In a few seconds the boats are but a couple of lengths apart, the heavy craft coming bow-on for the lighter; while the faces of those in her, slewed over their shoulders, show terribly forbidding. A glance tells Gwen Wynn 'twould be idle making appeal to them; nor does she. Still she is not silent. Unable to restrain her indignation, she calls out—

"Keep back, fellows! If you run against us 'twill go ill for you. Don't suppose you'll escape punishment."

"Bah!" responds one, "we an't a-frightened at yer threats—not we. That an't the way wi' us Forest chaps. Besides, we don't mean ye any much harm. Only gi'e us a kiss all round, an' then—maybe, we'll let ye go."

"Yes; kisses all round!" cries another. "That's the toll ye're got to pay at our pike; an' a bit o' squeeze by way o' boot."

The coarse jest elicits a peal of laughter from the other three. Fortunately for those who are its butt, since it takes the attention of the rowers from their oars, and before they can recover a stroke or two lost, the pleasure-boat glides past them, and goes dancing on, as did the fishing skiff.

With a yell of disappointment they bring their boat's head round, and row after; now straining at their oars with all strength. Luckily, they lack skill; which, fortunately for herself, the rower of the pleasure-boat possesses. It stands her in stead now, and, for a time, the *Gwendoline* leads without losing ground. But the struggle is unequal, four to one—strong men against a weak woman! Verily is she called on to make good her words, when saying she could row almost as ably as a man.

And so does she for a time. Withal it may not avail her. The task is too much for her woman's strength, fast becoming exhausted. While her strokes grow feebler, those of the pursuers seem to get stronger. For they are in earnest now; and, despite the bad management of their boat, it is rapidly gaining on the other.

"Pull, meeats!" cries one, the roughest of the gang, and apparently the ringleader, "pull like—hic—hic!"—his drunken tongue refuses the blasphemous word. "If ye lay me 'longside that girl wi' the gooc—goeeldy hair, I'll stan' someat stiff at the 'Kite's Nest' whens we get hic—'ome."

"All right, Bob!" is the rejoinder, "we'll do that. Ne'er a fear."

The prospect of "someat stiff" at the Forest hostelry inspires them to increase their exertion, and their speed proportionately augmented, no longer leaves a doubt of their being able to come up with the pursued boat. Confident, of it they commence jeering the ladies—"wenches" they call them—in speech profane, as repulsive.

For these, things look black. They are but a couple of boats' length ahead, and near below is a sharp turn in the river's channel; rounding which they will lose ground, and can scarcely fail to be overtaken. What then?

As Gwen Wynn asks herself the question, the anger late flashing in her eyes gives place to a look of keen anxiety. Her glances are sent to right, to left, and again over her shoulder, as they have been all day doing, but now with very different design. Then she was searching for a man, with no further thought than to feast her eyes on him; now she is looking for the same, in hopes he may save her from insult—it may be worse.

There is no man in sight—no human being on either side of the river! On the right a grim cliff rising sheer, with some goats clinging to its ledges. On the left a grassy slope with browsing sheep, their lambs stretch at their feet; but no shepherd, no one to whom she can call "Help!"

Distractedly she continues to tug at the oars; despairingly as the boats draw near the bend. Before rounding it she will be in the hands of those horrid men—embraced by their brawny, bear-like arms!

The thought restrengthens her own, giving them the energy of desperation. So inspired, she makes a final effort to elude the ruffian pursuers, and succeeds in turning the point.

Soon as round it, her face brightens up, joy dances in her eyes, as with panting breath she exclaims,—

"We're saved, Nelly! We're saved! Thank Heaven for it!"

Nelly does thank Heaven, rejoiced to hear they are saved; but without in the least comprehending how!



CHAPTER VI.

A DUCKING DESERVED.

Captain Ryecroft has been but a few minutes at his favourite fishing-place—just long enough to see his tackle in working condition, and cast his line across the water; as he does the last, saying—

"I shouldn't wonder, Wingate, if we don't see a salmon to-day. I fear that sky's too bright for his dainty kingship to mistake feathers for flies."

"Ne'er a doubt the fish'll be a bit shy," returns the boatman; "but," he adds, assigning their shyness to a different cause, "'tain't so much the colour o' the sky; more like it's that lot of Foresters has frightened them, with their hulk o' a boat makin' as much noise as a Bristol steamer. Wonder what brings such rubbish on the river anyhow. They han't no business on't; an' in my opinion theer ought to be a law 'gainst it—same's for trespassin' after game."

"That would be rather hard lines, Jack. These mining gentry need outdoor recreation as much as any other sort of people. Rather more I should say, considering that they're compelled to pass the greater part of their time underground. When they emerge from the bowels of the earth to disport themselves on its surface, it's but natural they should like a little aquatics; which you, by choice, an amphibious creature, cannot consistently blame them for. Those we've just met are doubtless out for a holiday, which accounts for their having taken too much drink—in some sense an excuse for their conduct. I don't think it at all strange seeing them on the water."

"Their faces han't seed much o' it anyhow," observes the waterman, seeming little satisfied with the Captain's reasoning. "And as for their being out on holiday, if I an't mistook, it be holiday as lasts all the year round. Two o' 'em may be miners—them as got the grimiest faces. As for t'other two, I don't think eyther ever touch't pick or shovel in their lives. I've seed both hangin' about Lydbrook, which be a queery place. Besides, one I've seed 'long wi' a man whose company is enough to gi'e a saint a bad character—that's Coracle Dick. Take my word for 't, Captain, there ain't a honest miner 'mong that lot—eyther in the way of iron or coal. If there wor I'd be the last man to go again them havin' their holiday;

'cepting I don't think they ought to take it on the river. Ye see what comes o' sich as they humbuggin' about in a boat?"

At the last clause of this speech—its Conservatism due to a certain professional jealousy—the Hussar officer cannot resist smiling. He had half forgotten the rudeness of the revellers—attributing it to intoxication—and more than half repented of his threat to bring them to a reckoning, which might not be called for, but might, and in all likelihood would, be inconvenient. Now, reflecting on Wingate's words, the frown which had passed from off his face again returns to it. He says nothing, however, but sits rod in hand, less thinking of the salmon than how he can chastise the "d—d scoun'rels," as his companion has pronounced them, should he, as he anticipates, again come in collision with them.

"Lissen!" exclaims the waterman; "that's them shoutin'! Comin' this way, I take it. What should we do to 'em, Captain?"

The salmon-fisher is half determined to reel in his line, lay aside the rod, and take out a revolving pistol he chances to have in his pocket—not with any intention to fire it at the fellows, but only frighten them.

"Yes," goes on Wingate, "they be droppin' down again—sure; I dar' say they've found the tide a bit too strong for 'em up above. An' I don't wonder; sich louty chaps as they thinkin' they cud guide a boat 'bout the Wye! Jist like mountin' hogs a-horseback!"

At this fresh sally of professional spleen the soldier again smiles, but says nothing, uncertain what action he should take, or how soon he may be called on to commence it. Almost instantly after he is called on to take action, though not against the four riotous Foresters, but a silly salmon, which has conceived a fancy for his fly. A purl on the water, with a pluck quick succeeding, tells of one on the hook, while the whizz of the wheel and rapid rolling out of catgut proclaims it a fine one.

For some minutes neither he nor his oarsman has eye or ear for aught save securing the fish, and both bend all their energies to "fighting" it. The line runs out, to be spun up and run off again; his river majesty, maddened at feeling himself so oddly and painfully restrained in his desperate efforts to escape, now rushing in one direction, now another, all the while the angler skilfully playing him, the equally skilled oarsman keeping the boat in concerted accord.

Absorbed by their distinct lines of endeavour they do not hear high words, mingled with exclamations, coming from above; or hearing, do not heed, supposing them to proceed from the four men they had met, in all likelihood now more inebriated than ever. Not till they have well-nigh finished their "fight," and the salmon, all but subdued, is being drawn towards the boat—Wingate, gaff in hand, bending over ready to strike it—not till then do they note other sounds, which even at that critical moment make them careless about the fish, in its last feeble throes, when its capture is good as sure, causing Ryecroft to stop winding his wheel, and stand listening.

Only for an instant. Again the voices of men, but now also heard the cry of a woman, as if she sending it forth were in danger or distress!

They have no need for conjecture, nor are they long left to it. Almost simultaneously they see a boat sweeping round the bend, with another close in its wake, evidently in chase, as told by the attitudes and gestures of those occupying both—in the one pursued two young ladies, in that pursuing four rough men readily recognisable. At a glance the Hussar officer takes in the situation—the waterman as well. The sight saves a salmon's life, and possibly two innocent women from outrage. Down goes Ryecroft's rod, the boatman simultaneously dropping his gaff; as he does so hearing thundered in his ears—

"To your oars, Jack! Make straight for them! Row with all your might!"

Jack Wingate needs neither command to act nor word to stimulate him. As a man he remembers the late indignity to himself; as a gallant fellow he now sees others submitted to the like. No matter about their being ladies; enough that they are women suffering insult; and more than enough at seeing who are the insulters.

In ten seconds' time he is on his thwart, oars in hand, the officer at the tiller; and in five more, the *Mary*, brought stem up stream, is surging against the current, going swiftly as if with it. She is set for the big boat pursuing—not now to shun a collision, but seek it.

As yet some two hundred yards are between the chased craft and that hastening to its rescue. Ryecroft, measuring the distance with his eyes, is in thought tracing out a course of action. His first instinct was to draw a pistol, and stop the pursuit with a shot. But no; it would not be English. Nor does he need resort to such deadly weapon. True there will be four against two; but what of it?

"I think we can manage them, Jack," he mutters through his teeth, "I'm good for two of them—the biggest and best."

"An' I t'other two—sich clumsy chaps as them! Ye can trust me takin' care o' 'em, Captin."

"I know it. Keep to your oars till I give the word to drop them."

"They don't 'pear to a sighted us yet. Too drunk I take it. Like as not when they see what's comin' they'll sheer off."

"They shan't have the chance. I intend steering bow dead on to them. Don't fear the result. If the *Mary* gets damaged I'll stand the expense of repairs."

"Ne'er a mind 'bout that, Captain. I'd gi'e the price o' a new boat to see the lot chestised—specially that big black fellow as did most o' the talkin'."

"You shall see it, and soon!"

He lets go the ropes, to disembarass himself of his angling accoutrements; which he hurriedly does, flinging them at his feet. When he again takes hold of the steering tackle the *Mary* is within six lengths of the advancing boats, both now nearly together, the bow of the pursuer overlapping the stern of the pursued. Only two of the men are at the oars; two standing up, one amidships, the other at the head.

Both are endeavouring to lay hold of the pleasure-boat, and bring it alongside. So occupied they see not the fishing skiff, while the two rowing, with backs turned, are equally unconscious of its approach. They only wonder at the "wenches," as they continue to call them, taking it so coolly, for these do not seem so much frightened as before.

"Coom, sweet lass!" cries he in the bow—the black fellow it is—addressing Miss Wynn. "Tain't no use you tryin' to get away. I must ha' my kiss. So drop yer oars, and ge'et to me!"

"Insolent fellow!" she exclaims, her eyes ablaze with anger. "Keep your hands off my boat! I command you!"

"But I ain't to be c'mmanded, ye minx. Not till I've had a smack o' them lips; an' by G— I s'll have it."

Saying which he reaches out to the full stretch of his long, ape-like arms, and

with one hand succeeds in grasping the boat's gunwale, while with the other he gets hold of the lady's dress, and commences dragging her towards him.

Gwen Wynn neither screams, nor calls "Help!" She knows it is near.

"Hands off!" cries a voice in a volume of thunder, simultaneous with a dull thud against the side of the larger boat, followed by a continued crashing as her gunwale goes in. The roughs, facing round, for the first time see the fishing skiff, and know why it is there. But they are too far gone in drink to heed or submit—at least their leader seems determined to resist. Turning savagely on Ryecroft, he stammers out—

"Hic—ic—who the blazes be you, Mr. White Cap? An' what d'ye want wi' me?"

"You'll see."

At the words he bounds from his own boat into the other; and, before the fellow can raise an arm, those of Ryecroft are around him in tight hug. In another minute the hulking scoundrel is hoisted from his feet, as though but a feather's weight, and flung overboard.

IN ANOTHER MINUTE THE HULKING SCOUNDREL IS FLUNG OVERBOARD.

Wingate has meanwhile also boarded, grappled on to the other on foot, and is threatening to serve him the same.

A plunge, with a wild cry—the man going down like a stone; another, as he comes up among his own bubbles; and a third, yet wilder, as he feels himself sinking for the second time!

The two at the oars, scared into a sort of sobriety, one of them cries out—

"Lor' o' mercy! Rob'll be drowned! He can't sweem a stroke."

"He's a-drownin' now!" adds the other.

It is true. For Rob has again come to the surface, and shouts with feebler voice,

while his arms tossed frantically about tell of his being in the last throes of suffocation!

Ryecroft looks regretful—rather alarmed. In chastising the fellow he had gone too far. He must save him!

Quick as the thought off goes his coat, with his boots kicked into the bottom of the boat; then himself over its side!

A splendid swimmer, with a few bold sweeps he is by the side of the drowning man. Not a moment too soon—just as the latter is going down for the third, likely the last time. With the hand of the officer grasping his collar, he is kept above water. But not yet saved. Both are now imperilled—the rescuer and he he would rescue. For, far from the boats, they have drifted into a dangerous eddy, and are being whirled rapidly round!

A cry from Gwen Wynn—a cry of real alarm, now—the first she has uttered! But before she can repeat it, her fears are allayed—set to rest again—at sight of still another rescuer. The young waterman has leaped back to his own boat, and is pulling straight for the strugglers. A few strokes, and he is beside them; then, dropping his oars, he soon has both safe in the skiff.

The half-drowned, but wholly frightened Rob is carried back to his comrades' boat, and dumped in among them; Wingate handling him as though he were but a wet coal sack, or piece of old tarpaulin. Then giving the "Forest chaps" a bit of his mind he bids them "be off."

And off go they, without saying word; as they drop down stream their downcast looks showing them subdued, if not quite sobered, and rather feeling grateful than aggrieved.



The other two boats soon proceed upward, the pleasure craft leading. But not now rowed by its owner; for Captain Ryecroft has hold of the oars. In the haste, or the pleasurable moments succeeding, he has forgotten all about the salmon left struggling on his line, or caring not to return for it, most likely will lose rod, line, and all. What matter? If he has lost a fine fish, he may have won the finest woman on the Wye!

And she has lost nothing—risks nothing now—not even the chiding of her aunt!
For now the pleasure-boat will be back in its dock in time to keep undisturbed
the understanding with Joseph.



CHAPTER VII.

AN INVETERATE NOVEL READER.

While these exciting incidents are passing upon the river, Llangorren Court is wrapped in that stately repose becoming an aristocratic residence—especially where an elderly spinster is head of the house, and there are no noisy children to go romping about. It is thus with Llangorren, whose ostensible mistress is Miss Linton, the aunt and legal guardian already alluded to. But, though presiding over the establishment, it is rather in the way of ornamental figure-head; since she takes little to do with its domestic affairs, leaving them to a skilled housekeeper who carries the keys.

Kitchen matters are not much to Miss Linton's taste, being a dame of the antique brocaded type, with pleasant memories of the past, that go back to Bath and Cheltenham; where, in their days of glory, as hers of youth, she was a belle, and did her share of dancing, with a due proportion of flirting, at the Regency balls. No longer able to indulge in such delightful recreations, the memory of them has yet charms for her, and she keeps it alive and warm by daily perusal of the *Morning Post* with a fuller hebdomadal feast from the *Court Journal*, and other distributors of fashionable intelligence. In addition she reads no end of novels, her favourites being those which tell of Cupid in his most romantic escapades and experiences, though not always the chastest. Of the prurient trash there is a plenteous supply, furnished by scribblers of both sexes, who ought to know better, and doubtless do; but knowing also how difficult it is to make their lucubrations interesting within the legitimate lines of literary art, and how easy out of them, thus transgress the moralities.

Miss Linton need have no fear that the impure stream will cease to flow, any more than the limpid waters of the Wye. Nor has she; but reads on, devouring volume after volume, in triunes as they issue from the press, and are sent her from the Circulating Library.

At nearly all hours of the day, and some of the night, does she so occupy herself. Even on this same bright April morn, when all nature rejoices, and every living thing seems to delight in being out of doors—when the flowers expand their petals to catch the kisses of the warm Spring sun—Dorothea Linton is seated in a

shady corner of the drawing-room, up to her ears in a three-volume novel, still odorous of printer's ink and binder's paste; absorbed in a love dialogue between a certain Lord Lutestring and a rustic damsel—daughter of one of his tenant farmers—whose life he is doing his best to blight, and with much likelihood of succeeding. If he fail, it will not be for want of will on his part, nor desire of the author to save the imperilled one. He will make the tempted iniquitous as the tempter, should this seem to add interest to the tale, or promote the sale of the book.

Just as his lordship has gained a point and the girl is about to give way, Miss Linton herself receives a shock, caused by a rat-tat at the drawing-room door, light, such as well-trained servants are accustomed to give before entering a room occupied by master or mistress.

To her command "Come in!" a footman presents himself, silver waiter in hand, on which is a card.

She is more than annoyed, almost angry, as taking the card, she reads—

"REVEREND WILLIAM MUSGRAVE."

Only to think of being thus interrupted on the eve of such an interesting climax, which seemed about to seal the fate of the farmer's daughter.

It is fortunate for his Reverence, that before entering within the room another visitor is announced, and ushered in along with him. Indeed the second caller is shown in first; for, although George Shenstone rung the front door bell after Mr. Musgrave had stepped inside the hall, there is no domestic of Llangorren but knows the difference between a rich baronet's son and a poor parish curate, as which should have precedence. To this nice, if not very delicate appreciation, the Reverend William is now indebted more than he is aware. It has saved him from an outburst of Miss Linton's rather tart temper, which, under the circumstances, otherwise he would have caught. For it so chances that the son of Sir George Shenstone is a great favourite with the old lady of Llangorren; welcome at all times, even amid the romantic gallantries of Lord Lutestring. Not that the young country gentleman has anything in common with the titled Lothario, who is habitually a dweller in cities. Instead, the former is a frank, manly fellow, devoted to field sports and rural pastimes, a little brusque in manner, but for all well-bred, and, what is even better, well-behaved. There is nothing odd in his calling at that early hour. Sir George is an old friend of the Wynn family—was

an intimate associate of Gwen's deceased father—and both he and his son have been accustomed to look in at Llangorren Court *san ceremonie*.

No more is Mr. Musgrave's matutinal visit out of order. Though but the curate, he is in full charge of parish duties, the rector being not only aged but an absentee—so long away from the neighbourhood as to have become almost a myth to it. For this reason his vicarial representative can plead scores of excuses for presenting himself at "The Court." There is the school, the church choir, and clothing club, to say nought of neighbouring news, which on most mornings make him a welcome visitor to Miss Linton; and no doubt would on this, but for the glamour thrown around her by the fascinations of the dear delightful Lutestring. It even takes all her partiality for Mr. Shenstone to remove its spell, and get him vouchsafed friendly reception.

"Miss Linton," he says, speaking first, "I've just dropped in to ask if the young ladies would go for a ride. The day's so fine, I thought they might like to."

"Ah, indeed," returns the spinster, holding out her fingers to be touched, but, under the plea of being a little invalided, excusing herself from rising. "Yes; no doubt they would like it very much."

Mr. Shenstone is satisfied with the reply; but less the curate, who neither rides nor has a horse. And less Shenstone himself—indeed both—as the lady proceeds. They have been listening, with ears all alert, for the sound of soft footsteps and rustling dresses. Instead, they hear words, not only disappointing, but perplexing.

"Nay, I am sure," continues Miss Linton, with provoking coolness, "they would have been glad to go riding with you; delighted—"

"But why can't they?" asked Shenstone impatiently, interrupting.

"Because the thing's impossible; they've already gone rowing."

"Indeed!" cry both gentlemen in a breath, seeming alike vexed by the intelligence, Shenstone mechanically interrogating:

"On the river?"

"Certainly?" answers the lady, looking surprised. "Why, George; where else could they go rowing? You don't suppose they've brought the boat up to the fishpond!"

"Oh, no," he stammers out. "I beg pardon. How very stupid of me to ask such a question. I was only wondering why Miss Gwen—that is, I am a little astonished—but—perhaps you'll think it impertinent of me to ask another question?"

"Why should I? What is it?"

"Only whether—whether she—Miss Gwen, I mean—said anything about riding to-day?"

"Not a word—at least not to me."

"How long since they went off—may I know, Miss Linton?"

"Oh, hours ago! Very early, indeed—just after taking breakfast. I wasn't down myself—as I've told you, not feeling very well this morning. But Gwen's maid informs me they left the house then, and I presume they went direct to the river."

"Do you think they'll be out long?" earnestly interrogates Shenstone.

"I should hope not," returns the ancient toast of Cheltenham, with aggravating indifference, for Lutestring is not quite out of her thoughts. "There's no knowing, however. Miss Wynn is accustomed to come and go, without much consulting me."

This with some acerbity—possibly from the thought that the days of her legal guardianship are drawing to a close, which will make her a less important personage at Llangorren.

"Surely they won't be out all day," timidly suggests the curate; to which she makes no rejoinder, till Mr. Shenstone puts it in the shape of an inquiry.

"Is it likely they will, Miss Linton?"

"I should say not. More like they'll be hungry, and that will bring them home. What's the hour now? I've been reading a very interesting book, and quite forgot myself. Is it possible?" she exclaims, looking at the ormolu dial on the mantelshelf. "Ten minutes to one! How time does fly, to be sure! I couldn't have believed it near so late—almost luncheon time! Of course you'll stay, gentlemen? As for the girls, if they are not back in time they'll have to go without. Punctuality is the rule of this house—always will be with me. I shan't wait one minute for them."

"But, Miss Linton, they may have returned from the river, and are now

somewhere about the grounds. Shall I run down to the boat-dock and see?"

It is Mr. Shenstone who thus interrogates.

"If you like—by all means. I shall be too thankful. Shame of Gwen to give us so much trouble. She knows our luncheon hour, and should have been back by this. Thanks, much, Mr. Shenstone."

As he is bounding off, she calls after—

"Don't you be staying too, else you shan't have a pick. Mr. Musgrave and I won't wait for any of you. Shall we, Mr. Musgrave?"

Shenstone has not tarried to hear either question or answer. A luncheon for Apicius were, at that moment, nothing to him; and little more to the curate, who, though staying, would gladly go along. Not from any rivalry with, or jealousy of, the baronet's son: they revolve in different orbits, with no danger of collision. Simply that he dislikes leaving Miss Linton alone—indeed, dare not. She may be expecting the usual budget of neighbourhood intelligence he daily brings her.

He is mistaken. On this particular day it is not desired. Out of courtesy to Mr. Shenstone, rather than herself, she had laid aside the novel; and it now requires all she can command to keep her eyes off it. She is burning to know what befel the farmer's daughter!



CHAPTER VIII.

A SUSPICIOUS STRANGER.

While Mr. Musgrave is boring the elderly spinster about new scarlet cloaks for the girls of the church choir, and other parish matters, George Shenstone is standing on the topmost step of the boat stair, in a mood of mind even less enviable than hers. For he has looked down into the dock, and there sees no Gwendoline—neither boat nor lady—nor is there sign of either upon the water, far as he can command a view of it. No sounds, such as he would wish, and might expect to hear—no dipping of oars, nor, what would be still more agreeable to his ear, the soft voices of women. Instead only the note of a cuckoo, in monotonous repetition, the bird balancing itself on a branch near by; and, farther off, the *hiccol*, laughing, as if in mockery—and at him! Mocking his impatience; ay, something more, almost his misery! That it is so his soliloquy tells:

"Odd her being out on the river! She promised me to go riding to-day. Very odd indeed! Gwen isn't the same she was—acting strange altogether for the last three or four days. Wonder what it means? By Jove, I can't comprehend it!"

His noncomprehension does not hinder a dark shadow from stealing over his brow, and there staying.

It is not unobserved. Through the leaves of the evergreen Joseph notes the pained expression, and interprets it in his own shrewd way—not far from the right one.

The old servant soliloquizing in less conjectural strain, says, or rather thinks—

"Master George be mad sweet on Miss Gwen. The country folk are all talkin' o't; thinking she's same on him, as if they knew anything about it. I knows better. An' he ain't no ways confident, else there wouldn't be that queery look on's face. It's the token o' jealousy for sure. I don't believe he have suspicion o' any rival particklar. Ah! it don't need that wi' sich a grand beauty as she be. He as love her might be jealous o' the sun kissing her cheeks, or the wind tossin' her hair!"

Joseph is a Welshman of Bardic ancestry, and thinks poetry. He continues—

"I know what's took her on the river, if he don't. Yes—yes, my young lady. Ye thought yerself wonderful clever, leavin' old Joe behind, tellin' him to hide hisself, and bribin' him to stay hid! And d'y 'spose I didn't observe them glances exchanged twixt you and the salmon fisher—sly, but, for all that, hot as streaks o' fire? And d'ye think I didn't see Mr. Whitecap going down, afore ye thought o' a row yerself? Oh, no; I noticed nothin' o' all that, not I! 'Twarn't meant for me—not for Joe—ha, ha!"

With a suppressed giggle at the popular catch coming in so *apropos*, he once more fixes his eyes on the face of the impatient watcher, proceeding with his soliloquy, though in changed strain:

"Poor young gentleman! I do pity he to be sure. He are a good sort, an' everybody likes him. So do she, but not the way he want her to. Well; things o' that kind allers do go contrarywise—never seem to run smooth like. I'd help him myself if 'twar in my power, but it ain't. In such cases help can only come frae the place where they say matches be made—that's Heaven. Ha! he's lookin' a bit brighter! What's cheerin' him? The boat coming back? I can't see it from here, nor I don't hear any rattle o' oars!"

The change he notes in George Shenstone's manner is not caused by the returning pleasure craft. Simply a reflection, which crossing his mind, for the moment tranquillizes him.

"What a stupid I am!" he mutters self-accusingly. "Now I remember, there was nothing said about the hour we were to go riding, and I suppose she understood in the afternoon. It was so the last time we went out together. By Jove! yes. It's all right, I take it; she'll be back in good time yet."

Thus reassured he remains listening. Still more satisfied, when a dull thumping sound, in regular repetition, tells him of oars working in their rowlocks. Were he learned in boating tactics he would know there are two pairs of them, and think this strange too; since the *Gwendoline* carries only one. But he is not so skilled—instead, rather averse to aquatics—his chosen home the hunting-field, his favourite seat in a saddle, not on a boat's thwart. It is only when the plashing of the oars in the tranquil water of the bye-way is borne clear along the cliff, that he perceives there are two pairs at work, while at the same time he observes two boats approaching the little dock, where but one belongs!

Alone at that leading boat does he look: with eyes in which, as he continues to gaze, surprise becomes wonderment, dashed with something like displeasure.

The boat he has recognised at the first glance—the *Gwendoline*—as also the two ladies in the stern. But there is also a man on the mid thwart, plying the oars.

"Who the deuce is he?"

Thus to himself George Shenstone puts it. Not old Joe, not the least like him. Nor is it the family Charon who sits solitary on the thwarts of that following. Instead, Joseph is now by Mr. Shenstone's side, passing him in haste—making to go down the boat stair!

"What's the meaning of all this, Joe?" asks the young man, in stark astonishment.

"Meanin' o' what, sir?" returns the old boatman, with an air of assumed innocence. "Be there anythin' amiss?"

"Oh, nothing," stammers Shenstone. "Only I supposed you were out with the young ladies. How is it you haven't gone?"

"Well, sir, Miss Gwen didn't wish it. The day bein' fine, an' nothing o' flood in the river, she sayed she'd do the rowin' herself."

"She hasn't been doing it for all that," mutters Shenstone to himself, as Joseph glides past and on down the stair; then repeating, "Who the deuce is he?" the interrogation as before referring to him who rows the pleasure boat.

By this it has been brought, bow in, to the dock, its stern touching the bottom of the stair; and, as the ladies step out of it, George Shenstone overhears a dialogue, which, instead of quieting his perturbed spirit, but excites him still more—almost to madness. It is Miss Wynn who has commenced it, saying,—

"You'll come up to the house, and let me introduce you to my aunt?"

This to the gentleman who has been pulling her boat, and has just abandoned the oars soon as seeing its painter in the hands of the servant.

"Oh, thank you!" he returns. "I would, with pleasure; but, as you see, I'm not quite presentable just now—anything but fit for a drawing-room. So I beg you'll excuse me to-day."

His saturated shirt-front, with other garments dripping, tells why the apology; but does not explain either that or aught else to him on the top of the stair, who, hearkening further, hears other speeches, which, while perplexing him, do nought to allay the wild tempest now surging through his soul. Unseen himself—

for he has stepped behind the tree lately screening Joseph—he sees Gwen Wynn holding out her hand to be pressed in parting salute—hears her address the stranger in words of gratitude, warm as though she were under some great obligation to him!

Then the latter leaps out of the pleasure boat into the other brought alongside, and is rowed away by his waterman: while the ladies ascend the stair—Gwen lingeringly, at almost every step, turning her face towards the fishing skiff, till this, pulled around the upper end of the eyot, can no more be seen.

All this George Shenstone observes, drawing deductions which send the blood in chill creep through his veins. Though still puzzled by the wet garments, the presence of the gentleman wearing them seems to solve that other enigma, unexplained as painful—the strangeness he has of late observed in the ways of Miss Wynn. Nor is he far out in his fancy, bitter though it be.

Not until the two ladies have reached the stair head do they become aware of his being there; and not then, till Gwen has made some observations to the companion, which, as those addressed to the stranger, unfortunately for himself, George Shenstone overhears.

"We'll be in time for luncheon yet, and aunt needn't know anything of what's delayed us—at least, not just now. True, if the like had happened to herself—say some thirty or forty years ago—she'd want all the world to hear of it, particularly that part of the world yclept Cheltenham. The dear old lady! Ha, ha!" After a laugh, continuing: "But, speaking seriously, Nell, I don't wish any one to be the wiser about our bit of an escapade—least of all, a certain young gentleman, whose Christian name begins with a G., and surname with an S."

"Those initials answer for mine," says George Shenstone, coming forward and confronting her. "If your observation was meant for me, Miss Wynn, I can only express regret for my bad luck in being within earshot of it."

At his appearance, so unexpected and abrupt, Gwen Wynn had given a start, feeling guilty, and looking it. Soon, however, reflecting whence he has come, and hearing what said, she feels less self-condemned than indignant, as evinced by her rejoinder.

"Ah! you've been overhearing us, Mr. Shenstone! Bad luck, you call it. Bad or good, I don't think you are justified in attributing it to chance. When a gentleman deliberately stations himself behind a shady bush, like that laurestinus for

instance, and there stands listening—intentionally—"

Suddenly she interrupts herself, and stands silent too—this on observing the effect of her words, and that they have struck terribly home. With bowed head the baronet's son is stooping towards her, the cloud on his brow telling of sadness—not anger. Seeing it, the old tenderness returns to her, with its familiarity, and she exclaims:—

"Come, George! There must be no quarrel between you and me. What you've just seen and heard, will be all explained by something you have yet to hear. Miss Lees and I have had a little bit of an adventure; and if you'll promise it shan't go further, we'll make you acquainted with it."

Addressed in this style, he readily gives the promise—gladly, too. The confidence so offered seems favourable to himself. But, looking for explanation on the instant, he is disappointed. Asking for it, it is denied him, with reason assigned thus:

"You forget we've been full four hours on the river, and are as hungry as a pair of kingfishers—hawks, I suppose, you'd say, being a game preserver. Never mind about the simile. Let us in to luncheon, if not too late."

She steps hurriedly off towards the house, the companion following, Shenstone behind both.

However hungry they, never man went to a meal with less appetite than he. All Gwen's cajoling has not tranquillized his spirit, nor driven out of his thoughts that man with the bronzed complexion, dark moustache, and white helmet hat.



CHAPTER IX.

JEALOUS ALREADY.

Captain Ryecroft has lost more than rod and line; his heart is as good as gone too—given to Gwendoline Wynn. He now knows the name of the yellow-haired Naiad—for this, with other particulars, she imparted to him on return up stream.

Neither has her confidence thus extended, nor the conversation leading to it, belied the favourable impression made upon him by her appearance. Instead, so strengthened it, that for the first time in his life he contemplates becoming a benedict. He feels that his fate is sealed—or no longer in his hands, but hers.

As Wingate pulls him on homeward, he draws out his cigar case, sets fire to a fresh weed, and, while the blue smoke wreaths up round the rim of his topee, reflects on the incidents of the day,—reviewing them in the order of their occurrence.

Circumstances apparently accidental have been strangely in his favour. Helped as by Heaven's own hand, working with the rudest instruments. Through the veriest scum of humanity he has made acquaintance with one of its fairest forms. More than mere acquaintance, he hopes; for surely those warm words, and glances far from cold, could not be the sole offspring of gratitude! If so a little service on the Wye goes a long way. Thus reflects he in modest appreciation of himself, deeming that he has done but little. How different the value put upon it by Gwen Wynn!

Still he knows not this, or at least cannot be sure of it. If he were, his thoughts would be all rose-coloured, which they are not. Some are dark as the shadows of the April showers now and then drifting across the sun's disc.

One that has just settled on his brow is no reflection from the firmament above—no vague imagining—but a thing of shape and form—the form of a man, seen at the top of the boat-stair, as the ladies were ascending, and not so far off as to have hindered him from observing the man's face, and noting that he was young and rather handsome. Already the eyes of love have caught the keenness of jealousy. A gentleman evidently on terms of intimacy with Miss Wynn. Strange, though, that the look with which he regarded her on saluting seemed to speak of

something amiss! What could it mean? Captain Ryecroft has asked this question as his boat was rounding the end of the eyot, with another in the self-same formulary of interrogation, of which but the moment before he was himself the subject:—

"Who the deuce can *he* be?"

Out upon the river, and drawing hard at his Regalia, he goes on:—

"Wonderfully familiar the fellow seemed! Can't be a brother! I understood her to say she had none. Does he live at Llangorren? No. She said there was no one there in the shape of masculine relative—only an old aunt, and that little dark damsel, who is cousin or something of the kind. But who in the deuce is the gentleman? Might *he* be a cousin?"

So propounding questions without being able to answer them, he at length addresses himself to the waterman—saying:

"Jack, did you observe a gentleman at the head of the stair?"

"Only the head and shoulders o' one, captain."

"Head and shoulders? that's enough. Do you chance to know him?"

"I ain't thorough sure; but I think he be a Mr. Shenstone."

"Who is Mr. Shenstone?"

"The son o' Sir George."

"Sir George! What do you know of *him*?"

"Not much to speak of—only that he be a big gentleman, whose land lies along the river, two or three miles below."

The information is but slight, and slighter the gratification it gives. Captain Ryecroft has heard of the rich baronet whose estate adjoins that of Llangorren, and whose title, with the property attached, will descend to an only son. It is the *torso* of this son he has seen above the red sandstone rock. In truth, a formidable rival! So he reflects, smoking away like mad.

After a time, he again observes,—

"You've said you don't know the ladies we've helped out of their little trouble?"

"Parsonally, I don't, captain. But, now as I see where they live, I know who they be. I've heerd talk 'bout the biggest o' them—a good deal."

The biggest of them! As if she were a salmon! In the boatman's eyes, bulk is evidently her chief recommendation!

Ryecroft smiles, further interrogating:—

"What have you heard of her?"

"That she be a *tidy* young lady. Wonderful fond o' field sport, such as hunting and that like. Fr' all, I may say that up to this day, I never set eyes on her afore."

The Hussar officer has been long enough in Herefordshire to have learnt the local signification of "tidy"—synonymous with "well-behaved." That Miss Wynn is fond of field sports—flood pastimes included—he has gathered from herself while rowing her up the river.

One thing strikes him as strange—that the waterman should not be acquainted with every one dwelling on the river's bank, at least for a dozen miles up and down. He seeks an explanation.

"How is it, Jack, that you, living but a short league above, don't know all about these people?"

He is unaware that Wingate though born on the Wye's banks, as he has told him, is comparatively a stranger to its middle waters—his birthplace being far up in the shire of Brecon. Still that is not the solution of the enigma, which the young waterman gives in his own way,—

"Lord love ye, sir! That shows how little you understand this river. Why, captain, it crooks an' crooks, and goes wobblin' about in such a way, that folks as lives less'n a mile apart knows no more o' one the other than if they wor ten. It comes o' the bridges bein' so few and far between. There's the ferry boats, true; but people don't take to 'em more'n they can help 'specially women—seein' there be some danger at all times, and a good deal o't when the river's aflood. That's frequent, summer well as winter."

The explanation is reasonable; and, satisfied with it, Ryecroft remains for a time wrapt in a dreamy reverie, from which he is aroused as his eyes rest upon a house—a quaint antiquated structure, half timber, half stone, standing not on the river's edge, but at some distance from it up a dingle. The sight is not new to

him; he has before noticed the house—struck with its appearance, so different from the ordinary dwellings.

"Whose is it, Jack?" he asks.

"B'longs to a man, name o' Murdock."

"Odd looking domicile!"

"Ta'nt a bit more that way than he be—if half what they say 'bout him be true."

"Ah! Mr. Murdock's a character, then?"

"Ay; an' a queery one."

"In what respect? what way?"

"More'n one—a goodish many."

"Specify, Jack."

"Well; for one thing, he a'nt sober to say half o' his time."

"Addicted to dipsomania."

"'Dicted to getting dead drunk. I've seen him so, scores o' 'casions."

"That's not wise of Mr. Murdock."

"No, captain; 'ta'nt neyther wise nor well. All the worse, considerin' the place where mostly he go to do his drinkin'."

"Where may that be?"

"The Welsh Harp—up at Rogue's Ferry."

"Rogue's Ferry? Strange appellation! What sort of place is it? Not very nice, I should say—if the name be at all appropriate."

"It's parfitly 'ppropriate, though I b'lieve it wa'nt that way bestowed. It got so called after a man the name o' Rugg, who once kepted the Welsh Harp and the ferry too. It's about two mile above, a little ways back. Besides the tavern, there be a cluster o' houses, a bit scattered about, wi' a chapel an' a grocery shop—one as deals truckways, an' a'nt partickler as to what they take in change—stolen goods welcome as any—ay, welcomer, if they be o' worth. They got plenty o'

them, too. The place be a regular nest o' poachers, an' worse than that—a good many as have sarved their spell in the Penitentiary."

"Why, Wingate, you astonish me! I was under the impression your Wyese was a sort of Arcadia, where one only met with innocence and primitive simplicity."

"You won't meet much o' either at Rogue's Ferry. If there be an uninnocent set on earth it's they as live there. Them Forest chaps we came 'cross a'nt no ways their match in wickedness. Just possible drink made them behave as they did—some o' 'em. But drink or no drink it be all the same wi' the Ferry people—maybe worse when they're sober. Any ways they're a rough lot."

"With a place of worship in their midst! That ought to do something towards refining them."

"Ought; and would, I daresay, if 'twar the right sort—which it a'nt. Instead, o' a kind as only the more corrupts 'em—being Roman."

"Oh! A Roman Catholic chapel. But how does it corrupt them?"

"By makin' 'em believe they can get cleared of their sins, hows'ever black they be. Men as think that way a'nt like to stick at any sort of crime—'specially if it brings 'em the money to buy what they calls absolution."

"Well, Jack, it's very evident you're no friend, or follower, of the Pope."

"Neyther o' Pope nor priest. Ah! captain; if you seed him o' the Rogue's Ferry Chapel, you wouldn't wonder at my havin' a dislike for the whole kit o' them."

"What is there 'specially repulsive about him?"

"Don't know as there be anythin' very special, in partickler. Them priests all look 'bout the same—such o' 'em as I've ever set eyes on. And that's like stoats and weasels, shootin' out o' one hole into another. As for him we're speakin' about, he's here, there, an' everywhere; sneakin' along the roads an' paths, hidin' behind bushes like a cat after birds, an' poppin' out where nobody expects him. If ever there war a spy meaner than another it's the priest of Rogue's Ferry."

"No," he adds, correcting himself. "There be one other in these parts worse than he—if that's possible. A different sort o' man, true; and yet they be a good deal thegither."

"Who is this other?"

"Dick Dempsey—better known by the name of Coracle Dick."

"Ah, Coracle Dick! He appears to occupy a conspicuous place in your thoughts, Jack; and rather a low one in your estimation. Why, may I ask? What sort of fellow is he?"

"The biggest blaggard as lives on the Wye, from where it springs out o' Plinlimmon to its emptying into the Bristol Channel. Talk o' poachers an' night netters. He goes out by night to catch somethin' beside salmon. 'Taint all fish as comes into his net, I know."

The young waterman speaks in such hostile tone both about priest and poacher, that Ryecroft suspects a motive beyond the ordinary prejudice against men who wear the sacerdotal garb, or go trespassing after game. Not caring to inquire into it now, he returns to the original topic, saying,—

"We've strayed from our subject, Jack—which was the hard-drinking owner of yonder house."

"Not so far, captain; seein' as he be the most intimate friend the priest have in these parts; though if what's said be true, not nigh so much as his Missus."

"Murdock is married, then?"

"I won't say that—leastwise I shouldn't like to swear it. All I know is, a woman lives wi' him, s'posed to be his wife. Odd thing she."

"Why odd?"

"'Cause she beant like any other o' womankind 'bout here."

"Explain yourself, Jack. In what does Mrs. Murdock differ from the rest of your Herefordshire fair?"

"One way, captain, in her not bein' fair at all. 'Stead, she be dark complected; most as much as one o' them women I've seed 'bout Cheltenham, nursin' the children o' old officers as brought 'em from India—*ayers* they call 'em. She a'nt one o' 'em, but French, I've heerd say; which in part, I suppose explains the thickness 'tween her an' the priest—he bein' the same."

"Oh! His reverence is a Frenchman, is he?"

"All o' that, captain. If he wor English, he woudn't—coudn't—be the

contemptible sneakin' hound he is. As for Mrs. Murdock, I can't say I've seed her more'n twice in my life. She keeps close to the house; goes nowhere! an' it's said nobody visits her nor him—leastwise none o' the old gentry. For all Mr. Murdock belongs to the best of them."

"He's a gentleman, is he?"

"Ought to be—if he took after his father."

"Why so?"

"Because he wor a squire—regular of the old sort. He's not been so long dead. I can remember him myself, though I hadn't been here such a many years—the old lady too—this Murdock's mother. Ah! now I think on't, she wor t'other squire's sister—father to the tallest o' them two young ladies—the one with the reddish hair."

"What! Miss Wynn?"

"Yes, captain; her they calls Gwen."

Ryecroft questions no farther. He has learnt enough to give him food for reflection—not only during the rest of that day, but for a week, a month—it may be throughout the remainder of his life.



CHAPTER X.

THE CUCKOO'S GLEN.

About a mile above Llangorren Court, but on the opposite side of the Wye, stands the house which had attracted the attention of Captain Ryecroft; known to the neighbourhood as "Glyngog"—Cymric synonym for "Cuckoo's Glen." Not immediately on the water's edge, but several hundred yards back, near the head of a lateral ravine which debouches on the valley of the river, to the latter contributing a rivulet.

Glyngog House is one of those habitations, common in the county of Hereford as other western shires—puzzling the stranger to tell whether they be gentleman's residence, or but the dwelling of a farmer. This from an array of walls, enclosing yard, garden, even the orchard—a plenitude due to the red sandstone being near, and easily shaped for building purposes.

About Glyngog House, however, there is something besides the circumvallation to give it an air of grandeur beyond that of the ordinary farm homestead; certain touches of architectural style which speak of the Elizabethan period—in short that termed Tudor. For its own walls are not altogether stone; instead, a framework of oaken uprights, struts, and braces, black with age, the panelled masonry between plastered and white-washed, giving to the structure a quaint, almost fantastic, appearance, heightened by an irregular roof of steep pitch, with projecting dormers, gables acute angled, overhanging windows, and carving at the coigns. Of such ancient domiciles there are yet many to be met with on the Wye—their antiquity vouched for by the materials used in their construction, when bricks were a costly commodity, and wood to be had almost for the asking.

About this one, the enclosing stone walls have been a later erection, as also the pillared gate entrance to its ornamental grounds, through which runs a carriage drive to the sweep in front. Many a glittering equipage may have gone round on that sweep; for Glyngog was once a manor-house. Now it is but the remains of one, so much out of repair as to show smashed panes in several of its windows, while the *enceinte* walls are only upright where sustained by the upholding ivy; the shrubbery run wild; the walks and carriage drive weed-covered; on the latter neither recent track of wheel, nor hoof-mark of horse.

For all, the house is not uninhabited. Three or four of the windows appear sound, with blinds inside them; while at most hours smoke may be seen ascending from at least two of the chimneys.

Few approach near enough the place to note its peculiarities. The traveller gets but a distant glimpse of its chimney-pots; for the country road, avoiding the dip of the ravine, is carried round its head, and far from the house. It can only be approached by a long, narrow lane, leading nowhere else, so steep as to deter any explorer save a pedestrian; while he, too, would have to contend with an obstruction of over-growing thorns and trailing brambles.

Notwithstanding these disadvantages, Glyngog has something to recommend it—a prospect not surpassed in the western shires of England. He who selected its site must have been a man of tastes rather æsthetic than utilitarian. For the land attached and belonging—some fifty or sixty acres—is barely arable; lying against the abruptly sloping sides of the ravine. But the view is superb. Below, the Wye, winding through a partially wood-covered plain, like some grand constrictor snake; its sinuosities only here and there visible through the trees, resembling a chain of detached lakes—till sweeping past the Cuckoo's Glen, it runs on in straight reach towards Llangorren.

Eye of man never looked upon lovelier landscape; mind of man could not contemplate one more suggestive of all that is, or ought to be, interesting in life. Peaceful smokes ascending out of far-off chimneys; farm-houses, with their surrounding walls, standing amid the greenery of old homestead trees—now in full leaf, for it is the month of June—here and there the sharp spire of a church, or the showy façade of a gentleman's mansion—in the distant background, the dark blue mountains of Monmouthshire; among them conspicuous the Bloreng, Skerrid, and Sugar Loaf. The man who could look on such a picture, without drawing from it inspirations of pleasure, must be out of sorts with the world, if not weary of it.

And yet just such a man is now viewing it from Glyngog House, or rather the bit of shrubbery ground in front. He is seated on a rustic bench partly shattered, barely enough of it whole to give room beside him for a small japanned tray on which are tumbler, bottle and jug—the two last respectively containing brandy and water; while in the first is an admixture of both. He is smoking a meerschaum pipe, which at short intervals he removes from his mouth to give place to the drinking glass.

The personal appearance of this man is in curious correspondence with the bench on which he sits, the walls around, and the house behind. Like all these, he looks dilapidated. Not only is his apparel out of repair, but his constitution too, as shown by hollow cheeks and sunken eyes, with crows feet ramifying around them. This due not, as with the surrounding objects, to age; for he is still under forty. Nor yet any of the natural infirmities to which flesh is heir; but evidently to drink. Some reddish spots upon his nose and flecks on the forehead, with the glass held in shaking hand, proclaims this the cause. And it is.

Lewin Murdock—such is the man's name—has led a dissipated life. Not much of it in England; still less in Herefordshire; and only its earlier years in the house he now inhabits—his paternal home. Since boyhood he has been abroad, staying none can say where, and straying no one knows whither—often seen, however, at Baden, Homburg, and other "hells," punting high or low, as the luck has gone for or against him. At a later period in Paris, during the Imperial *régime*—worst hell of all. It has stripped him of everything; driven him out and home, to seek asylum at Glyngog, once a handsome property, now but a *pied à terre*, on which he may only set his foot with a mortgage around his neck. For even the little land left to it is let out to a farmer, and the rent goes not to him. He is, in fact, only a tenant on his patrimonial estate; holding but the house at that, with the ornamental grounds and an acre or two of orchard, of which he takes no care. The farmer's sheep may scale the crumbling walls, and browse the weedy enclosure at will: give Lewin Murdock his meerschaum pipe, with enough brandy and water, and he but laughs. Not that he is of a jovial disposition, not at all given to mirth; only that it takes something more than the pasturage of an old orchard to excite his thoughts, or turn them to cupidity.

For all, land does this—the very thing. No limited tract; but one of many acres in extent—even miles—the land of Llangorren.

It is now before his face, and under his eyes, as a map unfolded. On the opposite side of the river it forms the foreground of the landscape; in its midst the many-windowed mansion, backed by stately trees, with well-kept grounds, and green pastures; at a little distance the "Grange," or home-farm, and farther off others that look of the same belonging—as they are. A smiling picture it is; spread before the eyes of Lewin Murdock, whenever he sits in his front window, or steps outside the door. And the brighter the sun shines on it, the darker the shadow on his brow.

Not much of an enigma either. That land of Llangorren belonged to his

grandfather, but now is, or soon will be, the property of his cousin—Gwendoline Wynn. Were she not, it would be his. Between him and it runs the Wye, a broad, deep river. But what its width or depth, compared with that other something between? A barrier stronger and more impassable than the stream, yet seeming slight as a thread. For it is but the *thread of a life*. Should it snap, or get accidentally severed, Lewin Murdock would only have to cross the river, proclaim himself master of Llangorren, and take possession.

He would scarce be human not to think of all this. And being human he does—has thought of it oft, and many a time. With feelings too, beyond the mere prompting of cupidity. These due to a legend handed down to him, telling of an unfair disposal of the Llangorren property; but a pittance given to his mother, who married Murdock of Glyngog; while the bulk went to her brother, the father of Gwen Wynn. All matters of testament, since the estate is unentailed; the only grace of the grandfather towards the Murdock branch being a clause entitling them to possession, in the event of the collateral heirs dying out. And of these but one is living—the heroine of our tale.

"Only she—but she!" mutters Lewin Murdock, in a tone of such bitterness, that, as if to drown it, he plucks the pipe out of his mouth, and gulps down the last drop in the glass.



CHAPTER XI.

A WEED BY THE WYESIDE.

"Only she—but she!" he repeats, grasping the bottle by the neck, and pouring more brandy into the tumbler.

Though speaking *sotto voce*, and not supposing himself overheard, he is, nevertheless—by a woman, who, coming forth from the house, has stepped silently behind him, there pausing.

Odd-looking apparition she, seen upon the Wyeside; altogether unlike a native of it, but altogether like one born upon the banks of the Seine, and brought up to tread the Boulevards of Paris—like the latter from the crown of her head to the soles of her high-heeled boots, on whose toes she stands poised and balancing. In front of that ancient English manor-house, she seems grotesquely out of place—as much as a costermonger, driving his moke-drawn cart among the Pyramids, or smoking a "Pickwick" by the side of the Sphinx.

For all there is nothing mysterious, or even strange in her presence there. She is Lewin Murdock's wife. If he has left his fortune in foreign lands, with the better part of his life and health, he has thence brought her, his better-half.

Physically a fine-looking woman, despite some ravages due to time, and possibly more to crime. Tall and dark as the daughters of the Latinic race, with features beautiful in the past—even still attractive to those not repelled by the beguiling glances of sin.

Such were hers, first given to him in a *café chantant* of the Tuileries—oft afterwards repeated in *jardin, bois*, and *bals* of the demi-monde, till at length she gave him her hand in the Eglise La Madeleine.

Busied with his brandy, and again gazing at Llangorren, he has not yet seen her; nor is he aware of her proximity till hearing an exclamation:—

"*Eh, bien?*"

He starts at the interrogatory, turning round.

"You think too loud, Monsieur—that is if you wish to keep your thoughts to yourself. And you might—seeing that it's a love secret! May I ask who is this *she* you're soliloquising about? Some of your old English *bonnes amies*, I suppose?"

This, with an air of affected jealousy she is far from feeling. In the heart of the *ex-cocotte* there is no place for such a sentiment.

"Got nothing to do with *bonnes amies*, young or old," he gruffly replies. "Just now I've got something else to think of than sweethearts. Enough occupation for my thoughts in the how I'm to support a wife—yourself, madame."

"It wasn't me you meant. No, indeed. Some other, in whom you appear to feel a very profound interest."

"There you're right, it was one other, in whom I feel all that."

"*Merci, Monsieur! Ma foi!* your candour deserves all thanks. Perhaps you'll extend it, and favour me with the lady's name? A lady, I presume. The grand Seigneur Lewin Murdock would not be giving his thoughts to less."

Ignorance pretended. She knows, or surmises, to whom he has been giving them; for she has been watching him from a window, and observed the direction of his glances. And she has more than a suspicion as to the nature of his reflections; since she is well aware as he of that something besides a river separating them from Llangorren.

"Her name?" she again asks, in tone of more demand, her eyes bent searchingly on his.

Avoiding her glance, he still pulls away at his pipe, without making answer.

"It is a love secret, then? I thought so. It's cruel of you, Lewin! This is the return for giving you—all I had to give!"

She may well speak hesitatingly, and hint at a limited sacrifice. Only her hand; and it more than tenderly pressed by scores—ay hundreds—of others, before being bestowed upon him. No false pretence, however, on her part. He knew all that, or should have known it. How could he help? Olympe, the belle of the Jardin Mabille, was no obscurity in the *demi-monde* of Paris—even in its days of glory under Napoleon le Petite.

Her reproach is also a pretence, though possibly with some sting felt. She is

drawing on to that term of life termed *passé*; and begins to feel conscious of it. He may be the same. Not that for his opinion she cares a straw—save in a certain sense, and for reasons altogether independent of slighted affection—the very purpose she is now working upon, and for which she needs to hold over him the power she has hitherto had. And well knows she how to retain it, rekindling love's fire when it seems in danger of dying out, either through appeal to his pity, or exciting his jealousy, which she can adroitly do, by her artful French ways and dark flashing eyes.

As he looks in them now, the old flame flickers up, and he feels almost as much her slave as when he first became her husband.

For all he does not show it. This day he is out of sorts with himself, and her, and all the world besides; so instead of reciprocating her sham tenderness—as if knowing it such—he takes another swallow of brandy, and smokes on in silence.

Now really incensed, or seeming so, she exclaims:—

"*Perfide!*" adding with a disdainful toss of the head, such as only the dames of the *demi-monde* know how to give, "Keep your secret! What care I?" Then changing tone, "*Mon Dieu!* France—dear France! Why did I ever leave you?"

"Because your dear France became too dear to live in."

"Clever *double entendre!* No doubt you think it witty! Dear, or not, better a garret there—a room in its humblest *entresol* than this. I'd rather serve in a cigar shop—keep a *gargot* in the Faubourg Montmartre—than lead such a *triste* life as we're now doing. Living in this wretched kennel of a house, that threatens to tumble on our heads!"

"How would you like to live in that over yonder?"

He nods towards Llangorren Court.

"You are merry, Monsieur. But your jests are out of place—in presence of the misery around us."

"You may some day," he goes on, without heeding her observation.

"Yes; when the sky falls we may catch larks. You seem to forget that Mademoiselle Wynn is younger than either of us, and by the natural laws of life will outlive both. Must, unless she break her neck in the hunting-field, get

drowned out of a boat, or meet *some other mischance*."

She pronounces the last three words slowly and with marked emphasis, pausing after she has spoken them, and looking fixedly in his face, as if to note their effect.

Taking the meerschaum from his mouth, he returns her look—almost shuddering as his eyes meet hers, and he reads in them a glance such as might have been given by Messalina, or the murderess of Duncan. Hardened as his conscience has become through a long career of sin, it is yet tender in comparison with hers. And he knows it, knowing her history, or enough of it—her nature as well—to make him think her capable of anything, even the crime her speech seems to point to—neither more nor less than—

He dares not think, let alone pronounce, the word. He is not yet up to that; though day by day, as his desperate fortunes press upon him, his thoughts are being familiarised with something akin to it—a dread, dark design, still vague, but needing not much to assume shape, and tempt to execution. And that the tempter is by his side he is more than half conscious. It is not the first time for him to listen to fell speech from those fair lips.

To-day he would rather shun allusion to a subject so grave, yet so delicate. He has spent part of the preceding night at the Welsh Harp—the tavern spoken of by Wingate—and his nerves are unstrung, yet not recovered from the revelry. Instead of asking her what she means by "some other mischance," he but remarks, with an air of careless indifference,—

"True, Olympe; unless something of that sort were to happen, there seems no help for us but to resign ourselves to patience, and live on expectations."

"Starve on them, you mean."

This in a tone, and with a shrug, which seem to convey reproach for its weakness.

"Well, *chérie*," he rejoins, "we can at least feast our eyes on the source whence our fine fortunes are to come. And a pretty sight it is, isn't it? *Un coup d'œil charmant!*"

He again turns his eyes upon Llangorren, as also she, and for some time both are silent.

Attractive at any time, the Court is unusually so on this same summer's day. For the sun, lighting up the verdant lawn, also shines upon a large white tent there erected—a marquee—from whose ribbed roof projects a signal staff, with flag floating at its peak. They have had no direct information of what all this is for—since to Lewin Murdock and his wife the society of Herefordshire is tabooed. But they can guess from the symbols that it is to be a garden party, or something of the sort, there often given. While they are still gazing its special kind is declared, by figures appearing upon the lawn and taking stand in groups before the tent. There are ladies gaily attired—in the distance looking like bright butterflies—some dressed *à la Diane*, with bows in hand, and quivers slung by their sides, the feathered shafts showing over their shoulders; a proportionate number of gentlemen attendant; while liveried servants stride to and fro erecting the ringed targets.

Murdock himself cares little for such things. He has had his surfeit of fashionable life; not only sipped its sweets, but drank its dregs of bitterness. He regards Llangorren with something in his mind more substantial than its sports and pastimes.

With different thoughts looks the Parisian upon them—in her heart a chagrin only known to those whose zest for the world's pleasure is of keenest edge, yet checked and baffled from indulgence—ambitions uncontrollable, but never to be attained. As Satan gazed back when hurled out of the Garden of Eden, so she at that scene upon the lawn of Llangorren. No *jardin* of Paris—not the Bois itself—ever seemed to her so attractive as those grounds, with that aristocratic gathering—a heaven none of her kind can enter, and but few of her country.

After long regarding it with envy in her eyes, and spleen in her soul—tantalized, almost to torture—she faces towards her husband, saying—

"And you've told me, between all that and us, there's but one life——"

"Two!" interrupts a voice—not his.

Both turning, startled, behold—*Father Rogier!*

CHAPTER XII.

A WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING.

Father Rogier is a French priest of a type too well known over all the world—the Jesuitical. Spare of form, thin-lipped, nose with the cuticle drawn across it tight as drum parchment, skin dark and cadaverous, he looks Loyola from head to heel.

He himself looks no one straight in the face. Confronted, his eyes fall to his feet, or turn to either side, not in timid abashment, but as those of one who feels himself a felon. And but for his habiliments he might well pass for such; though even the sacerdotal garb, and assumed air of sanctity, do not hinder the suspicion of a wolf in sheep's clothing—rather suggesting it.

And in truth is he one; a very Pharisee—Inquisitor to boot, cruel and keen as ever sate in secret Council over an *Auto da Fé*.

What is such a man doing in Herefordshire? What, in Protestant England? Time was, and not so long ago, when these questions would have been asked with curiosity, and some degree of indignation. As for instance, when our popular Queen added to her popularity, by somewhat ostentatiously declaring, that "no foreign priest should take tithe or toll in her dominions," even forbidding them their distinctive dress. Then they stole timidly, and sneakingly, through the streets, usually seen hunting in couples, and looking as if conscious their pursuit was criminal, or, at the least, illegal.

All that is over now; the ban removed, the boast unkept—to all appearance forgotten! Now they stalk boldly abroad, or saunter in squads, exhibiting their shorn crowns and pallid faces, without fear or shame; instead, triumphantly flouting their vestments in public walks or parks, or loitering in the vestibules of convents and monasteries, which begin to show thick over the land—threatening us with a curse as that anterior to the time of bluff King Hal. No one now thinks it strange to see shovel-hatted priest, or sandalled monk—no matter in what part of England, nor would wonder at one of either being resident upon Wyaside. Father Rogier, one of the former, is there with similar motive, and for the same purpose, his sort are sent everywhere—to enslave the souls of men and get

money out of their purses, in order that other men, princes, and priests like himself, may lead luxurious lives, without toil and by trickery. The same old story, since the beginning of the world, or man's presence upon it. The same craft as the rain-maker of South Africa, or the medicine man of the North American Indian; differing only in some points of practice; the religious juggler of a higher civilization, finding his readiest tools not in roots, snake-skins, and rattles, but the weakness of woman. Through this, as by sap and mine, many a strong citadel has been carried, after bidding defiance to the boldest and most determined assault.

Père Rogier well knows all this; and by experience, having played the propagandist game with some success since his settling in Herefordshire. He has not been quite three years resident on Wyeside, and yet has contrived to draw around him a considerable coterie of weak-minded Marthas and Marys, built him a little chapel, with a snug dwelling house, and is in a fair way of further feathering his nest. True, his neophytes are nearly all of the humbler class, and poor. But the Peter's pence count up in a remarkable manner, and are paid with a regularity which only blind devotion, or the zeal of religious partizanship, can exact. Fear of the Devil, and love of him, are like effective in drawing contributions to the box of the Rugg's Ferry chapel, and filling the pockets of its priest.

And if he have no grand people among his flock, and few disciples of the class called middle, he can boast of at least two claiming to be genteel—the Murdocks. With the man no false assumption either; neither does he assume, or value it. Different the woman. Born in the Faubourg Montmartre, her father a common *ouvrier*, her mother a *blanchisseuse*—herself a beautiful girl—Olympe Renault soon found her way into a more fashionable quarter. The same ambition made her Lewin Murdock's wife, and has brought her on to England. For she did not marry him without some knowledge of his reversionary interest in the land of which they have just been speaking, and at which they are still looking. That was part of the inducement held out for obtaining her hand; her heart he never had.

That the priest knows something of the same, indeed all, is evident from the word he has responsively pronounced. With step, silent and cat-like—his usual mode of progression—he has come upon them unawares, neither having note of his approach till startled by his voice. On hearing it, and seeing who, Murdock rises to his feet, as he does so saluting. Notwithstanding long years of a depraved life, his early training has been that of a gentleman, and its instincts at times

return to him. Besides, born and brought up Roman Catholic, he has that respect for his priest habitual to a proverb—would have, even if knowing the latter to be the veriest Pharisee that ever wore single-breasted black coat.

Salutations exchanged, and a chair brought out for the new comer to sit upon, Murdock demands explanation of the interrupting monosyllable, asking:

"What do you mean, Father Rogier, by 'two'?"

"What I've said, M'sieu; that there are two between you and that over yonder, or soon will be—in time perhaps ten. A fair *paysage* it is!" he continues, looking across the river; "a very vale of Tempé, or Garden of the Hesperides. *Parbleu!* I never believed your England so beautiful. Ah! what's going on at Llangorren?" This as his eyes rest upon the tent, the flags, and gaily-dressed figures. "A *fête champêtre*: Mademoiselle making merry! In honour of the anticipated change, no doubt."

"Still I don't comprehend," says Murdock, looking puzzled. "You speak in riddles, Father Rogier."

"Riddles easily read, M'sieu. Of this particular one you'll find the interpretation there."

This, pointing to a plain gold ring on the fourth finger of Mrs. Murdock's left hand, put upon it by Murdock himself on the day he became her husband.

He now comprehends—his quick-witted wife sooner.

"Ha!" she exclaims, as if pricked by a pin, "Mademoiselle to be married?"

The priest gives an assenting nod.

"That's news to me," mutters Murdock, in a tone more like he was listening to the announcement of a death.

"*Moi aussi!* Who, *Père?* Not Monsieur Shenstone, after all?"

The question shows how well she is acquainted with Miss Wynn—if not personally, with her surroundings and predilections!

"No," answers the priest. "Not he."

"Who then?" asked the two simultaneously.

"A man likely to make many heirs to Llangorren—widen the breach between you and it—ah! to the impossibility of that ever being bridged."

"*Père Rogier!*" appeals Murdock, "I pray you speak out! Who is to do this? His name?"

"*Le Capitaine Ryecroft.*"

"Captain Ryecroft! Who—what is he?"

"An officer of Hussars—a fine-looking fellow—sort of combination of Mars and Apollo; strong as Hercules! As I've said, likely to be father to no end of sons and daughters, with Gwen Wynn for their mother. *Helas!* I can fancy seeing them now—at play over yonder, on the lawn!"

"Captain Ryecroft!" repeats Murdock musingly; "I never saw—never heard of the man!"

"You hear of him now, and possibly see him too. No doubt he's among those gay toxophilites—Ha! no, he's nearer! What a strange coincidence! The old saw, 'speak of the fiend.' There's *your* fiend, Monsieur Murdock!"

He points to a boat on the river with two men in it; one of them wearing a white cap. It is dropping down in the direction of Llangorren Court.

"Which?" asks Murdock mechanically.

"He with the *chapeau blanc*. That's whom you have to fear. The other's but the waterman Wingate—honest fellow enough, whom no one need fear—unless indeed our worthy friend Coracle Dick, his competitor for the smiles of the pretty Mary Morgan. Yes, *mes amis!* Under that conspicuous *kepi* you behold the future lord of Llangorren."

"Never!" exclaims Murdock, angrily gritting his teeth. "Never!"

The French priest and *ci-devant* French courtesan exchange secret, but significant, glances; a pleased expression showing on the faces of both.

"You speak excitedly, M'sieu," says the priest, "emphatically, too. But how is it to be hindered?"

"I don't know," sourly rejoins Murdock; "I suppose it can't be," he adds, drawing back, as if conscious of having committed himself. "Never mind, now; let's drop

the disagreeable subject. You'll stay to dinner with us, Father Rogier?"

"If not putting you to inconvenience."

"Nay; it's you who'll be inconvenienced—starved, I should rather say. The butchers about here are not of the most amiable type; and, if I mistake not, our *menu* for to-day is a very primitive one—bacon and potatoes, with some greens from the old garden."

"Monsieur Murdock! It's not the fare, but the fashion, which makes a meal enjoyable. A crust and welcome is to me better cheer than a banquet with a grudging host at the head of the table. Besides, your English bacon is a most estimable dish, and with your succulent cabbages delectable. With a bit of Wye salmon to precede, and a pheasant to follow, it were food to satisfy Lucullus himself."

"Ah! true," assents the broken-down gentleman, "with the salmon and pheasant. But where are they? My fishmonger, who is conjointly also a game-dealer, is at present as much out with me as is the butcher; I suppose, from my being too much in with them—in their books. Still, they have not ceased acquaintance, so far as calling is concerned. That they do with provoking frequency. Even this morning, before I was out of bed, I had the honour of a visit from both the gentlemen. Unfortunately, they brought neither fish nor meat; instead, two sheets of that detestable blue paper, with red lines and rows of figures—an arithmetic not nice to be bothered with at one's breakfast. So, *Père*, I am sorry I can't offer you any salmon; and as for pheasant—you may not be aware, that it is out of season."

"It's never out of season, any more than barn-door fowl; especially if a young last year's *coq*, that hasn't been successful in finding a mate."

"But it's close time now," urges the Englishman, stirred by his old instincts of gentleman sportsman.

"Not to those who know how to open it," returns the Frenchman with a significant shrug. "And suppose we do that to-day?"

"I don't understand. Will your Reverence enlighten me?"

"Well, M'sieu; being Whit-Monday, and coming to pay you a visit, I thought you mightn't be offended by my bringing along with me a little present—for Madame here—that we're talking of—salmon and pheasant."

The husband, more than the wife, looks incredulous. Is the priest jesting? Beneath the *froc*, fitting tight his thin spare form, there is nothing to indicate the presence of either fish or bird.

"Where are they?" asks Murdock mechanically. "You say you've brought them along?"

"Ah! that was metaphorical. I meant to say I had sent them. And if I mistake not, they are near now. Yes; there's my messenger!"

He points to a man making up the glen, threading his way through the tangle of wild bushes that grow along the banks of the rivulet.

"Coracle Dick!" exclaims Murdock, recognising the poacher.

"The identical individual," answers the priest, adding, "who, though a poacher, and possibly has been something worse, is not such a bad fellow in his way—for certain purposes. True, he's neither the most devout nor best behaved of my flock; still a useful individual, especially on Fridays, when one has to confine himself to a fish diet. I find him convenient in other ways as well; as so might you, Monsieur Murdock—some day. Should you ever have need of a strong hard hand, with a heart in correspondence, Richard Dempsey possesses both, and would no doubt place them at your service—for a consideration."

While Murdock is cogitating on what the last words are meant to convey, the individual so recommended steps upon the ground. A stout thick-set fellow, with a shock of black curly hair coming low down, almost to his eyes, thus adding to their sinister and lowering look. For all a face not naturally uncomely, but one on which crime has set its stamp, deep and indelible.

His garb is such as gamekeepers usually wear, and poachers almost universally affect, a shooting coat of velveteen, corduroy smalls, and sheepskin gaiters buttoned over thick-soled shoes iron-tipped at the toes. In the ample skirt pockets of the coat—each big as a game-bag—appear two protuberances, that about balance one another—the present of which the priest has already delivered the invoice—in the one being a salmon "blotcher" weighing some three or four pounds, in the other a young cock pheasant.

Having made obeisance to the trio in the grounds of Glyngog, he is about drawing them forth when the priest prevents him, exclaiming:—

"*Arretez!* They're not commodities that keep well in the sun. Should a water-

bailiff, or one of the Llangorren gamekeepers chance to set eyes on them, they'd spoil at once. Those lynx-eyed fellows can see a long way, especially on a day bright as this. So, worthy Coracle, before uncarting, you'd better take them back to the kitchen."

Thus instructed the poacher strides off round to the rear of the house; Mrs. Murdock entering by the front door to give directions about dressing the dinner. Not that she intends to take any hand in cooking it—not she. That would be *infra dig.* for the *ancien belle of Mabile*. Poor as is the establishment of Glyngog, it can boast of a plain cook, with a *slavey* to assist.

The other two remain outside, the guest joining his host in a glass of brandy and water. More than one; for Father Rogier, though French, can drink like a born Hibernian. Nothing of the Good Templar in him.

After they have been for nigh an hour hobnobbing, conversing, Murdock still fighting shy of the subject, which is nevertheless uppermost in the minds of both, the priest once more approaches it, saying:—

"*Parbleu!* They appear to be enjoying themselves over yonder!" He is looking at the lawn where the bright forms are flitting to and fro. "And most of all, I should say, Monsieur White Cap—foretasting the sweets of which he'll ere long enter into full enjoyment; when he becomes master of Llangorren."

"That—never!" exclaims Murdock, this time adding an oath. "Never while I live. When I'm dead——"

"*Diner!*" interrupts a female voice from the house—that of its mistress seen standing on the doorstep.

"Madame summons us," says the priest, "we must in, M'sieu. While picking the bones of the pheasant, you can complete your unfinished speech. *Allons!*"



CHAPTER XIII.

AMONG THE ARROWS.

The invited to the archery meeting have nearly all arrived, and the shooting has commenced; half a dozen arrows in the air at a time, making for as many targets.

Only a limited number of ladies compete for the first score, each having a little coterie of acquaintances at her back.

Gwen Wynn herself is in this opening contest. Good with the bow, as at the oar—indeed with county celebrity as an archer—carrying the champion badge of her club—it is almost a foregone conclusion she will come off victorious.

Soon, however, those who are backing her begin to anticipate disappointment. She is not shooting with her usual skill, nor yet earnestness. Instead, negligently, and, to all appearance, with thoughts abstracted; her eyes every now and then straying over the ground, scanning the various groups, as if in search of a particular individual. The gathering is large—nearly a hundred people present—and one might come or go without attracting observation. She evidently expects one to come who is not yet there; and oftener than elsewhere her glances go towards the boat-dock, as if the personage expected should appear in that direction. There is a nervous restlessness in her manner, and after each reconnaissance of this kind, an expression of disappointment on her countenance.

It is not unobserved. A gentleman by her side notes it, and with some suspicion of its cause—a suspicion that pains him. It is George Shenstone; who is attending on her, handing the arrows—in short acting as her *aide-de-camp*. Neither is he adroit in the exercise of his duty; instead performs it bunglingly; his thoughts preoccupied, and eyes wandering about. His glances, however, are sent in the opposite direction—to the gate entrance of the park, visible from the place where the targets are set up.

They are both "prospecting" for the self-same individual, but with very different ideas—one eagerly anticipating his arrival, the other as earnestly hoping he may not come. For the expected one is a gentleman—no other than Vivian Ryecroft.

Shenstone knows the Hussar officer has been invited, and, however hoping or wishing it, has but little faith he will fail. Were it himself, no ordinary obstacle could prevent his being present at that archery meeting, any more than would five-barred gate, or bullfinch, hinder him from keeping up with hounds.

As time passes without any further arrivals, and the tardy guest has not yet put in appearance, Shenstone begins to think he will this day have Miss Wynn to himself, or at least without any very formidable competitor. There are others present who seek her smiles—some aspiring to her hand—but none he fears so much as the one still absent.

Just as he is becoming calm and confident, he is saluted by a gentleman of the genus "swell," who, approaching, drawls out the interrogatory:—

"Who is that fella, Shenstone?"

"What fellow?"

"He with the vewy peculya head gear. Indian affair—*topee*, I bewieve they call it."

"Where?" asks Shenstone, starting and staring to all sides.

"Yondaw! Appwoaching from the diwection of the rivaw. Looks a fwesh awival. I take it he must have come by bawt! Knaw him?"

George Shenstone, strong man though he be, visibly trembles. Were Gwen Wynn at that moment to face about, and aim one of her arrows at his breast, it would not bring more pallor upon his cheeks, nor pain to his heart. For he wearing the "peculya head gear" is the man he most fears, and whom he had hoped not to see this day.

So much is he affected, he does not answer the question put to him; nor indeed has he opportunity, as just then Miss Wynn, sighting the *topee* too, suddenly turning, says to him:—

"George! be good enough to take charge of these things." She holds her bow with an arrow she had been affixing to the string. "Yonder's a gentleman just arrived; who you know is a stranger. Aunt will expect me to receive him. I'll be back soon as I've discharged my duty."

Delivering the bow and unspent shaft, she glides off without further speech or

ceremony.

He stands looking after; in his eyes anything but a pleased expression. Indeed sullen, almost angry, as watching her every movement he notes the manner of her reception—greeting the new comer with a warmth and cordiality he, Shenstone, thinks uncalled for, however much stranger the man may be. Little irksome to her seems the discharge of that so-called duty; but so exasperating to the baronet's son, he feels like crushing the bow stick between his fingers, or snapping it in twain across his knee!

As he stands with eyes glaring upon them, he is again accosted by his inquisitive acquaintance, who asks:

"What's the matter, Jawge? Yaw haven't answered my intewogatowy!"

"What was it? I forget."

"Aw, indeed! That's stwange. I merely wished to know who Mr. White Cap is?"

"Just what I'd like to know myself. All I can tell you is, that he's an army fellow—in the Cavalry I believe—by name Ryecroft."

"Aw yas; Cavalwy. That's evident by the bend of his legs. Wyquoft—Wyquoft, you say?"

"So he calls himself—a captain of Hussars—his own story."

This in a tone and with a shrug of insinuation.

"But yaw don't think he's an adventuwer?"

"Can't say whether he is, or not."

"Who's his endawser? How came he intwoduced at Llangowen?"

"That I can't tell you."

He could though; for Miss Wynn, true to her promise, has made him acquainted with the circumstances of the river adventure, though not those leading to it; and he, true to his, has kept them a secret. In a sense therefore, he could not tell, and the subterfuge is excusable.

"By Jawve! The Light Bob appears to have made good use of his time—however intwoduced. Miss Gwen seems quite familiaw with him; and yondaw the little

Lees shaking hands, as though the two had been acquainted evaw since coming out of their cwadles! See! They're dwagging him up to the ancient spinster, who sits enthawned in her chair like a queen of the Tawnament times. Vewy mediæval the whole affair—vewy!"

"Instead, very modern; in my opinion disgustingly so!"

"Why d'yaw say that, Jawge?"

"Why! Because in either olden or mediæval times such a thing couldn't have occurred—here in Herefordshire."

"What thing, pway?"

"A man admitted into good society without endorsement or introduction. Now-a-days any one may be so; claim acquaintance with a lady, and force his company upon her, simply from having had the chance to pick up a dropped pocket-handkerchief, or offer his umbrella in a skiff of a shower!"

"But, shawly, that isn't how the gentleman yondaw made acquaintance with the fair Gwendoline?"

"Oh! I don't say that," rejoins Shenstone, with forced attempt at a smile—more natural, as he sees Miss Wynn separate from the group they are gazing at, and come back to reclaim her bow. Better satisfied, now, he is rather worried by his importunate friend, and to get rid of him adds:

"If you are really desirous to know how Miss Wynn became acquainted with him, you can ask the lady herself."

Not for all the world would the swell put that question to Gwen Wynn. It would not be safe; and thus snubbed he saunters away, before she is up to the spot.

Ryecroft, left with Miss Linton, remains in conversation with her. It is not his first interview; for several times already has he been a visitor at Llangorren—introduced by the young ladies as the gentleman who, when the pleasure-boat was caught in a dangerous whirl, out of which old Joseph was unable to extricate it, came to their rescue—possibly to the saving of their lives! Thus, the version of the adventure vouchsafed to the aunt—sufficient to sanction his being received at the Court.

And the ancient toast of Cheltenham has been charmed with him. In the

handsome Hussar officer she beholds the typical hero of her romance reading; so much like it, that Lord Lutestring has long ago gone out of her thoughts—passed from her memory as though he had been but a musical sound. Of all who bend before her this day, the worship of none is so welcome as that of the martial stranger.



Resuming her bow, Gwen shoots no better than before. Her thoughts, instead of being concentrated on the painted circles, as her eyes, are half the time straying over her shoulders to him behind, still in a *tête-à-tête* with the aunt. Her arrows fly wild and wide, scarce one sticking in the straw. In fine, among all the competitors, she counts lowest score—the poorest she has herself ever made. But what matters it? She is only too pleased when her quiver is empty, and she can have excuse to return to Miss Linton, on some question connected with the hospitalities of the house.

Observing all this, and much more besides, George Shenstone feels aggrieved—indeed exasperated—so terribly, it takes all his best breeding to withhold him from an exhibition of bad behaviour. He might not succeed were he to remain much longer on the ground—which he does not. As if misdoubting his power of restraint, and fearing to make a fool of himself, he too frames excuse, and leaves Llangorren long before the sports come to a close. Not rudely, or with any show of spleen. He is a gentleman, even in his anger; and bidding a polite, and formal, adieu to Miss Linton, with one equally ceremonious, but more distant, to Miss Wynn, he slips round to the stables, orders his horse, leaps into the saddle, and rides off.

Many the day he has entered the gates of Llangorren with a light and happy heart—this day he goes out of them with one heavy and sad.

If missed from the archery meeting, it is not by Miss Wynn. Instead, she is glad of his being gone. Notwithstanding the love passion for another now occupying her heart—almost filling it—there is still room there for the gentler sentiment of pity. She knows how Shenstone suffers—how could she help knowing?—and pities him.

Never more than at this same moment, despite that distant, half-disdainful adieu, vouchsafed to her at parting; by him intended to conceal his thoughts, as his

sufferings, while but the better revealing them. How men underrate the perception of women! In matters of this kind a very intuition.

None keener than that of Gwen Wynn. She knows why he has gone so short away—well as if he had told her. And with the compassionate thought still lingering, she heaves a sigh; sad as she sees him ride out through the gate—going in reckless gallop—but succeeded by one of relief, soon as he is out of sight!

In an instant after, she is gay and gladsome as ever; once more bending the bow, and making the catgut twang. But now shooting straight—hitting the target every time, and not unfrequently lodging a shaft in the "gold." For he who now attends on her, not only inspires confidence, but excites her to the display of skill. Captain Ryecroft has taken George Shenstone's place as her aide-de-camp; and while he hands the arrows, she spending them, others of a different kind pass between them—the shafts of Cupid—of which there is a full quiver in the eyes of both.



CHAPTER XIV.

BEATING ABOUT THE BUSH.

Naturally, Captain Ryecroft is the subject of speculation among the archers at Llangorren. A man of his mien would be so anywhere—if stranger. The old story of the unknown knight suddenly appearing on the tourney's field with closed visor, only recognisable by a love-lock or other favour of the lady whose cause he comes to champion.

He, too, wears a distinctive badge—in the white cap. For though our tale is of modern time, it antedates than when Brown began to affect the *pugaree*—sham of Manchester Mills—as an appendage to his cheap straw hat. That on the head of Captain Ryecroft is the regular forage cap, with quilted cover. Accustomed to it in India—whence he has but lately returned—he adheres to it in England, without thought of its attracting attention, and as little caring whether it does or not.

It does, however. Insular, we are supremely conservative—some might call it "caddish"—and view innovations with a jealous eye; as witness the so-called "moustache movement" not many years ago, and the fierce controversy it called forth.

For other reasons the officer of Hussars is at this same archery gathering a cynosure of eyes. There is a perfume of romance about him; in the way he has been introduced to the ladies of Llangorren; a question asked by others besides the importunate friend of George Shenstone. The true account of the affair with the drunken foresters has not got abroad—these keeping dumb about their own discomfiture; while Jack Wingate, a man of few words, and on this special matter admonished to silence, has been equally close-mouthed; Joseph also mute for reasons already mentioned.

Withal, a vague story has currency in the neighbourhood, of a boat, with two young ladies, in danger of being capsized—by some versions actually upset—and the ladies rescued from drowning by a stranger who chanced to be salmon-fishing near by—his name, Ryecroft. And as this tale also circulates among the archers at Llangorren, it is not strange that some interest should attach to the

supposed hero of it, now present.

Still, in an assemblage so large, and composed of such distinguished people—many of whom are strangers to one another—no particular personage can be for long an object of special concern; and if Captain Ryecroft continue to attract observation, it is neither from curiosity as to how he came there, nor the peculiarity of his head-dress, but the dark handsome features beneath it. On these more than one pair of bright eyes occasionally become fixed, regarding them with admiration.

None so warmly as those of Gwen Wynn; though hers neither openly nor in a marked manner. For she is conscious of being under the surveillance of other eyes, and needs to observe the proprieties.

In which she succeeds; so well, that no one watching her could tell, much less say, there is aught in her behaviour to Captain Ryecroft beyond the hospitality of host—which in a sense she is—to guest claiming the privileges of a stranger. Even when during an interregnum of the sports the two go off together, and, after strolling for a time through the grounds, are at length seen to step inside the summer-house, it may cause, but does not merit, remark. Others are acting similarly, sauntering in pairs, loitering in shady places, or sitting on rustic benches. Good society allows the freedom, and to its credit. That which is corrupt alone may cavil at it, and shame the day when such confidence be abused and abrogated.

Side by side they take stand in the little pavilion, under the shadow of its painted zinc roof. It may not have been all chance their coming thither—no more the archery party itself. That Gwendoline Wynn, who suggested giving it, can alone tell. But standing there with their eyes bent on the river, they are for a time silent, so much, that each can hear the beating of the other's heart—both brimful of love.

At such moment one might suppose there could be no reserve or reticence, but confession, full, candid, and mutual. Instead, at no time is this farther off. If *le joie fait peur*, far more *l'amour*.

And with all that has passed is there fear between them. On her part springing from a fancy she has been over forward—in her gushing gratitude for that service done, given too free expression to it, and needs being more reserved now. On his side speech is stayed by a reflection somewhat akin, with others besides. In his several calls at the Court his reception has been both welcome and warm.

Still, not beyond the bounds of well-bred hospitality. But why on each and every occasion has he found a gentleman there—the same every time—George Shenstone by name? There before him, and staying after! And this very day, what meant Mr. Shenstone by that sudden and abrupt departure? Above all, why her distraught look, with the sigh accompanying it, as the baronet's son went galloping out of the gate? Having seen the one, and heard the other, Captain Ryecroft has misinterpreted both. No wonder his reluctance to speak words of love.

And so for a time they are silent, the dread of misconception, with consequent fear of committal, holding their lips sealed. On a simple utterance now may hinge their life's happiness, or its misery.

Nor is it so strange, that in a moment fraught with such mighty consequence, conversation should be not only timid, but commonplace. They who talk of love's eloquence, but think of it in its lighter phases—perhaps its lying. When truly, deeply felt, it is dumb, as devout worshipper in the presence of the Divinity worshipped. Here, side by side, are two highly organized beings—a man handsome and courageous, a woman beautiful and aught but timid—both well up in the accomplishments, and gifted with the graces of life—loving each other to their souls' innermost depths, yet embarrassed in manner, and constrained in speech, as though they were a couple of rustics! More; for Corydon would fling his arms around his Phyllis, and give her an eloquent smack, which she, with like readiness would return.

Very different the behaviour of these in the pavilion. They stand for a time silent as statues—though not without a tremulous motion, scarce perceptible—as if the amorous electricity around stifled their breathing, for the time hindering speech. And when at length this comes, it is of no more significance than what might be expected between two persons lately introduced, and feeling but the ordinary interest in one another!

It is the lady who speaks first:—

"I understand you've been but a short while resident in our neighbourhood, Captain Ryecroft?"

"Not quite three months, Miss Wynn. Only a week or two before I had the pleasure of making your acquaintance."

"Thank you for calling it a pleasure. Not much in the manner, I should say; but

altogether the contrary," she laughs, adding—

"And how do you like our Wye?"

"Who could help liking it?"

"There's been much said of its scenery—in books and newspapers. You really admire it?"

"I do, indeed." His preference is pardonable under the circumstances. "I think it the finest in the world."

"What! you such a great traveller! In the tropics too; upon rivers that run between groves of evergreen trees, and over sands of gold! Do you really mean that, Captain Ryecroft?"

"Really—truthfully. Why not, Miss Wynn?"

"Because I supposed those grand rivers we read of were all so much superior to our little Herefordshire stream; in flow of water, scenery, everything——"

"Nay, not everything!" he says interruptingly. "In volume of water they may be; but far from it in other respects. In some it is superior to them all—Rhine, Rhone, ah! Hippocrene itself!"

His tongue is at length getting loosed.

"What other respects?" she asks.

"The forms reflected in it," he answers hesitatingly.

"Not those of vegetation! Surely our oaks, elms, and poplars cannot be compared with the tall palms and graceful tree ferns of the tropics?"

"No; not those."

"Our buildings neither, if photography tells truth, which it should. Those wonderful structures—towers, temples, pagodas—of which it has given us the *fac similes*—far excel anything we have on the Wye—or anything in England. Even our Tintern, which we think so very grand, were but as nothing to them. Isn't that so?"

"True," he says assentingly. "One must admit the superiority of Oriental architecture."

"But you've not told me what form our English river reflects, so much to your admiration!"

He has a fine opportunity for poetical reply. The image is in his mind—her own—with the word upon his tongue, "woman's." But he shrinks from giving it utterance. Instead, retreating from the position he had assumed, he rejoins evasively:—

"The truth is, Miss Wynn, I've had a surfeit of tropical scenery, and was only too glad once more to feast my eyes on the hill and dale landscapes of dear old England. I know none to compare with these of the Wyeside."

"It's very pleasing to hear you say that—to me especially. It's but natural I should love our beautiful Wye—I, born on its banks, brought up on them, and, I suppose, likely to——"

"What?" he asks, observing that she has paused in her speech.

"Be buried on them!" she answers laughingly. She intended to have said "Stay on them the rest of my life." "You'll think that a very grave conclusion," she adds, keeping up the laugh.

"One at all events very far off—it is to be hoped. An eventuality not to arise, till after you've passed many long and happy days—whether on the Wye, or elsewhere."

"Ah! who can tell? The future is a sealed book to all of us."

"Yours need not be—at least as regards its happiness. I think that is assured."

"Why do you say so, Captain Ryecroft?"

"Because it seems to me, as though you had yourself the making of it."

He is saying no more than he thinks; far less. For he believes she could make fate itself—control it, as she can his. And as he would now confess to her—is almost on the eve of it—but hindered by recalling that strange look and sigh sent after Shenstone. His fond fancies, the sweet dreams he has been indulging in ever since making her acquaintance, may have been but illusions. She may be playing with him, as he would with a fish on his hook. As yet, no word of love has passed her lips. Is there thought of it in her heart—for him?

"In what way? What mean you?" she asks, her liquid eyes turned upon him with

a look of searching interrogation.

The question staggers him. He does not answer it as he would, and again replies evasively—somewhat confusedly—

"Oh! I only meant, Miss Wynn—that you so young—so—well, with all the world before you—surely have your happiness in your own hands."

If he knew how much it is in his he would speak more courageously, and possibly with greater plainness. But he knows not, nor does she tell him. She, too, is cautiously retentive, and refrains taking advantage of his words, full of suggestion.

It will need another *séance*—possibly more than one—before the real confidence can be exchanged between them. Natures like theirs do not rush into confession as the common kind. With them it is as with the wooing of eagles.

She simply rejoins:

"I wish it were," adding with a sigh, "Far from it, I fear."

He feels as if he had drifted into a dilemma—brought about by his own *gaucherie*—from which something seen up the river, on the opposite side, offers an opportunity to escape—a house. It is the quaint old habitation of Tudor times. Pointing to it, he says:

"A very odd building, that! If I've been rightly informed, Miss Wynn, it belongs to a relative of yours?"

"I have a cousin who lives there."

The shadow suddenly darkening her brow, with the slightly explicit rejoinder, tells him he is again on dangerous ground. He attributes it to the character he has heard of Mr. Murdock. His cousin is evidently disinclined to converse about him.

And she is; the shadow still staying. If she knew what is at that moment passing within Glyngog—could but hear the conversation carried on at its dining table—it might be darker. It is dark enough in her heart, as on her face—possibly from a presentiment.

Ryecroft more than ever embarrassed, feels it a relief when Ellen Lees, with the Rev. Mr. Musgrave as her cavalier attendant—they, too, straying solitarily—

approach near enough to be hailed, and invited into the pavilion.

So the dialogue between the cautious lovers comes to an end—to both of them unsatisfactory enough. For this day their love must remain unrevealed; though never man and woman more longed to learn the sweet secret of each other's heart.



CHAPTER XV.

A SPIRITUAL ADVISER.

While the sports are in progress outside Llangorren Court, inside Glyngog House is being eaten that dinner to commence with salmon in season and end with pheasant out.

It is early; but the Murdocks often glad to eat what Americans call a "square meal," have no set hours for eating, while the priest is not particular.

In the faces of the trio seated at the table a physiognomist might find interesting study, and note expressions that would puzzle Lavater himself. Nor could they be interpreted by the conversation which, at first, only refers to topics of a trivial nature. But now and then, a *mot* of double meaning let down by Rogier, and a glance surreptitiously exchanged between him and his countryman, tell that the thoughts of these two are running upon themes different from those about which are their words.

Murdock, by no means of a trusting disposition, but oftentimes furiously jealous, has nevertheless, in this respect, no suspicion of the priest, less from confidence than a sort of contempt for the pallid puny creature, whom he feels he could crush in a moment of mad anger. And broken though he be, the stalwart, and once strong, Englishman could still do that. To imagine such a man as Rogier a rival in the affections of his own wife, would be to be little himself. Besides, he holds fast to that proverbial faith in the spiritual adviser, not always well founded—in his case certainly misplaced. Knowing nought of this, however, their exchanged looks, however markedly significant, escape his observation. Even if he did observe, he could not read in them aught relating to love. For, this day there is not; the thoughts of both are absorbed by a different passion—cupidity. They are bent upon a scheme of no common magnitude, but grand and comprehensive—neither more nor less than to get possession of an estate worth £10,000 a year—that Llangorren. They know its value as well as the steward who gives receipts for its rents.

It is no new notion with them; but one for some time entertained, and steps considered; still nothing definite either conceived, or determined on. A task, so

herculean, as dangerous and difficult, will need care in its conception, and time for its execution. True, it might be accomplished almost instantaneously with six inches of steel, or as many drops of belladonna. Nor would two of the three seated at the table stick at employing such means. Olympe Renault, and Gregorie Rogier have entertained thoughts of them—if not more. In the third is the obstructor. Lewin Murdock would cheat at dice and cards, do money-lenders without remorse, and tradesmen without mercy, ay, steal, if occasion offered; but murder—that is different—being a crime not only unpleasant to contemplate, but perilous to commit. He would be willing to rob Gwendoline Wynn of her property—glad to do it, if he only knew how—but to take away her life, he is not yet up to that.

But he is drawing up to it, urged by desperate circumstances, and spurred on by his wife, who loses no opportunity of bewailing their broken fortunes, and reproaching him for them; at her back the Jesuit secretly instructing, and dictating.

Not till this day have they found him in the mood for being made more familiar with their design. Whatever his own disposition, his ear has been hitherto deaf to their hints, timidly, and ambiguously given. But to-day things appear more promising, as evinced by his angry exclamation "Never!" Hence their delight at hearing it.

During the earlier stages of the dinner, as already said, they converse about ordinary subjects, like the lovers in the pavilion silent upon that paramount in their minds. How different the themes—as love itself from murder! And just as the first word was unspoken in the summer-house at Llangorren, so is the last unheard in the dining-room of Glyngog.

While the blotcher is being carved with a spoon—there is no fish slice among the chattels of Mr. Murdock—the priest in good appetite, and high glee pronounces it "crimp." He speaks English like a native, and is even up in its provincialisms; few in Herefordshire whose dialect is of the purest.

The phrase of the fishmonger received smilingly, the salmon is distributed and handed across the table; the attendance of the slavey, with claws not over clean, and ears that might be unpleasantly sharp, having been dispensed with.

There is wine without stint; for although Murdock's town tradesmen may be hard of heart, in the Welsh Harp there is a tender string he can still play upon; the Boniface of the Rugg's Ferry hostelry having a belief in his *post obit*

expectations. Not such an indifferent wine either, but some of the choicest vintage. The guests of the Harp, however rough in external appearance and rude in behaviour, have wonderfully refined ideas about drink, and may be often heard calling for "fizz"—some of them as well acquainted with the qualities of Möet and Cliquot, as a connoisseur of the most fashionable club.

Profiting by their æsthetic tastes, Lewin Murdock is enabled to set wines upon his table of the choicest brands. Light Bordeaux first with the fish, then sherry with the heavier greens and bacon, followed by champagne as they get engaged upon the pheasant.

At this point the conversation approaches a topic hitherto held in reserve, Murdock himself starting it:—

"So my Cousin Gwen's going to get married, eh! Are you sure of that, Father Rogier?"

"I wish I were as sure of going to heaven."

"But what sort of man is he? you haven't told us."

"Yes, I have. You forget my description, Monsieur—cross between Mars and Phœbus—strength herculean; sure to be father to a progeny numerous as that which spring from the head of Medusa—enough of them to make heirs for Llangorren to the end of time—keep you out of the property if you lived to be the age of Methuselah. Ah! a fine looking fellow, I can assure you; against whom the baronet's son, with his rubicund cheeks and hay-coloured hair, wouldn't stand the slightest chance—even were there nothing more to recommend the martial stranger. But there is."

"What more?"

"The mode of his introduction to the lady—that quite romantic."

"How was he introduced?"

"Well, he made her acquaintance on the water. It appears Mademoiselle Wynn and her companion Lees, were out on the river for a row alone. Unusual that! Thus out, some fellows—Forest of Dean dwellers—offered them insult; from which a gentleman angler, who chanced to be whipping the stream close by, saved them—he no other than *le Capitaine Ryecroft*. With such commencement of acquaintance, a man couldn't be much worth who didn't know how to improve

it—even to terminating in marriage if he wished. And with such a rich heiress as Mademoiselle Gwendoline Wynn—to say nought of her personal charms—there are few men who wouldn't wish it so to end. That he, the Hussar officer—captain, colonel, or whatever his rank—does, I've good reason to believe, as also that he will succeed in accomplishing his desires; no more doubt of it than of my being seated at this table. Yes; sure as I sit here that man will be the master of Llangorren."

"I suppose he will—must," rejoins Murdock, drawing out the words as though not greatly concerned, one way or the other.

Olympe looks dissatisfied, but not Rogier, nor she after a glance from the priest, which seems to say "Wait." He himself intends waiting till the drink has done its work.

Taking the hint, she remains silent, her countenance showing calm, as with the content of innocence, while in her heart is the guilt of hell, and the deceit of the devil.

She preserves her composure all through, and soon as the last course is ended, with a show of dessert placed upon the table—poor and *pro forma*—obedient to a look from Rogier, with a slight nod in the direction of the door, she makes her *congè*, and retires.

Murdock lights his meerschaum, the priest one of his paper cigarettes—of which he carries a case—and for some time they sit smoking and drinking; talking, too, but upon matters with no relation to that uppermost in their minds. They seem to fear touching it, as though it were a thing to contaminate. It is only after repeatedly emptying their glasses, their courage comes up to the standard required; that of the Frenchman first; who, nevertheless, approaches the delicate subject with cautious circumlocution.

"By the way, M'sieu," he says, "we've forgotten what we were conversing about, when summoned to dinner—a meal I've greatly enjoyed—notwithstanding your depreciation of the *menu*. Indeed, a very *bonne bouche* your English bacon, and the greens excellent, as also the *pommes de terre*. You were speaking of some event, or circumstance, to be conditional on your death. What is it? Not the deluge, I hope! True, your Wye is subject to sudden floods; might it have aught to do with them?"

"Why should it?" asks Murdock, not comprehending the drift.

"Because people sometimes get drowned in these inundations; indeed, often. Scarce a week passes without some one falling into the river, and there remaining, at least till life is extinct. What with its whirls and rapids, it's a very dangerous stream. I wonder at Mademoiselle Wynn venturing so courageously—so *carelessly* upon it."

The peculiar intonation of the last speech, with emphasis on the word *carelessly*, gives Murdock a glimpse of what it is intended to point to.

"She's got courage enough," he rejoins, without appearing to comprehend. "About her carelessness I don't know."

"But the young lady certainly is careless—recklessly so. That affair of her going out alone is proof of it. What followed may make her more cautious; still, boating is a perilous occupation, and boats, whether for pleasure or otherwise, are awkward things to manage—fickle and capricious as women themselves. Suppose hers should some day go to the bottom, she being in it?"

"That would be bad."

"Of course it would. Though, Monsieur Murdock, many men situated as you, instead of grieving over such an accident, would but rejoice at it."

"No doubt they would. But what's the use of talking of a thing not likely to happen?"

"Oh, true! Still, boat accidents being of such common occurrence, one is as likely to befall Mademoiselle Wynn as anybody else. A pity if it should—a misfortune! But so is the other thing."

"What other thing?"

"That such a property as Llangorren should be in the hands of heretics, having but a lame title too. If what I've heard be true, you yourself have as much right to it as your cousin. It were better it belonged to a true son of the Church, as I know you to be, M'sieu."

Murdock receives the compliment with a grimace. He is no hypocrite; still with all his depravity he has a sort of respect for religion, or rather its outward forms—regularly attends Rogier's chapel, and goes through all the ceremonies and genuflexions, just as the Italian bandit, after cutting a throat, will drop on his knees and repeat a *paternoster* at hearing the distant bell of the Angelus.

"A very poor one," he replies, with a half smile, half grin.

"In a worldly sense you mean? I'm aware you're not very rich."

"In more senses than that. Your Reverence, I've been a great sinner, I admit."

"Admission is a good sign—giving promise of repentance, which need never come too late if a man be disposed to it. It is a deep sin the Church cannot condone—a dark crime indeed."

"Oh, I haven't done anything deserving the name. Only such as a great many others."

"But you might be tempted some day. Whether or not it's my duty, as your spiritual adviser, to point out the true doctrine—how the Vatican views such things. It's after all only a question of balance between good and evil; that is, how much evil a man may have done, and the amount of good he may do. This world is a ceaseless war between God and the devil; and those who wage it in the cause of the former have often to employ the weapons of the latter. In our service the end justifies the means, even though these be what the world calls criminal—ay, even to the TAKING OF LIFE, else why should the great and

good Loyola have counselled drawing the sword, himself using it?"

"True," grunts Murdock, smoking hard, "you're a great theologian, Father Rogier. I confess ignorance in such matters; still, I see reason in what you say."

"You may see it clearer if I set the application before you. As for instance, if a man have a right to a certain property, or estate, and is kept out of it by a quibble, any steps he might take to possess himself would be justifiable providing he devote a portion of his gains to the good cause—that is, upholding the true faith, and so benefitting humanity at large. Such an act is held by the best of our Church authorities to compensate for any sin committed—supposing the money donation sufficient to make the amount of good it may do preponderate over the evil. And such a man would not only merit absolution, but freely receive it. Now, Monsieur, do you comprehend me?"

"Quite," says Murdock, taking the pipe from his mouth and gulping down a half-tumbler of brandy—for he has dropped the wine. Withal, he trembles at the programme thus metaphorically put before him, and fears admitting the application to himself.

Soon the more potent spirit takes away his last remnant of timidity, which the tempter perceiving, says:—

"You say you have sinned, Monsieur. And if it were only for that, you ought to make amends."

"In what way could I?"

"The way I've been speaking of. Bestow upon the Church the means of doing good, and so deserve indulgence."

"Ah! where am I to find this means?"

"On the other side of the river."

"You forget that there's more than the stream between."

"Not much to a man who would be true to himself."

"I'm that man all over." The brandy has made him bold, at length untying his tongue, while unsteadying it. "Yes, Père Rogier; I'm ready for anything that will release me from this damnable fix—debt over the ears—duns every day. Ha! I'd be true to myself, never fear!"

"It needs being true to the Church as well."

"I'm willing to be that when I have the chance, if ever I have it. And to get it I'd risk life. Not much if I lose it. It's become a burden to me, heavier than I can bear."

"You may make it as light as a feather, M'sieu; cheerful as that of any of those gay gentry you saw disporting themselves on the lawn at Llangorren—even that of its young mistress."

"How, *Père*?"

"By yourself becoming its master."

"Ah! if I could."

"You can!"

"With safety?"

"Perfect safety."

"And without committing"—he fears to speak the ugly English word, but expresses the idea in French—" *cette dernier coup*?"

"Certainly! Who dreams of that? Not I, M'sieu."

"But how is it to be avoided?"

"Easily."

"Tell me, Father Rogier!"

"Not to-night, Murdock!"—he has dropped the distant M'sieu—"Not to-night. It's a matter that calls for reflection—consideration, calm and careful. Time, too. Ten thousand *livres esterlies* per annum! We must both ponder upon it—sleep nights, and think days, over it—possibly have to draw Coracle Dick into our deliberations. But not to-night—*Par-dieu!* it's ten o'clock! And I have business to do before going to bed. I must be off."

"No, your Reverence; not till you've had another glass of wine."

"One more, then. But let me take it standing—the *tasse d'estrope*, as you call it."

Murdock assents; and the two rise up to drink the stirrup cup. But only the

Frenchman keeps his feet till the glasses are emptied; the other, now dead drunk, dropping back into his chair.

"*Bon soir Monsieur!*" says the priest, slipping out of the room, his host answering only by a snore.

For all, Father Rogier does not leave the house so unceremoniously. In the porch outside he takes more formal leave of a woman he there finds waiting for him. As he joins her going out, she asks, *sotto voce*:—

"*C'est arrangé?*"

"*Pas encore serait tout suite.*"

This the sole speech that passes between them; but something besides, which, if seen by her husband, would cause him to start from his chair—perhaps some little sober him.



CHAPTER XVI.

CORACLE DICK.

A traveller making the tour of the Wye will now and then see moving along its banks, or across the contiguous meadows, what he might take for a gigantic tortoise, walking upon his tail! Mystified by a sight so abnormal, and drawing nigh to get an explanation of it, he will discover that the moving object is after all but a man, carrying a boat upon his back! Still the tourist will be astonished at a feat so herculean—rival to that of Atlas—and will only be altogether enlightened when the boat-bearer lays down his burden—which, if asked, he will obligingly do—and permits him, the stranger, to satisfy his curiosity by an inspection of it. Set square on the sward at his feet, he will look upon a craft quaint as was ever launched on lake, stream, or tidal wave. For he will be looking at a "coracle."

Not only quaint in construction, but singularly ingenious in design, considering the ends to be accomplished. In addition, historically interesting; so much as to deserve more than passing notice, even in the pages of a novel. Nor will I dismiss it without a word, however it may seem out of place.

In shape the coracle bears resemblance to the half of a humming-top, or Swedish turnip cloven longitudinally, the cleft face scooped out leaving but the rind. The timbers consist of slender saplings—peeled and split to obtain lightness—disposed, some fore and aft, others athwart-ships, still others diagonally, as struts and ties, all having their ends in a band of wicker-work, which runs round the gunwale, holding them firmly in place, itself forming the rail. Over this framework is stretched a covering of tarred, and, of course, waterproof canvas, tight as a drum. In olden times it was the skin of ox or horse, but the modern material is better, because lighter, and less liable to decay, besides being cheaper. There is but one seat, or thwart, as the coracle is designed for only a single occupant, though in a pinch it can accommodate two. This is a thin board, placed nearly amidships, partly supported by the wicker rail, and in part by another piece of light scantling, set edgewise underneath.

In all things ponderosity is as much as possible avoided, since one of the essential purposes of the coracle is "portage"; and to facilitate this it is furnished

with a leathern strap, the ends attached near each extremity of the thwart, to be passed across the breast when the boat is borne overland. The bearer then uses his oar—there is but one, a broad-bladed paddle—by way of walking-stick; and so proceeds, as already said, like a tortoise travelling on its tail!

In this convenience of carriage lies the ingenuity of the structure—unique and clever beyond anything in the way of water-craft I have observed elsewhere, either among savage or civilized nations. The only thing approaching it in this respect is the birch bark canoe of the Esquimaux and the Chippeway Indians. But though more beautiful this, it is far behind our native craft in an economic sense—in cheapness and readiness. For while the Chippewayan would be stripping his bark from the tree, and re-arming it—to say nought of fitting to the frame timbers, stitching, and paying it—a subject of King Caradoc would have launched his coracle upon the Wye, and paddled it from Plinlimmon to Chepstow; as many a modern Welshman would the same.

Above all, is the coracle of rare historic interest—as the first venture upon water of a people—the ancestors of a nation that now rules the sea—their descendants proudly styling themselves its "Lords"—not without right and reason.

Why called "coracle" is a matter of doubt and dispute; by most admitted as a derivative from the Latin *corum*—a skin; this being its original covering. But certainly a misconception; since we have historic evidence of the basket and hide boat being in use around the shores of Albion hundreds of years before these ever saw Roman ship or standard. Besides, at the same early period, under the almost homonym of "corragh," it floated—still floats—on the waters of the Lerne, far west of anywhere the Romans ever went. Among the common people on the Wye it bears a less ancient appellation—that of "truckle."

From whatever source the craft derives its name, it has itself given a sobriquet to one of the characters of our tale—Richard Dempsey. Why the poacher is thus distinguished it is not easy to tell; possibly because he, more than any other in his neighbourhood, makes use of it, and is often seen trudging about the river bottoms with the huge carapace on his shoulders. It serves his purpose better than any other kind of boat, for Dick, though a snarer of hares and pheasants, is more of a salmon poacher, and for this—the water branch of his amphibious calling—the coracle has a special adaptation. It can be lifted out of the river, or launched upon it anywhere, without leaving trace; whereas with an ordinary skiff the moorings might be marked, the embarkation observed, and the night netter followed to his netting-place by the watchful water bailiff.

Despite his cunning and the handiness of his craft, Dick has not always come off scot-free. His name has several times figured in the reports of Quarter Sessions, and himself in the cells of the county gaol. This only for poaching; but he has also served a spell in prison for crime of a less venal kind—burglary. As the "job" was done in a distant shire, there has been nothing heard of it in that where he now resides. The worst known of him in the neighbourhood is his game and fish trespassing, though there is worse suspected. He whose suspicions are strongest being the waterman Wingate.

But Jack may be wronging him, for a certain reason—the most powerful that ever swayed the passion or warped the judgment of man—rivalry for the affections of a woman.

No heart, however hardened, is proof against the shafts of Cupid; and one has penetrated the heart of Coracle Dick, as deeply as has another that of Jack Wingate. And both from the same bow and quiver—the eyes of Mary Morgan.

She is the daughter of a small farmer who lives by the Wyeside; and being a farmer's daughter, above both in social rank, still not so high but that Love's ladder may reach her, and each lives in hope he may some day scale it. For Evan Morgan holds as a tenant, and his land is of limited acreage. Dick Dempsey and Jack Wingate are not the only ones who wish to have him for a father-in-law, but the two most earnest, and whose chances seem best. Not that these are at all equal; on the contrary, greatly disproportionate, Dick having the advantage. In his favour is the fact that Farmer Morgan is a Roman Catholic—his wife fanatically so—he, Dempsey, professing the same faith; while Wingate is a Protestant of pronounced type.

Under these circumstances Coracle has a friend at headquarters, in Mrs. Morgan, and an advocate who visits there, in the person of Father Rogier.

With this united influence in his favour, the odds against the young waterman are great, and his chances might appear slight—indeed would be, were it not for an influence to counteract. He, too, has a partisan inside the citadel, and a powerful one; since it is the girl herself. He knows—is sure of it, as man may be of any truth, communicated to him by loving lips amidst showers of kisses. For all this has passed between Mary Morgan and himself.

And nothing of it between her and Richard Dempsey. Instead, on her part, coldness and distant reserve. It would be disdain—ay, scorn—if she dare show it; for she hates the very sight of the man. But, controlled and close watched, she

has learnt to smile when she would frown.

The world—or that narrow circle of it immediately surrounding and acquainted with the Morgan family—wonders at the favourable reception it vouchsafes to Richard Dempsey—a known and noted poacher.

But in justice to Mrs. Morgan it should be said, she has but slight acquaintance with the character of the man—only knows it as represented by Rogier. Absorbed in her paternosters, she gives little heed to ought else; her thoughts, as her actions, being all of the dictation, and under the direction, of the priest. In her eyes Coracle Dick is as the latter has painted him, thus—

"A worthy fellow—poor it is true, but honest withal; a little addicted to fish and game taking, as many another good man. Who wouldn't with such laws—unrighteous, oppressive to the poor? Were they otherwise, the poacher would be a patriot. As for Dempsey, they who speak ill of him are only the envious—envying his good looks, and fine mental qualities. For he's clever, and they can't say nay—energetic, and likely to make his way in the world. Yet, one thing he would make, that's a good husband to your daughter Mary—one who has the strength and courage to take care of her."

So counsels the priest; and as he can make Mrs. Morgan believe black white, she is ready to comply with his counsel. If the result rested on her, Coracle Dick would have nothing to fear.

But it does not—he knows it does not, and is troubled. With all the influence in his favour, he fears that other influence against him—if against him—far more than a counterpoise to Mrs. Morgan's religious predilections, or the partisanship of his priest. Still he is not sure; one day the slave of sweet confidence, the next a prey to black bitter jealousy. And thus he goes on doting and doubting, as if he were never to know the truth.

A day comes when he is made acquainted with it, or, rather, a night; for it is after sundown the revelation reaches him—indeed, nigh on to midnight. His favoured, yet defeated, aspirations, are more than twelve months old. They have been active all through the preceding winter, spring, and summer. It is now autumn; the leaves are beginning to turn sere, and the last sheaves have been gathered to the stack.

No shire than that of Hereford more addicted to the joys of the Harvest Home; this often celebrated in a public and general way, instead of at the private and

particular farmhouse. One such is given upon the summit of Garran Hill—a grand gathering, to which all go of the class who attend such assemblages—small farmers with their families, their servants too, male and female. There is a cromlech on the hill's top, around which they annually congregate, and beside this ancient relic are set up the symbols of a more modern time—the Maypole—though it is Autumn—with its strings and garlands; the show booths and the refreshment tents, with their display of cakes, fruits, perry, and cider. And there are sports of various kinds, pitching the stone, climbing the greased pole—that of May now so slippery—jumping, racing in sacks, dancing—among other dances the Morris—with a grand *finale* of fireworks.

At this year's fête Farmer Morgan is present, accompanied by his wife and daughter. It need not be said that Dick Dempsey and Jack Wingate are there too. They are, and have been all the afternoon—ever since the gathering began. But during the hours of daylight neither approaches the fair creature to which his thoughts tend, and on which his eyes are almost constantly turning. The poacher is restrained by a sense of his unworthiness—a knowledge that there is not the place to make show of his aspirations to one all believe so much above him; while the waterman is kept back and aloof by the presence of the watchful mother.

With all her watchfulness he finds opportunity to exchange speech with the daughter—only a few words, but enough to make hell in the heart of Dick Dempsey, who overhears them.

It is at the closing scene of the spectacle, when the pyrotechnists are about to send up their final *feu de joie*, Mrs. Morgan, treated by numerous acquaintances to aniseed and other toothsome drinks, has grown less thoughtful of her charge, which gives Jack Wingate the opportunity he has all along been looking for. Sidling up to the girl, he asks, in a tone which tells of lovers *en rapport*, mutually, unmistakably—

"When, Mary?"

"Saturday night next. The priest's coming to supper. I'll make an errand to the shop, soon as it gets dark."

"Where?"

"The old place under the big elm."

"You're sure you'll be able?"

"Sure, never fear, I'll find a way."

"God bless you, dear girl. I'll be there, if anywhere on earth."

That is all that passes between them. But enough—more than enough—for Richard Dempsey. As a rocket, just then going up, throws its glare over his face, as also the others, no greater contrast could be seen or imagined. On the countenances of the lovers an expression of contentment, sweet and serene; on his a look such as Mephistopheles gave to Gretchen, escaping from his toils.

The curse in Coracle's heart is but hindered from rising to his lips by a fear of its foiling the vengeance he there and then determines on.



CHAPTER XVII.

THE "CORPSE CANDLE."

Jack Wingate lives in a little cottage whose bit of garden ground "brinks" the country road where the latter trends close to the Wye at one of its sharpest sinuosities. The cottage is on the convex side of the bend, having the river at back, with a deep drain, or wash, running up almost to its walls, and forming a fence to one side of the garden. This gives the waterman another and more needed advantage—a convenient docking place for his boat. There the *Mary*, moored, swings to her painter in safety; and when a rise in the river threatens, he is at hand to see she be not swept off. To guard against such catastrophe he will start up from his bed at any hour of the night, having more than one reason to be careful of the boat; for, besides being his *gagne-pain*, it bears the name, by himself given, of her the thought of whom sweetens his toil and makes his labour light. For her he bends industriously to his oar, as though he believed every stroke made and every boat's length gained was bringing him nearer to Mary Morgan. And in a sense so is it, whichever way the boat's head may be turned; the farther he rows her, the grander grows that heap of gold he is hoarding up against the day when he hopes to become a Benedict. He has a belief that if he could but display before the eyes of Farmer Morgan sufficient money to take a little farm for himself and stock it, he might then remove all obstacles between him and Mary—mother's objections and sinister and sacerdotal influence included.

He is aware of the difference of rank—that social chasm between—being oft bitterly reminded of it; but emboldened by Mary's smiles, he has little fear but that he will yet be able to bridge it.

Favouring the programme thus traced out, there is, fortunately, no great strain on his resources by way of drawback; only the maintaining of his own mother, a frugal dame—thrifty besides—who, instead of adding to the current expenses, rather curtails them by the adroit handling of her needle. It would have been a distaff in the olden days.

Thus helped in his housekeeping, the young waterman is enabled to put away almost every shilling he earns by his oar, and this same summer all through till

autumn, which it now is, has been more than usually profitable to him, by reason of his so often having Captain Ryecroft as his fare; for although the Hussar officer no longer goes salmon fishing—he has somehow been spoilt for that—there are other excursions upon which he requires the boat, and as ever generously, even lavishly, pays for it.

From one of these the young waterman has but returned; and, after carefully bestowing the *Mary* at her moorings, stepped inside the cottage. It is Saturday—within one hour of sundown—that same Saturday spoken of "at the Harvest Home." But though Jack is just home, he shows no sign of an intention to stay there; instead, behaves as if he intended going out again, though not in his boat.

And he does so intend, for a purpose unsuspected by his mother,—to keep that appointment made hurriedly and in a half whisper, amid the fracas of the fireworks.

The good dame had already set the table for tea, ready against his arrival, covered it with a cloth, snow-white of course. The tea-things superimposed, in addition a dining plate, knife and fork, these for a succulent beefsteak heard hissing on the gridiron almost as soon as the *Mary* made appearance at the mouth of the wash, and, soon as the boat was docked, done. It is now on the table, alongside the teapot; its savoury odour, mingling with the fragrance of the freshly "drawn" tea, fills the cottage kitchen with a perfume to delight the gods.

For all, it gives no gratification to Jack Wingate the waterman. The appetizing smell of the meat, and the more ethereal aroma of the Chinese shrub, are alike lost upon him. Appetite he has none, and his thoughts are elsewhere.

Less from observing his abstraction, than the slow, negligent movements of his knife and fork, the mother asks—

"What's the matter with ye, Jack? Ye don't eat!"

"I ain't hungry, mother."

"But ye been out since mornin', and tooked nothing wi' you!"

"True; but you forget who I ha' been out with. The captain ain't the man to let his boatman be a hungered. We war down the day far as Symond's yat, where he treated me to dinner at the hotel. The daintiest kind o' dinner, too. No wonder at my not havin' much care for eatin' now—nice as you've made things, mother."

Notwithstanding the compliment, the old lady is little satisfied—less as she observes the continued abstraction of his manner. He fidgets uneasily in his chair, every now and then giving a glance at the little Dutch clock suspended against the wall, which in loud ticking seems to say, "You'll be late—you'll be late." She suspects something of the cause, but inquires nothing of it. Instead, she but observes, speaking of the patron:—

"He be very good to ye, Jack."

"Ah! that he be; good to every one as comes nigh o' him—and's desarvin' it."

"But ain't he stayin' in the neighbourhood longer than he first spoke of doin'?"

"Maybe he is. Grand gentry such as he ain't like us poor folk. They can go and come whens'ever it please 'em. I suppose he have his reasons for remaining."

"Now, Jack, you know he have, an' I've heerd something about 'em myself."

"What have you heard, mother?"

"Oh, what! Ye han't been a rowin' him up and down the river now nigh on five months without findin' out. An' if you haven't, others have. It's goin' all about that he's after a young lady as lives somewhere below. Tidy girl, they say, tho' I never seed her myself. Is it so, my son? Say!"

"Well, mother, since you've put it straight at me in that way, I won't deny it to you, tho' I'm in a manner bound to saycrecy wi' others. It be true that the Captain have some notion o' such a lady."

"There be a story, too, o' her bein' nigh drowned an' his saving her out o' a boat. Now, Jack, whose boat could that be if it wa'nt your'n?"

"'Twor mine, mother; that's true enough. I would a-told you long ago, but he asked me not to talk o' the thing. Besides, I didn't suppose you'd care to hear about it."

"Well," she says, satisfied, "tan't much to me, nor you neyther, Jack; only as the Captain being so kind, we'd both like to know the best about him. If he have took a fancy for the young lady, I hope she return it. She ought after his doin' what he did for her. I han't heerd her name; what be it?"

"She's a Miss Wynn, mother. A very rich heiress. 'Deed I b'lieve she ain't a heiress any longer, or won't be, after next Thursday, sin' that day she comes o'

age. An' that night there's to be a big party at her place, dancin' an' all sorts o' festivities. I know it because the Captain's goin' there, an' has bespoke the boat to take him."

"Wynn, eh? That be a Welsh name. Wonder if she's any kin o' the great Sir Watkin."

"Can't say, mother. I believe there be several branches o' the Wynn family."

"Yes, and all o' the good sort. If she be one o' the Welsh Wynns, the Captain can't go far astray in having her for his wife."

Mrs. Wingate is herself of Cymric ancestry, originally from the shire of Pembroke, but married to a man of Montgomery, where Jack was born. It is only of late, in her widowhood, she has become a resident of Herefordshire.

"So you think he have a notion o' her, Jack?"

"More'n that, mother. I may as well tell ye; he be dead in love wi' her. An' if you seed the young lady herself, ye wouldn't wonder at it. She be most as good-looking as——"

Jack suddenly interrupted himself on the edge of a revelation he would rather not make, to his mother nor anyone else. For he has hitherto been as careful in keeping his own secret as that of his patron.

"As who?" she asks, looking him straight in the face, and with an expression in her eyes of no common interest—that of maternal solicitude.

"Who?—well—" he answers confusedly; "I wor goin' to mention the name o' a girl who the people 'bout here think the best lookin' o' any in the neighbourhood——"

"An' nobody more'n yourself, my son. You needn't gie her name. I know it."

"Oh, mother! what d'ye mean?" he stammers out, with eyes on the but half-eaten beefsteak. "I take it they've been tellin' ye some stories about me."

"No, they han't. Nobody's sayed a word about ye relatin' to that. I've seed it for myself, long since, though you've tried to hide it. I'm not goin' to blame ye eyther, for I believe she be a tidy proper girl. But she's far aboon you, my son; and ye maun mind how you behave yourself. If the young lady be anythin' likes good-lookin' as Mary Morgan——"

"Yes, mother! that's the strangest thing o' all——"

He interrupts her, speaking excitedly; again interrupting himself.

"What's strangest?" she inquires, with a look of wonderment.

"Never mind, mother! I'll tell you all about it some other time. I can't now; you see its nigh nine o' the clock."

"Well; an' what if 't be?"

"Because I may be too late."

"Too late for what? Surely you arn't goin' out again the night?" She asks this, seeing him rise up from his chair.

"I must, mother."

"But why?"

"Well, the boat's painter's got frailed, and I want a bit o' whipcord to lap it with. They have the thing at the Ferry shop, and I must get there afore they shut up."

A fib, perhaps pardonable, as the thing he designs lapping is not his boat's painter, but the waist of Mary Morgan, and not with slender whipcord, but his own stout arms.

"Why won't it do in the mornin'?" asks the ill-satisfied mother.

"Well, ye see, there's no knowin' but that somebody may come after the boat. The Captain mayent but he may, changin' his mind. Anyhow, he'll want her to go down to them grand doin's at Llangorren Court?"

"Llangorren Court?"

"Yes; that's where the young lady lives."

"That's to be on Thursday, ye sayed?"

"True; but, then, there may come a fare the morrow, an' what if there do? 'Tain't the painter only as wants splicing there's a bit o' leak sprung close to the cutwater, and I must hae some pitch to pay it."

If Jack's mother would only step out, and down to the ditch where the *Mary* is moored, with a look at the boat, she would make him out a liar. Its painter is

smooth and clean as a piece of gimp, not a strand unravelled—while but two or three gallons of bilge water at the boat's bottom attest to there being little or no leakage.

But she, good dame, is not thus suspicious, instead so reliant on her son's truthfulness, that without questioning further, she consents to his going, only with a proviso against his staying, thus appealingly put—

"Ye won't be gone long, my son! I know ye won't!"

"Indeed I shan't, mother. But why be you so partic'lar about my goin' out—this night more'n any other?"

"Because, Jack, this day, more'n most others, I've been feelin' bothered like, and a bit frightened."

"Frightened o' what? There han't been nobody to the house—has there?"

"No; ne'er a rover since you left me in the mornin'."

"Then what's been a scarin' ye, mother?"

"'Deed, I don't know, unless it ha' been brought on by the dream I had last night. 'Twer a dreadful unpleasant one. I didn't tell you o' it 'fore ye went out, thinkin' it might worry ye."

"Tell me now, mother."

"It hadn't nought to do wi' us ourselves, after all. Only concernin' them as live nearest us."

"Ha! the Morgans?"

"Yes; the Morgans."

"Oh, mother, what did you dream about them?"

"That I were standin' on the big hill above their house, in the middle o' the night, wi' black darkness all round me; and there lookin' down what should I see comin' out o' their door?"

"What?"

"The canwyll corph!"

"The canwyll corph?"

"Yes, my son; I seed it—that is I dreamed I seed it—coming just out o' the farmhouse door, then through the yard, and over the foot-plank at the bottom o' the orchard, when it went flarin' up the meadows straight towards the ferry. Though ye can't see that from the hill, I dreamed I did; an' seed the candle go on to the chapel an' into the buryin' ground. That woked me."

"What nonsense, mother! A ridiklous superstition! I thought you'd left all that sort o' stuff behind, in the mountains o' Montgomery, or Pembrokeshire, where the thing comes from, as I've heerd you say."

"No, my son; it's not stuff, nor superstition neyther; though English people say that to put slur upon us Welsh. Your father before ye believed in the *Canwyll Corph*, and wi' more reason ought I, your mother. I never told you, Jack, but the night before your father died I seed it go past our own door, and on to the graveyard o' the church where he now lies. Sure as we stand here there be some one doomed in the house o' Evan Morgan. There be only three in the family. I do hope it an't her as ye might some day be wantin' me to call daughter."

"Mother! You'll drive me mad! I tell ye it's all nonsense. Mary Morgan be at this moment healthy and strong—most as much as myself. If the dead candle ye've been dreamin' about were all o' it true, it couldn't be a burnin' for her. More like for Mrs. Morgan, who's half daft by believing in church candles and such things—enough to turn her crazy, if it doesn't kill her outright. As for you, my dear mother, don't let the dream bother you the least bit. An' ye mustn't be feeling lonely, as I shan't be long gone. I'll be back by ten sure."

Saying which, he sets his straw hat jauntily on his thick curly hair, gives his guernsey a straightening twitch, and, with a last cheering look and encouraging word to his mother, steps out into the night.

Left alone, she feels lonely withal, and more than ever afraid. Instead of sitting down to her needle, or making to remove the tea-things, she goes to the door, and there stays, standing on its threshold and peering into the darkness—for it is a pitch dark night—she sees, or fancies, a light moving across the meadows, as if it came from Farmer Morgan's house, and going in the direction of Rugg's Ferry. While she continues gazing, it twice crosses the Wye, by reason of the river's bend.

As no mortal hand could thus carry it, surely it is the *canwyll corph*!



CHAPTER XVIII.

A CAT IN THE CUPBOARD.

Evan Morgan is a tenant-farmer, holding Abergann. By Herefordshire custom, every farm or its stead, has a distinctive appellation. Like the land belonging to Glyngog, that of Abergann lies against the sides of a sloping glen—one of the hundreds or thousands of lateral ravines that run into the valley of the Wye. But, unlike the old manor-house, the domicile of the farmer is at the glen's bottom, and near the river's bank; nearer yet to a small influent stream, rapid and brawling, which sweeps past the lower end of the orchard in a channel worn deep into the soft sandstone.

Though with the usual imposing array of enclosure walls, the dwelling itself is not large, nor the outbuildings extensive; for the arable acreage is limited. This because the ridges around are too high pitched for ploughing, and if ploughed would be unproductive. They are not even in pasture, but overgrown with woods; less for the sake of the timber, which is only scrub, than as a covert for foxes. They are held in hand by Evan Morgan's landlord—a noted Nimrod.

For the same reason the farmhouse stands in a solitary spot, remote from any other dwelling. The nearest is the cottage of the Wingates—distant about half a mile, but neither visible from the other. Nor is there any direct road between, only a footpath, which crosses the brook at the bottom of the orchard, thence cunning over a wooded ridge to the main highway. The last, after passing close to the cottage, as already said, is deflected away from the river by this same ridge, so that when Evan Morgan would drive anywhere beyond the boundaries of his farm, he must pass out through a long lane, so narrow that were he to meet any one driving in, there would be a dead-lock. However, there is no danger; as the only vehicles having occasion to use this thoroughfare are his own farm waggon and a lighter "trap" in which he goes to market, and occasionally with his wife and daughter to merry-makings.

When the three are in it there is none of his family at home. For he has but one child—a daughter. Nor would he long have her were a half-score of young fellows allowed their way. At least this number would be willing to take her off his hands, and give her a home elsewhere. Remote as is the farmhouse of

Abergann, and narrow the lane leading to it, there are many who would be glad to visit there, if invited.

In truth a fine girl is Mary Morgan, tall, bright-haired, and with blooming cheeks, beside which red rose leaves would seem *fade*. Living in a town she would be its talk; in a village its belle. Even from that secluded glen has the fame of her beauty gone forth and afar. Of husbands she could have her choice, and among men much richer than her father.

In her heart she has chosen one, not only much poorer, but lower in social rank—Jack Wingate. She loves the young waterman, and wants to be his wife; but knows she cannot without the consent of her parents. Not that either has signified opposition, since they have never been asked. Her longings in that direction she has kept secret from them. Nor does she so much dread refusal by the father. Evan Morgan had been himself poor—began life as a farm labourer—and, though now an employer of such, his pride had not kept pace with his prosperity. Instead, he is, as ever, the same modest, unassuming man, of which the lower middle classes of the English people present many noble examples. From him Jack Wingate would have little to fear on the score of poverty. He is well acquainted with the young waterman's character, knows it to be good, and has observed the efforts he is making to better his condition in life; it may be with suspicion of the motive, at all events, admiringly—remembering his own. And although a Roman Catholic, he is anything but bigoted. Were he the only one to be consulted, his daughter might wed with the man upon whom she has fixed her affections, at any time it pleases them—ay, at any place, too, even within the walls of a Protestant Church! By him neither would Jack Wingate be rejected on the score of religion.

Very different with his wife. Of all the worshippers who compose the congregation at the Rugg's Ferry Chapel, none bend the knee to Baal as low as she; and over no one does Father Rogier exercise such influence. Baneful it is like to be; since not only has he control of the mother's conduct, but through that may also blight the happiness of the daughter.

Apart from religious fanaticism, Mrs. Morgan is not a bad woman—only a weak one. As her husband, she is of humble birth, and small beginnings; like him, too, neither has prosperity affected her in the sense of worldly ambition. Perhaps better if it had. Instead of spoiling, a little social pride might have been a bar to the dangerous aspirations of Richard Dempsey—even with the priest standing sponsor for him. But she has none, her whole soul being absorbed by blind

devotion to a faith which scruples not at anything that may assist in its propagandism.

It is the Saturday succeeding the festival of the Harvest Home, a little after sunset, and the priest is expected at Abergann. He is a frequent visitor there; by Mrs. Morgan ever made welcome, and treated to the best cheer the farmhouse can afford; plate, knife, and fork always placed for him. And, to do him justice, he may be deemed in a way worthy of such hospitality; for he is, in truth, a most entertaining personage; can converse on any subject, and suit his conversation to the company, whether high or low. As much at home with the wife of the Welsh farmer as with the French *ex-cocotte*, and equally so in the companionship of Dick Dempsey, the poacher. In his hours of *far niente* all are alike to him.

This night he is to take supper at Abergann, and Mrs. Morgan, seated in the farmhouse parlour, awaits his arrival. A snug little apartment, tastefully furnished, but with a certain air of austerity, observable in Roman Catholic houses; this by reason of some pictures of saints hanging against the walls, an image of the Virgin and, standing niche-like in a corner, one of the Crucifixion over the mantel-shelf, with crosses upon books, and other like symbols.

It is near nine o'clock, and the table is already set out. On grand occasions, as this, the farmhouse parlour is transformed into dining or supper room, indifferently. The meal intended to be eaten now is more of the former, differing in there being a tea-tray upon the table, with a full service of cups and saucers, as also in the lateness of the hour. But the odoriferous steam escaping from the kitchen, drifted into the parlour when its door is opened, tells of something in preparation more substantial than a cup of tea, with its usual accompaniment of bread and butter. And there is a fat capon roasting upon the spit, with a frying-pan full of sausages on the dresser, ready to be clapped upon the fire at the proper moment—as soon as the expected guest makes his appearance.

And in addition to the tea-things, there is a decanter of sherry on the table, and will be another of brandy when brought on—Father Rogier's favourite tippie, as Mrs. Morgan has reason to know. There is a full bottle of this—Cognac of best brand—in the larder cupboard, still corked as it came from the "Welsh Harp," where it cost six shillings—the Rugg's Ferry hostelry, as already intimated, dealing in drinks of a rather costly kind. Mary has been directed to draw the

cork, decant, and bring the brandy in, and for this purpose has just gone off to the larder. Thence instantly returning, but without either decanter or Cognac! Instead, with a tale which sends a thrill of consternation through her mother's heart. The cat has been in the cupboard, and there made havoc—upset the brandy bottle, and sent it rolling off the shelf on the stone flags of the floor! Broken, of course, and the contents—

No need for further explanation. Mrs. Morgan does not seek it. Nor does she stay to reflect on the disaster, but how it may be remedied. It will not mend matters to chastise the cat, nor cry over the spilt brandy, any more than if it were milk.

On short reflection she sees but one way to restore the broken bottle—by sending to the "Welsh Harp" for a whole one.

True, it will cost another six shillings, but she recks not of the expense. She is more troubled about a messenger. Where, and how, is one to be had? The farm labourers have long since left. They are all Benedicts, on board wages, and have departed for their respective wives and homes. There is a cowboy, yet he is also absent; gone to fetch the kine from a far-off pasturing place, and not be back in time; while the one female domestic maid-of-all-work is busy in the kitchen, up to her ears among pots and pans, her face at a red heat over the range. She could not possibly be spared. "It's very vexatious!" exclaims Mrs. Morgan, in a state of lively perplexity.

"It is indeed!" assents her daughter.

A truthful girl, Mary, in the main; but just now the opposite. For she is not vexed by the occurrence, nor does she deem it a disaster—quite the contrary. And she knows it was no accident, having herself brought it about. It was her own soft fingers, not the cat's claws, that swept that bottle from the shelf, sending it smash upon the stones! Tipped over by no *maladroit* handling of corkscrew, but downright deliberate intention! A stratagem that may enable her to keep the appointment made among the fireworks—that threat when she told Jack Wingate she would "find a way."

Thus is she finding it; and in furtherance she leaves her mother no time to consider longer about a messenger.

"I'll go!" she says, offering herself as one.

The deceit unsuspected, and only the willingness appreciated, Mrs. Morgan

rejoins:

"Do! that's a dear girl! It's very good of you, Mary. Here's the money."

While the delighted mother is counting out the shillings, the dutiful daughter whips on her cloak—the night is chilly—and adjusts her hat, the best holiday one, on her head; all the time thinking to herself how cleverly she has done the trick. And with a smile of pardonable deception upon her face, she trips lightly across the threshold, and on through the little flower garden in front.

Outside the gate, at an angle of the enclosure wall, she stops, and stands considering. There are two ways to the Ferry, here forking—the long lane and the shorter footpath. Which is she to take? The path leads down along the side of the orchard, and across the brook by the bridge—only a single plank. This spanning the stream, and originally fixed to the rock at both ends, has of late come loose, and is not safe to be traversed, even by day. At night it is dangerous—still more on one dark as this. And danger of no common kind at any time. The channel through which the stream runs is twenty feet deep, with rough boulders in its bed. One falling from above would at least get broken bones. No fear of that to-night, but something as bad, if not worse. For it has been raining throughout the earlier hours of the day, and there in the brook, now a raging torrent. One dropping into it would be swept on to the river, and there surely drowned, if not before.

It is no dread of any of these dangers which causes Mary Morgan to stand considering which route she will take. She has stepped that plank on nights dark as this, even since it became detached from the fastenings, and is well acquainted with its ways. Were there nought else, she would go straight over it, and along the footpath, which passes the "big elm." But it is just because it passes the elm she has now paused, and is pondering. Her errand calls for haste, and there she would meet a man sure to delay her. She intends meeting him for all that, and being delayed; but not till on her way back. Considering the darkness and obstructions on the footwalk she may go quicker by the road, though roundabout. Returning she can take the path.

This thought in her mind, with, perhaps, remembrance of the adage, "business before pleasure," decides her; and drawing closer her cloak, she sets off along the lane.

CHAPTER XIX.

A BLACK SHADOW BEHIND.

In the shire of Hereford there is no such thing as a village—properly so called. The tourist expecting to come upon one, by the black dot on his guide-book map, will fail to find it. Indeed, he will see only a church with a congregation, not the typical cluster of houses around. But no street, nor rows of cottages, in their midst—the orthodox patch of trodden turf—the "green." Nothing of all that.

Unsatisfied, and inquiring the whereabouts of the village itself, he will get answers only farther confusing him. One will say "here be it," pointing to no place in particular; a second, "thear," with his eye upon the church; a third, "over yonner," nodding to a shop of miscellaneous wares, also intrusted with the receiving and distributing of letters; while a fourth, whose ideas run on drink, looks to a house larger than the rest, having a square pictorial signboard, with red lion *rampant*, fox *passant*, horse's head, or such like symbol—proclaiming it an inn, or public.

Not far from, or contiguous to, the church will be a dwelling-house of special pretension, having a carriage entrance, sweep, and shrubbery of well-grown evergreens—the rectory, or vicarage; at greater distance, two or three cottages of superior class, by their owners styled "villas," in one of which dwells the doctor, a young Esculapius, just beginning practice, or an old one who has never had much; in another the relict of a successful shopkeeper left with an "independence"; while a third will be occupied by a retired military man—"captain," of course, whatever may have been his rank—possibly a naval officer, or an old salt of the merchant service. In their proper places stand the carpenter's shop and smithy, with their array of reapers, rollers, ploughs, and harrows seeking repair: among them perhaps a huge steam-threshing machine, that has burst its boiler, or received other damage. Then there are the houses of the *oi polloi*, mostly labouring men—their little cottages wide apart, or in twos and threes together, with no resemblance to the formality of town dwellings, but quaint in structure, ivy-clad or honeysuckled, looking and smelling of the country. Farther along the road is an ancient farmstead, its big barns and other outbuildings abutting on the highway, which for some distance is strewn with a

litter of rotting straw; by its side a muddy pond with ducks and a half-dozen geese, the gander giving tongue as the tourist passes by; if a pedestrian with knapsack on his shoulders the dog barking at him, in the belief he is a tramp or beggar. Such is the Herefordshire village, of which many like may be met along Wyeseide.

The collection of houses known as Rugg's Ferry is in some respects different. It does not lie on any of the main county thoroughfares, but a cross-country road connecting the two, that lead along the bounding ridges of the river. That passing through it is but little frequented, as the ferry itself is only for foot passengers, though there is a horse boat which can be had when called for. But the place is in a deep crater-like hollow, where the stream courses between cliffs of the old red sandstone, and can only be approached by the steepest "pitches."

Nevertheless, Rugg's Ferry has its mark upon the Ordnance map, though not with the little crosslet denoting a church. It could boast of no place of worship whatever till Father Rogier laid the foundation of his chapel.

For all, it has once been a brisk place in its days of glory; ere the railroad destroyed the river traffic, and the bargees made it a stopping port, as often the scene of rude, noisy revelry.

It is quieter now, and the tourist passing through might deem it almost deserted. He will see houses of varied construction—thirty or forty of them in all—clinging against the cliff in successive terraces, reached by long rows of steps carved out of the rock; cottages picturesque as Swiss *chalets*, with little gardens on ledges, here and there one trellised with grape vines or other climbers, and a round cone-topped cage of wicker holding captive a jackdaw, magpie, or it may be parrot or starling taught to speak.

Viewing these symbols of innocence, the stranger will imagine himself to have lighted upon a sort of English Arcadia—a fancy soon to be dissipated perhaps by the parrot or starling saluting him with the exclamatory phrases "God-damn-ye! go to the devil!—go to the devil!" And while he is pondering on what sort of personage could have instructed the creature in such profanity, he will likely enough see the instructor himself peering out through a partially opened door, his face in startling correspondence with the blasphemous exclamations of the bird. For there are other birds resident at Rugg's Ferry besides those in the cages—several who have themselves been caged in the county gaol. The slightly altered name bestowed upon the place by Jack Wingate, as others, is not so

inappropriate.

It may seem strange such characters congregating in a spot so primitive and rural, so unlike their customary haunts; incongruous as the ex-belle of Mabilie in her high-heeled *bottines* inhabiting the ancient manor-house of Glyngog.

But more of an enigma—indeed, a moral, or psychological puzzle; since one would suppose it the very last place to find them in. And yet the explanation may partly lie in moral and psychological causes. Even the most hardened rogue has his spells of sentiment, during which he takes delight in rusticity; and as the "Ferry" has long enjoyed the reputation of being a place of abode for him and his sort, he is there sure of meeting company congenial. Or the scent after him may have become too hot in the town, or city, where he has been displaying his dexterity; while here the policeman is not a power. The one constable of the district station dislikes taking, and rather steals through it on his rounds.

Notwithstanding all this, there are some respectable people among its denizens, and many visitors who are gentlemen. Its quaint picturesqueness attracts the tourist; while a stretch of excellent angling ground, above and below, makes it a favourite with amateur fishermen.

Centrally on a platform of level ground, a little back from the river's bank, stands a large three-story house—the village inn—with a swing sign in front, upon which is painted what resembles a triangular gridiron, though designed to represent a harp. From this the hostelry has its name—the "Welsh Harp!" But however rough the limning, and weather-blanching the board—however ancient the building itself—in its business there are no indications of decay, and it still does a thriving trade. Guests of the excursionist kind occasionally dine there; while in the angling season, *piscator* stays at it all through spring and summer; and if a keen disciple of Izaak, or an ardent admirer of the Wye scenery, often prolonging his sojourn into late autumn. Besides, from towns not too distant, the sporting tradesmen and fast clerks, after early closing on Saturdays, come hither, and remain over till Monday, for the first train catchable at a station some two miles off.

The "Welsh Harp" can provide beds for all, and sitting rooms besides. For it is a roomy *caravanserai*, and if a little rough in its culinary arrangements, has a cellar unexceptionable. Among those who taste its tap are many who know good wine from bad, with others who only judge of the quality by the price; and in accordance with this criterion the Boniface of the "Harp" can give them the very

best.

It is a Saturday night, and two of those last described connoisseurs, lately arrived at the Wyeseid hostelry, are standing before its bar counter, drinking rhubarb sap, which they facetiously call "fizz," and believe to be champagne. As it costs them ten shillings the bottle they are justified in their belief; and quite as well will it serve their purpose. They are young drapers' assistants from a large manufacturing town, out for their hebdomadal holiday, which they have elected to spend in an excursion to the Wye, and a frolic at Rugg's Ferry.

They have had an afternoon's boating on the river; and, now returned to the "Harp"—their place of put-up—are flush of talk over their adventures, quaffing the sham "shammy," and smoking "regalias," not anything more genuine.

While thus indulging they are startled by the apparition of what seems an angel, but what they know to be a thing of flesh and blood—something that pleases them better—a beautiful woman. More correctly speaking a girl; since it is Mary Morgan who has stepped inside the room set apart for the distributing of drink.

Taking the cigars from between their teeth—and leaving the rhubarb juice, just poured into their glasses, to discharge its pent-up gas—they stand staring at the girl, with an impertinence rather due to the drink than any innate rudeness. They are harmless fellows in their way; would be quiet enough behind their own counters, though fast before that of the "Welsh Harp," and foolish with such a face as that of Mary Morgan beside them.

She gives them scant time to gaze on it. Her business is simple, and speedily transacted.

"A bottle of your best brandy—the French cognac?" As she makes the demand, placing six shillings, the price understood, upon the lead-covered counter.

The barmaid, a practised hand, quickly takes the article called for from a shelf behind, and passes it across the counter, and with like alertness counting the shillings laid upon it, and sweeping them into the till.

It is all over in a few seconds' time; and with equal celerity Mary Morgan, slipping the purchased commodity into her cloak, glides out of the room—vision-like as she entered it.

"Who is that young lady?" asks one of the champagne drinkers, interrogating the barmaid.

"Young lady!" tartly returns the latter, with a flourish of her heavily chignoned head, "only a farmer's daughter."

"Aw!" exclaims the second tippler, in drawling imitation of Swelldom, "only the offspring of a chaw-bacon! she's a monstrously crummy creetya, anyhow."

"Devilish nice gal!" affirms the other, no longer addressing himself to the barmaid, who has scornfully shown them the back of her head, with its tower of twisted jute. "Devilish nice gal, indeed! Never saw spicier stand before a counter. What a dainty little fish for a farmer's daughter! Say, Charley! wouldn't you like to be sellin' her a pair of kids—Jouvin's best—helpin' her draw them on, eh?"

"By Jove, yes! That would I."

"Perhaps you'd prefer it being boots? What a stepper she is, too! S'pose we slide after, and see where she hangs out?"

"Capital idea! Suppose we do?"

"All right, old fellow! I'm ready with the yard stick—roll off!"

And without further exchange of their professional phraseology, they rush out, leaving their glasses half-full of the effervescing beverage—rapidly on the spoil.

They have sallied forth to meet disappointment. The night is black as Erebus, and the girl gone out of sight. Nor can they tell which way she has taken; and to inquire might get them "guyed," if not worse. Besides, they see no one of whom inquiry could be made. A dark shadow passes them, apparently the figure of a man; but so dimly descried, and going in such rapid gait, they refrain from hailing him.

Not likely they will see more of the "monstrously crummy creetya" that night—they may on the morrow somewhere—perhaps at the little chapel close by.

Registering a mental vow to do their devotions there, and recalling the bottle of fizz left uncorked on the counter, they return to finish it.

And they drain it dry, gulping down several goes of B.-and-S., besides, ere ceasing to think of the "devilish nice gal," on whose dainty little fist they would so like fitting kid gloves.

Meanwhile, she, who has so much interested the dry goods gentlemen, is making

her way along the road which leads past the Widow Wingate's cottage, going at a rapid pace, but not continuously. At intervals she makes stops, and stands listening—her glances sent interrogatively to the front. She acts as one expecting to hear footsteps, or a voice in friendly salutation, and see him saluting—for it is a man.

Footsteps are there besides her own, but not heard by her, nor in the direction she is hoping to hear them. Instead, they are behind, and light, though made by a heavy man. For he is treading gingerly as if on eggs—evidently desirous not to make known his proximity. Near he is, and were the light only a little clearer she would surely see him. Favoured by its darkness he can follow close, aided also by the shadowing trees, and still further from her attention being all given to the ground in advance, with thoughts preoccupied.

But closely he follows her, but never coming up. When she stops he does the same, moving on again as she moves forward. And so for several pauses, with spells of brisk walking between.

Opposite the Wingates' cottage she tarries longer than elsewhere. There was a woman standing in the door, who, however, does not observe her—cannot—a hedge of holly between. Cautiously parting its spinous leaves and peering through, the young girl takes a survey not of the woman, whom she well knows, but of a window—the only one in which there is a light. And less the window than the walls inside. On her way to the Ferry she had stopped to do the same; then seeing shadows—two of them—one a woman's, the other of a man. The woman is there in the door—Mrs. Wingate herself; the man, her son, must be elsewhere.

"Under the elm by this," says Mary Morgan, in soliloquy. "I'll find him there," she adds, silently gliding past the gate.

"Under the elm," mutters the man who follows, adding, "I'll kill her there—ay, both!"

Two hundred yards further on, and she reaches the place where the footpath debouches upon the road. There is a stile of the usual rough crossbar pattern, proclaiming a right of way.

She stops only to see there is no one sitting upon it—for there might have been—then leaping lightly over she proceeds along the path.

The shadow behind does the same, as though it were a spectre pursuing.

And now, in the deeper darkness of the narrow way, arcaded over by a thick canopy of leaves, he goes closer and closer, almost to touching. Were a light at this moment let upon his face, it would reveal features set in an expression worthy of hell itself; and cast farther down, would show a hand closed upon the haft of a long-bladed knife—nervously clutching—every now and then half drawing it from its sheath, as if to plunge its blade into the back of her who is now scarce six steps ahead!

And with this dread danger threatening—so close—Mary Morgan proceeds along the forest path, unsuspectingly: joyfully as she thinks of who is before, with no thought of that behind—no one to cry out, or even whisper, the word, "Beware!"



CHAPTER XX.

UNDER THE ELM.

In more ways than one has Jack Wingate thrown dust in his mother's eyes. His going to the Ferry after a piece of whipcord and a bit of pitch was fib the first; the second his not going there at all—for he has not. Instead, in the very opposite direction; soon as reaching the road, having turned his face towards Abergann, though his objective point is but the "big elm." Once outside the gate he glides along the holly hedge crouchingly, and with head ducked, so that it may not be seen by the good dame, who has followed him to the door.

The darkness favouring him, it is not; and congratulating himself at getting off thus deftly, he continues rapidly up the road.

Arrived at the stile, he makes stop, saying in soliloquy:—

"I take it she be sure to come; but I'd gi'e something to know which o' the two ways. Bein' so darkish, an' that plank a bit dangerous to cross, I ha' heard—'tan't often I cross it—just possible she may choose the roundabout o' the road. Still, she sayed the big elm, an' to get there she'll have to take the path comin' or goin' back. If I thought comin' I'd steer straight there an' meet her. But s'posin' she prefers the road, that 'ud make it longer to wait. Wonder which it's to be."

With hand rested on the top rail of the stile, he stands considering. Since their stolen interchange of speech at the Harvest Home, Mary has managed to send him word she will make an errand to Rugg's Ferry; hence his uncertainty. Soon again he resumes his conjectured soliloquy:—

"'Tan't possible she ha' been to the Ferry, an' goed back again? God help me, I hope not! An' yet there's just a chance. I weesh the Captain hadn't kep' me so long down there. An' the fresh from the rain that delayed us nigh half an hour, I oughtn't to a stayed a minute after gettin' home. But mother cookin' that nice bit o' steak; if I hadn't ate it she'd a been angry, and for certain suspected somethin'. Then listenin' to all that dismal stuff 'bout the corpse-candle. An' they believe it in the shire o' Pembroke. Rot the thing! Tho' I an't myself nowadays superstishus, it gi'ed me the creeps. Queer, her dreamin' she seed it go out o' Abergann! I do weesh she hadn't told me that; an' I mustn't say word o't to Mary. Tho' she ain't o'

the fearsome kind, a thing like that's enough to frighten any one. Well, what'd I best do? If she ha' been to the Ferry an's goed home again, then I've missed her, and no mistake! Still, she said she'd be at the elim, an's never broke her promise to me when she cud keep it. A man ought to take a woman at her word—a true woman—an' not be too quick to anticipate. Besides, the surer way's the safer. She appointed the old place, an' there I'll abide her. But what am I thinkin' o'? She may be there now, a-waitin' for me!"

He doesn't stay by the stile one instant longer, but, vaulting over it, strikes off along the path.

Despite the obscurity of the night, the narrowness of the track, and the branches obstructing, he proceeds with celerity. With that part he is familiar—knows every inch of it, well as the way from his door to the place where he docks his boat—at least so far as the big elm, under whose spreading branches he and she have oft clandestinely met. It is an ancient patriarch of the forest; its timber is honeycombed with decay, not having tempted the axe, by whose stroke its fellows have long ago fallen, and it now stands amid their progeny, towering over all. It is a few paces distant from the footpath, screened from it by a thicket of hollies interposed between, and extending around. From its huge hollow trunk a buttress, horizontally projected, affords a convenient seat for two, making it the very *beau ideal* of a trysting-tree.

Having got up and under it, Jack Wingate is a little disappointed—almost vexed—at not finding his sweetheart there. He calls her name—in the hope she may be among the hollies—at first cautiously and in a low voice, then louder. No reply; she has either not been, or has and is gone.

As the latter appears probable enough, he once more blames Captain Ryecroft, the rain, the river flood, the beefsteak—above all, that long yarn about the *canwyll corph*, muttering anathemas against the ghostly superstition.

Still she may come yet. It may be but the darkness that's delaying her. Besides, she is not likely to have the fixing of her time. She said she would "find a way"; and having the will—as he believes—he flatters himself she will find it, despite all obstructions.

With confidence thus restored, he ceases to pace about impatiently, as he has been doing ever since his arrival at the tree; and, taking a seat on the buttress, sits listening with all ears. His eyes are of little use in the Cimmerian gloom. He can barely make out the forms of the holly bushes, though they are almost within

reach of his hand.

But his ears are reliable, sharpened by love; and, ere long they convey a sound, to him sweeter than any other ever heard in that wood—even the songs of its birds. It is a swishing, as of leaves softly brushed by the skirts of a woman's dress—which it is. He needs no telling who comes. A subtle electricity, seeming to precede, warns him of Mary Morgan's presence, as though she were already by his side.

All doubts and conjectures at an end, he starts to his feet, and steps out to meet her. Soon as on the path he sees a cloaked figure, drawing nigh with a grace of movement distinguishable even in the dim glimmering light.

"That you, Mary?"

A question mechanical; no answer expected or waited for. Before any could be given she is in his arms, her lips hindered from words by a shower of kisses.

Thus having saluted, he takes her hand and leads her among the hollies. Not from precaution, or fear of being intruded upon. Few besides the farm people of Abergann use the right-of-way path, and unlikely any of them being on it at that hour. It is only from habit they retire to the more secluded spot under the elm, hallowed to them by many a sweet remembrance.

They sit down side by side; and close, for his arm is around her waist. How unlike the lovers in the painted pavilion at Llangorren! Here there is neither concealment of thought nor restraint of speech—no time given to circumlocution—none wasted in silence. There is none to spare, as she has told him at the moment of meeting.

"It's kind o' you comin', Mary," he says, as soon as they are seated. "I knew ye would."

"O Jack! What a work I had to get out—the trick I've played mother! You'll laugh when you hear it."

"Let's hear it, darling!"

She relates the catastrophe of the cupboard, at which he does laugh beyond measure, and with a sense of gratification. Six shillings thrown away—spilled upon the floor—and all for him! Where is the man who would not feel flattered, gratified, to be the shrine of such sacrifice, and from such a worshipper?

"You've been to the Ferry, then?"

"You see," she says, holding up the bottle.

"I weesh I'd known that. I could a met ye on the road, and we'd had more time to be thegither. It's too bad, you havin' to go straight back."

"It is. But there's no help for it. Father Rogier will be there before this, and mother mad impatient."

Were it light she would see his brow darken at mention of the priest's name. She does not, nor does he give expression to the thoughts it has called up. In his heart he curses the Jesuit—often has with his tongue, but not now. He is too delicate to outrage her religious susceptibilities. Still he cannot be altogether silent on a theme so much concerning both.

"Mary, dear!" he rejoins in grave, serious tone, "I don't want to say a word against Father Rogier, seein' how much he be your mother's friend; or, to speak more truthful, her favourite; for I don't believe he's the friend o' anybody. Sartinly, not mine, nor yours; and I've got it on my mind that man will some day make mischief between us."

"How can he, Jack?"

"Ah, how! A many ways. One, his sayin' ugly things about me to your mother—tellin' her tales that ain't true."

"Let him—as many as he likes; you don't suppose I'll believe them?"

"No, I don't, darling—'deed I don't."

A snatched kiss affirms the sincerity of his words; hers as well, in her lips not being drawn back, but meeting him half-way.

For a short time there is silence. With that sweet exchange thrilling their hearts it is natural.

He is the first to resume speech; and from a thought the kiss has suggested:—

"I know there be a good many who'd give their lives to get the like o' that from your lips, Mary. A soft word, or only a smile. I've heerd talk o' several. But one's spoke of, in particular, as bein' special favourite by your mother, and backed up by the French priest."

"Who?"

She has an idea who—indeed knows; and the question is only asked to give opportunity of denial.

"I dislike mentionin' his name. To me it seems like insultin' ye. The very idea o' Dick Dempsey——"

"You needn't say more," she exclaims, interrupting him. "I know what you mean. But you surely don't suppose I could think of him as a sweetheart? That *would* insult me."

"I hope it would; pleezed to hear you say't. For all, he thinks o' you, Mary; not only in the way o' sweetheart, but——" He hesitates.

"What?"

"I won't say the word. 'Tain't fit to be spoke—about him an' you."

"If you mean *wife*—as I suppose you do—listen! Rather than have Richard Dempsey for a husband, I'd die—go down to the river and drown myself! That horrid wretch! I hate him!"

"I'm glad to hear you talk that way—right glad."

"But why, Jack? You know it couldn't be otherwise! You should—after all that's passed. Heaven be my witness! you I love, and you alone. You only shall ever call me wife. If not—then nobody!"

"God bless ye!" he exclaims in answer to her impassioned speech. "God bless you, darling!" in the fervour of his gratitude flinging his arms around, drawing her to his bosom, and showering upon her lips an avalanche of kisses.

With thoughts absorbed in the delirium of love, their souls for a time surrendered to it, they hear not a rustling among the late fallen leaves; or, if hearing, supposed it to proceed from bird or beast—the flight of an owl, with wings touching the twigs; or a fox quartering the cover in search of prey. Still less do they see a form skulking among the hollies, black and boding as their shadows.

Yet such there is; the figure of a man, but with face more like that of demon—for it is he whose name has just been upon their lips. He has overheard all they have said; every word an added torture, every phrase sending hell to his heart. And now, with jealousy in its last dire throes, every remnant of hope extinguished—

cruelly crushed out—he stands, after all, unresolved how to act. Trembling, too; for he is at bottom a coward. He might rush at them and kill both—cut them to pieces with the knife he is holding in his hand. But if only one, and that her, what of himself? He had an instinctive fear of Jack Wingate, who has more than once taught him a subduing lesson.

That experience stands the young waterman in stead now, in all likelihood saving his life. For at this moment the moon, rising, flings a faint light through the branches of the trees; and like some ravenous nocturnal prowler that dreads the light of day, Richard Dempsey pushes his knife-blade back into its sheath, slips out from among the hollies, and altogether away from the spot.

But not to go back to Rugg's Ferry, nor to his own home. Well for Mary Morgan if he had.

By the same glimpse of silvery light warned as to the time, she knows she must needs hasten away; as her lover, that he can no longer detain her. The farewell kiss, so sweet yet painful, but makes their parting more difficult; and, not till after repeating it over and over, do they tear themselves asunder—he standing to look after, she moving off along the woodland path, as nymph or sylphide, with no suspicion that a satyr has preceded her, and is waiting not far off, with foul fell intent—no less than the taking of her life.



CHAPTER XXI.

A TARDY MESSENGER.

Father Rogier has arrived at Abergann; slipped off his goloshes, left them with his hat in the entrance passage; and stepped inside the parlour.

There is a bright coal fire chirping in the grate; for, although not absolutely cold, the air is damp and raw from the rain which has fallen during the earlier hours of the day. He has not come direct from his house at the Ferry, but up the meadows from below, along paths that are muddy, with wet grass overhanging. Hence his having on india-rubber overshoes. Spare of flesh, and thin-blooded, he is sensitive to cold.

Feeling it now, he draws a chair to the fire, and sits down with his feet rested on the fender.

For a time he has it all to himself. The farmer is still outside, looking after his cattle, and setting things up for the night; while Mrs. Morgan, after receiving him, has made excuse to the kitchen—to set the frying-pan on the coals. Already the sausages can be heard frizzling, while their savoury odour is borne everywhere throughout the house.

Before sitting down the priest had helped himself to a glass of sherry; and, after taking a mouthful or two, set it on the mantel-shelf, within convenient reach. It would have been brandy were there any on the table; but, for the time satisfied with the wine, he sits sipping it, his eyes now and then directed towards the door. This is shut, Mrs. Morgan having closed it after her as she went out.

There is a certain restlessness in his glances, as though he were impatient for the door to be re-opened, and someone to enter.

And so is he, though Mrs. Morgan herself is not the someone—but her daughter. Gregorie Rogier has been a fast fellow in his youth—before assuming the cassock a very *mauvais sujet*. Even now in the maturer age, and despite his vows of celibacy, he has a partiality for the sex, and a keen eye to female beauty. The fresh, youthful charms of the farmer's daughter have many a time made it water, more than the now stale attractions of Olympe, *née* Renault. She is not the only

disciple of his flock he delights in drawing to the confessional.

But there is a vast difference between the mistress of Glyngog and the maiden of Abergann. Unlike are they as Lucrezia Borgia to that other Lucretia—victim of Tarquin *filis*. And the priest knows he must deal with them in a very different manner. He cannot himself have Mary Morgan for a wife—he does not wish to—but it may serve his purpose equally well were she to become the wife of Richard Dempsey. Hence his giving support to the pretensions of the poacher—not all unselfish.

Eagerly watching the door, he at length sees it pushed open; and by a woman, but not the one he is wishing for. Only Mrs. Morgan re-entering to speak apologies for delay in serving supper. It will be on the table in a trice.

Without paying much attention to what she says, or giving thought to her excuses, he asks, in a drawl of assumed indifference,—

"Where is Ma'mselle Marie? Not on the sick list, I hope?"

"Oh no, your reverence. She was never in better health in her life, I'm happy to say."

"Attending to culinary matters, I presume? Bothering herself—on my account, too! Really, madame, I wish you wouldn't take so much trouble when I come to pay you these little visits—calls of duty. Above all, that ma'mselle should be scorching her fair cheeks before a kitchen fire."

"She's not—nothing of the kind, Father Rogier."

"Dressing, may be? That isn't needed either—to receive poor me."

"No; she's not dressing."

"Ah! What then? Pardon me for appearing inquisitive. I merely wish to have a word with her before monsieur, your husband, comes in—relating to a matter of the Sunday school. She's at home, isn't she?"

"Not just this minute. She soon will be."

"What! Out at this hour?"

"Yes; she has gone up to the Ferry on an errand. I wonder you didn't meet her! Which way did you come, Father Rogier—the path or the lane?"

"Neither—nor from the Ferry. I've been down the river on visitation duty, and came up through the meadows. It's rather a dark night for your daughter to have gone upon an errand! Not alone, I take it?"

"Yes; she went alone."

"But why, madame?"

Mrs. Morgan had not intended to say anything about the nature of the message, but it must come out now.

"Well, your reverence," she answers, laughing, "it's rather an amusing matter—as you'll say yourself, when I tell it you."

"Tell it, pray!"

"It's all through a cat—our big Tom."

"Ah, Tom! What *jeu d'esprit* has he been perpetrating?"

"Not much of a joke, after all; but more the other way. The mischievous creature got into the pantry, and somehow upset a bottle—indeed, broke it to pieces."

"*Chat maudit!* But what has that to do with your daughter's going to the Ferry?"

"Everything. It was a bottle of best French brandy—unfortunately the only one we had in the house. And as they say misfortunes never do come single, it so happened our boy was away after the cows, and nobody else I could spare. So I've sent Mary to the Welsh Harp for another. I know your reverence prefers brandy to wine."

"Madame, your very kind thoughtfulness deserves my warmest thanks. But I'm really sorry at your having taken all this trouble to entertain me. Above all, I regret its having entailed such a disagreeable duty upon your Mademoiselle Marie. Henceforth I shall feel reluctance in setting foot over your threshold."

"Don't say that, Father Rogier. Please don't. Mary didn't think it disagreeable. I should have been angry with her if she had. On the contrary, it was herself proposed going; as the boy was out of the way, and our girl in the kitchen, busy about supper. But poor it is—I'm sorry to tell you—and will need the drop of Cognac to make it at all palatable."

"You underrate your *menu*, madame, if it be anything like what I've been

accustomed to at your table. Still, I cannot help feeling regret at ma'mselle's having been sent to the Ferry—the roads in such condition. And so dark, too—she may have a difficulty in finding her way. Which did she go by—the path or the lane? Your own interrogatory to myself—almost verbatim—*c'est drole!*"

With but a vague comprehension of the interpolated French and Latin phrases, the farmer's wife makes rejoinder:

"Indeed, I can't say which. I never thought of asking her. However, Mary's a sensible lass, and surely wouldn't think of venturing over the foot-plank a night like this. She knows it's loose. Ah!" she continues, stepping to the window, and looking out, "there be the moon up! I'm glad of that; she'll see her way now, and get sooner home."

"How long is it since she went off?"

Mrs. Morgan glances at the clock over the mantel; soon she sees where the hands are, exclaiming:

"Mercy me! It's half-past nine! She's been gone a good hour!"

Her surprise is natural. To Rugg's Ferry is but a mile, even by the lane and road. Twenty minutes to go and twenty more to return were enough. How are the other twenty being spent? Buying a bottle of brandy across the counter, and paying for it, will not explain; that should occupy scarce as many seconds. Besides, the last words of the messenger, at starting off, were a promise of speedy return. She has not kept it! And what can be keeping *her*?

Her mother asks this question, but without being able to answer it. She can neither tell nor guess. But the priest, more suspicious, has his conjectures; one giving him pain—greatly exciting him, though he does not show it. Instead, with simulated calmness, he says:

"Suppose I step out and see whether she be near at hand?"

"If your reverence would. But please don't stay for her. Supper's quite ready, and Evan will be in by the time I get it dished. I wonder what's detaining Mary!"

If she only knew what, she would be less solicitous about the supper, and more about the absent one.

"No matter," she continues, cheering up, "the girl will surely be back before we

sit down to the table. If not, she must go——"

The priest had not stayed to hear the clause threatening to disentitle the tardy messenger. He is too anxious to learn the cause of delay; and, in the hope of discovering it, with a view to something besides, he hastily claps on his hat—without waiting to defend his feet with the goloshes—then glides out and off across the garden.

Mrs. Morgan remains in the doorway looking after him, with an expression on her face not all contented. Perhaps she too has a foreboding of evil; or, it may be, she but thinks of her daughter's future, and that she is herself doing wrong by endeavouring to influence it in favour of a man about whom she has of late heard discreditable rumours. Or, perchance, some suspicion of the priest himself may be stirring within her: for there are scandals abroad concerning him, that have reached even her ears. Whatever the cause, there is shadow on her brow, as she watches him pass out through the gate; scarce dispelled by the bright blazing fire in the kitchen, as she returns thither to direct the serving of the supper.

If she but knew the tale he, Father Rogier, is so soon to bring back, she might not have left the door so soon, or upon her own feet; more likely have dropped down on its threshold, to be carried from it fainting, if not dead!



CHAPTER XXII.

A FATAL STEP.

Having passed out through the gate, Rogier turns along the wall; and, proceeding at a brisk pace to where it ends in an angle, there comes to a halt.

On the same spot where about an hour before stopped Mary Morgan—for a different reason. She paused to consider which of the two ways she would take; he has no intention of taking either, or going a step farther. Whatever he wishes to say to her can be said where he now is, without danger of its being overheard at the house—unless spoken in a tone louder than that of ordinary conversation. But it is not on this account he has stopped; simply that he is not sure which of the two routes she will return by—and for him to proceed along either would be to risk the chance of not meeting her at all.

But that he has some idea of the way she will come, with suspicion of why and what is delaying her, his mutterings tell:

"*Morbleu!* over an hour since she set out! A tortoise could have crawled to the Ferry, and crept back within the time! For a demoiselle with limbs lithe and supple as hers—pah! It can't be the brandy bottle that's the obstruction. Nothing of the kind. Corked, capsuled, wrapped, ready for delivery—in all two minutes, or at most, three! She so ready to run for it, too—herself proposed going! Odd, that, to say the least. Only understandable on the supposition of something prearranged. An assignation with the River Triton for sure! Yes; he's the anchor that's been holding her—holds her still. Likely, they're somewhat under the shadow of that wood, now—standing—sitting—ach! I wish I but knew the spot; I'd bring their billing and cooing to an abrupt termination. It will not do for me to go on guesses; I might miss the straying damsel with whom this night I want a word in particular—must have it. Monsieur Coracle may need binding a little faster, before he consents to the service required of him. To ensure an interview with her it is necessary to stay on this spot, however trying to patience."

For a second or two he stands motionless, though all the while active in thought, his eyes also restless. These, turning to the wall, show him that it is overgrown with ivy. A massive cluster on its crest projects out, with hanging tendrils, whose

tops almost touch the ground. Behind them there is ample room for a man to stand upright, and so be concealed from the eyes of anyone passing, however near.

"*Grace à Dieu!*" he exclaims, observing this; "the very place. I must take her by surprise. That's the best way when one wants to learn how the cat jumps. Ha! *cette chat* Tom; how very opportune his mischievous doings—for Mademoiselle! Well, I must give *Madame la mère* counsel better to guard against such accidents hereafter; and how to behave when they occur."

He has by this ducked his head, and stepped under the arcading evergreen.

The position is all he could desire. It gives him a view of both ways by which on that side the farmhouse can be approached. The cart lane is directly before his face, as is also the footpath when he turns towards it. The latter leading, as already said, along a hedge to the orchard's bottom, there crosses the brook by a plank—this being about fifty yards distant from where he has stationed himself. And as there is now moonlight he can distinctly see the frail footbridge, with a portion of the path beyond, where it runs through straggling trees, before entering the thicker wood. Only at intervals has he sight of it, as the sky is mottled with masses of cloud, that every now and then, drifting over the moon's disc, shut off her light with the suddenness of a lamp extinguished.

When she shines he can himself be seen. Standing in crouched attitude with the ivy tendrils festooned over his pale, bloodless face, he looks like a gigantic spider behind its web, on the wait for prey—ready to spring forward and seize it.

For nigh ten minutes he thus remains watching, all the while impatiently chafing. He listens too; though with little hope of hearing aught to indicate the approach of her expected. After the pleasant *tête-à-tête*, he is now sure she must have held with the waterman, she will be coming along silently, her thoughts in sweet, placid contentment; or she may come on with timid, stealthy steps, dreading rebuke by her mother for having overstayed her time.

Just as the priest in bitterest chagrin is promising himself that rebuked she shall be, he sees what interrupts his resolves, suddenly and altogether withdrawing his thoughts from Mary Morgan. It is a form approaching the plank, on the opposite side of the stream; not hers, nor woman's; instead the figure of a man! Neither erect nor walking in the ordinary way, but with head held down and shoulders projected forward, as if he were seeking concealment under the bushes that beset the path, for all drawing nigh to the brook with the rapidity of one pursued, and

who thinks there is safety only on its other side!

"*Sainte Vierge!*" exclaims the priest, *sotto voce*. "What can all that mean? And who——"

He stays his self-asked interrogatory, seeing that the skulker has paused too—at the farther end of the plank, which he has now reached. Why? It may be from fear to set foot on it; for indeed is there danger to one not intimately acquainted with it. The man may be a stranger—some fellow on teamo who intends trying the hospitality of the farmhouse—more likely its henroosts, judging by his manner of approach.

While thus conjecturing, Rogier sees the skulker stoop down, immediately after hearing a sound, different from the sough of the stream; a harsh grating noise, as of a piece of heavy timber drawn over a rough surface of rock.

"Sharp fellow!" thinks the priest; "with all his haste, wonderfully cautious! He's fixing the thing steady before venturing to tread upon it! Ha! I'm wrong; he don't design crossing it after all!"

This as the crouching figure erects itself and, instead of passing over the plank, turns abruptly away from it. Not to go back along the path, but up the stream on that same side! And with bent body as before, still seeming desirous to shun observation.

Now more than ever mystified, the priest watches him, with eyes keen as those of a cat set for nocturnal prowling. Not long till he learns who the man is. Just then the moon, escaping from a cloud, flashes her full light in his face, revealing features of diabolic expression—that of a murderer striding away from the spot where he has been spilling blood!

Rogier recognises Coracle Dick, though still without the slightest idea of what the poacher is doing there.

"*Que diantre!*" he exclaims, in surprise; "what can that devil be after! Coming up to the plank and not crossing! Ha! yonder's a very different sort of pedestrian approaching it? Ma'mselle Mary at last!"

This as by the same intermittent gleam of moonlight he descries a straw hat, with streaming ribbons, over the tops of the bushes beyond the brook.

The brighter image drives the darker one from his thoughts; and, forgetting all

about the man, in his resolve to take the woman unawares, he steps out from under the ivy, and makes forward to meet her. He is a Frenchman, and to help her over the foot-plank will give him a fine opportunity for displaying his cheap gallantry.

As he hastens down to the stream, the moon remaining unclouded, he sees the young girl close to it on the opposite side. She approaches with proud carriage, and confident step, her cheeks even under the pale light showing red—flushed with the kisses so lately received, as it were still clinging to them. Her heart yet thrilling with love, strong under its excitement, little suspects she how soon it will cease to beat.

Boldly she plants her foot upon the plank, believing, late boasting, a knowledge of its tricks. Alas! there is one with which she is not acquainted—could not be—a new and treacherous one, taught it within the last two minutes. The daughter of Evan Morgan is doomed; one more step will be her last in life.

**THE DAUGHTER OF EVAN MORGAN IS DOOMED. ONE MORE STEP WILL BE
HER LAST.**

She makes it, the priest alone being witness. He sees her arms flung aloft, simultaneously hearing a shriek; then arms, body, and bridge sink out of sight suddenly, as though the earth had swallowed them!

CHAPTER XXIII.

A SUSPICIOUS WAIF.

On returning homeward the young waterman bethinks him of a difficulty—a little matter to be settled with his mother. Not having gone to the shop, he has neither whipcord nor pitch to show. If questioned about these commodities, what answer is he to make? He dislikes telling her another lie. It came easy enough before the interview with his sweetheart, but now it is not so much worth while.

On reflection, he thinks it will be better to make a clean breast of it. He has already half confessed, and may as well admit his mother to full confidence about the secret he has been trying to keep from her—unsuccessfully, as he now knows.

While still undetermined, a circumstance occurs to hinder him from longer withholding it, whether he would or not. In his abstraction he has forgotten all about the moon, now up, and at intervals shining brightly. During one of these he has arrived at his own gate, as he opens it seeing his mother on the doorstep. Her attitude shows she has already seen him, and observed the direction whence he has come. Her words declare the same.

"Why, Jack!" she exclaims, in feigned astonishment, "ye bean't a comin' from the Ferry that way?"

The interrogatory, or rather the tone in which it is put, tells him the cat is out of the bag. No use attempting to stuff the animal in again; and seeing it is not, he rejoins, laughingly,—

"Well, mother, to speak the truth, I ha'nt been to the Ferry at all. An' I must ask you to forgie me for practisin' a trifle o' deception on ye—that 'bout the *Mary* wantin' repairs."

"I suspected it, lad; an' that it wor the tother *Mary* as wanted something, or you wanted something wi' her. Since you've spoke repentful, an' confessed, I ain't agoin' to worrit ye about it. I'm glad the boat be all right, as I ha' got good news for you."

"What?" he asks, rejoiced at being so easily let off.

"Well; you spoke truth when ye sayed there was no knowin' but that somebody might be wantin' to hire ye any minnit. There's been one aready."

"Who? Not the Captain?"

"No, not him. But a grand livery chap; footman or coachman—I ain't sure which—only that he came frae a Squire Powell's, 'bout a mile back."

"Oh! I know Squire Powell—him o' New Hall, I suppose it be. What did the sarvint say?"

"That if you wasn't engaged, his young master wants ye to take hisself, and some friends that be staying wi' him, for a row down the river."

"How far did the man say? If they be bound to Chepstow, or even but Tintern, I don't think I could go—unless they start Monday mornin'. I'm 'gaged to the Captain for Thursday, ye know; an' if I went the long trip, there'd be all the bother o' gettin' the boat back—an' bare time."

"Monday! Why it's the morrow they want ye."

"Sunday! That's queerish, too. Squire Powell's family be a sort o' strict religious, I've heerd."

"That's just it. The livery chap sayed it be a church they're goin' to; some curious kind o' old worshippin' place, that lie in a bend o' the river, where carriages ha' difficulty in gettin' to it."

"I think I know the one, an' can take them there well enough. What answer did you gie to the man?"

"That ye could take 'em, an' would. I know'd you hadn't any other bespeak; and since it wor to a church, wouldn't mind its bein' Sunday."

"Sartinly not. Why should I?" asks Jack, who is anything but a Sabbatarian. "Where do they weesh the boat to be took? Or am I to wait for 'em here?"

"Yes; the man spoke o' them comin' here, an' at a very early hour. Six o'clock. He sayed the clergyman be a friend o' the family, an' they're to ha' their breakfasts wi' him, afore goin' to church."

"All right! I'll be ready for 'em, come's as early as they may."

"In that case, my son, ye' better get to your bed at once. Ye've had a hard day o' it, and need rest. Should ye like take a drop o' somethin' 'fores you lie down?"

"Well, mother, I don't mind. Just a glass o' your elderberry."

She opens a cupboard, brings forth a black bottle, and fills him a tumbler of the dark red wine—home made, and by her own hands.

Quaffing it, he observes,—

"It be the best stuff that I know of to put spirit into a man, an' makes him feel cheery. I've heerd the Captain hisself say it beats their *Spanish Port* all to pieces."

Though somewhat astray in his commercial geography, the young waterman, as his patron, is right about the quality of the beverage; for elderberry wine, made in the correct way, is superior to that of Oporto. Curious scientific fact, I believe not generally known, that the soil where grows the *Sambucus* is that most favourable to the growth of the grape.

Without going thus deeply into the philosophy of the subject, or at all troubling himself about it, the boatman soon gets to the bottom of his glass, and bidding his mother good-night, retires to his sleeping room.

Getting into bed, he lies for a while sweetly thinking of Mary Morgan, and that satisfactory interview under the elm; then goes to sleep as sweetly to dream of her.



There is just a streak of daylight stealing in through the window as he awakes; enough to warn him that it is time to be up and stirring. Up he instantly is, and arrays himself, not in his everyday boating habiliments, but a suit worn only on Sundays and holidays.

The mother, also astir betimes, has his breakfast on the table soon as he is rigged; and just as he finishes eating it, the rattle of wheels on the road in front, with voices, tells him his fare has arrived.

Hastening out, he sees a grand carriage drawn up at the gate, double horsed, with

coachman and footman on the box; inside young Mr. Powell, his pretty sister, and two others—a lady and gentleman, also young.

Soon they are all seated in the boat, the coachman having been ordered to take the carriage home, and bring it back at a certain hour. The footman goes with them—the *Mary* having seats for six.

Rowed down stream, the young people converse among themselves, gaily now and then giving way to laughter, as though it were any other day than Sunday. But their boatman is merry also with memories of the preceding night; and, though not called upon to take part in their conversation, he likes listening to it. Above all, he is pleased with the appearance of Miss Powell, a very beautiful girl, and takes note of the attention paid her by the gentleman who sits opposite. Jack is rather interested in observing these, as they remind him of his own first approaches to Mary Morgan.

His eyes, though, are for a time removed from them, while the boat is passing Abergann. Out of the farmhouse chimneys just visible over the tops of the trees, he sees smoke ascending. It is not yet seven o'clock, but the Morgans are early-risers, and by this mother and daughter will be on their way to *Matins*, and possibly Confession at the Rugg's Ferry Chapel. He dislikes to reflect on the last, and longs for the day when he has hopes to cure his sweetheart of such a repulsive devotional practice.

Pulling on down, he ceases to think of it, and of her for the time, his attention being engrossed by the management of the boat. For just below Abergann the stream runs sharply, and is given to caprices; but farther on, it once more flows in gentle tide along the meadow-lands of Llangorren.

Before turning the bend, where Gwen Wynn and Eleanor Lees were caught in the rapid current, at the estuary of a sluggish inflowing brook, whose waters are now beaten back by the flooded river, he sees what causes him to start, and hang on the stroke of his oar.

"What is it, Wingate?" asks young Powell, observing his strange behaviour. "Oh! a waif—that plank floating yonder! I suppose you'd like to pick it up! But remember! it's Sunday, and we must confine ourselves to works of necessity and mercy."

Little think the four who smiled at this remark—five with the footman—what a weird, painful impression the sight of that drifting thing has made on the sixth

who is rowing them.

Nor does it leave him all that day; but clings to him in the church, to which he goes; at the Rectory, where he is entertained; and while rowing back up the river—hangs heavy on his heart as lead!

Returning, he looks out for the piece of timber, but cannot see it; for it is now after night, the young people having stayed dinner with their friend the clergyman.

Kept later than they intended, on arrival at the boat's dock they do not remain there an instant; but, getting into the carriage, which has been some time awaiting them, are whirled off to New Hall.

Impatient are they to be home. Far more—for a different reason—the waterman, who but stays to tie the boat's painter; and, leaving the oars in her thwarts, hastens into his house. The plank is still uppermost in his thoughts, the presentiment heavy on his heart.

Not lighter, as on entering at the door he sees his mother seated with her head bowed down to her knees.

He does not wait for her to speak; but asks excitedly:—

"What's the matter, mother?"

The question is mechanical—he almost anticipates the answer, or its nature.

"Oh, my son, my son! As I told ye. It was *the canwyll corph!*"



CHAPTER XXIV.

"THE FLOWER OF LOVE-LIES-BLEEDING."

There is a crowd collected round the farmhouse of Abergann. Not an excited, or noisy one; instead, the people composing it are of staid demeanour, with that formal solemnity observable on the faces of those at a funeral.

And a funeral it is, or soon to be. For, inside there is a chamber of death; a coffin with a corpse—that of her, who, had she lived, would have been Jack Wingate's wife.

Mary Morgan has indeed fallen victim to the mad spite of a monster. Down went she into that swollen stream, which, ruthless and cruel as he who committed her to it, carried her off on its engulfing tide—her form tossed to and fro, now sinking, now coming to the surface, and again going down. No one to save her—not an effort at rescue made by the cowardly Frenchman, who, rushing on to the chasm's edge, there stopped, only to gaze affrightedly at the flood surging below, foam crested—only to listen to her agonized cry, farther off and more freely put forth, as she was borne onward to her doom.

Once again he heard it, in that tone which tells of life's last struggle with death—proclaiming death the conqueror. Then all was over. As he stood horror-stricken, half-bewildered, a cloud suddenly curtained the moon, bringing black darkness upon the earth, as if a pall had been thrown over it. Even the white froth on the water was for the while invisible. He could see nothing—nothing hear, save the hoarse, harsh torrent rolling relentlessly on. Of no avail, then, his hurrying back to the house, and raising the alarm. Too late it was to save Mary Morgan from drowning; and, only by the accident of her body being thrown up against a bank was it that night recovered.

It is the third day after, and the funeral about to take place. Though remote the situation of the farmstead, and sparsely inhabited the district immediately around, the assemblage is a large one. This partly from the unusual circumstances of the girl's death, but as much from the respect in which Evan Morgan is held by his neighbours far and near. They are there in their best attire, men and women alike, Protestants as Catholics, to show a sympathy, which in

truth many of them sincerely feel.

Nor is there among the people assembled any conjecturing about the cause of the fatal occurrence. No hint or suspicion that there has been foul play. How could there? So clearly an accident, as pronounced by the coroner at his inquiry held the day after the drowning—brief and purely *pro forma*.

Mrs. Morgan herself told of her daughter sent on that errand from which she never returned; while the priest, eye-witness, stated the reason why. Taken together, this was enough; though further confirmed by the absent plank, found and brought back on the following day. Even had Wingate rowed back up the river during daylight, he would not have seen it again. The farm labourers and others accustomed to cross by it gave testimony as to its having been loose.

But of all whose evidence was called for, one alone could have put a different construction on the tale. Father Rogier could have done this; but did not, having his reasons for withholding the truth. He is now in possession of a secret that will make Richard Dempsey his slave for life—his instrument, willing or unwilling, for such purpose as he may need him, no matter what its iniquity.

The hour of interment has been fixed for twelve o'clock. It is now a little after eleven, and everybody has arrived at the house. The men outside in groups, some in the little flower-garden in front, others straying into the farmyard to have a look at the fattening pigs, or about the pastures to view the white-faced Herefords and "Ryeland" sheep, of which last Evan Morgan is a noted breeder.

Inside the house are the women—some relatives of the deceased, with the farmer's friends and more familiar acquaintances. All admitted to the chamber of death to take a last look at the dead. The corpse is in the coffin, but with lid not yet screwed on. There lies the corpse in its white drapery, still untouched by "decay's effacing finger," beautiful as living bride, though now a bride for the altar of eternity.

The stream passes in and out; but besides those only curious coming and going, there are some who remain in the room. Mrs. Morgan herself sits beside the coffin, at intervals giving way to wildest grief, a cluster of women around vainly essaying to comfort her.

There is a young man seated in the corner, who seems to need consoling almost as much as she. Every now and then his breast heaves in audible sobbing, as though the heart within were about to break. None wonder at this; for it is Jack

Wingate.

Still, there are those who think it strange his being there—above all, as if made welcome. They know not the remarkable change that has taken place in the feelings of Mrs. Morgan. Beside that bed of death, all who were dear to her daughter were dear to her now. And she is aware that the young waterman was so; for he has told her, with tearful eyes and sad, earnest words, whose truthfulness could not be doubted.

But where is the other, the false one? Not there—never has been since the fatal occurrence. Came not to the inquest, came not to inquire or condole; comes not now to show sympathy, or take part in the rites of sepulture.

There are some who make remark about his absence, though none lament it—not even Mrs. Morgan herself. The thought of the bereaved mother is that he would have ill-befitted being her son. Only a fleeting reflection, her whole soul being engrossed in grief for her lost daughter.

The hour for closing the coffin has come. They but await the priest to say some solemn words. He has not yet arrived, though every instant looked for. A personage so important has many duties to perform, and may be detained by them elsewhere.

For all, he does not fail. While inside the death chamber they are conjecturing the cause of his delay, a buzz outside, with a shuffling of feet in the passage, tells of way being made for him.

Presently he enters the room, and stepping up to the coffin, stands beside it, all eyes turned towards him. His are upon the face of the corpse—at first with the usual look of official gravity and feigned grief. But continuing to gaze upon it, a strange expression comes over his features, as though he saw something that surprised or unusually interested him. It affects him even to giving a start; so light, however, that no one seems to observe it. Whatever the emotion, he conceals it; and in calm voice pronounces the prayer, with all its formalities and gestures.

The lid is laid on, covering the form of Mary Morgan—for ever veiling her face from the world. Then the pall is thrown over, and all carried outside.

There is no hearse, no plumes, nor paid pall-bearers. Affection supplies the place of this heartless luxury of the tomb. On the shoulders of four men the coffin is

borne away, the crowd forming into procession as it passes, and following.

On to the Rugg's Ferry chapel,—into its cemetery, late consecrated. There lowered into a grave already prepared to receive it; and, after the usual ceremonial of the Roman Catholic religion, covered up and turfed over.

Then the mourners scatter off for their homes, singly or in groups, leaving the remains of Mary Morgan in their last resting-place, only her near relatives with thought of ever again returning to stand over them.

There is one exception; this is a man not related to her, but who would have been had she lived. Wingate goes away with the intention ere long to return. The chapel burying ground brinks upon the river, and when the shades of night have descended over it, he brings his boat alongside. Then, fixing her to the bank, he steps out, and proceeds in the direction of the new-made grave. All this cautiously, and with circumspection, as if fearing to be seen. The darkness favouring him, he is not.

Reaching the sacred spot, he kneels down, and with a knife, taken from his pockets, scoops out a little cavity in the lately laid turf. Into this he inserts a plant, which he has brought along with him—one of a common kind, but emblematic of no ordinary feeling. It is that known to country people as "The Flower of Love-lies-bleeding" (*Amaranthus caudatus*).

Closing the earth around its roots, and restoring the sods, he bends lower, till his lips are in contact with the grass upon the grave. One near enough might hear convulsive sobbing, accompanied by the words:—

"Mary, darling! you're wi' the angels now; and I know you'll forgie me if I've done ought to bring about this dreadful thing. Oh, dear, dear Mary! I'd be only too glad to be lyin' in the grave along wi' ye. As God's my witness, I would."

For a time he is silent, giving way to his grief—so wild as to seem unbearable. And just for an instant he himself thinks it so, as he kneels with the knife still open in his hand, his eyes fixed upon it. A plunge with that shining blade with point to his heart, and all his misery would be over!

"My mother—my poor mother—no!"

These few words, with the filial thought conveyed, save him from suicide. Soon as repeating them, he shuts to his knife, rises to his feet, and, returning to the boat again, rows himself home; but never with so heavy a heart.



CHAPTER XXV.

A FRENCH FEMME DE CHAMBRE.

Of all who assisted at the ceremony of Mary Morgan's funeral, no one seemed so impatient for its termination as the priest. In his official capacity, he did all he could to hasten it—soon as it was over, hurrying away from the grave, out of the burying ground, and into his house near by.

Such haste would have appeared strange—even indecent—but for the belief of his having some sacerdotal duty that called him elsewhere; a belief strengthened by their shortly after seeing him start off in the direction of the ferry-boat.

Arriving there, the Charon attendant rows him across the river; and, soon as setting foot on the opposite side, he turns face down stream, taking a path that meanders through fields and meadows. Along this he goes rapidly as his legs can carry him—in a walk. Clerical dignity hinders him from proceeding at a run, though, judging by the expression of his countenance, he is inclined to it.

The route he is on would conduct to Llangorren Court—several miles distant—and thither is he bound; though the house itself is not his objective point. He does not visit, nor would it serve him to show his face there—least of all to Gwen Wynn. She might not be so rude as to use her riding whip on him, as she once felt inclined in the hunting-field; but she would certainly be surprised to see him at her home.

Yet it is one within her house he wishes to see, and is now on the way for it, pretty sure of being able to accomplish his object. True to her fashionable instincts and *toilette* necessities, Miss Linton keeps a French maid, and it is with this damsel Father Rogier designs having an interview. He is thoroughly *en rapport* with the *femme de chambre*, and through her, aided by the Confession, kept advised of everything which transpires at the Court, or all he deems it worth while to be advised about.

His confidence that he will not have his long walk for nothing rests on certain matters of pre-arrangement. With the foreign domestic he has succeeded in establishing a code of signals, by which he can communicate, with almost a certainty of being able to see her—not inside the house, but at a place near

enough to be convenient. Rare the park in Herefordshire through which there is not a right-of-way path, and one runs across that of Llangorren. Not through the ornamental grounds, nor at all close to the mansion—as is frequently the case, to the great chagrin of the owner—but several hundred yards distant. It passes from the river's bank to the county road, all the way through trees, that screen it from view of the house. There is a point, however, where it approaches the edge of the wood, and there one traversing it might be seen from the upper windows. But only for an instant, unless the party so passing should choose to make stop in the place exposed.

It is a thoroughfare not much frequented, though free to Father Rogier as any one else; and, now hastening along it, he arrives at that spot where the break in the timber brings the house in view. Here he makes a halt, still keeping under the trees; to a branch of one of them, on the side towards the Court, attaching a piece of white paper he has taken out of his pocket. This done, with due caution and care, that he be not observed in the act, he draws back to the path, and sits down upon a stile close by, to await the upshot of his telegraphy.

His haste hitherto explained by the fact, only at certain times are his signals likely to be seen, or could they be attended to. One of the surest and safest is during the early afternoon hours, just after luncheon, when the ancient toast of Cheltenham takes her accustomed *siesta*, before dressing herself for the drive, or reception of callers. While the mistress sleeps, the maid is free to dispose of herself as she pleases.

It was to hit this interlude of leisure Father Rogier has been hurrying; and that he has succeeded is soon known to him, by his seeing a form with floating drapery, recognisable as that of the *femme de chambre*. Gliding through the shrubbery, and evidently with an eye to escape observation, she is only visible at intervals; at length lost to his sight altogether as she enters among the thick standing trees. But he knows she will turn up again.

And she does after a short time, coming along the path towards the stile where here he is seated.

"Ah! *ma bonne!*" he exclaims, dropping on his feet, and moving forward to meet her. "You've been prompt! I didn't expect you quite so soon. Madame la Chatelaine oblivious, I apprehend; in the midst of her afternoon nap?"

"Yes, Père; she was when I stole off. But she has given me directions about dressing her, to go out for a drive—earlier than usual. So I must get back

immediately."

"I'm not going to detain you very long. I chanced to be passing, and thought I might as well have a word with you—seeing it's the hour when you're off duty. By the way, I hear you're about to have grand doings at the Court—a ball, and what not?"

"*Oui, m'ssieu; oui.*"

"When is it to be?"

"On Thursday. Mademoiselle celebrates *son jour de naissance*—the twenty-first, making her of age. It is to be a grand fête as you say. They've been all last week preparing for it."

"Among the invited, Le Capitaine Ryecroft, I presume?"

"Oh, yes. I saw madame write the note inviting him—indeed, took it myself down to the hall table for the post-boy."

"He visits often at the Court of late?"

"Very often—once a week, sometimes twice."

"And comes down the river by boat, doesn't he?"

"In a boat. Yes—comes and goes that way."

Her statement is reliable, as Father Rogier has reason to believe—having an inkling of suspicion that the damsel has of late been casting sheep's eyes, not at Captain Ryecroft, but his young boatman, and is as much interested in the movements of the *Mary* as either the boat's owner or charterer.

"Always comes by water, and returns by it," observes the priest, as if speaking to himself. "You're quite sure of that, *ma fille*?"

"Oh, quite, Père!"

"Mademoiselle appears to be very partial to him. I think you told me she often accompanies him down to the boat stair at his departure?"

"Often! Always."

"Always?"

"*Toujours!* I never knew it otherwise. Either the boat stair or the pavilion."

"Ah! the summer-house! They hold their *tête-à-tête* there at times, do they?"

"Yes, they do."

"But not when he leaves at a late hour—as, for instance, when he dines at the Court; which I know he has done several times?"

"Oh, yes; even then. Only last week he was there for dinner, and Ma'mselle Gwen went with him to his boat, or the pavilion, to bid adieus. No matter what the time to her. *Ma foi!* I'd risk my word she'll do the same after this grand ball that's to be. And why shouldn't she, Père Rogier? Is there any harm in it?"

The question is put with a view of justifying her own conduct, that would be somewhat similar were Jack Wingate to encourage it, which, to say truth, he never has.

"Oh, no," answers the priest, with an assumed indifference; "no harm whatever, and no business of ours. Mademoiselle Wynn is mistress of her own actions, and will be more after the coming birthday, number *vingt-un*. But," he adds, dropping the *rôle* of the interrogator, now that he has got all the information wanted, "I fear I'm keeping you too long. As I've said, chancing to come by, I signalled—chiefly to tell you that next Sunday we have High Mass in the chapel, with special prayers for a young girl who was drowned last Saturday night, and whom we've just this day interred. I suppose you've heard?"

"No, I haven't. Who, Père?"

Her question may appear strange, Rugg's Ferry being so near to Llangorren Court, and Abergann still nearer. But for reasons already stated, as others, the ignorance of the Frenchwoman as to what has occurred at the farmhouse is not only intelligible, but natural enough.

Equally natural, though in a sense very different, is the look of satisfaction appearing in her eyes, as the priest in answer gives the name of the drowned girl.

"*Marie, la fille de fermier Morgan.*"

The expression that comes over her face is, under the circumstances, terribly repulsive—being almost that of joy! For not only has she seen Mary Morgan at the chapel, but something besides—heard her name coupled with that of the

waterman, Wingate.

In the midst of her strong, sinful emotions, of which the priest is fully cognizant, he finds it a good opportunity for taking leave. Going back to the tree where the bit of signal paper has been left, he plucks it off, and crumbles it into his pocket. Then, returning to the path, shakes hands with her, says "*Bon jour!*" and departs.

She is not a beauty, or he would have made his adieus in a very different way.



CHAPTER XXVI.

THE POACHER AT HOME.

Coracle Dick lives all alone. If he have relatives, they are not near, nor does any one in the neighbourhood know aught about them. Only some vague report of a father away off in the colonies, where he went against his will; while the mother—is believed dead.

Not less solitary is Coracle's place of abode. Situated in a dingle with sides thickly wooded, it is not visible from anywhere. Nor is it near any regular road; only approachable by a path, which there ends—the dell itself being a *cul-de-sac*. Its open end is toward the river, running in at a point where the bank is precipitous, so hindering thoroughfare along the stream's edge, unless when its waters are at their lowest.

Coracle's house is but a hovel, no better than the cabin of a backwoods squatter. Timber structure, too, in part, with a filling up of rough mason work. Its half-dozen perches of garden ground, once reclaimed from the wood, have grown wild again, no spade having touched them for years. The present occupant of the tenement has no taste for gardening, nor agriculture of any kind; he is a poacher, *pur sang*—at least, so far as is known. And it seems to pay him better than would the cultivation of cabbages—with pheasants at nine shillings the brace, and salmon three shillings the pound. He has the river, if not the mere, for his net, and the land for his game—making as free with both as ever did Alan-a-dale.

But, whatever the price of fish and game, be it high or low, Coracle is never without good store of cash, spending it freely at the Welsh Harp, as elsewhere; at times so lavishly, that people of suspicious nature think it cannot all be the product of night netting and snaring. Some of it, say scandalous tongues, is derived from other industries, also practised by night, and less reputable than trespassing after game. But, as already said, these are only rumours, and confined to the few. Indeed, only a very few have intimate acquaintance with the man. He is of a reserved, taciturn habit, somewhat surly: not talkative even in his cups. And though ever ready to stand treat in the Harp taproom, he rarely practises hospitality in his own house; only now and then, when some

acquaintance of like kidney and calling pays him a visit. Then the solitary domicile has its silence disturbed by the talk of men, thick as thieves—often speech which, if heard beyond its walls, 'twould not be well for its owner.

More than half time, however, the poacher's dwelling is deserted, and oftener at night than by day. Its door, shut and padlocked, tells when the tenant is abroad. Then only a rough lurcher dog—a dangerous animal, too—is guardian of the place. Not that there are any chattels to tempt the cupidity of the kleptomaniac. The most valuable movable inside was not worth carrying away; and outside is but the coracle standing in a lean-to shed, propped up by its paddle. It is not always there, and, when absent, it may be concluded that its owner is on some expedition up, down, or across the river. Nor is the dog always at home; his absence proclaiming the poacher engaged in the terrestrial branch of his profession—running down hares or rabbits.



It is the night of the same day that has seen the remains of Mary Morgan consigned to their resting-place in the burying-ground of the Rugg's Ferry chapel. A wild night it has turned out, dark and stormy. The autumnal equinox is on, and its gales have commenced stripping the trees of their foliage. Around the dwelling of Dick Dempsey the fallen leaves lie thick, covering the ground as with cloth of gold; at intervals torn to shreds, as the wind swirls them up and holds them suspended.

Every now and then they are driven against the door, which is shut, but not locked. The hasp is hanging loose, the padlock with its bowed bolt open. The coracle is seen standing upright in the shed; the lurcher not anywhere outside—for the animal is within, lying upon the hearth in front of a cheerful fire. And before the same sits its master, regarding a pot which hangs over it on hooks; at intervals lifting off the lid, and stirring the contents with a long-handled spoon of white metal. What these are might be told by the aroma: a stew, smelling strongly of onions with game savour conjoined. Ground game at that, for Coracle is in the act of "jugging" a hare. Handier to no man than him were the recipe of Mrs. Glass, for he comes up to all its requirements—even the primary and essential one—knows how to catch his hare as well as cook it.

The stew is done, dished, and set steaming upon the table, where already has been placed a plate—the time-honoured willow pattern—with a knife and two-

pronged fork. There is, besides, a jug of water, a bottle containing brandy, and a tumbler.

Drawing his chair up, Coracle commences eating. The hare is a young one—a leveret he has just taken from the stubble—tender and juicy—delicious even without the red-currant jelly he has not got, and for which he does not care. Withal, he appears but little to enjoy the meal, and only eats as a man called upon to satisfy the cravings of hunger. Every now and then, as the fork is being carried to his head, he holds it suspended, with the morsel of flesh on its prongs, while listening to sounds outside!

At such intervals the expression upon his countenance is that of the keenest apprehension; and as a gust of wind, unusually violent, drives a leafy branch in loud clout against the door, he starts in his chair, fancying it the knock of a policeman with his muffled truncheon!

This night the poacher is suffering from no ordinary fear of being summoned for game trespass. Were that all, he could eat his leveret as composedly as if it had been regularly purchased and paid for. But there is more upon his mind; the dread of a writ being presented to him, with shackles at the same time—of being taken handcuffed to the county jail—thence before a court of assize—and finally to the scaffold!

He has reason to apprehend all this. Notwithstanding his deep cunning, and the dexterity with which he accomplished his great crime, a man must have witnessed it. Above the roar of the torrent, mingling with the cries of the drowning girl as she struggled against it, were shouts in a man's voice, which he fancied to be that of Father Rogier. From what he has since heard, he is now certain of it. The coroner's inquest, at which he was not present, but whose report has reached him, puts that beyond doubt. His only uncertainty is, whether Rogier saw him by the footbridge, and if so to recognise him. True, the priest has nothing said of him at the 'quest; for all he, Coracle, has his suspicions; now torturing him almost as much as if sure that he was detected tampering with the plank. No wonder he eats his supper with little relish, or that after every few mouthfuls he takes a swallow of the brandy, with a view to keeping up his spirits.

Withal he has no remorse. When he recalls the hastily exchanged speeches he overheard upon Garranhill, with that more prolonged dialogue under the trysting-tree, the expression upon his features is not one of repentance, but

devilish satisfaction at the fell deed he has done. Not that his vengeance is yet satisfied. It will not be till he have the other life—that of Jack Wingate. He has dealt the young waterman a blow which at the same time afflicts himself; only by dealing a deadlier one will his own sufferings be relieved. He has been long plotting his rival's death, but without seeing a safe way to accomplish it. And now the thing seems no nearer than ever—this night farther off. In his present frame of mind—with the dread of the gallows upon it—he would be too glad to cry quits, and let Wingate live!

Starting at every swish of the wind, he proceeds with his supper, hastily devouring it, like a wild beast; and when at length finished, he sets the dish upon the floor for the dog. Then lighting his pipe, and drawing the bottle nearer to his hand, he sits for a while smoking.

Not long before being interrupted by a noise at the door; this time no stroke of wind-tossed waif, but a touch of knuckles. Though slight and barely audible, the dog knows it to be a knock, as shown by his behaviour. Dropping the half-gnawed bone, and springing to its feet, the animal gives out an angry growling.

Its master has himself started from his chair, and stands trembling. There is a slit of a door at back convenient for escape; and for an instant his eye is on it, as though he had half a mind to make exit that way. He would blow out the light were it a candle; but cannot as it is the fire, whose faggots are still brightly ablaze.

While thus undecided, he hears the knock repeated—this time louder, and with the accompaniment of a voice, saying,—

"Open your door, Monsieur Dick."

Not a policeman, then; only the priest!



CHAPTER XXVII.

A MYSTERIOUS CONTRACT.

"Only the priest!" muttered Coracle to himself, but little better satisfied than if it were the policeman.

Giving the lurcher a kick to quiet the animal, he pulls back the bolt, and draws open the door, as he does so asking, "That you, Father Rogier?"

"*C'est moi!*" answers the priest, stepping in without invitation. "Ah! *mon braconnier!* you're having something nice for supper. Judging by the aroma ragout of hare. Hope I haven't disturbed you. Is it hare?"

"It was, your Reverence, a bit of leveret."

"Was! You've finished then. It is all gone?"

"It is. The dog had the remains of it, as ye see."

He points to the dish on the floor.

"I'm sorry at that—having rather a relish for leveret. It can't be helped, however."

"I wish I'd known ye were comin'. Dang the dog!"

"No, no! Don't blame the poor dumb brute. No doubt it too has a taste for hare, seeing it's half hound. I suppose leverets are plentiful just now, and easily caught, since they can no longer retreat to the standing corn?"

"Yes, your Reverence. There be a good when o' them about."

"In that case, if you should stumble upon one, and bring it to my house, I'll have it jugged for myself. By the way, what have you got in that black jack?"

"It's brandy."

"Well, Monsieur Dick, I'll thank you for a mouthful."

"Will you take it neat, or mixed wi' a drop o' water?"

"Neat—raw. The night's that, and the two raws will neutralize one another. I feel chilled to the bones, and a little fatigued, toiling against the storm."

"It be a fearsome night. I wonder at your Reverence bein' out—exposin' yourself in such weather!"

"All weathers are alike to me—when duty calls. Just now I'm abroad on a little matter of business that won't brook delay."

"Business—wi' me?"

"With you, *mon braconnier!*"

"What may it be, your Reverence?"

"Sit down, and I shall tell you. It's too important to be discussed standing."

The introductory dialogue does not tranquillize the poacher; instead, further intensifies his fears. Obedient, he takes his seat one side the table, the priest planting himself on the other, the glass of brandy within reach of his hand.

After a sip, he resumes speech with the remark,—

"If I mistake not, you are a poor man, Monsieur Dempsey?"

"You ain't no ways mistaken 'bout that, Father Rogier."

"And you'd like to be a rich one?"

Thus encouraged, the poacher's face lights up a little. Smilingly he makes reply,
—

"I can't say as I'd have any particular objection. 'Stead, I'd like it wonderful well."

"You can be, if so inclined."

"I'm ever so inclined, as I've sayed. But how, your Reverence? In this hard work-o'-day world 'tan't so easy to get rich."

"For you, easy enough. No labour, and not much more difficulty than transporting your coracle five or six miles across the meadows."

"Somethin' to do wi' the coracle, have it?"

"No; 'twill need a bigger boat—one that will carry three or four people. Do you know where you can borrow such, or hire it?"

"I think I do. I've a friend, the name o' Rob Trotter, who's got just sich a boat. He'd lend it me, sure."

"Charter it, if he doesn't. Never mind about the price. I'll pay."

"When might you want it, your Reverence?"

"On Thursday night, at ten, or a little later—say half-past."

"And where am I to bring it?"

"To the Ferry; you'll have it against the bank by the back of the Chapel burying-ground, and keep it there till I come to you. Don't leave it to go up to the 'Harp,' or anywhere else; and don't let any one see either the boat or yourself, if you can possibly avoid it. As the nights are now dark at that hour, there need be no difficulty in your rowing up the river without being observed. Above all, you're to make no one the wiser of what you're to do, or anything I'm now saying to you. The service I want you for is one of a secret kind, and not to be prattled about."

"May I have a hint o' what it is?"

"Not now; you shall know in good time—when you meet me with the boat. There will be another along with me—maybe two—to assist in the affair. What will be required of you is a little dexterity, *such as you displayed on Saturday night.*"

No need the emphasis on the last words to impress their meaning upon the murderer. Too well he comprehends, starting in his chair as if a hornet had stung him.

"How—where?" he gasps out in the confusion of terror.

The double interrogatory is but mechanical, and of no consequence. Hopeless any attempt at concealment or subterfuge; as he is aware on receiving the answer, cool and provokingly deliberate.

"You have asked two questions, Monsieur Dick, that call for separate replies. To the first, 'How?' I leave you to grope out the answer for yourself, feeling pretty sure you'll find it. With the second I'll be more particular, if you wish me. Place

—where a certain foot-plank bridges a certain brook, close to the farmhouse of Abergann. It—the plank, I mean—last Saturday night, a little after nine, took a fancy to go drifting down the Wye. Need I tell you who sent it, Richard Dempsey?"

The man thus interrogated looks more than confused—horrified, well-nigh crazed. Excitedly stretching out his hand, he clutches the bottle, half fills the tumbler with brandy, and drinks it down at a gulp. He almost wishes it were poison, and would instantly kill him!

Only after dashing the glass down does he make reply—sullenly, and in a hoarse, husky voice,—

"I don't want to know one way or the other. D——n the plank! What do I care?"

"You shouldn't blaspheme, Monsieur Dick. That's not becoming—above all, in the presence of your spiritual adviser. However, you're excited, as I see, which is in some sense an excuse."

"I beg your Reverence's pardon. I was a bit excited about something."

He has calmed down a little at thought that things may not be so bad for him after all. The priest's last words, with his manner, seem to promise secrecy. Still further quieted as the latter continues:

"Never mind about what. We can talk of it afterwards. As I've made you aware—more than once, if I rightly remember—there's no sin so great but that pardon may reach it—if repented and atoned for. On Thursday night you shall have an opportunity to make some atonement. So be there with the boat!"

"I will, your Reverence, sure as my name's Richard Dempsey."

Idle of him to be thus earnest in promising. He can be trusted to come as if led on a string. For he knows there is a halter around his neck, with one end of it in the hand of Father Rogier.

"Enough!" returns the priest. "If there be anything else I think of communicating to you before Thursday, I'll come again—to-morrow night. So be at home. Meanwhile, see to securing the boat. Don't let there be any failure about that, *coûte que coûte*. And let me again enjoin silence—not a word to any one, even your friend Rob. *Verbum sapientibus!* But as you're not much of a scholar, Monsieur Coracle, I suppose my Latin's lost on you. Putting it in your own

vernacular, I mean: keep a close mouth, if you don't wish to wear a necktie of material somewhat coarser than either silk or cotton. You comprehend?"

To the priest's satanical humour the poacher answers, with a sickly smile,—

"I do, Father Rogier—perfectly."

"That's sufficient. And now, *mon braconnier*, I must be gone. Before starting out, however, I'll trench a little further on your hospitality. Just another drop, to defend me from these chill equinoctials."

Saying which he leans towards the table, pours out a stoop of the brandy—best Cognac from the "Harp" it is—then quaffing it off, bids "bon soir!" and takes departure.

Having accompanied him to the door, the poacher stands upon its threshold looking after, reflecting upon what has passed, anything but pleasantly. Never took he leave of a guest less agreeable. True, things are not quite so bad as he might have expected, and had reason to anticipate. And yet they are bad enough. He is in the toils—the tough, strong meshes of the criminal net, which at any moment may be drawn tight and fast around him; and between policeman and priest there is little to choose. For his own purposes the latter may allow him to live; but it will be as the life of one who has sold his soul to the devil!

While thus gloomily cogitating, he hears a sound, which but makes still more sombre the hue of his thoughts. A voice comes pealing up the glen—a wild, wailing cry, as of some one in the extreme of distress. He can almost fancy it the shriek of a drowning woman. But his ears are too much accustomed to nocturnal sounds, and the voices of the woods, to be deceived. That heard was only a little unusual by reason of the rough night—its tone altered by the whistling of the wind.

"Bah!" he exclaims, recognising the call of the screech owl, "it's only one o' them cursed brutes. What a fool fear makes a man!"

And with this hackneyed reflection he turns back into the house, rebolts the door, and goes to his bed—not to sleep, but lie long awake, kept so by that same fear.



CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE GAME OF PIQUE.

The sun has gone down upon Gwen Wynn's natal day—its twenty-first anniversary—and Llangorren Court is in a blaze of light, for a grand entertainment is there being given—a ball.

The night is a dark one; but its darkness does not interfere with the festivities; instead, heightens their splendour, by giving effect to the illuminations. For although autumn, the weather is still warm, and the grounds are illuminated. Parti-coloured lamps are placed at intervals along the walks, and suspended in festoonery from the trees, while the casement windows of the house stand open, people passing in and out of them as if they were doors. The drawing-room is this night devoted to dancing; its carpet taken up, the floor made as slippery as a skating rink with beeswax—abominable custom! Though a large apartment, it does not afford space for half the company to dance in; and to remedy this, supplementary quadrilles are arranged on the smooth turf outside—a string and wind band from the neighbouring town making music loud enough for all.

Besides, all do not care for the delightful exercise. A sumptuous spread in the dining-room, with wines at discretion, attracts a proportion of the guests; while there are others who have a fancy to go strolling about the lawn, even beyond the coruscation of the lamps; some who do not think it too dark anywhere, but the darker the better.

The *elite* of at least half the shire is present, and Miss Linton, who is still the hostess, reigns supreme in fine exuberance of spirits. Being the last entertainment at Llangorren over which she is officially to preside, one might imagine she would take things in a different way; but as she is to remain resident at the Court, with privileges but slightly, if at all, curtailed, she has no gloomy forecast of the future. Instead, on this night present she lives as in the past; almost fancies herself back at Cheltenham in its days of splendour, and dancing with the "first gentleman in Europe" redivivus. If her star be going down, it is going in glory, as the song of the swan is sweetest in its dying hour.

Strange that on such a festive occasion, with its circumstances attendant, the old

spinster, hitherto mistress of the mansion, should be happier than the younger one, hereafter to be! But, in truth so is it. Notwithstanding her great beauty and grand wealth—the latter no longer in prospective, but in actual possession—despite the gaiety and grandeur surrounding her, the friendly greetings and warm congratulations received on all sides—Gwen Wynn is herself anything but gay. Instead, sad, almost to wretchedness!

And from the most trifling of causes, though not as by her estimated; little suspecting she has but herself to blame. It has arisen out of an episode, in love's history of common and very frequent occurrence—the game of pique. She and Captain Ryecroft are playing it, with all the power and skill they can command. Not much of the last, for jealousy is but a clumsy fencer. Though accounted keen, it is often blind as love itself; and were not both under its influence, they would not fail to see through the flimsy deceptions they are mutually practising on one another. In love with each other almost to distraction, they are this night behaving as though they were the bitterest enemies, or at all events, as friends sorely estranged.

She began it; blamelessly, even with praiseworthy motive; which, known to him, no trouble could have come up between them. But when, touched with compassion for George Shenstone, she consented to dance with him several times consecutively, and in the intervals remained conversing—too familiarly, as Captain Ryecroft imagined—all this with an "engagement ring" on her finger, by himself placed upon it—not strange in him, thus *fiancé* feeling a little jealous; no more that he should endeavour to make her the same. Strategy, old as hills, or hearts themselves.

In his attempt he is, unfortunately, too successful; finding the means near by—an assistant willing and ready to his hand. This in the person of Miss Powell; she who went to church on the Sunday before in Jack Wingate's boat—a young lady so attractive as to make it a nice point whether she or Gwen Wynn be the attraction of the evening.

Though only just introduced, the Hussar officer is not unknown to her by name, with some repute of his heroism besides. His appearance speaks for itself, making such impression upon the lady as to set her pencil at work inscribing his name on her card for several dances, round and square, in rapid succession.

And so between him and Gwen Wynn the jealous feeling, at first but slightly entertained, is nursed and fanned into a burning flame—the green-eyed monster

growing bigger as the night gets later.

On both sides it reaches its maximum when Miss Wynn, after a waltz, leaning on George Shenstone's arm, walks out into the grounds, and stops to talk with him in a retired, shadowy spot.

Not far off is Captain Ryecroft observing them, but too far to hear the words passing between. Were he near enough for this, it would terminate the strife raging in his breast, as the sham flirtation he is carrying on with Miss Powell—put an end to *her* new-sprung aspirations, if she has any.

It does as much for the hopes of George Shenstone—long in abeyance, but this night rekindled and revived. Beguiled, first by his partner's amiability in so oft dancing with, then afterwards using him as a foil, he little dreams that he is but being made a cat's-paw. Instead, drawing courage from the deception, emboldened as never before, he does what he never dared before—make Gwen Wynn a proposal of marriage. He makes it without circumlocution, at a single bound, as he would take a hedge upon his hunter.

"Gwen! you know how I love you—would give my life for you! Will you be ——" Only now he hesitates, as if his horse baulked.

"Be what?" she asks, with no intention to help him over, but mechanically, her thoughts being elsewhere.

"My wife?"

She starts at the words, touched by his manly way, yet pained by their appealing earnestness, and the thought she must give denying response.

And how is she to give it, with least pain to him? Perhaps the bluntest way will be the best. So thinking, she says,—

"George, it can never be. Look at that!"

She holds out her left hand, sparkling with jewels.

"At what?" he asks, not comprehending.

"That ring." She indicates a cluster of brilliants, on the fourth finger, by itself, adding the word "Engaged."

"O God!" he exclaims, almost in a groan. "Is that so?"

"It is."

For a time there is silence; her answer less maddening than making him sad.

With a desperate effort to resign himself, he at length replies,—

"Dear Gwen! for I must still call you—ever hold you so—my life hereafter will be as one who walks in darkness, waiting for death—ah, longing for it!"

Despair has its poetry, as love; oft exceeding the last in fervour of expression, and that of George Shenstone causes surprise to Gwen Wynn, while still further paining her. So much she knows not how to make rejoinder, and is glad when a *fanfare* of the band instrument gives note of another quadrille—the Lancers—about to begin.

Still engaged partners for the dance, but not to be for life, they return to the drawing-room, and join in it; he going through its figures with a sad heart and many a sigh.

Nor is she less sorrowful—only more excited; nigh unto madness as she sees Captain Ryecroft *vis-à-vis* with Miss Powell; on his face an expression of content, calm, almost cynical; hers radiant as with triumph!

In this moment of Gwen Wynn's supreme misery—acme of jealous spite—were George Shenstone to renew his proposal, she might pluck the betrothal ring from her finger, and give answer, "I will!"

It is not to be so, however weighty the consequences. In the horoscope of her life there is yet a heavier.



CHAPTER XXIX.

JEALOUS AS A TIGER.

It is a little after two A.M., and the ball is breaking up. Not a very late hour, as many of the people live at a distance, and have a long drive homeward, over hilly roads.

By the fashion prevailing a *galop* brings the dancing to a close. The musicians, slipping their instruments into cases and baize bags, retire from the room; soon after deserted by all, save a spare servant or two, who make the rounds to look to extinguishing the lamps, with a sharp eye for waifs in the shape of dropped ribbons or *bijouterie*.

Gentlemen guests stay longer in the dining-room over claret and champagne "cup," or the more time-honoured B. and S.; while in the hallway there is a crush, and on the stairs a stream of ladies, descending cloaked and hooded.

Soon the crowd waxes thinner, relieved by carriages called up, quickly filling, and whirled off.

That of Squire Powell is among them; and Captain Ryecroft, not without comment from certain officious observers, accompanies the young lady he has been so often dancing with to the door.

Having seen her off with the usual ceremonies of leave-taking, he returns into the porch, and there for a while remains. It is a large portico, with Corinthian columns, by one of which he takes stand, in shadow. But there is a deeper shadow on his own brow, and a darkness in his heart, such as he has never in his life experienced. He feels how he has committed himself, but not with any remorse or repentance. Instead, the jealous anger is still within his breast, ripe and ruthless as ever. Nor is it so unnatural. Here is a woman—not Miss Powell, but Gwen Wynn—to whom he has given his heart—acknowledged the surrender, and in return had acknowledgment of hers—not only this, but offered his hand in marriage—placed the pledge upon her finger, she assenting and accepting—and now, in the face of all, openly, and before his face, engaged in flirtation!

It is not the first occasion for him to have observed familiarities between her and

the son of Sir George Shenstone; trifling, it is true, but which gave him uneasiness. But to-night things have been more serious, and the pain caused him all-imbuing and bitter.

He does not reflect how he has been himself behaving. For to none more than the jealous lover is the big beam unobservable, while the little mote is sharply descried. He only thinks of her ill-behaviour, ignoring his own. If she has been but dissembling, coquetting with him, even that were reprehensible. Heartless, he deems it—sinister—something more, an indiscretion. Flirting while engaged—what might she do when married?

He does not wrong her by such direct self-interrogation. The suspicion were unworthy of himself, as of her; and as yet he has not given way to it. Still her conduct seems inexcusable, as inexplicable; and to get explanation of it he now tarries, while others are hastening away.

Not resolutely. Besides the half-sad, half-indignant expression upon his countenance, there is also one of indecision. He is debating within himself what course to pursue, and whether he will go off without bidding her good-bye. He is almost mad enough to be ill-mannered; and possibly, were it only a question of politeness, he would not stand upon, or be stayed by, it. But there is more. The very same spiteful rage hinders him from going. He thinks himself aggrieved, and, therefore, justifiable in demanding to know the reason—to use a slang, but familiar phrase "having it out."

Just as he has reached this determination, an opportunity is offered him. Having taken leave of Miss Linton, he has returned to the door, where he stands hat in hand, his overcoat already on. Miss Wynn is now also there, bidding good-night to some guests—intimate friends—who have remained till the last. As they move off, he approaches her; she, as if unconsciously, and by the merest chance, lingering near the entrance. It is all pretence on her part, that she has not seen him dallying about; for she has several times, while giving *congé* to others of the company. Equally feigned her surprise, as she returns his salute, saying,—

"Why, Captain Ryecroft! I supposed you were gone long ago!"

"I am sorry, Miss Wynn, you should think me capable of such rudeness."

"Captain Ryecroft" and "Miss Wynn," instead of "Vivian" and "Gwen"! It is a bad beginning, ominous of a worse ending.

The rejoinder, almost a rebuke, places her at a disadvantage, and she says rather confusedly—

"Oh! certainly not, sir. But where there are so many people, of course one does not look for the formalities of leave-taking."

"True; and, availing myself of that, I might have been gone long since, as you supposed, but for——"

"For what?"

"A word I wish to speak with you—alone. Can I?"

"Oh, certainly."

"Not here?" he asks suggestingly.

She glances around. There are servants hurrying about through the hall, crossing and recrossing, with the musicians coming forth from the dining-room, where they have been making a clearance of the cold fowl, ham, and heel-taps.

With quick intelligence comprehending, but without further speech, she walks out into the portico, he preceding. Not to remain there, where eyes would still be on them, and ears within hearing. She has an Indian shawl upon her arm—throughout the night carried while promenading—and again throwing it over her shoulders, she steps down upon the gravelled sweep, and on into the grounds.

Side by side they proceed in the direction of the summer-house, as many times before, though never in the same mood as now; and never, as now, so constrained and silent—for not a word passes between them till they reach the pavilion.

There is light in it. But a few hundred yards from the house, it came in for part of the illumination, and its lamps are not yet extinguished—only burning feebly.

She is the first to enter—he to resume speech, saying,—

"There was a day, Miss Wynn, when, standing on this spot, I thought myself the happiest man in Herefordshire. Now I know it was but a fancy—a sorry hallucination."

"I do not understand you, Captain Ryecroft!"

"Oh, yes, you do. Pardon my contradicting you; you've given me reason."

"Indeed! In what way? I beg, nay, demand, explanation."

"You shall have it; though superfluous, I should think, after what has been passing—this night especially."

"Oh! this night especially! I supposed you so much engaged with Miss Powell as not to have noticed anything or anybody else. What was it, pray?"

"You understand, I take it, without need of my entering into particulars."

"Indeed, I don't—unless you refer to my dancing with George Shenstone."

"More than dancing with him—keeping his company all through!"

"Not strange that, seeing I was left so free to keep it! Besides, as I suppose you know, his father was my father's oldest and most intimate friend."

She makes this avowal condescendingly, observing he is really vexed, and thinking the game of contraries has gone far enough. He has given her a sight of his cards, and with the quick, subtle instinct of woman, she sees that among them Miss Powell is no longer chief trump. Were his perception as keen as hers, their jealous conflict would now come to a close, and between them confidence and friendship, stronger than ever, be restored.

Unfortunately it is not to be. Still miscomprehending, yet unyielding, he rejoins sneeringly,—

"And I suppose your father's daughter is determined to continue that intimacy with his father's son, which might not be so very pleasant to him who should be your husband! Had I thought of that when I placed a ring upon your finger——"

Before he can finish, she has plucked it off, and, drawing herself up to full height, says in bitter retort,—

"You insult me, sir! Take it back!"

With the words, the gemmed circlet is flung upon the little rustic table, from which it rolls off.

He has not been prepared for such abrupt issue, though his rude speech tempted it. Somewhat sorry, but still too exasperated to confess or show it, he rejoins defiantly,—

"If you wish it to end so, let it!"

"Yes; let it!"

They part without further speech. He, being nearest the door, goes out first, taking no heed of the diamond cluster which lies sparkling upon the floor.

Neither does she touch, or think of it. Were it the Koh-i-noor, she would not care for it now. A jewel more precious—the one love of her life—is lost, cruelly crushed—and, with heart all but breaking, she sinks down upon the bench, draws the shawl over her face, and weeps till its rich silken tissue is saturated with her tears.

The wild spasm passed, she rises to her feet, and stands leaning upon the baluster rail, looking out and listening. Still dark, she sees nothing, but hears the stroke of a boat's oars in measured and regular repetition—listens on till the sound becomes indistinct, blending with the sough of the river, the sighing of the breeze, and the natural voices of the night.

She may never hear *his* voice, never look on his face again!

At the thought she exclaims, in anguished accent, "This the ending! It is too _____"

What she designed saying is not said. Her interrupted words are continued into a shriek—one wild cry—then her lips are sealed, suddenly, as if stricken dumb, or dead!

Not by the visitation of God. Before losing consciousness, she felt the embrace of brawny arms—knew herself the victim of man's violence.



CHAPTER XXX.

STUNNED AND SILENT.

Down in the boat-dock, upon the thwarts of his skiff, sits the young waterman awaiting his fare. He has been up to the house, and there hospitably entertained—feasted. But with the sorrow of his recent bereavement still fresh, the revelry of the servants' hall had no fascination for him—instead, only saddening him the more. Even the blandishments of the French *femme de chambre* could not detain him; and fleeing them, he has returned to his boat long before he expects being called upon to use the oars.

Seated, pipe in mouth—for Jack too indulges in tobacco—he is endeavouring to put in the time as well as he can; irksome at best with that bitter grief upon him. And it is present all the while, with scarce a moment of surcease, his thoughts ever dwelling on her who is sleeping her last sleep in the burying-ground at Rugg's Ferry.

While thus disconsolately reflecting, a sound falls upon his ears which claims his attention, and for an instant or two occupies it. If anything, it was the dip of an oar; but so light that only one with ears well trained to distinguish noises of the kind could tell it to be that. He, however, has no doubt of it, muttering to himself,—

"Wonder whose boat can be on the river this time o' night—mornin', I ought to say? Wouldn't be a tourist party—starting off so early. No; can't be that. Like enough Dick Dempsey out a-salmon stealin'! The night so dark—just the sort for the rascal to be about on his unlawful business."

While thus conjecturing, a scowl, dark as the night itself, flits over his own face.

"Yes; a coracle!" he continues; "must 'a been the splash o' a paddle. If't had been a regular boat's oar, I'd a heard the thumpin' against the thole pins."

For once the waterman is in error. It is no paddle whose stroke he has heard, nor a coracle impelled by it; but a boat rowed by a pair of oars. And why there is no "thumpin' against the thole pins" is because the oars are muffled. Were he out in the main channel—two hundred yards above the byway—he would see the craft

itself with three men in it. But only at that instant, as in the next it is headed into a bed of "witheys"—flooded by the freshet—and pushed on through them to the bank beyond.

Soon it touches *terra firma*, the men spring *out*; two of them going off towards the grounds of Llangorren Court. The third remains by the boat.

Meanwhile, Jack Wingate, in his skiff, continues listening; but hearing no repetition of the sound that had so slightly reached his ear, soon ceases to think of it, again giving way to his grief, as he returns to reflect on what lies in the chapel cemetery. If he but knew how near the two things were together—the burying-ground and the boat—he would not be long in his own.

Relieved he is when at length voices are heard up at the house—calls for carriages—proclaiming the ball about to break up. Still more gratified, as the banging of doors, and the continuous rumble of wheels, tell of the company fast clearing off.

For nigh half an hour the rattling is incessant; then there is a lull, and he listens for a sound of a different sort—a footfall on the stone stairs that lead down to the little dock—that of his fare, who may at any moment be expected.

Instead of footsteps, he hears voices on the cliff above, off in the direction of the summer-house. Nothing to surprise him that. It is not the first time he has listened to the same, and under very similar circumstances; for soon as hearing he recognises them. But it is the first time for him to note their tone as it is now—to his astonishment that of anger.

"They be quarrellin', I declare," he says to himself. "Wonder what for! Somethin' crooked's come between 'em at the ball—bit o' jealousy, maybe. I shudn't be surprised if it's about young Mr. Shenstone. Sure as eggs is eggs, the Captain have ugly ideas consarnin' him. He needn't though, an' wouldn't, if he seed through the eyes o' a sensible man. Course, bein' deep in love, he can't. I seed it long ago. She be mad about him as he o' her—if not madder. Well; I daresay it be only a lovers' quarrel, an'll soon blow over. Woe's me! I weesh——"

He would say, "I weesh 'twar only that 'twixt myself an' Mary," but the words break upon his lips, while a scalding tear trickles down his cheek.

Fortunately his anguished sorrow is not allowed further indulgence for the time. The footstep so long listened for is at length upon the boat stair; not firm, in its

wanted way, but as though he making it were intoxicated!

But Wingate does not believe it is that. He knows the Captain to be abstemious, or, at all events, not greatly given to drink. He has never seen him overcome by it; and surely he would not be, on this night in particular. Unless, indeed, it may have to do with the angry speech overheard, or the something thought of preceding it!

The conjectures of the waterman are brought to an end by the arrival of his fare at the bottom of the boat stair, where he stops only to ask—

"Are you there, Jack?"

The pitchy darkness accounts for the question.

Receiving answer in the affirmative, he gropes his way along the ledge of rock, reeling like a drunken man. Not from drink, but the effects of that sharp, defiant rejoinder still ringing in his ears. He seems to hear, in every gust of the wind swirling down from the cliff above, the words, "Yes; let it!"

He knows where the skiff should be—where it was left—beyond the pleasure boat. The dock is not wide enough for both abreast, and to reach his own he must go across the other—make a gang-plank of the *Gwendoline*.

As he sets foot upon the thwarts of the pleasure craft, has he a thought of what were his feelings when he first planted it there, after ducking the Forest of Dean fellow? Or, stepping off, does he spurn the boat with angry heel, as in angry speech he has done her whose name it bears? Neither. He is too excited and confused to think of the past, or aught but the black, bitter present.

Still staggering, he drops down upon the stern sheets of the skiff, commanding the waterman to shove off. A command promptly obeyed, and in silence. Jack can see the Captain is out of sorts, and, suspecting the reason, naturally supposes that speech at such time might not be welcome. He says nothing, therefore; but, bending to his oars, pulls on up the byway.

Just outside its entrance a glimpse can be got of the little pavilion—by looking back. And Captain Ryecroft does this, over his shoulder; for, seated at the tiller, his face is from it. The light is still there, burning dimly as ever. For all, he is enabled to trace the outlines of a figure, in shadowy *silhouette*—a woman standing by the baluster rail, as if looking out over it.

He knows who it is: it can only be Gwen Wynn. Well were it for both could he but know what she is at that moment thinking. If he did, back would go his boat, and the two again be together—perhaps never more to part in spite.

Just then, as if ominous, and in spiteful protest against such consummation, the sombre sandstone cliff draws between, and Captain Ryecroft is carried onward, with heart dark and heavy as the rock.



CHAPTER XXXI.

A STARTLING CRY.

During all this while Wingate has not spoken a word, though he also has observed the same figure in the pavilion. With face that way, he could not avoid noticing it, and easily guesses who she is. Had he any doubt, the behaviour of the other would remove it.

"Miss Wynn, for sartin," he thinks to himself, but says nothing.

Again turning his eyes upon his patron, he notes the distraught air, with head drooping, and feels the effect in having to contend against the rudder ill-directed. But he forbears making remark. At such a moment his interference might not be tolerated—perhaps resented. And so the silence continues.

Not much longer. A thought strikes the waterman, and he ventures a word about the weather. It is done for a kindly feeling—for he sees how the other suffers—but in part because he has a reason for it. The observation is,—

"We're goin' to have the biggest kind o' a rain-pour, Captain."

The Captain makes no immediate response. Still in the morose mood, communing with his own thoughts, the words fall upon his ear unmeaningly, as if from a distant echo.

After a time it occurs to him he has been spoken to, and asks,—

"What did you observe, Wingate?"

"That there be a rain storm threatenin', o' the grandest sort. There's flood enough now; but afore long it'll be all over the meadows."

"Why do you think that? I see no sign. The sky's very much clouded, true; but it has been just the same for the last several days."

"'Tain't the sky as tells me, Captain."

"What then?"

"The *heequall*."

"The heequall?"

"Yes; it's been a-cacklin' all through the afternoon and evenin'—especial loud just as the sun wor settin'. I nivir know'd it do that 'ithout plenty o' wet comin' soon after."

Ryecroft's interest is aroused, and for the moment forgetting his misery, he says,
—

"You're talking enigmas, Jack! At least, they are so to me. What is this barometer you seem to place such confidence in? Beast, bird, or fish?"

"It be a bird, Captain. I believe the gentry folks calls it a woodpecker, but 'bout here it be more generally known by the name *heequall*."

The orthography is according to Jack's orthoepy, for there are various spellings of the word.

"Anyhow," he proceeds, "it gies warnin' o' rain, same as a weather-glass. When it ha' been laughin' in the mad way it wor most part o' this day, you may look out for a downpour. Besides, the owls ha' been a-doin' their best, too. While I wor waiting for ye in that darksome hole, one went sailin' up an' down the backwash, every now an' then swishin' close to my ear and giein' a screech—as if I hadn't enough o' the disagreeable to think o'. They allus come that way when one's feelin' out o' sorts—just as if they wanted to make things worse. Hark! D'd ye hear that, Captain?"

"I did."

They speak of a sound that has reached their ears from below—down the river.

Both show agitation, but most the waterman; for it resembled a shriek, as of a woman in distress. Distant, just as one he heard across the wooded ridge, on that fatal night after parting with Mary Morgan. He knows now, that must have been her drowning cry, and has often thought since whether, if aware of it at the time, he could have done aught to rescue her. Not strange, that with such a recollection he is now greatly excited by a sound so similar!

"That warent no heequall, nor screech-owl neyther," he says, speaking in a half whisper.

"What do you think it was?" asks the Captain, also *sotto voce*.

"The scream o' a female. I'm 'most sure 'twor that."

"It certainly did seem a woman's voice. In the direction of the Court, too!"

"Yes; it comed that way."

"I've half a mind to put back, and see if there be anything amiss. What say you, Wingate?"

"Gie the word, sir! I'm ready."

The boatman has his oars out of water, and holds them so, Ryecroft still undecided. Both listen with bated breath. But, whether woman's voice, or whatever the sound, they hear nothing more of it; only the monotonous ripple of the river, the wind mournfully sighing through the trees upon its banks, and a distant "brattle" of thunder, bearing out the portent of the bird.

"Like as not," says Jack, "'twor some o' them sarvint girls screechin' in play, fra havin' had a drop too much to drink. There's a Frenchy thing among 'em as wor gone nigh three sheets i' the wind 'fores I left. I think, Captain, we may as well keep on."

The waterman has an eye to the threatening rain, and dreads getting a wet jacket.

But his words are thrown away; for, meanwhile, the boat, left to itself, has drifted downward, nearly back to the entrance of the byway, and they are once more within sight of the kiosk on the cliff. There all is darkness—no figure distinguishable. The lamps have burnt out, or been removed by some of the servants.

"She has gone away from it," is Ryecroft's reflection to himself. "I wonder if the ring be still on the floor—or, has she taken it with her! I'd give something to know that."

Beyond he sees a light in the upper window of the house—that of a bedroom, no doubt. She may be in it, unrobing herself, before retiring to rest. Perhaps standing in front of a mirror, which reflects that form of magnificent outline he was once permitted to hold in his arms, thrilled by the contact, and never to be thrilled so again! Her face in the glass—what the expression upon it? Sadness, or joy? If the former, she is thinking of him; if the latter, of George Shenstone.

As this reflection flits across his brain, the jealous rage returns, and he cries out to the waterman,—

"Row back, Wingate! Pull hard, and let us home!"

Once more the boat's head is turned upstream, and for a long spell no further conversation is exchanged—only now and then a word relating to the management of the craft, as between rower and steerer. Both have relapsed into abstraction—each dwelling on his own bereavement. Perhaps boat never carried two men with sadder hearts, or more bitter reflections. Nor is there so much difference in the degree of their bitterness. The sweetheart, almost bride, who has proved false, seems to her lover not less lost, than to hers, she who has been snatched away by death!

As the *Mary* runs into the slip of backwater—her accustomed mooring-place—and they step out of her, the dialogue is renewed by the owner asking,—

"Will ye want me the morrow, Captain?"

"No, Jack."

"How soon do you think? 'Scuse me for questionin'; but young Mr. Powell have been here the day, to know if I could take him an' a friend down the river, all the way to the Channel. It's for sea-fishin' or duck-shootin', or somethin' o' that sort; an' they want to engage the boat most part o' a week. But, if you say the word, they must look out for somebody else. That be the reason o' my askin' when's you'd need me again."

"Perhaps never."

"Oh! Captain; don't say that. 'Tan't as I care 'bout the boat's hire, or the big pay you've been givin' me. Believe me, it ain't. Ye can have me an' the *Mary* 'ithout a sixpence o' expense—long's ye like. But to think I'm niver to row you again, that 'ud vex me dreadful—maybe more'n ye gi'e me credit for, Captain."

"More than I give you credit for! It couldn't, Jack. We've been too long together for me to suppose you actuated by mercenary motives. Though I may never need your boat again, or see yourself, don't have any fear of my forgetting you. And now, as a souvenir, and some slight recompense of your services, take this."

The waterman feels a piece of paper pressed into his hand, its crisp rustle proclaiming it a bank-note. It is a "tenner," but in the darkness he cannot tell, and

believing it only a "fiver," still thinks it too much; for it is all extra of his fare.

With a show of returning it, and, indeed, the desire to do so, he says protestingly,

"I can't take it, Captain. You ha' paid me too handsome arready."

"Nonsense, man! I haven't done anything of the kind. Besides, that isn't for boat-hire, nor yourself; only a little *douceur*, by way of present to the good dame inside the cottage—asleep, I take it."

"That case, I accept. But won't my mother be grieved to hear o' your goin' away—she thinks so much o' ye, Captain. Will ye let me wake her up? I'm sure she'd like to speak a partin' word, and thank you for this big gift."

"No, no! don't disturb the dear old lady. In the morning you can give her my kind regards and parting compliments. Say to her, when I return to Herefordshire—if I ever do—she shall see me. For yourself, take my word, should I ever again go rowing on this river, it will be in a boat called the *Mary*, pulled by the best waterman on the Wye."

Modest though Jack Wingate be, he makes no pretence of misunderstanding the recondite compliment, but accepts it in its fullest sense, rejoicing,—

"I'd call it flattery, Captain, if't had come from anybody but you. But I know ye never talk nonsense, an' that's just why I be so sad to hear ye say you're goin' off for good. I feeled so bad 'bout losin' poor Mary; it makes it worse now losin' you. Good-night!"

The Hussar officer has a horse, which has been standing in a little lean-to shed, under saddle. The lugubrious dialogue has been carried on simultaneously with the bridling, and the "Good-night" is said as Ryecroft springs up on his stirrup.

Then as he rides away into the darkness, and Jack Wingate stands listening to the departing hoof-stroke, at each repetition more indistinct, he feels indeed forsaken, forlorn; only one thing in the world now worth living for—but one to keep him anchored to life—his aged mother!



CHAPTER XXXII.

MAKING READY FOR THE ROAD.

Having reached his hotel, Captain Ryecroft seeks neither rest nor sleep, but stays awake for the remainder of the night.

The first portion of his time he spends in gathering up his *impedimenta*, and packing. Not a heavy task. His luggage is light, according to the simplicity of a soldier's wants; and as an old campaigner, he is not long in making ready for the *route*.

His fishing tackle, guncase and portmanteau, with an odd bundle or two of miscellaneous effects, are soon strapped and corded—after which he takes a seat by a table to write out the labels.

But now a difficulty occurs to him—the address. His name, of course; but what the destination? Up to this moment he has not thought of where he is going; only that he must go somewhere—away from the Wye. There is no Lethe in that stream for memories like his.

To his regiment he cannot return, for he has none now. Months since he ceased to be a soldier, having resigned his commission at the expiration of his leave of absence—partly in displeasure at being refused extension of it, but more because the attractions of the "Court" and the grove had made those of the camp uncongenial. Thus his visit to Herefordshire has not only spoiled him as a salmon-fisher, but put an end to his military career.

Fortunately he was not dependent on it; for Captain Ryecroft is a rich man. And yet he has no home he can call his own; the last ten years of his life having been passed in Hindostan. Dublin is his native place; but what would or could he now do there? his nearest relatives are dead, his friends few, his schoolfellows long since scattered—many of them, as himself, waifs upon the world. Besides, since his return from India, he has paid a visit to the capital of the Emerald Isle; where, finding all so changed, he cares not to go back—at least, for the present.

Whither then?

One place looms upon the imagination—almost naturally as home itself—the metropolis of the world. He will proceed thither, though not there to stay. Only to use it as a point of departure for another metropolis—the French one. In that focus and centre of gaiety and fashion—Maelstrom of dissipation—he may find some relief from his misery, if not happiness. Little hope has he; but it may be worth the trial, and he will make it.

So determining, he takes up the pen, and is about to put "London" on the labels. But as an experienced strategist, who makes no move with undue haste and without due deliberation, he sits a while longer considering.

Strange as it may seem, and a question for psychologists, a man thinks best upon his back; better still with a cigar between his teeth—powerful help to reflection. Aware of this Captain Ryecroft lights a "weed," and looks around him. He is in his sleeping apartment, where, beside the bed, there is a sofa—horsehair cushion and squab hard as stones—the orthodox hotel article.

Along this he lays himself, and smokes away furiously. Spitefully, too; for he is not now thinking of either London or Paris. He cannot yet. The happy past, the wretched present, are too soul-absorbing to leave room for speculations of the future. The "fond rage of love" is still active within him. It is to "blight his life's bloom," leaving him "an age all winters?" Or is there yet a chance of reconciliation? Can the chasm which angry words have created be bridged over? No. Not without confession of error—abject humiliation on his part—which in his present frame of mind he is not prepared to make—will not—could not.

"Never!" he exclaims, plucking the cigar from between his lips, but soon returning it, to continue the train of his reflections.

Whether from the soothing influence of the nicotine, or other cause, his thoughts after a time became more tranquillized—their hue sensibly changed, as betokened by some muttered words which escape him.

"After all, I may be wronging her. If so, may God forgive, as I hope He will pity me. For if so, I am less deserving forgiveness, and more to be pitied than she."

As in ocean's storm, between the rough, surging billows, foam-crested, are spots of smooth water, so in thought's tempest are intervals of calm. It is during one of these he speaks as above; and continuing to reflect in the same strain, things, if not quite *couleur de rose*, assume a less repulsive aspect. Gwen Wynn may have been but dissembling—playing with him—and he would now be contented,

ready—even rejoiced—to accept it in that sense; ay, to the abject humiliation that but the moment before he had so defiantly rejected. So reversed his sentiments now—modified from mad anger to gentle forgiveness—he is almost in the act of springing to his feet, tearing the straps from his packed paraphernalia, and letting all loose again!

But just at this crisis he hears the town clock tolling six, and voices in conversation under his window. It is a bit of a gossip between two stable-men—*attachés* of the hotel—an ostler and fly-driver.

"Ye had a big time last night at Llangorren?" says the former inquiringly.

"Ah! that ye may say," returns the Jarvey, with a strongly accentuated hiccup, telling of heel-taps. "Never knowed a bigger, s'help me. Wine runnin' in rivers, as if 'twas only table-beer—an' the best kind o't too. I'm so full o' French champagne, I feel most like burstin'."

"She be a grand gal, that Miss Wynn. An't she?"

"In course is—one of the grandest. But she an't going to be a *girl* long. By what I heerd them say in the sarvints' hall, she's soon to be broke into pair-horse harness."

"Wi' who?"

"The son o' Sir George Shenstone."

"A good match they'll make, I sh'd say. Tidier chap than he never stepped inside this yard. Many's the time he's tipped me."

There is more of the same sort, but Captain Ryecroft does not hear it; the men have moved off beyond ear shot. In all likelihood he would not have listened had they stayed. For again he seems to hear those other words—that last spiteful rejoinder, "Yes; let it."

His own spleen returning, in all its keen hostility, he springs upon his feet, hastily steps back to the table, and writes on the slip of parchment,—

Mr. Vivian Ryecroft,
Passenger to London.
G.W.R.

He cannot attach them till the ink gets dry; and, while waiting for it to do so, his thoughts undergo still another revulsion, again leading him to reflect whether he may not be in the wrong, and acting inconsiderately—rashly.

In fine, he resolves on a course which had not hitherto occurred to him—he will write to her. Not in repentance, nor any confession of guilt on his part. He is too proud, and still too doubting for that. Only a test letter to draw her out, and, if possible, discover how she too feels under the circumstances. Upon the answer—if he receive one—will depend whether it is to be the last.

With pen still in hand, he draws a sheet of note-paper towards him. It bears the hotel stamp and name, so that he has no need to write an address—only the date.

This done, he remains for a time considering—thinking what he should say. The larger portion of his manhood's life spent in camp, under canvas—not the place for cultivating literary tastes or epistolary style—he is at best an indifferent correspondent, and knows it. But the occasion supplies thoughts; and as a soldier accustomed to prompt brevity, he puts them down—quickly and briefly as a campaigning despatch.

With this, he does not wait for the ink to dry, but uses the blotter. He dreads another change of resolution. Folding up the sheet, he slips it into an envelope, on which he simply superscribes—

Miss Wynn,
Llangorren Court.

Then rings a bell—the hotel servants are now astir—and directs the letter to be dropped into the post-box.

He knows it will reach her that same day at an early hour, and its answer him—should one be vouchsafed—on the following morning. It might that same night at the hotel where he is now staying; but not the one to which he is going—as his letter tells, the "Langham, London."

And while it is being slowly carried by a pedestrian postman along hilly roads

towards Llangorren, he, seated in a first-class carriage of the G.W.R., is swiftly whisked towards the metropolis.



CHAPTER XXXIII.

A SLUMBERING HOUSEHOLD.

As calm succeeds a storm, so at Llangorren Court on the morning after the ball there was quietude—up to a certain hour more than common. The domestics justifying themselves by the extra services of the preceding night, lie late. Outside is stirring only the gardener with an assistant, at his usual work, and in the yard a stable help or two looking after the needs of the horses. The more important functionaries of this department—coachman and headgroom—still slumber, dreaming of champagne bottles brought back to the servants' hall three parts full, with but half-demolished pheasants, and other fragmentary delicacies.

Inside the house, things are on a parallel; there only a scullery and kitchen maid astir. The higher class servitors availing themselves of the license allowed, are still abed, and it is ten as butler, cook, and footman make their appearance, entering on their respective *rôles* yawningly, and with reluctance.

There are two lady's-maids in the establishment—the little French demoiselle attached to Miss Linton, and an English damsel of more robust build, whose special duties are to wait upon Miss Wynn. The former lies late on all days, her mistress not requiring early manipulation; but the maid, "native and to the manner born," is wont to be up betimes. This morning is an exception. After such a night of revelry, slumber holds her enthralled, as in a trance; and she is abed late as any of the others, sleeping like a dormouse.

As her dormitory window looks out upon the back yard, the stable clock, a loud striker, at length awakes her—not in time to count the strokes, but a glance at the dial gives her the hour.

While dressing herself, she is in a flutter, fearing rebuke—not for having slept so late, but because of having gone to sleep so early. The dereliction of duty, about which she is so apprehensive, has reference to a spell of slumber antecedent—taken upon a sofa in her young mistress's dressing-room. There awaiting Miss Wynn to assist in disrobing her after the ball, the maid dropped over and forgot everything—only remembering who she was, and what her duties, when too late to attend to them. Starting up from the sofa, and glancing at the mantel

timepiece, she saw, with astonishment, its hands pointing to half-past 4 a.m.!

Reflection following:—

"Miss Gwen must be in bed by this! Wonder why she didn't wake me up? Rang no bell? Surely I'd have heard it? If she did, and I haven't answered—well, the dear young lady's just the sort not to make any ado about it. I suppose she thought I'd gone to my room, and didn't wish to disturb me? But how could she think that? Besides, she must have passed through here, and seen me on the sofa!" The dressing-room is an ante-chamber of Miss Wynn's sleeping apartment. "She mightn't though,"—the contradiction suggested by the lamp burning low and dim. "Still, it is strange, her not calling me, nor requiring my attendance?"

Gathering herself up, the girl stands for a while in cogitation. The result is a move across the carpeted floor in soft, stealthy step, and an ear laid close to the keyhole of the bed-chamber door.

"Sound asleep! I can't go in now. Mustn't—I daren't awake her."

Saying which, the negligent attendant slips to her own sleeping room, a flight higher; and in ten minutes after, is herself once more in the arms of Morpheus; this time retained in them till released, as already said, by the tolling of the stable clock.

Conscious of unpardonable remissness, she dresses in careless haste—any way, to be in time for attendance on her mistress, at morning toilet.

Her first move is to hurry down to the kitchen, get the can of hot water, and take it up to Miss Wynn's sleeping room. Not to enter, but tap at the door and leave it.

She does the tapping; and, receiving no response nor summons from inside, concludes that the young lady is still asleep and not to be disturbed. It is a standing order of the house, and, pleased to be precise in its observance—never more than on this morning—she sets down the painted can, and hurries back to the kitchen, soon after taking her seat by a breakfast table, unusually well spread, for the time to forget about her involuntary neglect of duty.

The first of the family proper appearing downstairs is Eleanor Lees; she, too, much behind her accustomed time. Notwithstanding, she has to find occupation for nearly an hour before any of the others join her; and she endeavours to do this by perusing a newspaper which has come by the morning post.

With indifferent success. It is a Metropolitan daily, having but little in it to interest her, or indeed any one else; almost barren of news, as if its columns were blank. Three or four long-winded "leaders," the impertinent outpourings of irresponsible anonymity; reports of Parliamentary speeches, four-fifths of them not worth reporting; chatter of sham statesmen, with their drivellings at public dinners; "Police intelligence," in which there is half a column devoted to Daniel Driscoll, of the Seven Dials, how he blackened the eye of Bridget Sullivan, and bit off Pat Kavanagh's ear, a *crim. con.* or two in all their prurience of detail; Court intelligence, with its odious plush and petty paltriness—this is the pabulum of a "London Daily" even the leading one supplies to its easily satisfied *clientèle* of readers! Scarce a word of the world's news, scarce a word to tell of its real life and action—how beats the pulse, or thrills the heart of humanity! If there be anything in England half a century behind the age, it is its Metropolitan Press—immeasurably inferior to the Provincial.

No wonder the "companion"—educated lady—with only such a sheet for her companion, cannot kill time for even so much as an hour. Ten minutes were enough to dispose of all its contents worth glancing at.

And after glancing at them, Miss Lees drops the bald broadsheet—letting it fall to the floor to be scratched by the claws of a playful kitten—about all it is worth.

Having thus settled scores with the newspaper, she hardly knows what next to do. She has already inspected the superscription of the letters, to see if there be any for herself. A poor, fortuneless girl, of course her correspondence is limited, and there is none. Two or three for Miss Linton, with quite half a dozen for Gwen. Of these last is one in a handwriting she recognises—knows it to be from Captain Ryecroft, even without the hotel stamp to aid identification.

"There was a coolness between them last night," remarks Miss Lees to herself, "if not an actual quarrel; to which, very likely, this letter has reference. If I were given to making wagers, I'd bet that it tells of his repentance. So soon, though! It must have been written after he got back to his hotel, and posted to catch the early delivery." "What!" she exclaims, taking up another letter, and scanning the superscription. "One from George Shenstone, too! It, I dare say, is in a different strain, if that I saw—Ha!" she ejaculates, instinctively turning to the window, and letting go Mr. Shenstone's epistle, "William! Is it possible—so early?"

Not only possible, but an accomplished fact. The reverend gentleman is inside the gates of the park, sauntering on towards the house.

She does not wait for him to ring the bell, or knock; but meets him at the door, herself opening it. Nothing *outré* in the act, on a day succeeding a night, with everything upside down, and the domestic, whose special duty it is to attend to door-opening, out of the way.

Into the morning-room Mr. Musgrave is conducted, where the table is set for breakfast. He oft comes for luncheon, and Miss Lees knows he will be made equally welcome to the earlier meal; all the more to-day, with its heavier budget of news, and grander details of gossip, which Miss Linton will be expecting and delighted to revel in. Of course the curate has been at the ball; but, like "Slippery Sam," erst Bishop of Oxford, not much in the dancing room. For all, he, too, has noticed certain peculiarities in the behaviour of Miss Wynn to Captain Ryecroft, with others having reference to the son of Sir George Shenstone—in short, a triangular play he but ill understood. Still, he could tell by the straws, as they blew about, that they were blowing adversely; though what the upshot, he is yet ignorant, having, as became his cloth, forsaken the scene of revelry at a respectably early hour.

Nor does he now care to inquire into it, any more than Miss Lees to respond to such interrogation. Their own affair is sufficient for the time; and engaging in an amorous duel of the milder type—so different from the stormy, passionate combat between Gwendoline Wynn and Vivian Ryecroft—they forget all about these—even their existence—as little remembering that of George Shenstone.

For a time there are but two individuals in the world of whom either has a thought—one Eleanor Lees, the other William Musgrave.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"WHERE'S GWEN?"

Not for long are the companion and curate permitted to carry on the confidential dialogue, in which they had become interested. Too disagreeably soon is it interrupted by a third personage appearing upon the scene. Miss Linton has at length succeeded in dragging herself out of the embrace of the somnolent divinity, and enters the breakfast room, supported by her French *femme de chambre*.

Graciously saluting Mr. Musgrave, she moves towards the table's head, where an antique silver urn sends up its curling steam—flanked by tea and coffee pot, with contents already prepared for pouring into their respectively shaped cups. Taking her seat, she asks:

"Where's Gwen?"

"Not down yet," meekly responds Miss Lees; "at least, I haven't seen anything of her."

"Ah! she beats us all to-day," remarks the ancient toast of Cheltenham, "in being late," she adds, with a laugh at her little *jeu d'esprit*. "Usually such an early riser, too. I don't remember having ever been up before her. Well, I suppose she's fatigued, poor thing!—quite done up. No wonder, after dancing so much, and with everybody."

"Not everybody, aunt!" says her companion, with a significant emphasis on the everybody. "There was one gentleman she never danced with all the night. Wasn't it a little strange?" This in a whisper, and aside.

"Ah! true. You mean Captain Ryecroft?"

"Yes."

"It was a little strange. I observed it myself. She seemed distant with him, and he with her. Have you any idea of the reason, Nelly?"

"Not in the least. Only I fancy something must have come between them."

"The usual thing; lovers' tiff, I suppose. Ah, I've seen a great many of them in my time. How silly men and women are—when they're in love! Are they not, Mr. Musgrave?"

The curate answers in the affirmative, but somewhat confusedly, and blushing, as he imagines it may be a thrust at himself.

"Of the two," proceeds the garrulous spinster, "men are the most foolish under such circumstances. No!" she exclaims, contradicting herself—"when I think of it, no. I've seen ladies, high-born, and with titles, half beside themselves about Beau Brummel, distractedly quarrelling as to which should dance with him! Beau Brummel, who ended his days in a low lodging-house! Ha! ha! ha!"

There is a *soupçon* of spleen in the tone of Miss Linton's laughter, as though she had herself once felt the fascinations of the redoubtable dandy.

"What could be more ridiculous?" she goes on. "When one looks back upon it, the very extreme of absurdity. Well," taking hold of the *cafetière*, and filling her cup, "it's time for that young lady to be downstairs. If she hasn't been lying awake ever since the people went off, she should be well rested by this. Bless me," glancing at the ormolu dial over the mantel, "it's after eleven, Clarisse," to the *femme de chambre*, still in attendance; "tell Miss Wynn's maid to say to her mistress we're waiting breakfast. *Veet, tray veet!*" she concludes, with a pronunciation and accent anything but Parisian.

Off trips the French demoiselle, and upstairs; almost instantly returning down them, Miss Wynn's maid along, with a report which startles the trio at the breakfast table. It is the English damsel who delivers it in the vernacular.

"Miss Gwen isn't in her room; nor hasn't been all the night long."

Miss Linton is in the act of removing the top from a guinea-fowl's egg, as the maid makes the announcement. Were it a bomb bursting between her fingers, the surprise could not be more sudden or complete.

Dropping egg and cup, in stark astonishment, she demands:

"What do you mean, Gibbons?"

Gibbons is the girl's name.

"Oh, ma'am! just what I've said."

"Say it again. I can't believe my ears."

"That Miss Gwen hasn't slept in her room."

"And where has she slept?"

"The goodness only knows."

"But you ought to know. You're her maid—you undressed her."

"I did not, I am sorry to say," stammered out the girl, confused and self-accused; "very sorry I didn't."

"And why didn't you, Gibbons? Explain that."

Thus brought to book, the peccant Gibbons confesses to what has occurred in all its details. No use concealing aught—it must come out anyhow.

"And you're quite sure she has not slept in her room?" interrogates Miss Linton, as yet unable to realize a circumstance so strange and unexpected.

"Oh, yes, ma'am. The bed hasn't been lied upon by anybody—neither sheets or coverlet disturbed. And there's her nightdress over the chair, just as I laid it out for her."

"Very strange," exclaims Miss Linton; "positively alarming."

For all, the old lady is not alarmed yet—at least, not to any great degree. Llangorren Court is a "house of many mansions," and can boast of a half-score spare bedrooms. And she, now its mistress, is a creature of many caprices. Just possible she has indulged in one after the dancing—entered the first sleeping apartment that chanced in her way, flung herself on a bed or sofa in her ball dress, fallen asleep, and is there still slumbering.

"Search them all!" commands Miss Linton, addressing a variety of domestics, whom the ringing of bells has brought around her.

They scatter off in different directions, Miss Lees along with them.

"It's very extraordinary. Don't you think so?"

This to the curate, the only one remaining in the room with her.

"I do, decidedly. Surely no harm has happened her. I trust not. How could

there?"

"True, how? Still, I'm a little apprehensive, and won't feel satisfied till I see her. How my heart does palpitate, to be sure!"

She lays her spread palm over the cardiac region, with an expression less of pain, than the affectation of it.

"Well, Eleanor," she calls out to the companion, re-entering the room with Gibbons behind. "What news?"

"Not any, aunt."

"And you really think she hasn't slept in her room?"

"Almost sure she hasn't. The bed, as Gibbons told you, has never been touched, nor the sofa. Besides, the dress she wore last night isn't there."

"Nor anywhere else, ma'am," puts in the maid; about such matters specially intelligent. "As you know, 'twas the sky-blue silk, with blonde lace over-skirt, and flower-de-loose on it. I've looked everywhere, and can't find a thing she had on—not so much as a ribbon!"

The other searchers are now returning in rapid succession, all with a similar tale. No word of the missing one—neither sign nor trace of her.

At length the alarm is serious and real, reaching fever height. Bells ring, and servants are sent in every direction. They go rushing about, no longer confining their search to the sleeping apartments, but extending it to rooms where only lumber has place—to cellars almost unexplored, garrets long unvisited, everywhere. Closet and cupboard doors are drawn open, screens dashed aside, and panels parted, with keen glances sent through the chinks. Just as in the baronial castle, and on that same night when young Lovel lost his "own fair bride."

And while searching for their young mistress, the domestics of Llangorren Court have the romantic tale in their minds. Not one of them but knows the fine old song of the "Mistletoe Bough." Male and female—all have heard it sung in that same house, at every Christmas-tide, under the "kissing bush," where the pale green branch and its waxen berries were conspicuous.

It needs not the mystic memory to stimulate them to zealous exertions. Respect

for their young mistress—with many of them almost adoration—is enough; and they search as if for sister, wife, or child, according to their feelings and attachments.

In vain—all in vain. Though certain that no "old oak chest" inside the walls of Llangorren Court encloses a form destined to become a skeleton, they cannot find Gwen Wynn. Dead or living, she is not in the house.



CHAPTER XXXV.

AGAIN THE ENGAGEMENT RING.

The first hurried search, with its noisy excitement, proving fruitless, there follows an interregnum calmer with suspended activity. Indeed, Miss Linton directs it so. Now convinced that her niece has really disappeared from the place, she thinks it prudent to deliberate before proceeding further.

She has no thought that the young lady has acted otherwise than of her own will. To suppose her carried off is too absurd—a theory not to be entertained for an instant. And having gone so, the questions are, why, and whither? After all, it may be, that at the ball's departing, moved by a mad prank, she leaped into the carriage of some lady friends, and was whirled home with them, just in the dress she had been dancing in. With such an impulsive creature as Gwen Wynn, the freak was not improbable. Nor is there any one to say nay. In the bustle and confusion of departure, the other domestics were busy with their own affairs, and Gibbons sound asleep.

And if true, a "hue and cry" raised and reaching the outside world would at least beget ridicule, if it did not cause absolute scandal. To avoid this, the servants are forbidden to go beyond the confines of the Court, or carry any tale outward—for the time.

Beguiled by this hopeful belief, Miss Linton, with the companion assisting, scribbles off a number of notes, addressed to the head of three or four families in whose houses her niece must have so abruptly elected to take refuge for the night—merely to ask if such was the case, the question couched in phrase guarded, and as possible suggestive. These are dispatched by trusted messengers, cautioned to silence; Mr. Musgrave himself volunteering a round of calls at other houses, to make personal inquiry.

This matter settled, the old lady waits the result, though without any very sanguine expectations of success. For another theory has presented itself to her mind—that Gwen has run away with Captain Ryecroft!

Improbable as the thing might appear, Miss Linton, nevertheless for a while has faith in it. It was as she might have done some forty years before, had she but

met the right man—such as he. And measuring her niece by the same romantic standard—with Gwen's capriciousness thrown into the account—she ignores everything else; even the absurdity of such a step from its sheer causelessness. That to her is of little weight; no more the fact of the young lady taking flight in a thin dress, with only a shawl upon her shoulders. For Gibbons, called upon to give an account of her wardrobe, has taken stock, and found everything in its place—every article of her mistress's drapery save the blue silk dress and Indian shawl—hats and bonnets hung up or in their boxes, but all there, proving her to have gone off bareheaded?

Not the less natural, reasons Miss Linton—instead, only a component part in the chapter of contrarities.

So, too, the coolness observed between the betrothed sweethearts throughout the preceding night—their refraining from partnership in the dances—all dissembling on their part, possibly to make the surprise of the after event more piquant and complete.

So runs the imagination of the novel-reading spinster, fresh and fervid as in her days of girlhood—passing beyond the trammels of reason—leaving the bounds of probability.

But her theory is short-lived. It receives a death blow from a letter which Miss Lees brings under her notice. It is that superscribed in the handwriting of Captain Ryecroft, which the companion had for the time forgotten; she having no thought that it would have anything to do with the young lady's disappearance. And the letter proves that he can have nothing to do with it. The hotel stamp, the post-mark, the time of deposit and delivery are all understood, all contributing to show it must have been posted, if not written, that same morning. Were she with him, it would not be there.

Down goes the castle of romance Miss Linton has been constructing—wrecked—scattered as a house of cards.

It is quite possible that letter contains something that would throw light upon the mystery, perhaps clear all up; and the old lady would like to open it.

But she may not—dare not. Gwen Wynn is not one to allow tampering with her correspondence; and as yet her aunt cannot realize the fact—nor even entertain the supposition—that she is gone for good and for ever.

As time passes, however, and the different messengers return, with no news of the missing lady—Mr. Musgrave is also back without tidings—the alarm is renewed, and search again set up. It extends beyond the precincts of the house, and the grounds already explored, off into woods and fields, along the banks of river and byewash, everywhere that offers a likelihood, the slightest, of success. But neither in wood, spinney, or coppice can they find traces of Gwen Wynn; all "draw blank," as George Shenstone would say of a cover where no fox is found.

And just as this result is reached, that gentleman himself steps upon the ground to receive a shock such as he has rarely experienced. The news communicated is a surprise to him, for he has arrived at the Court, knowing nought of the strange incident which has occurred. He has come thither on an afternoon call, not altogether dictated by ceremony. Despite all that has passed—what Gwen Wynn told him, what she showed holding up her hand—he does not even yet despair. Who so circumstanced ever does? What man in love, profoundly, passionately as he, could believe his last chance eliminated, or have his ultimate hope extinguished? He had not. Instead, when bidding adieu to her after the ball, he felt some revival of it, several causes having contributed to its rekindling. Among others, her gracious behaviour to himself, so gratifying; but more, her distant manner towards his rival, which he could not help observing, and saw with secret satisfaction.

And still thus reflecting on it, he enters the gates at Llangorren, to be stunned by the strange intelligence there awaiting him—Miss Wynn missing! gone away! run away! perhaps carried off! lost! and cannot be found! For in these varied forms, and like variety of voices, is it conveyed to him.

Needless to say, he joins in the search with ardour, but distractedly, suffering all the sadness of a torn and harrowed heart. But to no purpose; no result to soothe or console him. His skill at drawing a cover is of no service here. It is not for a fox "stole away," leaving hot scent behind; but a woman goes without print of foot or trace to indicate the direction, without word left to tell the cause of departure.

Withal, George Shenstone continues to seek for her long after the others have desisted. For his views differ from those entertained by Miss Linton, and his apprehensions are of a keener nature. He remains at the Court throughout the evening, making excursions into the adjacent woods, searching, and again exploring everywhere. None of the servants think it strange; all know of his intimate relations with the family.

Mr. Musgrave remains also; both of them asked to stay dinner—a meal this day eaten *sans façon*, in haste, and under agitation.

When, after it, the ladies retire to the drawing-room—the curate along with them—George Shenstone goes out again, and over the grounds. It is now night, and the darkness lures him on; for it was in such she disappeared. And although he has no expectation of seeing her there, some vague thought has drifted into his mind, that in darkness he may better reflect, and something be suggested to avail him.

He strays on to the boat stair, looks down into the dock, and there sees the *Gwendoline* at her moorings. But he thinks only of the other boat, which, as he now knows, on the night before lay alongside her. Has it indeed carried away Gwen Wynn? He fancies it has—he can hardly have a doubt of it. How else is her disappearance to be accounted for? But has she been borne off by force, or went she willingly? These are the questions which perplex him; the conjectured answer to either causing him keenest anxiety.

After remaining a short while on the top of the stair, he turns away with a sigh, and saunters on towards the pavilion. Though under the shadow of its roof the obscurity is complete, he, nevertheless, enters and sits down. He is fatigued with the exertions of the afternoon, and the strain upon his nerves through the excitement.

Taking a cigar from his case and nipping off the end, he rasps a fusee to light it. But before the blue fizzing blaze dims down, he drops the cigar to clutch at an object on the floor, whose sparkle has caught his eye. He succeeds in getting hold of it, though not till the fusee has ceased flaming. But he needs no light to tell him what he has got in his hand. He knows it is that which so pained him to see on one of Gwen Wynn's fingers—the engagement ring!



CHAPTER XXXVI.

A MYSTERIOUS EMBARKATION.

Not in vain had the green woodpecker given out its warning note. As Jack Wingate predicted from it, soon after came a downpour of rain. It was raining as Captain Rycroft returned to his hotel, as at intervals throughout that day; and now on the succeeding night it is again sluicing down as from a shower-bath. The river is in full flood, its hundreds of affluents, from Plinlimmon downward, having each contributed its quota, till Vaga, usually so pure, limpid, and tranquil, rolls on in vast turbulent volume, muddy and maddened. There is a strong wind as well, whose gusts, now and then striking the water's surface, lash it into furrows with white frothy crests.

On the Wye this night there would be danger for any boat badly manned or unskilfully steered. And yet a boat is about to embark upon it—one which throughout the afternoon has been lying moored in a little branch stream that runs in opposite the lands of Llangorren, a tributary supplied by the dingle in which stands the dwelling of Richard Dempsey. It is the same near whose mouth the poacher and the priest were seen by Gwen Wynn and Eleanor Lees on the day of their remarkable adventure with the forest roughs. And almost in the same spot is the craft now spoken of; no coracle, however, but a regular pair-oared boat of a kind in common use among Wye watermen.

It is lying with bow on the bank, its painter attached to a tree, whose branches extend over it. During the day no one has been near it, and it is not likely that any one has observed it. Some little distance up the brook, and drawn well in under the spreading boughs, that, almost touching the water, darkly shadow the surface, it is not visible from the river's channel: while, along the edge of the rivulet, there is no thoroughfare, nor path of any kind. No more a landing-place where boat is accustomed to put in or remain at moorings. That now there has evidently been brought thither for some temporary purpose.

Not till after the going down of the sun is this declared. Then, just as the purple of twilight is changing to the inky blackness of night, and another dash of rain clatters on the already saturated foliage, three men are seen moving among the trees that grow thick along the streamlet's edge. They seem not to mind it,

although pouring down in torrents; for they have come through the dell, as from Dempsey's house, and are going in the direction of the boat, where there is no shelter. But if they regard not getting wet,—something they do regard; else why should they observe such caution in their movements, and talk in subdued voices? All the more strange this, in a place where there is so little likelihood of their being overheard, or encountering any one to take note of their proceedings.

It is only between two of them that conversation is carried on; the third walking far in advance, beyond earshot of speech in the ordinary tone; besides, the noise of the tempest would hinder his hearing them. Therefore, it cannot be on his account they converse guardedly. More likely their constraint is due to the solemnity of the subject; for solemn it is, as their words show.

"They'll be sure to find the body in a day or two. Possibly to-morrow, or, if not, very soon. A good deal will depend on the state of the river. If this flood continue, and the water remain discoloured as now, it may be several days before they light on it. No matter when; your course is clear, Monsieur Murdock."

"But what do you advise my doing, *Père*? I'd like you to lend me your counsel—give me minute directions about everything."

"In the first place, then, you must show yourself on the other side of the water, and take an active part in the search. Such a near relative, as you are, 'twould appear strange if you didn't. All the world may not be aware of the little tiff—rather prolonged though—that's been between you. And if it were, your keeping away on such an occasion would give cause for greater scandal. Spite so rancorous! that of itself should excite curious thoughts—suspicions. Naturally enough. A man, whose own cousin is mysteriously missing, not caring to know what has become of her! And when knowing—when 'Found drowned,' as she will be—not to show either sympathy or sorrow! *Ma foi!* they might mob you if you didn't!"

"That's true enough," grunts Murdock, thinking of the respect in which his cousin is held, and her great popularity throughout the neighbourhood.

"You advise my going over to Llangorren?"

"Decidedly I do. Present yourself there to-morrow, without fail. You may make the hour reasonably late, saying that the sinister intelligence has only just reached you at Glyngog—out of the way as it is. You'll find plenty of people at the Court on your arrival. From what I've learnt this afternoon, through my

informant resident there, they'll be hot upon the search to-morrow. It would have been more earnest to-day, but for that quaint old creature with her romantic notions; the latest of them, as Clarisse tells me, that Mademoiselle had run away with the Hussar! But it appears a letter has reached the Court in his handwriting, which put a different construction on the affair, proving to them it could be no elopement—at least, with him. Under these circumstances, then, to-morrow morning, soon as the sun is up, there'll be a hue and cry all over the country; so loud you couldn't fail to hear, and will be expected to have a voice in it. To do that effectually, you must show yourself at Llangorren, and in good time."

"There's sense in what you say. You're a very Solomon, Father Rogier. I'll be there, trust me. Is there anything else you think of?"

The Jesuit is for a time silent, apparently in deep thought. It is a ticklish game the two are playing, and needs careful consideration, with cautious action.

"Yes," he at length answers. "There are a good many other things I think of; but they depend upon circumstances not yet developed by which you will have to be guided. And you must yourself, M'ssieu, as you best can. It will be quite four days, if not more, ere I can get back. They may even find the body to-morrow—if they should think of employing drags, or other searching apparatus. Still, I fancy, 'twill be some time before they come to a final belief in her being drowned. Don't you on any account suggest it. And should there be such search, endeavour, in a quiet way, to have it conducted in any direction but the right one. The longer before fishing the thing up, the better it will be for our purposes: you comprehend?"

"I do."

"When found, as it must be in time, you will know how to show becoming grief; and, if opportunity offer, you may throw out a hint having reference to *Le Capitaine Ryecroft*. His having gone away from his hotel this morning, no one knows why or whither—decamping in such haste too—that will be sure to fix suspicion upon him—possibly have him pursued and arrested as the murderer of Miss Wynn! Odd succession of events, is it not?"

"It is indeed."

"Seems as if the very Fates were in a conspiracy to favour our design. If we fail now, 'twill be our own fault. And that reminds me there should be no waste of time—must not. One hour of this darkness may be worth an age—or, at all

events, ten thousand pounds per annum. *Allons! vite-vite?*"

He steps briskly onward, drawing his caped cloak closer to protect him from the rain, now running in rivers down the drooping branches of the trees.

Murdock follows; and the two, delayed by a dialogue of such grave character, draw closer to the third who had gone ahead. They do not overtake him, however, till after he has reached the boat, and therein deposited a bundle he has been bearing—of weight sufficient to make him stagger, where the ground was rough and uneven. It is a package of irregular oblong shape, and such size, that, laid along the boat's bottom timbers, it occupies most part of the space forward of the mid-thwart.

Seeing that he who has thus disposed of it is Coracle Dick, one might believe it poached salmon, or land game now in season in the act of being transported to some receiver of such commodities. But the words spoken by the priest as he comes up forbid this belief: they are an interrogatory:—

"Well, *mon braconnier*; have you stowed my luggage?"

"It's in the boat, Father Rogier."

"And all ready for starting?"

"The minute your reverence steps in."

"So, well! And now, M'ssieu," he adds, turning to Murdock, and again speaking in undertone, "if you play *your* part skilfully, on return I may find you in a fair way of getting installed as the Lord of Llangorren. Till then, adieu!"

Saying which, he steps over the boat's side, and takes seat in its stern.

Shoved off by sinewy arms, it goes brushing out from under the branches, and is rapidly drifted down towards the river.

Lewin Murdock is left standing on the brook's edge, free to go what way he wishes.

Soon he starts off, not on return to the empty domicile of the poacher, nor yet direct to his own home: but first to the Welsh Harp—there to gather the gossip of the day, and learn whether the startling tale, soon to be told, has yet reached Rugg's Ferry.



CHAPTER XXXVII.

AN ANXIOUS WIFE.

Inside Glyngog House is Mrs. Murdock, alone, or with only the two female domestics. But these are back in the kitchen while the ex-cocotte is moving about in front, at intervals opening the door, and a-gazing out into the night—a dark, stormy one; for it is the same in which has occurred the mysterious embarkation of Father Rogier, only an hour later.

To her no mystery; she knows whither the priest is bound, and on what errand. It is not him, therefore, she is expecting, but her husband to bring home word that her countryman has made a safe start. So anxiously does she await this intelligence, that, after a time, she stays altogether on the doorstep, regardless of the raw night, and a fire in the drawing-room which blazes brightly. There is another in the dining-room, and a table profusely spread—set out for supper with dishes of many kinds—cold ham and tongue, fowl and game, flanked by decanters of different wines sparkling attractively.

Whence all this plenty, within walls where of late and for so long has been such scarcity?

As no one visits at Glyngog save Father Rogier, there is no one but he to ask the question. And he would not, were he there; knowing the answer better than any one else. He ought. The cheer upon Lewin Murdock's table, with a cheerfulness observable on Mrs. Murdock's face, are due to the same cause, by himself brought about, or to which he has largely contributed. As Moses lends money on *post obits*, at "sixty per shent," with other expectations, a stream of that leaven has found its way into the ancient manor-house of Glyngog, conducted thither by Gregoire Rogier, who has drawn it from a source of supply provided for such eventualities, and seemingly inexhaustible—the treasury of the Vatican.

Yet only a tiny rivulet of silver, but soon, if all goes well, to become a flood of gold grand and yellow as that in the Wye itself, having something to do with the waters of this same stream.

No wonder there is now brightness upon the face of Olympe Renault, so long shadowed. The sun of prosperity is again to shine upon the path of her life.

Splendour, gaiety, *voluptè*, be hers once more, and more than ever!

As she stands in the door of Glyngog, looking down the river, at Llangorren, and through the darkness sees the Court with only one or two windows alight—they but in dim glimmer—she reflects less on how they blazed the night before, with lamps over the lawn, like constellations of stars, than how they will flame hereafter, and ere long—when she herself be the ruling spirit and mistress of the mansion.

But as the time passes and no husband home, a cloud steals over her features. From being only impatient, she becomes nervously anxious. Still standing in the door, she listens for footsteps she has oft heard making approach unsteadily, little caring. Not so to-night. She dreads to see him return intoxicated. Though not with any solicitude of the ordinary woman's kind, but for reasons purely prudential. They are manifested in her muttered soliloquy:—

"Gregoire must have got off long ere this—at least two hours ago. He said they'd set out soon as it came night. Half an hour was enough for my husband to return up the meadows home. If he has gone to the Ferry first, and sets to drinking in the Harp! *Cette auberge maudit*. There's no knowing what he may do or say. Saying would be worse than doing. A word in his cups—a hint of what has happened—might undo everything: draw danger upon us all! And such danger—*l'prise de corps, mon Dieu!*"

Her cheek blanches at thought of the ugly spectres thus conjured up.

"Surely he will not be so stupid—so insane? Sober, he can keep secrets well enough—guard them closely, like most of his countrymen. But the Cognac? Hark! Footsteps! His, I hope."

She listens without stirring from the spot. The tread is heavy, with now and then a loud stroke against stones. Were her husband a Frenchman, it would be different. But Lewin Murdock, like all English country gentlemen, affects substantial foot gear; and the step is undoubtedly his. Not as usual, however; to-night firm and regular, telling him to be sober!

"He isn't such a fool after all!"

Her reflection followed by the inquiry, called out—

"*C'est vous, mon mari?*"

"Of course it is. Who else could it be? You don't expect the Father, our only visitor, to-night? You'll not see him for several days to come."

"He's gone then?"

"Two hours ago. By this he should be miles away; unless he and Coracle have had a capsize, and been spilled out of their boat. No unlikely occurrence with the river running so madly."

She still shows unsatisfied, though not from any apprehension of the boat's being upset. She is thinking of what may have happened at the Welsh Harp; for the long interval, since the priest's departure, her husband could only have been there. She is less anxious, however, seeing the state in which he presents himself; so unusual, coming from the "*auberge maudite*."

"Two hours ago they got off, you say?"

"About that; just as it was dark enough to set out with safety, and no chance of being observed."

"They did so?"

"Oh, yes."

"*Le bagage bien arrangé?*"

"*Parfaitement*; or, as we say in English, neat as a trivet. If you prefer another form—nice as nine-pence."

She is pleased at his facetiousness, quite a new mode for Lewin Murdock. Coupled with his sobriety, it gives her confidence that things have gone on smoothly, and will to the end. Indeed, for some days Murdock has been a new man—acting as one with some grave affair on his hands—a feat to accomplish, or negotiation to effect—resolved on carrying it to completeness.

Now, less from anxiety as to what he has been saying at the Welsh Harp, than to know what he has there heard said by others, she further interrogates him:—

"Where have you been meanwhile, monsieur?"

"Part of the time at the Ferry; the rest of it I've spent on paths and roads coming and going. I went up to the Harp to hear what I could hear."

"And what did you hear?"

"Nothing much to interest us. As you know, Rugg's is an out-of-the-way corner—none more so on the Wye—and the Llangorren news hasn't reached it. The talk of the Ferry folk is all about the occurrence at Abergann, which still continues to exercise them. The other don't appear to have got much abroad, if at all, anywhere—for reasons told Father Rogier by your countrywoman, Clarisse, with whom he held an interview sometime during the afternoon."

"And has there been no search yet?"

"Search, yes; but nothing found, and not much noise made, for the reasons I allude to."

"What are they? You haven't told me."

"Oh! various. Some of them laughable enough. Whimsies of that Quixotic old lady who has been so long doing the honours at Llangorren."

"Ah! Madame Linton. How has she been taking it?"

"I'll tell you after I've had something to eat and drink. You forget, Olympe, where I've been all the day long—under the roof of a poacher, who, of late otherwise employed, hadn't so much as a head of game in his house. True, I've since made call at an hotel, but you don't give me credit for my abstemiousness! What have you got to reward me for it?"

"*Entrez!*" she exclaims, leading him into the dining-room, their dialogue so far having been carried on in the porch. "*Voilà!*"

He is gratified, though no ways surprised at the set out. He does not need to inquire whence it comes. He, too, knows it is a sacrifice to the rising sun. But he knows also what a sacrifice he will have to make in return for it—one third the estate of Llangorren.

"Well, *ma chérie*," he says, as this reflection occurs to him, "we'll have to pay pretty dear for all this. But I suppose there's no help for it."

"None," she answers, with a comprehension of the circumstances clearer and fuller than his. "We've made the contract, and must abide by it. If broken by us, it wouldn't be a question of property, but life. Neither yours nor mine would be safe for a single hour. Ah, monsieur! you little comprehend the power of those gentry, *les Jesuites*—how sharp their claws, and far reaching!"

"Confound them!" he exclaims, angrily dropping down upon a chair by the table's side.

He eats ravenously, and drinks like a fish. His day's work is over, and he can afford the indulgence.

And while they are at supper, he imparts all details of what he has done and heard; among them Miss Linton's reasons for having put restraint upon the search.

"The old simpleton!" he says, concluding his narration; "she actually believed my cousin to have run away with that captain of Hussars—if she don't believe it still! Ha, ha, ha! She'll think differently when she sees that body brought out of the water. *It* will settle the business!"

Olympe Renault, retiring to rest, is long kept awake by the pleasant thought, not that for many more nights will she have to sleep in a mean bed at Glyngog, but on a grand couch in Llangorren Court.



CHAPTER XXXVIII.

IMPATIENT FOR THE POST.

Never man looked with more impatience for a post than Captain Ryecroft for the night mail from the West, its morning delivery in London. It may bring him a letter, on the contents of which will turn the hinges of his life's fate, assuring his happiness, or dooming him to misery. And if no letter come, its failure will make misery for him all the same.

It is scarce necessary to say the epistle thus expected, and fraught with such grave consequence, is an answer to his own; that written in Herefordshire, and posted before leaving the Wyeside Hotel. Twenty-four hours have since elapsed; and now, on the morning after, he is at the Langham, London, where the response, if any, should reach him.

He has made himself acquainted with the statistics of postal time, telling him when the night mail is due, and when the first distribution of letters in the metropolitan district. At earliest in the Langham, which has post and telegraph office within its own walls, this palatial hostelry, unrivalled for convenience, being in direct communication with all parts of the world.

It is on the stroke of 8 a.m., and, the ex-Hussar officer, pacing the tessellated tiles outside the deputy-manager's moderately sized room with its front glass-protected, watches for the incoming of the post-carrier.

It seems an inexorable certainty—though a very vexatious one—that person, or thing, awaited with unusual impatience, must needs be behind time—as if to punish the moral delinquency of the impatient one. Even postmen are not always punctual, as Vivian Ryecroft has reason to know. That amiable and active individual in coatee of coarse cloth, with red rag facings, flitting from door to door, brisk as a blue-bottle, on this particular morning does not step across the threshold of the Langham till nearly half-past eight. There is a thick fog, and the street flags are "greasy." That would be the excuse for his tardy appearance, were he called upon to give one.

Dumping down his sack, and spilling its contents upon the lead-covered sill of the booking-office window, he is off again on a fresh and further flight.

With no abatement of impatience, Captain Ryecroft stands looking at the letters being sorted—a miscellaneous lot, bearing the post-marks of many towns and many countries, with the stamps of nearly every civilized nation on the globe; enough of them to make the eyes of an ardent stamp-collector shed tears of concupiscence.

Scarcely allowing the sorter time to deposit them in their respective pigeon holes, Ryecroft approaches and asks if there be any for him—at the same time giving his name.

"No, not any," answers the clerk, after drawing out all under letter R, and dealing them off as a pack of cards.

"Are you quite sure, sir? Pardon me. I intend starting off within the hour, and, expecting a letter of some importance, may I ask you to glance over them again?"

In all the world there are no officials more affable than those of the Langham. They are, in fact, types of the highest *hotel civilization*. Instead of showing nettled, he thus appealed to makes assenting rejoinder, accompanying his words with a re-examination of the letters under R; soon as completed saying,—

"No, sir; none for the name of Ryecroft."

He bearing this name turns away, with an air of more than disappointment. The negative denoting that no letter had been written in reply, vexes—almost irritates him. It is like a blow repeated—a second slap in his face held up in humiliation—after having forgiven the first. He will not so humble himself—never forgive again. This his resolve as he ascends the great stairway to his room, once more to make ready for travel.

The steam-packet service between Folkestone and Boulogne is "tidal." Consulting Bradshaw, he finds the boat on that day leaves the former place at 4 p.m.; the connecting train from the Charing Cross station, 1. Therefore have several hours to be put in meanwhile.

How are they to be occupied? He is not in the mood for amusement. Nothing in London could give him that now—neither afford him a moment's gratification.

Perhaps in Paris? And he will try. There men have buried their griefs—women as well: too oft laying in the same grave their innocence, honour, and reputation. In the days of Napoleon the Little, a grand cemetery of such; hosts entering it

pure and stainless, to become tainted as the Imperial *regimé* itself.

And he, too, may succumb to its influence, sinister as hell itself. In his present frame of mind it is possible. Nor would his be the first noble spirit broken down, wrecked on the reef of a disappointed passion—love thwarted, the loved one never again to be spoken to—in all likelihood never more met!

While waiting for the Folkestone train, he is a prey to the most harrowing reflections, and in hope of escaping them, descends to the billiard-room—in the Langham a well-appointed affair, with tables the very best.

The marker accommodates him to a hundred up, which he loses. It is not for that he drops the cue disheartened, and retires. Had he won, with Cook, Bennett, or Roberts as his adversary, 'twould have been all the same.

Once more mounting to his room, he makes an appeal to the ever-friendly Nicotian. A cigar, backed by a glass of brandy, may do something to soothe his chafed spirit; and lighting the one, he rings for the other. This brought him, he takes seat by the window, throws up the sash, and looks down upon the street—there to see what gives him a fresh spasm of pain; though to two others affording the highest happiness on earth. For it is a wedding ceremony being celebrated at "All Souls" opposite, a church before whose altar many fashionable couples join hands to be linked together for life. Such a couple is in the act of entering the sacred edifice; carriages drawing up and off in quick succession, coachmen with white rosettes and whips ribbon-decked, footmen wearing similar favours—an unusually stylish affair.

As in shining and with smiling faces, the bridal train ascends the steps two by two, disappearing within the portals of the church, the spectators on the nave and around the enclosure rails also looking joyous, as though each—even the raggedest—had a personal interest in the event, from the window opposite Captain Ryecroft observes it with very different feelings. For the thought is before his mind, how near he has been himself to making one in such a procession—at its head—followed by the bitter reflection, he now never shall.

A sigh, succeeded by a half-angry ejaculation; then the bell rung with a violence which betrays how the sight has agitated him.

On the waiter entering, he cries out,—

"Call me a cab."

"Hansom, sir?"

"No! four-wheeler. And this luggage get downstairs soon as possible."

His impediments are all in travelling trim—but a few necessary articles having been unpacked—and a shilling tossed upon the strapped portmanteau ensures it, with the lot, a speedy descent down the lift.

A single pipe of Mr. Trafford's silver whistle brings a cab to the Langham entrance in twenty seconds time, and in twenty more a traveller's luggage, however heavy, is slung to the top, with the lighter articles stowed inside. His departure so accelerated, Captain Ryecroft—who had already settled his bill—is soon seated in the cab, and carried off.

But despatch ends on leaving the Langham. The cab, being a four-wheeler, crawls along like a tortoise. Fortunately for the fare he is in no haste now; instead, will be too early for the Folkestone train. He only wanted to get away from the scene of that ceremony, so disagreeably suggestive.

Shut up, imprisoned, in the plush-lined vehicle, shabby, and not over clean, he endeavours to beguile time by gazing out at the shop windows. The hour is too early for Regent Street promenaders. Some distraction, if not amusement, he derives from his "cabby's" arms; these working to and fro as if the man were rowing a boat. In burlesque it reminds him of the Wye, and his waterman Wingate!

But just then something else recalls the western river not ludicrously, but with another twinge of pain. The cab is passing through Leicester Square, one of the lungs of London, long diseased, and in process of being doctored. It is beset with hoardings, plastered against which are huge posters of the advertising kind. Several of them catch the eye of Captain Ryecroft, but only one holds it, causing him the sensation described. It is the announcement of a grand concert to be given at the St. James's Hall, for some charitable purpose of Welsh speciality. Programme with list of performers. At their head, in largest lettering, the queen of the eisteddfod—

EDITH WYNNE!

To him in the cab now a name of galling reminiscence notwithstanding the difference of orthography. It seems like a Nemesis pursuing him!

He grasps the leathern strap, and letting down the ill-fitting sash with a clatter, cries out to the cabman,—

"Drive on, Jarvey, or I'll be late for my train! A shilling extra for time."

If cabby's arms sparred slowly before, they now work as though he were engaged in catching flies; and with their quickened action, aided by several cuts of a thick-thonged whip, the Rosinante goes rattling through the narrow defile of Heming's Row, down King William Street, and across the Strand into the Charing Cross station.



CHAPTER XXXIX.

JOURNEY INTERRUPTED.

Captain Ryecroft takes a through ticket for Paris, without thought of breaking journey, and in due time reaches Boulogne. Glad to get out of the detestable packet, little better than a ferry-boat, which plies between Folkestone and the French seaport, he loses not a moment in scaling the equally detestable gang-ladder by which alone he can escape.

Having set foot upon French soil, represented by a rough cobble-stone pavement, he bethinks of passport and luggage—how he will get the former *vised* and the latter looked after with the least trouble to himself. It is not his first visit to France, nor is he unacquainted with that country's customs; therefore knows that a "tip" to *sergent de ville* or *douanier* will clear away the obstructions in the shortest possible time—quicker if it be a handsome one. Feeling in his pockets for a florin or a half-crown, he is accosted by a voice familiar and of friendly tone.

"Captain Ryecroft!" it exclaims, in a rich, rolling brogue, as of Galway. "Is it yourself? By the powers of Moll Kelly, and it is."

"Major Mahon!"

"The same, old boy. Give us a grip of your fist, as on that night when you pulled me out of the ditch at Delhi, just in time to clear the bayonets of the pandys. A nate thing, and a close shave, wasn't it? But what's brought you to Boulogne?"

The question takes the traveller aback. He is not prepared to explain the nature of his journey, and with a view to evasion he simply points to the steamer, out of which the passengers are still swarming.

"Come, old comrade!" protests the Major, good-naturedly, "that won't do; it isn't satisfactory for bosom friends, as we've been, and still are, I trust. But, maybe, I make too free, asking your business in Boulogne?"

"Not at all, Mahon. I have no business in Boulogne; I'm on the way to Paris."

"Oh! a pleasure trip, I suppose?"

"Nothing of the kind. There's no pleasure for me in Paris or anywhere else."

"Aha!" ejaculated the Major, struck by the words, and their despondent tone, "what's this, old fellow? Something wrong?"

"Oh, not much—never mind."

The reply is little satisfactory. But seeing that further allusion to private matters might not be agreeable, the Major continues, apologetically—

"Pardon me, Ryecroft. I've no wish to be inquisitive, but you have given me reason to think you out of sorts, somehow. It isn't your fashion to be low-spirited, and you shan't be so long as you're in my company—if I can help it."

"It's very kind of you, Mahon; and for the short time I'm to be with you, I'll do the best I can to be cheerful. It shouldn't be a great effort. I suppose the train will be starting in a few minutes?"

"What train?"

"For Paris."

"You're not going to Paris now—not this night?"

"I am, straight on."

"Neither straight nor crooked, *ma bohil!*"

"I must."

"Why must you? If you don't expect pleasure there, for what should you be in such haste to reach it? Bother, Ryecroft! you'll break your journey here, and stay a few days with me? I can promise you some little amusement. Boulogne isn't such a dull place just now. The smash of Agra & Masterman's, with Overend & Gurney following suit, has sent hither a host of old Indians, both soldiers and civilians. No doubt you'll find many friends among them. There are lots of pretty girls, too—I don't mean natives, but our countrywomen—to whom I'll have much pleasure in presenting you."

"Not for the world, Mahon—not one! I have no desire to extend my acquaintance in that way."

"What, turned hater! women too. Well, leaving the fair sex on one side, there's half a dozen of the other here—good fellows as ever stretched legs on

mahogany. They're strangers to you, I think; but will be delighted to know you, and do their best to make Boulogne agreeable. Come, old boy. You'll stay? Say the word."

"I would, Major, and with pleasure, were it any other time. But, I confess, just now I'm not in the mood for making new acquaintance—least of all among my countrymen. To tell the truth, I'm going to Paris chiefly with a view of avoiding them."

"Nonsense! You're not the man to turn *solitaire*, like Simon Stylites, and spend the rest of your days on the top of a stone pillar! Besides, Paris is not the place for that sort of thing. If you're really determined on keeping out of company for awhile—I won't ask why—remain with me, and we'll take strolls along the sea-beach, pick up pebbles, gather shells, and make love to mermaids, or the Boulognese fish-fags, if you prefer it. Come, Ryecroft, don't deny me. It's so long since we've had a day together, I'm dying to talk over old times—recall our *camaraderie* in India."

For the first time in forty-eight hours Captain Ryecroft's countenance shows an indication of cheerfulness—almost to a smile, as he listens to the rattle of his jovial friend, all the pleasanter from its patois recalling childhood's happy days. And as some prospect of distraction from his sad thoughts—if not a restoration of happiness—is held out by the kindly invitation, he is half inclined to accept it. What difference whether he find the grave of his griefs in Paris or Boulogne—if find it he can?

"I'm booked to Paris," he says mechanically, and as if speaking to himself.

"Have you a through ticket?" asks the Major, in an odd way.

"Of course I have."

"Let me have a squint at it?" further questions the other, holding out his hand.

"Certainly. Why do you wish that?"

"To see if it will allow you to shunt yourself here."

"I don't think it will. In fact, I know it don't. They told me so at Charing Cross."

"Then they told you what wasn't true; for it does. See here!"

What the Major calls upon him to look at are some bits of pasteboard, like

butterflies, fluttering in the air, and settling down over the copestone of the dock. They are the fragments of the torn ticket.

"Now, old boy! you're booked for Boulogne."

The melancholy smile, up to that time on Ryecroft's face, broadens into a laugh at the stratagem employed to detain him. With cheerfulness for the time restored, he says:

"Well, Major, by that you've cost me at least one pound sterling. But I'll make you recoup it in boarding and lodging me for—possibly a week."

"A month—a year, if you should like your lodgings and will stay in them. I've got a snug little compound in the Rue Tintelleries, with room to swing hammocks for us both; besides a bin or two of wine, and, what's better, a keg of the 'raal crayther.' Let's along and have a tumbler of it at once. You'll need it to wash the channel spray out of your throat. Don't wait for your luggage. These Custom-house gentry all know me, and will send it directly after. Is it labelled?"

"It is; my name's on everything."

"Let me have one of your cards." The card is handed to him. "There, Monsieur," he says, turning to a *douanier*, who respectfully salutes, "take this, and see that all the *bagage* bearing the name on it be kept safely till called for. My servant will come for it. *Garçon!*" This to the driver of a *voiture*, who, for some time viewing them with expectant eye, makes response by a cut of his whip, and brisk approach to the spot where they are standing.

Pushing Captain Ryecroft into the hack, and following himself, the Major gives the French Jehu his address, and they are driven off over the rough, rib-cracking cobbles of Boulogne.



CHAPTER XL.

HUE AND CRY.

The ponies and pet stag on the lawn at Llangorren wonder what it is all about. So different from the garden parties and archery meetings, of which they have witnessed many a one! Unlike the latter in their quiet stateliness is the excited crowd at the Court this day; still more, from its being chiefly composed of men. There are a few women, also, but not the slender-waisted creatures, in silks and gossamer muslins, who make up an outdoor assemblage of the aristocracy. The sturdy dames and robust damsels now rambling over its grounds and gravelled walks are the dwellers in roadside cottages, who at the words "Murdered or Missing," drop brooms upon half-swept floors, leave babies uncared-for in their cradles, and are off to the indicated spot.

And such words have gone abroad from Llangorren Court, coupled with the name of its young mistress. Gwen Wynn is missing, if she be not also murdered.

It is the second day after her disappearance, as known to the household; and now it is known throughout the neighbourhood, near and far. The slight scandal dreaded by Miss Linton no longer has influence with her. The continued absence of her niece, with the certainty at length reached that she is not in the house of any neighbouring friend, would make concealment of the matter a grave scandal in itself. Besides, since the half-hearted search of yesterday, new facts have come to light; for one, the finding of that ring on the floor of the pavilion. It has been identified not only by the finder, but by Eleanor Lees, and Miss Linton herself. A rare cluster of brilliants, besides of value, it has more than once received the inspection of these ladies—both knowing the giver, as the nature of the gift.

How comes it to have been there in the summer-house? Dropped, of course; but under what circumstances?

Questions perplexing, while the thing itself seriously heightens the alarm. No one, however rich or regardless, would fling such precious stones away; above all, gems so bestowed, and, as Miss Lees has reason to know, prized and fondly treasured.

The discovery of the engagement ring deepens the mystery instead of doing

aught towards its elucidation. But it also strengthens a suspicion, fast becoming belief, that Miss Wynn went not away of her own accord; instead, has been taken.

Robbed, too, before being carried off. There were other rings upon her fingers—diamonds, emeralds, and the like. Possibly in the scramble, on the robbers first seizing hold and hastily stripping her, this particular one had slipped through their fingers, fallen to the floor, and so escaped observation. At night and in the darkness, all likely enough.

So for a time run the surmises, despite the horrible suggestion attaching to them, almost as a consequence. For if Gwen Wynn had been robbed, she may also be murdered. The costly jewels she wore, in rings, bracelets, and chains, worth many hundreds of pounds, may have been the temptation to plunder her; but the plunderers identified, and, fearing punishment, would also make away with her person. It may be abduction, but it has now more the look of murder.

By midday the alarm has reached its height—the hue and cry is at its loudest. No longer confined to the family and domestics—no more the relatives and intimate friends—people of all classes and kinds take part in it. The pleasure grounds of Llangorren, erst private and sacred as the Garden of the Hesperides, are now trampled by heavy, hobnailed shoes; while men in smocks, slops, and sheepskin gaiters, stride excitedly to and fro, or stand in groups, all wearing the same expression on their features—that of a sincere, honest anxiety, with a fear some sinister mischance has overtaken Miss Wynn. Many a young farmer is there who has ridden beside her in the hunting-field, often behind her, noways nettled by her giving him the "lead"; instead, admiring her courage and style of taking fences over which, on his cart nag, he dares not follow—enthusiastically proclaiming her "pluck" at markets, race meetings, and other gatherings wherever came up talk of "Tally-ho."

Besides those on the ground drawn thither by sympathetic friendship, and others the idly curious, still others are there in the exercise of official duty. Several magistrates have arrived at Llangorren, among them Sir George Shenstone, chairman of the district bench; the police superintendent also, with several of his blue-coated subordinates.

There is a man present about whom remark is made, and who attracts more attention than either justice of the peace or policeman. It is a circumstance unprecedented—a strange sight, indeed—Lewin Murdock at the Court! He is

there, nevertheless, taking an active part in the proceedings.

It seems natural enough to those who but know him to be the cousin of the missing lady, ignorant of the long family estrangement. Only to intimate friends is there aught singular in his behaving as he now does. But to these, on reflection, his behaviour is quite comprehensible. They construe it differently from the others—the outside spectators. More than one of them, observing the anxious expression on his face, believe it but a semblance, a mask to hide the satisfaction within his heart, to become joy if Gwen Wynn be found—dead.

It is not a thing to be spoken of openly, and no one so speaks of it. The construction put upon Lewin Murdock's motives is confined to the few, for only a few know how much he is interested in the upshot of that search.

Again it is set on foot, but not as on the day preceding. Now no mad rushing to and fro of mere physical demonstration. This day there is due deliberation—a council held, composed of the magistrates and other gentlemen of the neighbourhood, aided by a lawyer or two, and the talents of an experienced detective.

As on the day before, the premises are inspected, the grounds gone over, the fields traversed, the woods as well, while parties proceed up and down the river, and along both sides of the backwash. The eyot also is quartered, and carefully explored from end to end.

As yet the drag has not been called into requisition, the deep flood, with a swift, strong current, preventing it. Partly that, but as much because the searchers do not as yet believe, cannot realize the fact, that Gwendoline Wynn is dead, and her body at the bottom of the Wye! Robbed and drowned! Surely it cannot be!

Equally incredible that she has drowned herself. Suicide is not thought of—incredible under the circumstances.

A third supposition, that she has been the victim of revenge—of a jealous lover's spite—seems alike untenable. She, the heiress, owner of the vast Llangorren estates, to be so dealt with—pitched into the river like some poor cottage girl, who has quarrelled with a brutal sweetheart! The thing is preposterous!

And yet this very thing begins to receive credence in the minds of many—of more, as new facts are developed by the magisterial inquiry, carried on inside the house. There a strange chapter of evidence comes out, or rather, is elicited. Miss

Linton's maid, Clarisse, is the author of it. This sportive creature confesses to having been out in the grounds as the ball was breaking up, and, lingering there till after the latest guest had taken departure, heard high voices, speaking as in anger. They came from the direction of the summer-house, and she recognised them as those of Mademoiselle and Le Capitaine—by the latter meaning Captain Ryecroft.

Startling testimony this, when taken in connection with the strayed ring; collateral to the ugly suspicion the latter had already conjured up.

Nor is the *femme de chambre* telling any untruth. She was in the grounds at that same hour, and heard the voices as affirmed. She had gone down to the boat dock in the hope of having a word with the handsome waterman; and returned from it reluctantly, finding he had betaken himself to his boat.

She does not thus state her reason for so being abroad, but gives a different one. She was merely out to have a look at the illumination—the lamps and transparencies, still unextinguished—all natural enough. And questioned as to why she said nothing of it on the day before, her answer is equally evasive. Partly that she did not suppose the thing worth speaking of, and partly because she did not like to let people know that Mademoiselle had been behaving in that way—quarrelling with a gentleman.

In the flood of light just let in, no one any longer thinks that Miss Wynn has been robbed; though it may be that she has suffered something worse. What for could have been angry words? And the quarrel—how did it end?

And now the name Ryecroft is on every tongue, no longer in cautious whisperings, but loudly pronounced. Why is he not here?

His absence is strange, unaccountable under the circumstances. To none seeming more so than to those holding counsel inside, who have been made acquainted with the character of that waif—the gift ring—told he was the giver. He cannot be ignorant of what is passing at Llangorren. True, the hotel where he sojourns is in a town five miles off; but the affair has long since found its way thither, and the streets are full of it.

"I think we had better send for him," observes Sir George Shenstone to his brother justices. "What say you, gentlemen?"

"Certainly; of course," is the unanimous rejoinder.

"And the waterman too?" queries another. "It appears that Captain Ryecroft came to the ball in a boat. Does any one know who was his boatman?"

"A fellow named Wingate," is the answer given by young Shenstone. "He lives by the roadside, up the river, near Rugg's Ferry."

"Possibly he may be here, outside," says Sir George. "Go, see!" This to one of the policemen at the door, who hurries off. Almost immediately to return—told by the people that Jack Wingate is not among them.

"That's strange, too!" remarks one of the magistrates. "Both should be brought hither at once—if they don't choose to come willingly."

"Oh!" exclaims Sir George, "they'll come willingly, no doubt. Let a policeman be despatched for Wingate. As for Captain Ryecroft, don't you think, gentlemen, it would be only politeness to summon him in a different way. Suppose I write a note requesting his presence, with explanations?"

"That will be better," say several assenting.

This note is written, and a groom gallops off with it; while a policeman on foot makes his way to the cottage of the Widow Wingate.

Nothing new transpires in their absence; but on their return—both arriving about the same time—the agitation is intense. For both come back unaccompanied; the groom bringing the report that Captain Ryecroft is no longer at the hotel—had left it on the day before by the first train for London!

The policeman's tale is, that Jack Wingate went off on the same day, and about the same early hour; not by rail to London, but in his boat, down the river to the Bristol Channel!

Within less than a hour after, a police officer is despatched to Chepstow, and further, if need be; while the detective, with one of the gentlemen accompanying, takes the next train for the metropolis.



CHAPTER XLI.

BOULOGNE-SUR-MER.

Major Mahon is a soldier of the rollicking Irish type—good company as ever drank wine at a regimental mess-table, or whisky-and-water under the canvas of a tent. Brave in war, too, as evinced by sundry scars of wounds given by the sabres of rebellious sowars, and an empty sleeve dangling down by his side. This same token also proclaims that he is no longer in the army. For he is not—having left it disabled at the close of the Indian Mutiny: after the relief of Lucknow, where he also parted with his arm.

He is not rich; one reason for his being in Boulogne—convenient place for men of moderate means. There he has rented a house, in which for nearly a twelve-month he has been residing: a small domicile, *meublé*. Still, large enough for his needs: for the Major, though nigh forty years of age, has never thought of getting married; or, if so, has not carried out the intention. As a bachelor in the French watering-place, his income of five hundred per annum supplies all his wants—far better than if it were in an English one.

But economy is not his only reason for sojourning in Boulogne. There is another alike creditable to him, or more. He has a sister, much younger than himself, receiving education there—an only sister, for whom he feels the strongest affection, and likes to be beside her.

For all he sees her only at stated times, and with no great frequency. Her school is attached to a convent, and she is in it as a *pensionnaire*.

All these matters are made known to Captain Ryecroft on the day after his arrival at Boulogne. Not in the morning. It has been spent in promenading through the streets of the lower town and along the *jetée*, with a visit to the grand lion of the place, *l'Établissement de Bains*, ending in an hour or two passed at the "cercle," of which the Major is a member, and where his old campaigning comrades, against all protestations, is introduced to the half-dozen "good fellows as ever stretched legs under mahogany."

It is not till a later hour, however, after a quiet dinner in the Major's own house, and during a stroll upon the ramparts of the *Haute Ville*, that these confidences

are given to his guest, with all the exuberant frankness of the Hibernian heart.

Ryecroft, though Irish himself, is of a less communicative nature. A native of Dublin, he has Saxon in his blood, with some of its secretiveness; and the Major finds a difficulty in drawing him in reference to the particular reason of his interrupted journey to Paris. He essays, however, with as much skill as he can command, making approach as follows:

"What a time it seems, Ryecroft, since you and I have been together—an age! And yet, if I'm not wrong in my reckoning, it was but a year ago. Yes; just twelve months, or thereabout. You remember we met at the 'Rag,' and dined there with Russel, of the Artillery."

"Of course I remember it."

"I've seen Russel since—about three months ago, when I was over in England. And, by the way, 'twas from him I last heard of yourself."

"What had he to say about me?"

"Only that you were somewhere down west—on the Wye, I think—salmon-fishing. I know you were always good at casting a fly."

"That all he said?"

"Well, no," admits the Major, with a sly, inquisitive glance at the other's face. "There was a trifle of a codicil added to the information about your whereabouts and occupation."

"What, may I ask?"

"That you'd been wonderfully successful in your angling; had hooked a very fine fish—a big one, besides—and sold out of the army; so that you might be free to play it on your line; in fine, that you'd captured, safe landed, and intended staying by it for the rest of your days. Come, old boy! don't be blushing about the thing; you know you can trust Charley Mahon. Is it true?"

"Is what true?" asks the other, with an air of assumed innocence.

"That you've caught the richest heiress in Herefordshire, or she you, or each the other, as Russel had it, and which is best for both of you. Down on your knees, Ryecroft! Confess!"

"Major Mahon! If you wish me to remain your guest for another night—another hour—you'll not ask me aught about that affair, nor even name it. In time I may tell you all; but now, to speak of it gives me a pain which even you, one of my oldest, and, I believe, truest friends, cannot fully understand."

"I can at least understand that it's something serious." The inference is drawn less from Ryecroft's words than their tone and the look of utter desolation which accompanies them. "But," continues the Major, greatly moved, "you'll forgive me, old fellow, for being so inquisitive? I promise not to press you any more. So let's drop the subject, and speak of something else."

"What, then?" asks Ryecroft, scarce conscious of questioning.

"My little sister, if you like. I call her little because she was so when I went out to India. She's now a grown girl, tall as that, and, as flattering friends say, a great beauty. What's better, she's good. You see that building below?"

They are on the outer edge of the rampart, looking upon the ground adjacent to the *enceinte* of the ancient *cit *. A slope in warlike days serving as the *glacis*, now occupied by dwellings, some of them pretentious, with gardens attached. That which the Major points to is one of the grandest, its enclosure large, with walls that only a man upon stilts of the Landes country could look over.

"I see—what of it?" asks the ex-Hussar.

"It's the convent where Kate is at school—the prison in which she's confined, I might better say," he adds, with a laugh, but in tone more serious than jocular.

It need scarce be said that Major Mahon is a Roman Catholic. His sister being in such a seminary is evidence of that. But he is not bigoted, as Ryecroft knows, without drawing the deduction from his last remark.

His old friend and fellow-campaigner does not even ask explanation of it, only observing—

"A very fine mansion it appears—walks, shade-trees, arbours, fountains. I had no idea the nuns were so well bestowed. They ought to live happily in such a pretty place. But then, shut up, domineered over, coerced, as I've heard they are—ah, liberty! It's the only thing that makes the world worth living in."

"Ditto, say I. I echo your sentiment, old fellow, and feel it. If I didn't, I might have been long ago a Benedict, with a millstone around my neck in the shape of

a wife, and half a score of smaller ones of the grindstone pattern—in piccaninnies. Instead, I'm free as the breezes, and by the Moll Kelly, intend remaining so."

The Major winds up the ungallant declaration with a laugh. But this is not echoed by his companion, to whom the subject touched upon is a tender one.

Perceiving it so, Mahon makes a fresh start in the conversation, remarking—

"It's beginning to feel a bit chilly up here. Suppose we saunter down to the Cercle, and have a game of billiards!"

"If it be all the same to you, Mahon, I'd rather not go there to-night."

"Oh! it's all the same to me. Let us home, then, and warm up with a tumbler of whisky toddy. There were orders left for the kettle to be kept on the boil. I see you still want cheering, and there's nothing will do that like a drop of the *crather*. *Allons!*"

Without resisting, Ryecroft follows his friend down the stairs of the rampart. From the point where they descended the shortest way to the Rue Tintelleries is through a narrow lane not much used, upon which abut only the back walls of gardens, with their gates or doors. One of these, a gaol-like affair, is the entrance to the convent in which Miss Mahon is at school. As they approach it, a *fiacre* is standing in front, as if but lately drawn up to deliver its fare—a traveller. There is a lamp, and by its light, dim, nevertheless, they see that luggage is being taken inside. Some one on a visit to the Convent, or returning after absence. Nothing strange in all that; and neither of the two men make remark upon it, but keep on.

Just, however, as they are passing the hack, about to drive off again, Captain Ryecroft, looking towards the door still ajar, sees a face inside it which causes him to start.

"What is it?" asks the Major, who feels the spasmodic movement—the two walking arm-in-arm.

"Well! if it wasn't that I am in Boulogne instead of on the banks of the river Wye, I'd swear that I saw a man inside that doorway whom I met not many days ago in the shire of Hereford."

"What sort of a man?"

"A priest!"

"Oh! black's no mark among sheep. The *prêtres* are all alike, as peas or policemen. I'm often puzzled myself to tell one from t'other."

Satisfied with this explanation, the ex-Hussar says nothing further on the subject, and they continue on to the Rue Tintelleries.

Entering his house, the Major calls for "matayrials," and they sit down to the steaming punch. But before their glasses are half emptied, there is a ring at the door bell, and soon after a voice inquiring for "Captain Ryecroft." The entrance-hall being contiguous to the dining-room where they are seated, they hear all this.

"Who can be asking for me?" queries Ryecroft, looking towards his host.

The Major cannot tell—cannot think—who; but the answer is given by his Irish manservant entering with a card, which he presents to Captain Ryecroft, saying,

"It's for you, yer honner."

The name on the card is—

"MR. GEORGE SHENSTONE."

CHAPTER XLII.

WHAT DOES HE WANT?

"Mr. George Shenstone?" queries Captain Ryecroft, reading from the card. "George Shenstone!" he repeats, with a look of blank astonishment—"What the deuce does it mean?"

"Does what mean?" asks the Major, catching the other's surprise.

"Why, this gentleman being here. You see that?" He tosses the card across the table.

"Well, what of it?"

"Read the name!"

"Mr. George Shenstone. Don't know the man. Haven't the most distant idea who he is. Have you?"

"Oh, yes."

"Old acquaintance; friend, I presume? No enemy, I hope?"

"If it be the son of a Sir George Shenstone, of Herefordshire, I can't call him either friend or enemy; and as I know nobody else of the name, I suppose it must be he. If so, what he wants with me is a question I can no more answer than the man in the moon. I must get the answer from himself. Can I take the liberty of asking him into your house, Mahon!"

"Certainly, my dear boy! Bring him in here, if you like, and let him join us—"

"Thanks, Major!" interrupts Ryecroft. "But no; I'd prefer first having a word with him alone. Instead of drinking, he may want fighting with me."

"Oh, oh!" ejaculates the Major. "Murtagh!" to the servant, an old soldier of the 18th, "show the gentleman into the drawing-room."

"Mr. Shenstone and I," proceeds Ryecroft in explanation, "have but the very slightest acquaintance. I've only met him a few times in general company, the

last at a ball—a private one—just three nights ago. 'Twas that very morning I met the priest I supposed we'd seen up there. 'Twould seem as if everybody on the Wyeside had taken the fancy to follow me into France."

"Ha—ha—ha! About the *prêtre*, no doubt you're mistaken. And maybe this isn't your man, either. The same name, you're sure?"

"Quite. The Herefordshire baronet's son is George, as his father, to whose title he is heir. I never heard of his having any other——"

"Stay!" interrupts the Major, again glancing at the card, "here's something to help identification—an address—*Ormeston Hall*."

"Ah! I didn't observe that." In his agitation he had not, the address being in small script at the corner. "Ormeston Hall? Yes, I remember, Sir George's residence is so called. Of course it's the son—must be."

"But why do you think he means fight? Something happened between you, eh?"

"No, nothing between us, directly."

"Ah! Indirectly, then? Of course the old trouble—a woman."

"Well, if it be fighting the fellow's after, I suppose it must be about that," slowly rejoins Ryecroft, half in soliloquy and pondering over what took place on the night of the ball. Now vividly recalling that scene in the summer-house, with the angry words there spoken, he feels good as certain George Shenstone has come after him on the part of Miss Wynn.

The thought of such championship stirs his indignation, and he exclaims—

"By Heavens! he shall have what he wants. But I mustn't keep him waiting. Give me that card, Major!"

The Major returns it to him, coolly observing—

"If it is to be a blue pill, instead of a whisky punch, I can accommodate you with a brace of barkers, good as can be got in Boulogne. You haven't told me what your quarrel's about; but from what I know of you, Ryecroft, I take it you're in the right, and you can count on me as a second. Lucky it's my left wing that's clipped. With the right I can shoot straight as ever, should there be need for making it a four-cornered affair."

"Thanks, Mahon! You're just the man I'd have asked such a favour from."

"The gentleman's inside the dhrawin-room, surr."

This from the ex-Royal Irish, who has again presented himself, saluting.

"Don't yield the *Sassenach* an inch!" counsels the Major, a little of the old Celtic hostility stirring within him. "If he demands explanations, hand him over to me. I'll give them to his satisfaction. So, old fellow, be firm!"

"Never fear!" returns Ryecroft, as he steps out to receive the unexpected visitor, whose business with him he fully believes to have reference to Gwendoline Wynn.

And so has it. But not in the sense he anticipates, nor about the scene on which his thoughts have dwelt. George Shenstone is not there to call him to account for angry words, or rudeness of behaviour. Something more serious, since it was the baronet's son who left Llangorren Court in company with the plain-clothes policeman. The latter is still along with him, though not inside the house. He is standing upon the street at a convenient distance, though not with any expectation of being called in, or required for any further service now, professionally. Holding no writ, nor the right to serve such if he had it, his action hitherto has been simply to assist Mr. Shenstone in finding the man suspected of either abduction or murder. But as neither crime is yet proved to have been committed, much less brought home to him, the English policeman has no further errand in Boulogne—while the English gentleman now feels that his is almost as idle and aimless. The impulse which carried him thither, though honourable and gallant, was begot in the heat of blind passion. Gwen Wynn having no brother, he determined to take the place of one, his father not saying nay. And so resolved, he had set out to seek the supposed criminal, "interview" him, and then act according to the circumstances, as they should develop themselves.

In the finding of his man he has experienced no difficulty. Luggage labelled "LANGHAM HOTEL, LONDON," gave him hot scent, as far as the grand *caravanserai* at the bottom of Portland Place. Beyond it was equally fresh, and lifted with like ease. The traveller's traps re-directed at the Langham, "PARIS *via* FOLKESTONE and BOULOGNE"—the new address there noted by porters and traffic manager—was indication sufficient to guide George Shenstone across the Channel; and cross it he did by the next day's packet for Boulogne.

Arrived in the French seaport, he would have gone straight on to Paris had he been alone. But, accompanied by the policeman, the result was different. This—an old dog of the detective breed—soon as setting foot on French soil, went sniffing about among *serjents de ville* and *douaniers*, the upshot of his investigations being to bring the chase to an abrupt termination—he finding that the game had gone no further. In short, from information received at the Custom House, Captain Ryecroft was run to earth in the Rue Tintelleries, under the roof of Major Mahon.

And now that George Shenstone is himself under it, having sent in his card, and been ushered into the drawing-room, he does not feel at his ease; instead, greatly embarrassed; not from any personal fear—he has too much "pluck" for that. It is a sense of delicacy, consequent upon some dread of wrong-doing. What, after all, if his suspicions prove groundless, and it turn out that Captain Ryecroft is entirely innocent? His heart, torn by sorrow, exasperated with anger, starting away from Herefordshire, he did not thus interrogate. Then he supposed himself in pursuit of an abductor, who, when overtaken, would be found in the company of the abducted.

But, meanwhile, both his suspicions and sentiments have undergone a change. How could they otherwise? He pursued, has been travelling openly and without any disguise, leaving traces at every turn and deflection of his route, plain as fingerposts! A man guilty of aught illegal, much more one who has committed a capital crime, would not be acting thus. Besides, Captain Ryecroft has been journeying alone, unaccompanied by man or woman; no one seen with him until meeting his friend, Major Mahon, on the packet landing at Boulogne.

No wonder that Mr. Shenstone, now *au fait* to all this—easily ascertained along the route of travel—feels that his errand is an awkward one. Embarrassed when ringing Major Mahon's door-bell, he is still more so inside that room, while awaiting the man to whom his card has been taken. For he has intruded himself into the house of a gentleman a perfect stranger to himself, to call his guest to account. The act is inexcusable, rude almost to grotesqueness!

But there are other circumstances attendant, of themselves unpleasant enough. The thing he has been tracking up is no timid hare or cowardly fox; but a man, a soldier, gentleman as himself, who, like a tiger of the jungles, may turn upon and tear him.

It is no thought of this, no craven fear, which makes him pace Major Mahon's

drawing-room floor so excitedly. His agitation is due to a different and nobler cause—the sensibility of the gentleman, with the dread of shame should he find himself mistaken. But he has a consoling thought. Prompted by honour and affection, he embarked in the affair, and, still urged by them, he will carry it to the conclusion, *coûte que coûte*.



CHAPTER XLIII.

A GAGE D'AMOUR.

Pacing to and fro, with stride jerky and irregular, Shenstone at length makes stop in front of the fireplace, not to warm himself—there is no fire in the grate—nor yet to survey his face in the mirror above. His steps are arrested by something he sees resting upon the mantel-shelf; a sparkling object—in short, a cigar-case of the beaded pattern.

Why should that attract the attention of the young Herefordshire squire, causing him to start, as it first catches his eye? In his lifetime he has seen scores of such, without caring to give them a second glance. But it is just because he has looked upon this one before, or fancies he has, that he now stands gazing at it, on the instant after reaching towards and taking it up.

Ay, more than once has he seen that same cigar-case—he is now sure as he holds it in his hand, turning it over and over—seen it before its embroidery was finished; watched fair fingers stitching the beads on, cunningly combining the blue and amber and gold, tastefully arranging them in rows and figures—two hearts central, transfixed by a barbed and feathered shaft—all save the lettering he now looks upon, and which was never shown him. Many a time during the months past, he had hoped, and fondly imagined, the skilful contrivance and elaborate workmanship might be for himself. Now he knows better; the knowledge revealed to him by the initials V. R. entwined in a monogram, and the words underneath "FROM GWEN."

Three days ago the discovery would have caused him a spasm of keenest pain. Not so now. After being shown that betrothal ring, no gift, no pledge, could move him to further emotion. He but tosses the beaded thing back upon the mantel, with the reflection that he to whom it belongs has been born under a more propitious star than himself.

Still, the little incident is not without effect. It restores his firmness, with the resolution to act as originally intended. This is still further strengthened as Ryecroft enters the room, and he looks upon the man who has caused him so much misery. A man feared, but not hated, for Shenstone's noble nature and

generous disposition hinder him from being blinded either to the superior personal or mental qualities of his rival. A rival he fears only in the field of love; in that of war or strife of other kind, the doughty young west-country squire would dare even the devil. No tremor in his frame, no unsteadfastness in the glance of his eye, as he regards the other stepping inside the open door, and with the card in his hand, coming towards him.

Long ago introduced, and several times in company together, but cool and distant, they coldly salute. Holding out the card, Ryecroft says interrogatively—

"Is this meant for me, Mr. Shenstone?"

"Yes."

"Some matter of business, I presume. May I ask what it is?"

The formal inquiry, in a tone passive and denying, throws the fox-hunter as upon his haunches. At the same time its evident cynicism stings him to a blunt if not rude rejoinder.

"I want to know—what you have done with Miss Wynn."

He so challenged starts aback, turning pale, and looking distraught at his challenger, while he repeats the words of the latter, with but the personal pronoun changed—

"What I have done with Miss Wynn!" Then adding, "Pray explain yourself, sir!"

"Come, Captain Ryecroft, you know what I allude to."

"For the life of me I don't."

"Do you mean to say you're not aware of what's happened?"

"What's happened! When? Where?"

"At Llangorren, the night of that ball. You were present—I saw you."

"And I saw you, Mr. Shenstone. But you don't tell me what happened."

"Not at the ball, but after."

"Well, and what after?"

"Captain Ryecroft, you're either an innocent man, or the most guilty on the face

of the earth."

"Stop, sir! Language like yours requires justification of the gravest kind. I ask an explanation—demand it!"

Thus brought to bay, George Shenstone looks straight in the face of the man he has so savagely assailed, there to see neither consciousness of guilt, nor fear of punishment. Instead, honest surprise, mingled with keen apprehension; the last, not on his own account, but hers of whom they are speaking. Intuitively, as if whispered by an angel in his ear, he says, or thinks to himself: "This man knows nothing of Gwendoline Wynn. If she has been carried off, it has not been by him; if murdered, he is not her murderer."

"Captain Ryecroft," he at length cries out in hoarse voice, the revulsion of feeling almost choking him, "if I've been wronging you, I ask forgiveness, and you'll forgive; for if I have, you do not, cannot know what has occurred."

"I've told you I don't," affirms Ryecroft, now certain that the other speaks of something different, and more serious than the affair he had himself been thinking of. "For Heaven's sake, Mr. Shenstone, explain! What *has* occurred there?"

"Miss Wynn is gone away!"

"Miss Wynn gone away! But whither?"

"Nobody knows. All that can be said is, she disappeared on the night of the ball, without telling any one; no trace left behind—except——"

"Except what?"

"A ring—a diamond cluster. I found it myself in the summer-house. You know the place—you know the ring, too?"

"I do, Mr. Shenstone; have reasons—painful ones. But I am not called upon to give them now, nor to you. What could it mean?" he adds, speaking to himself, thinking of that cry he heard when being rowed off. It connects itself with what he hears now; seems once more resounding in his ears, more than ever resembling a shriek! "But, sir, please proceed! For God's sake keep nothing back; tell me everything!"

Thus appealed to, Shenstone answers by giving an account of what has occurred

at Llangorren Court—all that had transpired previous to his leaving, and frankly confesses his own reasons for being in Boulogne.

The manner in which it is received still further satisfying him of the other's guiltlessness, he again begs to be forgiven for the suspicions he had entertained.

"Mr. Shenstone," returns Ryecroft, "you ask what I am ready and willing to grant—God knows how ready, how willing. If any misfortune has befallen her we are speaking of, however great your grief, it cannot be greater than mine."

Shenstone is convinced. Ryecroft's speech, his looks, his whole bearing, are those of a man not only guiltless of wrong to Gwendoline Wynn, but one who, on her account, feels anxiety keen as his own.

He stays not to question further; but once more making apologies for his intrusion—which are accepted without anger—he bows himself back into the street.

The business of his travelling companion in Boulogne was over some time ago. His is now equally ended; and though without having thrown any new light on the mystery of Miss Wynn's disappearance, still with some satisfaction to himself he dares not dwell upon. Where is the man who would not rather know his sweetheart dead than see her in the arms of a rival? However ignoble the feeling, or base to entertain it, it is natural to the human heart tortured by jealousy—too natural, as George Shenstone that night knows, with head tossing upon a sleepless pillow. Too late to catch the Folkestone packet, his bed is in Boulogne—no bed of roses, but a couch of Procrustean.



Meanwhile, Captain Ryecroft returns to the room where his friend the Major has been awaiting him. Impatiently, though not in the interim unemployed; as evinced by a flat mahogany box upon the table, and beside it a brace of duelling pistols, which have evidently been submitted to examination. They are the "best barkers that can be got in Boulogne."

"We shan't need them, Major, after all."

"The devil we shan't! He's shown the white feather?"

"No, Mahon; instead, proved himself as brave a fellow as ever stood before

sword-point, or dared pistol bullet."

"Then there's no trouble between you?"

"Ah! yes, trouble; but not between us. Sorrow shared by both. We're in the same boat."

"In that case, why didn't you bring him in?"

"I didn't think of it."

"Well, we'll drink his health. And since you say you've both embarked in the same boat—a bad one—here's to your reaching a good haven, and in safety!"

"Thanks, Major! The haven I now want to reach, and intend entering ere another sun sets, is the harbour of Folkestone."

The Major almost drops his glass.

"Why, Ryecroft, you're surely joking?"

"No, Mahon; I'm in earnest—dead, anxious earnest."

"Well, I wonder! No, I don't," he adds, correcting himself. "A man needn't be surprised at anything where there's a woman concerned. May the devil take her who's taking you away from me!"

"Major Mahon!"

"Well—well, old boy! Don't be angry. I meant nothing personal, knowing neither the lady, nor the reason for thus changing your mind, and so soon leaving me. Let my sorrow at that be my excuse."

"You shall be told it this night—now!"

In another hour Major Mahon is in possession of all that relates to Gwendoline Wynn, known to Vivian Ryecroft; no more wondering at the anxiety of his guest to get back to England, nor doing aught to detain him. Instead, he counsels his immediate return; accompanies him to the first morning packet for Folkestone; and at the parting hand-shake again reminds him of that well-timed grip in the ditch of Delhi, exclaiming,

"God bless you, old boy! Whatever the upshot, remember you've a friend, and a bit of a tent to shelter you in Boulogne—not forgetting a little comfort from the

crayther!"



CHAPTER XLIV.

SUICIDE, OR MURDER.

Two more days have passed, and the crowd collected at Llangorren Court is larger than ever. But it is not now scattered, nor are people rushing excitedly about; instead, they stand thickly packed in a close clump, which covers all the carriage sweep in front of the house. For the search is over, the lost one has at length been found—found when the flood subsided, and the drag could do its work—*found drowned!*

Not far away, nor yet in the main river; but that narrow channel, deep and dark, inside the eyot. In a little angular embayment at the cliff's base, almost directly under the summer-house was the body discovered. It came to the surface soon as touched by the grappling iron, which caught in the loose drapery around it. Left alone for another day, it would have risen of itself.

Taken out of the water, and borne away to the house, it is now lying in the entrance hall, upon a long table there set centrally.

The hall, though a spacious one, is filled with people; and but for two policemen stationed at the door, would be densely crowded. These have orders to admit only the friends and intimates of the family, with those whose duty requires them to be there officially. There is again a council in deliberation; but not as on days preceding. Then it was to inquire into what had become of Gwendoline Wynn, and whether she were still alive; to-day it is an inquest being held over her dead body!

There lies it, just as it came out of the water. But, oh! how unlike what it was before being submerged! Those gossamer things, silks and laces—the dress worn by her at the ball—no more floating and feather-like, but saturated, mud-stained, "clinging like cerements" around a form whose statuesque outlines, even in death, show the perfection of female beauty. And her chrome yellow hair, cast in loose coils about, has lost its silken gloss, and grown darker in hue: while the rich rose red is gone from her cheeks, already swollen and discoloured; so soon had the ruthless water commenced its ravages!

No one would know Gwen Wynn now. Seeing that form prostrate and pulseless,

who could believe the same, which but a few nights before was there moving about, erect, lissome, and majestic? Or in that face, dark and disfigured, who could recognise the once radiant countenance of Llangorren's young heiress? Sad to contemplate those mute motionless lips, so late wreathed with smiles, and pleasant words! And those eyes, dulled with "muddy impurity," that so short while ago shone bright and gladsome, rejoicing in the gaiety of youth and the glory of beauty—sparkling, flashing, conquering!

All is different now; her hair dishevelled, her dress disordered and dripping, the only things upon her person unchanged being the rings on her fingers, the wrist bracelets, the locket still pendant to her neck—all gemmed and gleaming as ever, the impure water affecting not their costly purity. And their presence has a significance, proclaiming an important fact, soon to be considered.

The coroner, summoned in haste, has got upon the ground, selected his jury, and gone through the formularies for commencing the inquest. These over, the first point to be established is the identification of the body. There is little difficulty in this; and it is solely through routine, and for form's sake, that the aunt of the deceased lady, her cousin, the lady's maid, and one or two other domestics, are submitted to examination. All testify to their belief that the body before them is that of Gwendoline Wynn.

Miss Linton, after giving her testimony, is borne off to her room in hysterics, while Eleanor Lees is led away weeping.

Then succeeds inquiry as to how the death has been brought about; whether it be a case of suicide or assassination? If murder, the motive cannot have been robbery. The jewellery, of grand value, forbids the supposition of this, checking all conjecture. And if suicide, why? That Miss Wynn should have taken her own life—made away with herself—is equally impossible of belief.

Some time is occupied in the investigation of facts, and drawing deductions. Witnesses of all classes and kinds thought worth the calling are called and questioned. Everything already known, or rumoured, is gone over again, till at length they arrive at the relations of Captain Ryecroft with the drowned lady. They are brought out in various ways, and by different witnesses; but only assume a sinister aspect in the eyes of the jury on their hearing the tale of the French *femme de chambre*—strengthened, almost confirmed, by the incident of that ring found on the floor of the summer-house. The finder is not there to tell how; but Miss Linton, Miss Lees, and Mr. Musgrave, vouch for the fact at

second hand.

The one most wanted is Vivian Rycroft himself, and next him the waterman Wingate. Neither has yet made appearance at Llangorren, nor has either been heard of. The policeman sent after the last has returned to report a bootless expedition. No word of the boatman at Chepstow, nor anywhere else down the river. And no wonder there is not, since young Powell and his friends have taken Jack's boat beyond the river's mouth—duck-shooting along the shores of the Severn sea—there camping out, and sleeping in places far from towns, or stations of the rural constabulary.

And the first is not yet expected—cannot be. From London, George Shenstone had telegraphed: "Captain Rycroft gone to Paris, where he (Shenstone) would follow him." There has been no *telegram* later to know whether the followed has been found. Even if he have, there has not been time for return from the French metropolis.

Just as this conclusion has been reached by the coroner, his jury, the justices, and other gentlemen interested in and assisting at the investigation inside the hall, to the surprise of those on the sweep without, George Shenstone presents himself in their midst; their excited movement with the murmur of voices proclaiming his advent. Still greater their astonishment when, shortly after—within a few seconds—Captain Rycroft steps upon the same ground, as though the two had come thither in companionship! And so might it have been believed, but for two hotel hackneys seen drawn up on the drive outside the skirts of the crowd, where they delivered their respective fares, after having brought them separately from the railway station.

Fellow-travellers they have been, but whether friends or not, the people are surprised at the manner of their arrival; or rather, at seeing Captain Rycroft so present himself. For in the days just past he has been the subject of a horrid suspicion, with the usual guesses and conjectures relating to it and him. Not only has he been freely calumniated, but doubts thrown out that Rycroft is his real name, and denial of his being an officer of the army, or ever having been; with bold, positive asseveration that he is a swindler and adventurer! All that while Gwen Wynn was but missing. Now that her body is found, since its discovery, still harsher have been the terms applied to him; at length to culminate in calling him a murderer!

Instead of voluntarily presenting himself at Llangorren alone, arms and limbs

free, they expected to see him—if seen at all—with a policeman by his side, and manacles on his wrists!

Astonished, also, are those within the hall, though in a milder degree, and from different causes. They did not look for the man to be brought before them handcuffed; but no more did they anticipate seeing him enter almost simultaneously, and side by side, with George Shenstone; they, not having the hackney carriages in sight, taking it for granted that the two have been travelling together.

However strange or incongruous the companionship, those noting have no time to reflect about it; their attention being called to a scene that, for a while, fixes and engrosses it.

Going wider apart as they approach the table on which lies the body, Shenstone and Rycroft take opposite sides—coming to a stand, each in his own attitude. From information already imparted to them, they have been prepared to see a corpse, but not such as that! Where is the beautiful woman, by both beloved, fondly, passionately? Can it be possible that what they are looking upon is she who once was Gwendoline Wynn!

Whatever their reflections, or whether alike, neither makes them known in words. Instead, both stand speechless, stunned—withered-like, as two strong trees simultaneously scathed by lightning—the bolt which has blasted them lying between!



CHAPTER XLV.

A PLENTIFUL CORRESPONDENCE.

If Captain Ryecroft's sudden departure from Herefordshire brought suspicion upon him, his reappearance goes far to remove it. For that this is voluntary soon becomes known. The returned policeman has communicated the fact to his fellow-professionals, it is by them further disseminated among the people assembled outside.

From the same source other information is obtained in favour of the man they have been so rashly and gravely accusing. The time of his starting off, the mode of making his journey, without any attempt to conceal his route of travel or cover his tracks—instead, leaving them so marked that any messenger, even the simplest, might have followed and found him. Only a fool fleeing from justice would have so fled, or one seeking to escape punishment for some trivial offence; but not a man guilty of murder.

Besides, is he not back there—come of his own accord—to confront his accusers, if any there still be? So runs the reasoning throughout the crowd on the carriage sweep.

With the gentlemen inside the house, equally complete is the revolution of sentiment in his favour. For, after the first violent outburst of grief, young Shenstone, in a few whispered words, makes known to them the particulars of his expedition to Boulogne, with that interview in the house of Major Mahon. Himself convinced of his rival's innocence, he urges his conviction on the others.

But before their eyes is a sight almost confirmatory of it. That look of concentrated anguish in Captain Ryecroft's eyes cannot be counterfeit. A soldier who sheds tears could not be an assassin; and as he stands in bent attitude leaning over the table on which lies the corpse, tears are seen stealing down his cheeks, while his bosom rises and falls in quick, convulsive heaving.

Shenstone is himself very similarly affected, and the bystanders beholding them are convinced that, in whatever way Gwendoline Wynn may have come by her death, the one is innocent of it as the other.

For all, justice requires that the accusations already made, or menaced, against Captain Ryecroft be cleared up. Indeed, he himself demands this, for he is aware of the rumours that have been abroad about him. On this account he is called upon by the coroner to state what he knows concerning the melancholy subject of their inquiry.

But first George Shenstone is examined—as it were by way of skirmish, and to approach, in a manner delicate as possible, the man mainly, though doubtfully accused.

The baronet's son, beginning with the night of the ball—the fatal night—tells how he danced repeatedly with Miss Wynn; between two sets walked out with her over the lawn, stopped, and stood for some time under a certain tree, where in conversation she made known to him the fact of her being betrothed by showing him the engagement ring. She did not say who gave it, but he surmised it to be Captain Ryecroft—was sure of its being he—even without the evidence of the engraved initials afterwards observed by him inside it.

As it has already been identified by others, he is only asked to state the circumstances under which he found it. Which he does, telling how he picked it up from the floor of the summer-house; but without alluding to his own motives for being there, or acting as he has throughout.

As he is not questioned about these, why should he? But there are many hearing who guess them—not a few quite comprehending all. George Shenstone's mad love for Miss Wynn has been no secret, neither his pursuit of her for many long months, however hopeless it might have seemed to the initiated. His melancholy bearing now, which does not escape observation, would of itself tell the tale.

His testimony makes ready the ground for him who is looked upon less in the light of a witness than as one accused, by some once more, and more than ever so. For there are those present who not only were at the ball, but noticed that triangular byplay upon which Shenstone's tale, without his intending it, has thrown a sinister light. Alongside the story of Clarisse, there seems to have been motive, almost enough for murder. An engagement angrily broken off—an actual quarrel—Gwendoline Wynn never afterwards seen alive! That quarrel, too, by the water's edge, on a cliff at whose base her body has been found! Strange—altogether improbable—that she should have drowned herself. Far easier to believe that he, her *fiancé*, in a moment of mad, headlong passion, prompted by fell jealousy, had hurled her over the high bank.

Against this returned current of adverse sentiment, Captain Ryecroft is called upon to give his account, and state all he knows. What he will say is weighted with heavy consequences to himself. It may leave him at liberty to depart from the spot voluntarily, as he came, or be taken from it in custody. But he is yet free, and so left to tell his tale, no one interrupting.

And without circumlocution he tells it, concealing nought that may be needed for its comprehension—not even his delicate relations to the unfortunate lady. He confesses his love—his proposal of marriage—its acceptance—the bestowal of the ring—his jealousy and its cause—the ebullition of angry words between him and his betrothed—the so-called quarrel—her returning the ring, with the way, and why he did not take it back—because at that painful crisis he neither thought of nor cared for such a trifle. Then parting with, and leaving her within the pavilion, he hastened away to his boat, and was rowed off. But, while passing up stream, he again caught sight of her, still standing in the summer-house, apparently leaning upon, and looking over, its baluster rail. His boat moving on, and trees coming between, he no more saw her; but soon after heard a cry—his waterman as well—startling both.

It is a new statement in evidence, which startles those listening to him. He could not comprehend, and cannot explain it; though now knowing it must have been the voice of Gwendoline Wynn—perhaps her last utterance in life.

He had commanded his boatman to hold way, and they dropped back down stream again to get within sight of the summer-house, but then to see it dark, and to all appearance deserted.

Afterwards he proceeded home to his hotel, there to sit up for the remainder of the night, packing and otherwise preparing for his journey—of itself a consequence of the angry parting with his betrothed, and the pledge so slightly returned.

In the morning he wrote to her, directing the letter to be dropped into the post office; which he knew to have been done before his leaving the hotel for the railway station.

"Has any letter reached Llangorren Court?" inquires the coroner, turning from the witness, and putting the question in a general way. "I mean for Miss Wynn, since the night of that ball?"

The butler present, stepping forward, answers in the affirmative, saying,—

"There are a good many for Miss Gwen since—some almost coming in every post."

Although there is, or was, but one Miss Gwen Wynn at Llangorren, the head servant, as the others, from habit calls her "Miss Gwen," speaking of her as if she were still alive.

"It is your place to look after the letters, I believe?"

"Yes, I attend to that."

"What have you done with those addressed to Miss Wynn?"

"I gave them to Gibbons, Miss Gwen's lady's-maid."

"Let Gibbons be called again!" directs the coroner.

The girl is brought in the second time, having been already examined at some length, and, as before, confessing her neglect of duty.

"Mr. Williams," proceeds the examiner, "gave you some letters for your late mistress. What have you done with them?"

"I took them upstairs to Miss Gwen's room."

"Are they there still?"

"Yes; on the dressing table, where she always had the letters left for her."

"Be good enough to bring them down here. Bring all."

Another pause in the proceedings while Gibbons is off after the now posthumous correspondence of the deceased lady, during which whisperings are interchanged between the coroner and the jurymen, asking questions of one another. They relate to a circumstance seeming strange; that nothing has been said about these letters before—at least, to those engaged in the investigation.

The explanation, however, is given—a reason evident and easily understood. They have seen the state of mind in which the two ladies of the establishment are—Miss Linton almost beside herself, Eleanor Lees not far from the same. In the excitement of occurrences, neither has given thought to letters, even having forgotten the one which so occupied their attention on that day when Gwen was missed from her seat at the breakfast table. It might not have been seen by them then, but for Gibbons not being in the way to take it upstairs as usual. These

facts, or rather deductions, are informal, and discussed while the maid is absent on her errand.

She is gone but for a few seconds, returning, waiter in hand, with a pile of letters upon it, which she presents in the orthodox fashion. Counted, there are more than a dozen of them, the deceased lady having largely corresponded. A general favourite—to say nothing of her youth, beauty, and riches—she had friends far and near; and, as the butler had stated, letters coming by "almost every post"—that but once a day, however, Llangorren lying far from a postal town, and having but one daily delivery. Those upon the tray are from ladies, as can be told by the delicate angular chirography—all except two, that show a rounder and bolder hand. In the presence of her to whom they were addressed—now speechless and unprotesting—no breach of confidence to open them. One after another their envelopes are torn off, and they are submitted to the jury—those of the lady correspondents first. Not to be deliberately read, but only glanced at, to see if they contain aught relating to the matter in hand. Still, it takes time; and would more were they all of the same pattern—double sheets, with the scrip crossed, and full to the four corners.

Fortunately, but a few of them are thus prolix and puzzling; the greater number being notes about the late ball, birthday congratulations, invitations to "at homes," dinner parties, and such like.

Recognising their character, and that they have no relation to the subject of inquiry, the jurymen pass them through their fingers speedily as possible, and then turn with greater expectancy to the two in masculine handwriting. These the coroner has meanwhile opened, and read to himself, finding one signed "George Shenstone," the other "Vivian Ryecroft."

Nobody present is surprised to hear that one of the letters is Ryecroft's. They have been expecting it so. But not that the other is from the son of Sir George Shenstone. A word, however, from the young man himself explains how it came there, leaving the epistle to tell its own tale. For as both undoubtedly bear upon the matter of inquiry, the Coroner has directed both to be read aloud.

Whether by chance or otherwise, that of Shenstone is taken first. It is headed—

"Ormeiston Hall, 4 a.m., *Après le bal.*"

The date, thus oddly indicated, seems to tell of the writer being in better spirits than might have been expected just at that time; possibly from a still lingering belief that all is not yet hopeless with him. Something of the same runs through the tone of his letter, if not its contents, which are—

"DEAR GWEN,—I've got home, but can't turn in without writing you a word, to say that, however sad I feel at what you've told me—and sad I am, God knows—if you think I shouldn't come near you any more—and from what I noticed last night, perhaps I ought not—only say so, and I will not. Your slightest word will be a command to one who, though no longer hoping to have your hand, will still hope and pray for your happiness. That one is,

"Yours devotedly, if despairingly,

"GEORGE SHENSTONE.

"P.S.—Do not take the trouble of writing an answer. I would rather get it from your lips; and that you may have the opportunity of so giving it, I will call at the Court in the afternoon. Then you can say whether it is to be my last visit there.—G. S."

The writer, present and listening, bravely bears himself. It is a terrible infliction, nevertheless, having his love secret thus revealed—his heart, as it were, laid open before all the world. But he is too sad to feel it now, and makes no remark, save a word or two explanatory, in answer to questions from the coroner.

Nor are any comments made upon the letter itself. All are too anxious as to the contents of that other, bearing the signature of the man who is to most of them a stranger.

It carries the address of the hotel in which he has been all summer sojourning, and its date is only an hour or two later than that of Shenstone's. No doubt, at the self-same moment, the two men were pondering upon the words they intended writing to Gwendoline Wynn—she who now can never read them.

Very different in spirit are their epistles, unlike as the men themselves. But, so too, are the circumstances that dictated them; that of Ryecroft reads thus:—

"GWENDOLINE,—While you are reading this, I shall be on my way to London, where I shall stay to receive your answer—if you think it worth

while to give one. After parting as we've done, possibly you will not. When you so scornfully cast away that little love-token, it told me a tale—I may say a bitter one—that you never really regarded the gift, nor cared for the giver. Is that true, Gwendoline? If not, and I am wronging you, may God forgive me. And I would crave your forgiveness; entreat you to let me replace the ring upon your finger. But if true—and you know best—then you can take it up—supposing it is still upon the floor where you flung it—fling it into the river, and forget him who gave it.

"VIVIAN RYECROFT."

To this half-doubting, half-defiant epistle there is also a postscript:—

"I shall be at the Langham Hotel, London, till to-morrow noon, where your answer, if any, will reach me. Should none come, I shall conclude that all is ended between us, and henceforth you will neither need, nor desire, to know my address.

"V. R."

The contents of the letter make a vivid impression on all present. Its tone of earnestness, almost anger, could not be assumed or pretended. Beyond doubt, it was written under the circumstances stated; and, taken in conjunction with the writer's statement of other events, given in such a clear, straightforward manner, there is again complete revulsion of feeling in his favour, and once more a full belief in his innocence which questioning him by cross-examination fails to shake, instead strengthens; and when, at length, having given explanation of everything, he is permitted to take his place among the spectators and mourners, it is with little fear of being dragged away from Llangorren Court in the character of a criminal.



CHAPTER XLVI.

FOUND DROWNED.

As a pack of hounds thrown off the scent, but a moment before hot, now cold, are the coroner and his jury.

But only in one sense like the dogs these human searchers. There is nothing of the sleuth in their search, and they are but too glad to find the game they have been pursuing and lost is a noble stag, instead of a treacherous, wicked wolf.

Not a doubt remains in their minds of the innocence of Captain Ryecroft—not the shadow of one. If there were, it is soon to be dissipated. For while they are deliberating on what had best next be done, a noise outside, a buzz of voices, excited exclamations, at length culminating in a cheer, tell of someone fresh arrived and received triumphantly.

They are not left long to conjecture who the new arrival is. One of the policemen stationed at the door stepping aside tells who—the man after Captain Ryecroft himself most wanted. No need saying it is Jack Wingate.

But a word about how the waterman has come thither, arriving at such a time, and why not sooner. It is all in a nutshell. But the hour before he returned from the duck-shooting expedition on the shores of the Severn sea, with his boat brought back by road—on a donkey-cart. On arrival at his home, and hearing of the great event at Llangorren, he had launched his skiff, leaped into it, and pulled himself down to the Court as if rowing in a regatta.

In the *patois* of the American prairies he is now "arrove," and, still panting for breath, is brought before the Coroner's Court, and submitted to examination. His testimony confirms that of his old fare—in every particular about which he can testify. All the more credible is it from his own character. The young waterman is well known as a man of veracity—incapable of bearing false witness.

When he tells them that after the Captain had joined him, and was still with him in the boat, he not only saw a lady in the little house overhead, but recognised her as the young mistress of Llangorren—when he positively swears to the fact—no one any more thinks that she whose body lies dead was drowned or

otherwise injured by the man standing bowed and broken over it. Least of all the other, who alike suffers and sorrows. For soon as Wingate has finished giving evidence, George Shenstone steps forward, and holding out his hand to his late rival, says, in the hearing of all,—

"Forgive me, sir, for having wronged you by suspicion! I now make reparation for it in the only way I can—by declaring that I believe you as innocent as myself."

The generous behaviour of the baronet's son strikes home to every heart, and his example is imitated by others. Hands from every side are stretched towards that of the stranger, giving it a grasp which tells of their owners being also convinced of his innocence.

But the inquest is not yet ended—not for hours. Over the dead body of one in social rank as she, no mere perfunctory investigation would satisfy the public demand, nor would any coroner dare to withdraw till everything has been thoroughly sifted, and to the bottom.

In view of the new facts brought out by Captain Ryecroft and his boatman—above all, that cry heard by them—suspicions of foul play are rife as ever, though no longer pointed at him.

As everything in the shape of verbal testimony worth taking has been taken, the coroner calls upon his jury to go with him to the place where the body was taken out of the water. Leaving it in charge of two policemen, they sally forth from the house two and two, he preceding, the crowd pressing close.

First they visit the little dock, in which they see two boats—the *Gwendoline* and *Mary*—lying just as they were on that night when Captain Ryecroft stepped across the one to take his seat in the other. He is with the coroner, so is Wingate, and both questioned give minute account of that embarkation, again in brief *résumé* going over the circumstances that preceded and followed it.

The next move is to the summer-house, to which the distance from the dock is noted, one of the jurymen stepping it—the object to discover how time will correspond to the incidents as detailed. Not that there is any doubt about the truth of Captain Ryecroft's statements, nor those of the boatman; for both are fully believed. The measuring is only to assist in making calculation how long time may have intervened between the lovers' quarrel and the death-like cry, without thought of their having any connection—much less that the one was

either cause or consequence of the other.

Again there is consultation at the summer-house, with questions asked, some of which are answered by George Shenstone, who shows the spot where he picked up the ring. And outside, standing on the cliff's brink, Ryecroft and the waterman point to the place, near as they can fix it, where their boat was when the sad sound reached their ears, again recounting what they did after.

Remaining a while longer on the cliff, the coroner and jury, with craned necks, look over its edge. Directly below is the little embayment in which the body was found. It is angular, somewhat horse-shoe shaped; the water within stagnant, which accounts for the corpse not having been swept away. There is not much current in the backwash at any part; enough to have carried it off had the drowning been done elsewhere. But beyond doubt it has been there. Such is the conclusion arrived at by the Coroner's jury, firmly established in their minds, at sight of something hitherto unnoticed by them. For though not in a body, individually each had already inspected the place, negligently. But now in official form, with wits on the alert, one looking over detects certain abrasions on the face of the cliff—scratches on the red sandstone—distinguishable by the fresher tint of the rock—unquestionably made by something that had fallen from above, and what but the body of Gwendoline Wynn? They see, moreover, some branches of a juniper bush near the cliff's base, broken, but still clinging. Through that the falling form must have descended!

There is no further doubting the fact. There went she over; the only questions undetermined being, whether with her own will, by misadventure, or man's violence. In other words, was it suicide, accident, or murder.

To the last many circumstances point, and especially the fact of the body remaining where it went into the water. A woman being drowned accidentally, or drowning herself, in the death-struggle would have worked away some distance from the spot she had fallen, or thrown herself in. Still, the same would occur if thrown in by another; only that this other might by some means have extinguished life before-hand.

This last thought, or surmise, carries coroner and jury back to the house, and to a more particular examination of the body. In which they are assisted by medical men—surgeons and physicians—several of both being present, unofficially; among them the one who administers to the ailings of Miss Linton. There is none of them who has attended Gwendoline Wynn, who never knew ailment of

any kind.

Their *post-mortem* examining does not extend to dissection. There is no need. Without it there are tests which tell the cause of death—that of drowning.

Beyond this they can throw no light on the affair, which remains mysterious as ever.

Flung back on reasoning of the analytical kind, the coroner and his jury can come to no other conclusion than that the first plunge into the water, in whatever way made, was almost instantly fatal; and if a struggle followed, it ended by the body returning to, and sinking in the same place where it first went down.

Among the people outside pass many surmises, guesses, and conjectures. Suspicions also, but no more pointing to Captain Ryecroft.

They take another, and more natural, direction. Still nothing has transpired to inculcate any one, or, in the finding of a coroner's jury, connect man or woman with it.

This is at length pronounced in the usual formula, with its customary tag:—"FOUND DROWNED. BUT HOW, etc., etc."

With such ambiguous rendering, the once beautiful body of Gwendoline Wynn is consigned to a coffin, and in due time deposited in the family vault, under the chancel of Llangorren Church.

CHAPTER XLVII.

A MAN WHO THINKS IT MURDER.

Had Gwendoline Wynn been a poor cottage girl, instead of a rich young lady—owner of estates—the world would soon have ceased to think of her. As it is, most people have settled down to the belief that she has simply been the victim of a misadventure, her death due to accident.

Only a few have other thoughts, but none that she has committed suicide. The theory of *felo de se* is not entertained, because not entertainable. For, in addition to the testimony taken at the coroner's inquest, other facts came out in examination by the magistrates, showing there was no adequate reason why she should put an end to her life. A lover's quarrel of a night's, still less an hour's, duration, could not so result. And that there was nothing beyond this, Miss Linton is able to say assuredly. Still more Eleanor Lees, who, by confidences exchanged, and mutually imparted, was perfectly *au fait* to the feelings of her relative and friend—knew her hopes and her fears, and that among the last there was none to justify the deed of despair. Doubts now and then, for when and where is love without them; but with Gwen Wynn slight, evanescent as the clouds in a summer sky. She was satisfied that Vivian Ryecroft loved her, as that she herself lived. How could it be otherwise? and her behaviour on the night of the ball was only a transient spite which would have passed off soon as the excitement was over, and calm reflection returned. Altogether impossible she could have given way to it so far as in wilful rage to take the last leap into eternity. More likely standing on the cliff's edge, anxiously straining her eyes after the boat which was bearing him away in anger, her foot slipped upon the rock, and she fell over into the flood.

So argues Eleanor Lees, and such is the almost universal belief at the close of the inquest, and for some time after. And if not self-destruction, no more could it be murder with a view to robbery.

The valuable effects left untouched upon her person forbade supposition of that. If murder, the motive must have been other than the possession of a few hundred pounds' worth of jewellery. So reasons the world at large, naturally enough.

For all, there are a few who still cling to a suspicion of there having been foul play; but not now with any reference with Captain Ryecroft. Nor are they the same who had suspected him. Those yet doubting the accidental death are the intimate friends of the Wynn family, who knew of its affairs relating to the property with the conditions on which the Llangorren estates were held. Up to this time only a limited number of individuals has been aware of their descent to Lewin Murdock. And when at length this fact comes out, and still more emphatically by the gentleman himself taking possession of them, the thoughts of the people revert to the mystery of Miss Wynn's death, so unsatisfactorily cleared up at the coroner's inquest.

Still, the suspicions thus newly aroused, and pointing in another quarter, are confined to those acquainted with the character of the new man suspected. Nor are they many. Beyond the obscure corner of Rugg's Ferry there are few who have ever heard of, still fewer ever seen him. Outside the pale of "society," with most part of his life passed abroad, he is a stranger, not only to the gentry of the neighbourhood, but most of the common people as well. Jack Wingate chanced to have heard of him by reason of his proximity to Rugg's Ferry, and his own necessity for oft going there. But possibly as much on the account of the intimate relations existing between the owner of Glyngog House and Coracle Dick.

Others less interested know little of either individual, and when it is told that a Mr. Lewin Murdock has succeeded to the estates of Llangorren—at the same time it becoming known that he is the cousin of her whom death has deprived of them—to the general public the succession seems natural enough; since it has been long understood that the lady had no nearer relative.

Therefore, only the few intimately familiar with the facts relating to the reversion of the property held fast to the suspicion thus excited. But as no word came out, either at the inquest or elsewhere, and nothing has since arisen to justify it, they also begin to share the universal belief, that for the death of Gwendoline Wynn nobody is to blame.

Even George Shenstone, sorely grieving, accepts it thus. Of unsuspecting nature, incapable of believing in a crime so terrible, a deed so dark, as that would infer, he cannot suppose that the gentleman, now his nearest neighbour—for the lands of Llangorren adjoin those of his father—has come into possession of them by such foul means as murder.

His father may think differently, he knowing more of Lewin Murdock. Not much

of his late life, but his earlier, with its surroundings and antecedents. Still Sir George is silent, whatever his thoughts. It is not a subject to be lightly spoken of, or rashly commented upon.

There is one who, more than any other, reflects upon the sad fate of her whom he had so fondly loved, and differing from the rest as to how she came to her death; this one is Captain Ryecroft. He, too, might have yielded to the popular impression of its having been accidental, but for certain circumstances that have come to his knowledge, and which he has yet kept to himself. He has not forgotten what was, at an early period, communicated to him by the waterman Wingate, about the odd-looking old house up the glen; nor yet the uneasy manner of Gwendoline Wynn, when once, in conversation with her, he referred to the place and its occupier. This, with Jack's original story, and other details added, besides incidents that have since transpired, are recalled to him vividly on hearing that the owner of Glyngog has also become owner of Llangorren.

It is some time before this news reaches him; for, just after the inquest, an important matter had arisen affecting some property of his own, which required his presence in Dublin, there for days detaining him. Having settled it, he has returned to the same town and hotel where he had been the summer sojourning. Nor came he back on errand aimless, but with a purpose. Ill-satisfied with the finding of the coroner's jury, he is determined to investigate the affair in his own way.

Accident he does not believe in—least of all that the lady, having made a false step, had fallen over the cliff. When he last saw her, she was inside the pavilion, leaning over the baluster rail, breast high, protected by it. If gazing after him and his boat, the position gave her as good a view as she could have. Why should she have gone outside? And the cry heard so soon after? It was not like that of one falling, and so far. In descent, it would have been repeated, which it was not.

Of suicide he has never entertained a thought, above all, for the reason suggested—jealousy of himself. How could he, while so keenly suffering it for her? No; it could not be that—nor suicide from any cause.

The more he ponders upon it, the surer grows he that Gwendoline Wynn has been the victim of a villainous murder. And it is for this reason he has returned to the Wye, first to satisfy himself of the fact, then, if possible, to find the perpetrator, and bring him to justice.

As no robber has done the drowning, conjecture is narrowed to a point, his

suspicions finally becoming fixed on Lewin Murdock.

He may be mistaken, but will not surrender them until he find evidence of their being erroneous, or proof that they are correct. And to obtain it he will devote, if need be, all the rest of his days, with the remainder of his fortune. For what are either now to him? In life he has had but one love, real, and reaching the height of a passion. She who inspired it is now sleeping her last sleep—lying cold in her tomb—his love and memory of her alone remaining warm.

His grief has been great, but its first wild throes have passed, and he can reflect calmly—more carefully consider what he should do. From the first some thoughts about Murdock were in his mind; still only vague. Now, on returning to Herefordshire, and hearing what has happened meanwhile—for during his absence there has been a removal from Glyngog to Llangorren—the occurrence, so suggestive, restores his former train of reflection, placing things in a clearer light.

As the hunter, hitherto pursuing upon a cold trail, is excited by finding the slot fresher, so he. And so will he follow it to the end—the last trace or sign. For no game, however grand—elephant, lion, or tiger—could attract like that he believes himself to be after—a human tiger—a murderer.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

ONCE MORE UPON THE RIVER.

Nowhere in England—perhaps nowhere in Europe—is the autumnal foliage more charmingly tinted than on the banks of the Wye, where it runs through the shire of Hereford. There Vaga threads her way amid woods that appear painted, and in colours almost as vivid as those of the famed American forests. The beech, instead of, as elsewhere, dying off dull bistre, takes a tint of bright amber; the chestnut turns translucent lemon; the oak leaves show rose colours along their edges, and the wych-hazel coral red by its umbels of thickly clustering fruit. Here and there along the high-pitched hill-sides flecks of crimson proclaim the wild cherry, spots of hoar white bespeak the climbing clematis, scarlet the holly with its wax-like berries, and maroon red the hawthorn; while interspersed and contrasting are dashes of green in all its varied shades, where yews, junipers, gorse, ivy, and other indigenous evergreens display their living verdure throughout all the year, daring winter's frosts, and defying its snows.

It is autumn now, and the woods of the Wye have donned its dress; no livery of faded green, nor sombre russet, but a robe of gaudiest sheen, its hues scarlet, crimson, green, and golden. Brown October elsewhere, is brilliant here; and though leaves have fallen, and are falling, the sight suggests no thought of decay, nor brings sadness to the heart of the beholder. Instead, the gaudy tapestry, hanging from the trees, and the gay-coloured carpet spread underneath, but gladden it. Still further is it rejoiced by sounds heard. For the woods of Wyeseid are not voiceless, even in winter. Within them the birds ever sing, and although their autumn concert may not equal that of spring,—lacking its leading tenor, the nightingale—still is it alike vociferous and alike splendidly attuned. Bold as ever is the flageolet note of the blackbird; not less loud and sweet the carol of his shier cousin the thrush; as erst soft and tender the cooing of the cushat; and with mirth unabated the cackle of the green woodpecker, as with long tongue, prehensile as human hand, it penetrates the ant-hive in search of its insect prey.

October it is; and where the Wye's silver stream, like a grand glistening snake, meanders amid these woods of golden hue and glorious song, a small row-boat is seen dropping downward. There are two men in it—one rowing, the other seated in the stern sheets, steering. The same individuals have been observed before in like relative position and similarly occupied. For he at the oars is Jack Wingate, the steerer Captain Ryecroft.

Little thought the young waterman, when that "big gift"—the ten pound bank-note—was thrust into his palm, he would so soon again have the generous donor for a fare.

He has him now, without knowing why, or inquiring. Too glad once more to sit on his boat's thwarts, *vis-à-vis* with the Captain, it would ill become him to be inquisitive. Besides, there is a feeling of solemnity in their thus again being together, with sadness pervading the thoughts of both, and holding speech in restraint. All he knows is that his old fare has hired him for a row down the river, but bent on no fishing business, for it is twilight. His excursion has a different object; but what, the boatman cannot tell. No inference could be drawn from the laconic order he received at embarking.

"Row me down the river, Jack!" distance and all else left undefined.

And down Jack is rowing him in regular measured stroke, no words passing between them. Both are silent, as though listening to the plash of the oar-blades, or the roundelay of late singing birds on the river's bank.

Yet neither of these sounds has place in their thoughts; instead, only the memory of one different and less pleasant. For they are thinking of cries—shrieks heard by them not so long ago, and still too fresh in their memory.

Ryecroft is the first to break silence, saying,—

"This must be about the place where we heard it."

Although not a word has been said of what the "it" is, and the remark seems made in soliloquy rather than as an interrogation, Wingate well knows what is meant, as shown by his rejoinder:—

"It's the very spot, Captain."

"Ah! you know it?"

"I do—am sure. You see that big poplar standing on the bank there?"

"Yes; well?"

"We wor just abreast o' it when ye bid me hold way. In course we must a heard the screech just then."

"Hold way now! Pull back a length or two. Steady her. Keep opposite the tree!"

The boatman obeys, first pulling the back stroke, then staying his craft against the current.

Once more relapsing into silence, Ryecroft sends his gaze down stream, as though noting the distance to Llangorren Court, whose chimneys are visible in the moonlight now on. Then, as if satisfied with some mental observation, he directs the other to row off. But as the kiosk-like structure comes within sight, he orders another pause, while making a minute survey of the summer-house, and the stretch of water between. Part of this is the main channel of the river, the other portion being the narrow way behind the eyot; on approaching which the pavilion is again lost to view, hidden by a tope of tall trees. But once within the bye-way, it can be again sighted; and when near the entrance to this the waterman gets the word to pull into it.

He is somewhat surprised at receiving this direction. It is the way to Llangorren Court, by the boat-stair, and he knows the people now living there are not friends of his fare—not even acquaintances, so far as he has heard. Surely the Captain is not going to call on Mr. Lewin Murdock—in amicable intercourse?

So queries Jack Wingate, but only of himself, and without receiving answer. One way or other he will soon get it; and thus consoling himself, he rows on into the narrower channel.

Not much farther before getting convinced that the Captain has no intention of making a call at the Court, nor is the *Mary* to enter that little dock, where more than once she had lain moored beside the *Gwendoline*. When opposite the summer-house, he is once more commanded to bring to, with the intimation added,—

"I'm not going any farther, Jack."

Jack ceases stroke, and again holds the skiff so as to hinder it from drifting.

Ryecroft sits with eyes turned towards the cliff, taking in its *façade* from base to summit, as though engaged in a geological study, or trigonometrical calculation.

The waterman, for a while wondering what it is all about, soon begins to have a glimmer of comprehension. It is clearer when he is directed to scull the boat up into the little cove where the body was found. Soon as he has her steadied inside it, close up against the cliff's base, Ryecroft draws out a small lamp, and lights it. He then rises to his feet, and, leaning forward, lays hold of a projecting point of rock. On that resting his hand, he continues for some time regarding the scratches on its surface, supposed to have been made by the feet of the drowned lady in her downward descent. Where he stands they are close to his eyes, and he can trace them from commencement to termination. And so doing, a shadow of doubt is seen to steal over his face, as though he doubted the finding of the coroner's jury, and the belief of every one that Gwendoline Wynn had there fallen over.

Bending lower, and examining the broken branches of the juniper, he doubts no more, but is sure—convinced of the contrary!

Jack Wingate sees him start back with a strange surprised look, at the same time exclaiming,—

"I thought as much! No accident!—no suicide—murdered!"

Still wondering, the waterman asks no questions. Whatever it may mean, he expects to be told in time, and is therefore patient.

His patience is not tried by having to stay much longer there. Only a few moments more, during which Ryecroft bends over the boat's side, takes the juniper twigs in his hand, one after the other, raises them up as they were before being broken, then lets them gently down again!

To his companion he says nothing to explain this apparently eccentric manipulation, leaving Jack to guesses. Only when it is over, and he is apparently satisfied, or with observation exhausted, giving the order,—

"Way, Wingate! Row back—up the river!"

With alacrity the waterman obeys, but too glad to get out of that shadowy passage; for a weird feeling is upon him, as he remembers how there the screech owls mournfully cried, as if to make him sadder when thinking of his own lost love.

Moving out into the main channel and on up stream, Ryecroft is once more silent and musing. But on reaching the place from which the pavilion can be again sighted, he turns round on the thwart and looks back. It startles him to see a form under the shadow of its roof—a woman!—how different from that he last saw there! The ex-cocotte of Paris—faded flower of the Jardin Mabille—has replaced the fresh beautiful blossom of Wyeseide—blighted in its bloom!



CHAPTER XLIX.

THE CRUSHED JUNIPER.

Notwithstanding the caution with which Captain Ryecroft made his reconnaissance, it was nevertheless observed, and from beginning to end. Before his boat drew near the end of the eyot, above the place where for the second time it had stopped, it came under the eye of a man who chanced to be standing on the cliff by the side of the summer-house.

That he was there by accident, or at all events not looking out for a boat, could be told by his behaviour on first sighting this; neither by change of attitude nor glance of eye evincing any interest in it. His reflection is,—

"Some fellows after salmon, I suppose. Have been up to that famous catching place by the ferry, and are on the way home downward—to Rock Weir, no doubt! Ha!"

The ejaculation is drawn from him by seeing the boat come to a stop, and remain stationary in the middle of the stream.

"What's that for?" he asks himself, now more carefully examining the craft.

It is still full four hundred yards from him, but the moonlight being in his favour, he makes it out to be a pair-oared skiff with two men in it.

"They don't seem to be dropping a net," he observes, "nor engaged about anything. That's odd!"

Before they came to a stop, he heard a murmur of voices, as of speech, a few words, exchanged between them, but too distant for him to distinguish what they had said. Now they are silent, sitting without stir; only a slight movement in the arms of the oarsman to keep the boat in its place.

All this seems strange to him observing: not less when a flood of moonlight brighter than usual falls over the boat, and he can tell by the attitude of the man in the stern, with face turned upward, that he is regarding the structure on the cliff.

He is not himself standing beside it now. Soon as becoming interested by the behaviour of the men in the boat, from its seeming eccentricity, he had glided back behind a bush, and there now crouches, an instinct prompting him to conceal himself.

Soon after he sees the boat moving on, and then for a few seconds it is out of sight, again coming under his view near the upper end of the islet, evidently setting in for the old channel. And while he watches, it enters!

As this is a sort of private way, the eyot itself being an adjunct of the ornamental grounds of Llangorren, he wonders whose boat it can be, and what its business there. By the backwash, it must be making for the dock and stair; the men in it, or one of them, for the Court.

While still surprisedly conjecturing, his ears admonish him that the oars are at rest, and another stoppage has taken place. He cannot see the skiff now, as the high bank hinders. Besides, the narrow passage is arcaded over by trees still in thick foliage; and, though the moon is shining brightly above, scarce a ray reaches the surface of the water. But an occasional creak of an oar in its rowlock, and some words spoken in low tone—so low he cannot make them out—tell him that the stoppage is directly opposite the spot where he is crouching—as predatory animal in wait for its prey.

What was at first mere curiosity, and then matter of but slight surprise, is now an object of keen solicitude. For of all places in the world, to him there is none invested with greater interest than that where the boat has been brought to. Why has it stopped there? Why is it staying? For he can tell it is by the silence continuing. Above all, who are the men in it?

He asks these questions of himself, but does not stay to reason out the answers. He will best get them by his eyes; and to obtain sight of the skiff and its occupants, he glides a little way along the cliff, looking out for a convenient spot. Finding one, he drops first to his knees, then upon all fours, and crawls out to its edge. Craning his head over, but cautiously, and with a care it shall be under cover of some fern leaves, he has a view of the water below, with the boat on it—only indistinct on account of the obscurity. He can make out the figures of the two men, though not their faces, nor anything by which he may identify them—if already known. But he sees that which helps to a conjecture, at the same sharpening his apprehensions—the boat once more in motion, not moving off, but up into the little cove, where a dead body late lay! Then, as one of the men

strikes a match and sets light to a lamp, lighting up his own face with that of the other opposite, he on the bank above at length recognises both.

But it is no longer a surprise to him. The presence of the skiff there, the movements of the men in it—like his own, evidently under restraint and stealthy—have prepared him for seeing whom he now sees—Captain Ryecroft and the waterman Wingate.

Still, he cannot think of what they are after, though he has his suspicions; the place, with something only known to himself, suggesting them—conjecture at first soon becoming certainty, as he sees the ex-officer of Hussars rise to his feet, hold his lamp close to the cliff's face, and inspect the abrasions on the rock!

He is not more certain, but only more apprehensive, when the crushed juniper twigs are taken in hand, examined, and let go again. For he has by this divined the object of it all.

If any doubt lingered, it is set at rest by the exclamatory words following, which, though but muttered, reach him on the cliff above, heard clear enough—

"No accident—no suicide—murdered!"

They carry tremor to his heart, making him feel as a fox that hears the tongue of hound on its track. Still distant, but for all causing it fear, and driving it to think of subterfuge.

And of this thinks he, as he lies with his face among the ferns; ponders upon it till the boat has passed back up the dark passage out into the river, and he hears the last light dipping of its oars in the far distance.

He even forgets a woman, for whom he was waiting at the summer-house, and who there without finding him has flitted off again.

At length rising to his feet, and going a little way, he too gets into a boat—one he finds, with oars aboard, down in the dock. It is not the *Gwendoline*—she is gone.

Seating himself on the mid thwart, he takes up the oars, and pulls towards the place lately occupied by the skiff of the waterman. When inside the cove, he lights a match, and holds it close to the face of the rock where Ryecroft held his lamp. It burns out, and he draws a second across the sand-paper; this to show him the broken branches of the juniper, which he also takes in hand and examines—soon also dropping them, with a look of surprise, followed by the

exclamatory phrases—

"Prodigiously strange! I see his drift now. Cunning fellow! On the track he has discovered the trick, and 'twill need another trick to throw him off it. This bush must be uprooted—destroyed."

He is in the act of grasping the juniper, to pluck it out by the roots. A dwarf thing, this could be easily done. But a thought stays him—another precautionary forecast, as evinced by his words—

"That won't do."

After repeating them, he drops back on the boat's thwart, and sits for a while considering, with eyes turned toward the cliff, ranging it up and down.

"Ah!" he exclaims at length, "the very thing; as if the devil himself had fixed it for me! That *will* do; smash the bush to atoms—blot out everything, as if an earthquake had gone over Llangorren."

While thus oddly soliloquising, his eyes are still turned upward, apparently regarding a ledge which, almost loose as a boulder, projects from the bank above. It is directly over the juniper, and if detached from its bed, as it easily might be, would go crashing down, carrying the bush with it.

And that same night it does go down. When the morning sun lights up the cliff, there is seen a breakage upon its face just underneath the summer-house. Of course, a landslip, caused by the late rains acting on the decomposed sandstone. But the juniper bush is no longer there; it is gone, root and branch!



CHAPTER L.

REASONING BY ANALYSIS.

Captain Ryecroft's start at seeing a woman within the pavilion was less from surprise than an emotion due to memory. When he last saw his betrothed alive, it was in that same place, and almost in a similar attitude—leaning over the baluster rail. Besides, many other souvenirs cling around the spot, which the sight vividly recalls; and so painfully, that he at once turns his eyes away from it, nor again looks back. He has an idea who the woman is, though personally knowing her not, nor ever having seen her.

The incident agitates him a little; but he is soon calm again, and for some time after sits silent—in no dreamy reverie, but actively cogitating, though not of it or her. His thoughts are occupied with a discovery he has made in his exploration just ended. An important one, bearing on the suspicion he had conceived almost proving it correct. Of all the facts that came before the coroner and his jury, none more impressed them, nor perhaps so much influenced their finding, as the tale-telling traces upon the face of the cliff. Nor did they arrive at their conclusion with any undue haste or light deliberation. Before deciding, they had taken boat, and from below more minutely inspected them. But with their first impression unaltered—or only strengthened—that the abrasions on the soft sandstone rock were made by a falling body, and the bush borne down by the same. And what but the body of Gwendoline Wynn? Living or dead, springing off, or pitched over, they could not determine. Hence the ambiguity of their verdict.

Very different the result reached by Captain Ryecroft after viewing the same. In his Indian campaigns, the ex-cavalry officer, belonging to the "Light," had his share of scouting experience. It enables him to read "sign" with the skill of trapper or prairie hunter; and on the moment his lamp threw its light against the cliff's face, he knew the scratches were not caused by anything that came *down*, since they had been *made from below*! And by some blunt instrument, as the blade of a boat oar. Then the branches of the juniper. Soon as getting his eyes close to them, he saw they had been broken *inward*, their drooping tops turned *toward* the cliff, not *from* it! A falling body would have bent them in an opposite direction, and the fracture been from the upper and inner side! Everything

indicated their having been crushed from below—not by the same boat's oar, but likely enough by the hands that held it!

It was on reaching this conclusion that Captain Ryecroft gave involuntary utterance to the exclamatory words heard by him lying flat among the ferns above, the last one sending a thrill of fear through his heart.

And upon it the ex-officer of Hussars is still reflecting as he returns up stream.

Since the command given to Wingate to row him back, he has not spoken, not even to make remark about that suggestive thing seen in the summer-house above—though the other has observed it also. Facing that way, the waterman has his eyes on it for a longer time. But the bearing of the Captain admonishes him that he is not to speak till spoken to; and he silently tugs at his oars, leaving the other to his reflections.

These are, that Gwendoline Wynn has been surely assassinated, though not by being thrown over the cliff. Possibly not drowned at all, but her body dropped into the water where found—conveyed thither after life was extinct! The scoring of the rock and the snapping of the twigs, all that done to mislead, as it had misled everybody but himself. To him it has brought conviction that there has been a deed of blood—done by the hand of another. "No accident—no suicide—murdered!"

He is not questioning the fact, nor speculating upon the motive now. The last has been already revolved in his mind, and is clear as daylight. To such a man as he has heard Lewin Murdock to be, an estate worth £10,000 a year would tempt to crime, even the capital one, which certainly he has committed. Ryecroft only thinks of how he can prove its committal—bring the deed of guilt home to the guilty one. It may be difficult—impossible; but he will do his best.

Embarked in the enterprise, he is considering what will be the best course to pursue—pondering upon it. He is not the man to act rashly at any time, but in a matter of such moment caution is especially called for. He is already on the track of a criminal who has displayed no ordinary cunning, as proved by that misguiding sign. A false move made, or word spoken in careless confidence, by exposing his purpose, may defeat it. For this reason he has hitherto kept his intention to himself—not having given a hint of it to any one.

From Jack Wingate it cannot be longer withheld, nor does he wish to withhold it. Instead, he will take him into his confidence, knowing he can do so with safety.

That the young waterman is no prating fellow he has already had proof, while of his loyalty he never doubted.

First, to find out what Jack's own thoughts are about the whole thing. For since their last being in a boat together, on that fatal night, little speech has passed between them. Only a few words on the day of the inquest, when Captain Ryecroft himself was too excited to converse calmly, and before the dark suspicion had taken substantial shape in his mind.

Once more opposite the poplar, he directs the skiff to be brought to. Which done, he sits just as when that sound startled him on return from the ball—apparently thinking of it, as in reality he is.

For a minute or so he is silent; and one might suppose he listened, expecting to hear it again. But no; he is only, as on the way down, making note of the distance to the Llangorren grounds. The summer-house he cannot now see, but judges the spot where it stands by some tall trees he knows to be beside it.

The waterman observing him, is not surprised when at length asked the question,
—

"Don't you believe, Wingate, the cry came from above—I mean from the top of the cliff?"

"I'm a'most sure it did. I thought at the time it comed from higher ground still—the house itself. You remember my sayin' so, Captain; and that I took it to be some o' the sarvint girls shoutin' up there."

"I do remember—you did. It was not, alas! but their mistress."

"Yes; she for sartin, poor young lady! We now know that."

"Think back, Jack! Recall it to your mind; the tone, the length of time it lasted—everything. Can you?"

"I can, an' do. I could all but fancy I hear it now!"

"Well, did it strike you as a cry that would come from one falling over the cliff—by accident, or otherwise?"

"It didn't; an' I don't yet believe it wor—accydent or no accydent."

"No! What are your reasons for doubting it?"

"Why, if it had a been a woman eyther fallin' over or flung, she'd ha' gied tongue a second time—ay, a good many times—'fore getting silenced. It must ha' been into the water, an' people don't drown at the first goin' down. She'd ha' riz to the surface once, if not twice; an' screeched sure. We couldn't ha' helped hearin' it. Ye remember, Captain, 'twor dead calm for a spell just precedin' the thunderstorm. When that cry come, ye might ha' heerd the leap o' a trout a quarter mile off. But it worn't repeated—not so much as a mutter."

"Quite true. But what do you conclude from its not having been?"

"That she who gied the shriek wor in the grasp o' somebody when she did it, an' wor silenced instant by bein' choked or smothered; same as they say's done by them scoundrels called garroters."

"You said nothing of this at the inquest?"

"No, I didn't, for several reasons. One, I wor so took by surprise, just home, an' hearin' what had happened. Besides, the crowner didn't question me on my feelin's—only about the facts o' the case. I answered all his questions, clear as I could remember, an' far's I then understood things; but not as I understand them now."

"Ah! you have learnt something since?"

"Not a thing, Captain—only what I've been thinkin' o', by rememberin' a circumstance I'd forgot."

"What?"

"Well, whiles I wor sittin' in the skiff that night, waitin' for you to come, I heerd a sound different from the hootin' o' them owls."

"Indeed! What sort of sound?"

"The plashing o' oars. There wor sartin another boat about there besides this one."

"In what direction did you hear them?"

"From above. It must ha' been that way. If't had been a boat gone up from below, I'd ha' noticed the stroke again across the strip o' island. But I didn't."

"The same if one had passed on down."

"Just so; an' for that reason I now believe it wor comin' down, an' stopped somewhere just outside the backwash."

An item of intelligence new to the Captain as it is significant. He recalls the hour—between two and three o'clock in the morning. What boat could have been there but his own? And if other, what its business?

"You're quite sure there was a boat, Wingate?" he asks, after a pause.

"The oars o' one—that I'm quite sure o'. An' where there's smoke, fire can't be far off. Yes, Captain, there wor a boat about there. I'm willin' to swear to it."

"Have you any idea whose?"

"Well, no; only some conjecter. First hearin' the oar, I wor under the idea it might be Dick Dempsey, out salmon-stealin'. But at the second plunge I could tell it wor no paddle, but a pair of regular oars. They gied but two or three strokes, an' then stopped suddintly; not as though the boat had been rowed back, but brought up against the bank, an' there layed."

"You don't think it was Dick and his coracle, then?"

"I'm sure it worn't the coracle, but ain't so sure about its not bein' him. 'Stead, from what happened that night, an's been a-happenin' ever since, I b'lieve he wor one o' the men in that boat."

"You think there were others?"

"I do—leastways, suspect it."

"And who do you suspect besides?"

"For one, him as used live up there, but's now livin' in Llangorren."

They have long since parted from the place where they made stop opposite the poplar, and are now abreast the Cuckoo's Glen, going on. It is to Glyngog House Wingate alludes, visible up the ravine, the moon gleaming upon its piebald walls and lightless windows—for it is untenanted.

"You mean Mr. Murdock?"

"The same, Captain. Though he worn't at the ball, as I've heerd say—and might ha' know'd without tellin'—I've got an idea he bean't far off when 'twor breakin' up. An' there wor another there, too, beside Dick Dempsey."

"A third! Who?"

"He as lives a bit further above."

"You mean——?"

"The French priest. Them three ain't often far apart; an' if I bean't astray in my reck'nin', they were mighty close thegither that same night, an' nigh Llangorren Court. They're all in or about it now, the precious tribang, an' I'd bet big they've got footin' there by the foulest o' foul play. Yes, Captain, sure as we be sittin' in this boat, she as owned the place ha' been murdered, the men as done it bein' Lewin Murdock, Dick Dempsey, and the Roman priest o' Rogues!"

CHAPTER LI.

A SUSPICIOUS CRAFT.

To the waterman's unreserved statement of facts and suspicions, Captain Ryecroft makes no rejoinder. The last are in exact consonance with his own already conceived, the first alone new to him.

And on the first he now fixes his thoughts, directing them to that particular one of a boat being in the neighbourhood of the Llangorren grounds about the time he was leaving them. For it, too, has a certain correspondence with something on the same night observed by himself—a circumstance he had forgotten, or ceased to think of, but now recalled with vivid distinctness. All the more as he listens to the conjectures of Wingate, about three men having been in that boat, and whom he supposed them to be.

The number is significant as corresponding with what occurred to himself. The time as well, since, but a few hours before, he also had his attention drawn to a boat, under circumstances somewhat mysterious. The place was different; for all not to contradict the supposition of the waterman, rather confirming it.

On his way to the Court, his black dress kerseymere protected by india-rubber overalls, Ryecroft, as known, had ridden to Wingate's house, and was thence rowed to Llangorren. His going to a ball by boat, instead of carriage or hotel hackney, was not for the sake of convenience, nor yet due to eccentricity. The prospect of a private interview with his betrothed at parting, as on former occasions expected to be pleasant, was his ruling motive for this arrangement. Besides, his calls at the Court were usually made in the same way, his custom being to ride as far as the Wingate cottage, leave his roadster there, and thence take the skiff. Between his town and the waterman's house, there is a choice of routes, the main country road keeping well away from the river, and a narrower one, which follows the trend of the stream along its edge, where practicable, but also here and there thrown off by meadows subject to inundations, or steep spurs of the parallel ridges. This, an ancient trackway now little used, was the route Captain Ryecroft had been accustomed to take on his way to Wingate's cottage, not from its being shorter or better, but for the scenery, which, far excelling that of the other, equals any upon the Wyese. In addition, the very loneliness of the

road had its charm for him, since only at rare intervals is a house seen by its side, and rarer still living creature encountered upon it. Even where it passes Rugg's Ferry, there intersecting the ford road, the same solitude characterizes it. For this quaint conglomeration of dwellings is on the opposite side of the stream—all save the chapel and the priest's house, standing some distance back from the bank, and screened by a spinney of trees.

With the topography of this place he is quite familiar; and now to-night it is vividly recalled to his mind by what the waterman has told him. For on that other night, so sadly remembered, as he was riding past Rugg's, he saw the boat thus brought back to his recollection. He had got a little beyond the crossing of the Ford road, where it leads out from the river—himself on the other going downwards—when his attention was drawn to a dark object against the bank on the opposite side of the stream. The sky at the time moonless, he might not have noticed it, but for other dark objects seen in motion beside it, the thing itself being stationary. Despite the obscurity, he could make them out to be men busied around a boat. Something in their movements, which seemed made in a stealthy manner—too cautious for honesty—prompted him to pull up, and sit in his saddle observing them. He had himself no need to take precautions for concealment, the road at this point passing under old oaks, whose umbrageous branches, arcading over, shadowed the causeway, making it dark around as the interior of a cavern.

Nor was he called upon to stay long there—only a few seconds after drawing bridle—just time enough for him to count the men, and see there were three of them, when they stepped over the sides of the boat, pushed her out from the bank, and rowed off down the river.

Even then he fancied there was something surreptitious in their proceedings; for the oars, instead of rattling in their rowlocks, made scarce any noise, while their dip was barely audible, though so near.

Soon both boat and those on board were out of his sight, and the slight sound made by them beyond his hearing. Had the road kept along the river's bank, he would have followed, and further watched them; but just below Rugg's it is carried off across a ridge, with steep pitch, and while ascending this he ceased to think of them.

He might not have thought of them at all, had they made their embarkation at the ordinary landing-place, by the ford and ferry. There such a sight would have

been nothing unusual, nor a circumstance to excite curiosity. But the boat, when he first observed it, was lying below, up against the bank by the chapel ground, across which the men must have come.

Recalling all this, with what Jack Wingate had just told him, connecting events together, and making comparison of time, place, and other circumstances, he thus interrogatively reflects:

"Might not that boat have been the same whose oars Jack heard down below? and the men in it those whose names he had mentioned? Three of them—that at least in curious correspondence? But the time? About nine, or a little after, as I passed Rugg's Ferry. That appears too early for the after event? No; they may have had other arrangements to make before proceeding to their murderous work. Odd, though, their knowing *she* would be out there. But they need not have known that—likely did not. More like they meant to enter the house after every one had gone away, and there do the deed. A night different from the common, everything in confusion; the servants sleeping sounder than usual, from having indulged in drink—some of them overcome by it, as I saw myself before leaving. Yes; it's quite probable the assassins took all that into consideration—surprised, no doubt, to find their victim so convenient—in fact, as if she had come forth to receive them. Poor girl!"

All this chapter of conjectures has been to himself, and in sombre silence, at length broken by the voice of his boatman, saying,—

"You've come afoot, Captain; an' it be a longish walk to the town, most o' the road muddy. Ye'll let me row you up the river—leastways, for a couple o' miles further; then ye can take the footpath through Powell's meadows."

Roused as from a reverie, the Captain, looking out, sees they are nearly up to the boatman's cottage, which accounts for the proposal thus made. After a little reflection, he says in reply,—

"Well, Jack, if it wasn't that I dislike overworking you——"

"Don't mention it!" interrupts Jack. "I'll be only too pleased to take you all the way to the town itself, if ye say the word. It a'nt so late yet, but to leave me plenty of time. Besides, I've got to go up to the ferry, anyhow, to get some grocery for mother. I may as well do it in the boat—'deed better than dragglin' along them roughish roads."

"In that case I consent. But you must let me take the oars."

"No, Captain; I'd prefer workin' 'em myself, if it be all the same to you."

The Captain does not insist, for in truth he would rather remain at the tiller. Not because he is indisposed for a spell of pulling, nor is it from disinclination to walk, that he has so readily accepted the waterman's offer. After reflecting, he would have asked the favour so courteously extended. And for a reason having nothing to do with convenience, or the fear of fatigue; but a purpose which has just shaped itself in his thoughts, suggested by the mention of the ferry.

It is that he may consider this—be left free to follow the train of conjecture which the incident has interrupted—he yields to the boatman's wishes, and keeps his seat in the stern.

By a fresh spurt the *Mary* is carried beyond her mooring place—as she passes it her owner for an instant feathering his oars and holding up his hat. It is a signal to one he sees there, standing outside in the moonlight—his mother.



CHAPTER LII.

MATERNAL SOLICITUDE.

"The poor lad! His heart be sore sad; at times most nigh breakin'! That's plain—spite o' all he try hide it."

It is the Widow Wingate who thus compassionately reflects—the subject, her son.

She is alone within her cottage, the waterman being away with his boat. Captain Ryecroft has taken him down the river. It is on this nocturnal exploration, when the cliff at Llangorren is inspected by lamp-light.

But she knows neither the purpose nor the place, any more than did Jack himself at starting. A little before sunset, the Captain came to the house, afoot and unexpectedly; called her son out, spoke a few words to him, when they started away in the skiff. She saw they went down stream—that is all.

She was some little surprised, though—not at the direction taken, but the time of setting out. Had Llangorren been still in possession of the young lady, of whom her son has often spoken to her, she would have thought nothing strange of it. But in view of the late sad occurrence at the Court, with the change of proprietorship consequent—about all of which she has been made aware—she knows the Captain cannot be bound thither, and therefore wonders whither. Surely, not a pleasure excursion, at such an unreasonable hour—night just drawing down?

She would have asked, but had no opportunity. Her son, summoned out of the house, did not re-enter; his oars were in the boat, having just come off a job; and the Captain appeared to be in haste. Hence Jack's going off, without, as he usually does, telling his mother the why and the where.

It is not this that is now fidgeting her. She is far from being of an inquisitive turn—least of all with her son—and never seeks to pry into his secrets. She knows his sterling integrity, and can trust him. Besides, she is aware that he is of a nature somewhat uncommunicative, especially upon matters that concern himself, and above all when he has a trouble on his mind—in short, one who

keeps his sorrows locked up in his breast, as though preferring to suffer in silence.

And just this it is she is now bemoaning. She observes how he is suffering, and has been, ever since that hour when a farm labourer from Abergann brought him tidings of Mary Morgan's fatal mishap.

Of course she, his mother, expected him to grieve wildly and deeply, as he did; but not deeply so long. Many days have passed since that dark one; but since, she has not seen him smile—not once! She begins to fear his sorrow may never know an end. She has heard of broken hearts—his may be one. Not strange her solicitude.

"What make it worse," she says, continuing her soliloquy, "he keep thinkin' that he hae been partways to blame for the poor girl's death, by makin' her come out to meet him!"—Jack has told his mother of the interview under the big elm, all about it, from beginning to end.—"That hadn't a thing to do wi' it. What happened wor ordained, long afore she left the house. When I dreamed that dream 'bout the corpse candle, I feel'd most sure somethin' would come o't; but then seein' it go up the meadows, I wor' althegither convinced. When *it* burn, no human creetur' ha' lit it; an' none can put it out, till the doomed one be laid in the grave. Who could 'a carried it across the river—that night especial, wi' a flood lippin' full up to the banks? No mortal man, nor woman neyther!"

As a native of Pembrokeshire, in whose treeless valleys the *ignis fatuus* is oft seen, and on its dangerous coast cliffs, in times past, too oft the lanthorn of the smuggler, with the "stalking horse" of the inhuman wrecker, Mrs. Wingate's dream of the *canwyll corph* was natural enough—a legendary reflection from tales told her in childhood, and wild songs chanted over her cradle.

But her waking vision, of a light borne up the river bottom, was a phenomenon yet more natural; since in truth was it a real light, that of a lamp, carried in the hands of a man with a coracle on his back, which accounts for its passing over the stream. And the man was Richard Dempsey, who below had ferried Father Rogier across on his way to the farm of Abergann, where the latter intended remaining all night. The priest in his peregrinations, often nocturnal, accustomed to take a lamp along, had it with him on that night, having lit it before entering the coracle; but, with the difficulty of balancing himself in the crank little craft, he had set it down under the thwart, and at landing forgotten all about it. Thence the poacher, detained beyond time in reference to an appointment he meant

being present at, had taken the shortest cut up the river bottom to Rugg's Ferry. This carried him twice across the stream, where it bends by the waterman's cottage; his coracle, easily launched and lifted out, enabling him to pass straight over and on, in his haste not staying to extinguish the lamp, nor even thinking of it.

Not so much wonder, then, in Mrs. Wingate believing she saw the *canwyll corph*. No more that she believes it still, but less, in view of what has since come to pass; as she supposes, but the inexorable fiat of fate.

"Yes!" she exclaims, proceeding with her soliloquy; "I knowed it would come. Poor thing! I hadn't no great knowledge of her myself; but sure she wor a good girl, or my son couldn't had been so fond o' her. If she'd had badness in her, Jack wouldn't greet and grieve as he be doin' now."

Though right in the premises—for Mary Morgan was a good girl—Mrs. Wingate is unfortunately wrong in her deductions. But, fortunately for her peace of mind, she is so. It is some consolation to her to think that she whom her son loved, and for whom he so sorrows, was worthy of his love as his sorrow.

It is wearing late, the sun having long since set; and still wondering why they went down the river, she steps outside to see if there be any sign of them returning. From the cottage but little can be seen of the stream, by reason of its tortuous course; only a short reach on either side, above and below.

Placing herself to command a view of the latter, she stands gazing down it. In addition to maternal solicitude, she feels anxiety of another and less emotional nature. Her tea-caddy is empty, the sugar all expended, and other household things deficient. Jack was just about starting off for the Ferry to replace them when the Captain came. Now it is a question whether he will be home in time to reach Rugg's before the shop closes. If not, there will be a scant supper for him, and he must grope his way lightless to bed; for among the spent commodities were candles, the last one having been burnt out. In the Widow Wingate's life candles seem to play an important part!

However, from all anxieties on this score she is at length and ere long relieved; her mind set at rest by a sound heard on the tranquil air of the night, the dip of a boat's oars, distant, but recognisable. Often before listening for the same, she instinctively knows them to be in the hands of her son; for Jack rows with a stroke no waterman on the Wye has but he—none equalling it in *timbre* and regularity. His mother can tell it as a hen the chirp of her own chick, or a ewe the

bleat of its lamb.

That it is his stroke she has soon other evidence than her ears. In a few seconds after hearing the oars she sees them, their wet blades glistening in the moonlight, the boat between.

And now she only waits for it to be pulled up and into the wash—its docking place—when Jack will tell her where they have been, and what for; perhaps, too, the Captain will come inside the cottage and speak a friendly word with her, as he has frequently done.

While thus pleasantly anticipating, she has a disappointment. The skiff is passing onward—proceeding up the river! But she is comforted by seeing a hat held aloft—the salute telling her she is herself seen, and that Jack has some good reason for the prolongation of the voyage. It will no doubt terminate at the ferry, where he will get the candles and comestibles, saving him a second journey thither, and so killing two birds with one stone.

Contenting herself with this construction of it, she returns inside the house, touches up the faggots on the fire, and by their cheerful blaze thinks no longer of candles, or any other light—forgetting even the *canwyll corph*.



CHAPTER LIII.

A SACRILEGIOUS HAND.

Between Wingate's cottage and Rugg's, Captain Ryecroft has but slight acquaintance with the river, knows it only by a glimpse had here and there from the road. Now, ascending by boat, he makes note of certain things appertaining to it—chiefly, the rate of its current, the windings of its channel, and the distance between the two places. He seems considering how long a boat might be in passing from one to the other. And just this is he thinking of, his thoughts on that boat he saw starting downward.

Whatever his object in all this, he does not reveal it to his companion. The time has not come for taking the waterman into full confidence. It will, but not to-night.

He has again relapsed into silence, which continues till he catches sight of an object on the left bank, conspicuous against the sky, beside the moon's disc, now low. It is a cross surmounting a structure of ecclesiastical character, which he knows to be the Roman Catholic chapel at Rugg's. Soon as abreast of it, he commands—

"Hold way, Jack! Keep her steady awhile!"

The waterman obeys without questioning why this new stoppage. He is himself interrogated the instant after, thus,—

"You see that shadowed spot under the bank—by the wall?"

"I do, Captain."

"Is there any landing-place there for a boat?"

"None, as I know of. Course a boat may put in anywhere, if the bank bean't eyther a cliff or a quagmire. The reg'lar landin'-place be above, where the ferry punt lays."

"But have you ever known of a boat being moored in there?"

The question has reference to the place first spoken of.

"I have, Captain; my own. That but once, an' the occasion not o' the pleasantest kind. 'Twar the night after my poor Mary wor buried, when I comed to say a prayer over her grave, an' plant a flower on it. I may say I stole there to do it, not wishin' to be obsarved by that sneak o' a priest, nor any o' their Romish lot. Exceptin' my own, I never knew or heard o' another boat bein' laid long there."

"All right! Now on!"

And on the skiff is sculled up stream for another mile, with little further speech passing between oarsman and steerer; it confined to subjects having no relation to what they have been all the evening occupied with.

For Ryecroft is once more in reverie, or rather silently thinking, his thoughts concentrated on the one theme—endeavouring to solve that problem, simple of itself, but with many complications and doubtful ambiguities—how Gwendoline Wynn came by her death.

He is still observed in a sea of conjectures, far as ever from its shore, when he feels the skiff at rest; as it ceases motion its oarsman asking—

"Do you weesh me to set you out here, Captain? There be the right-o'-way path through Powell's meadows. Or would ye rather be took on up to the town? Say which you'd like best, an' don't think o' any difference it makes to me."

"Thanks, Jack; it's very kind of you, but I prefer the walk up the meadows. There'll be moonlight enough yet. And as I shall want your boat to-morrow—it may be for the whole of the day—you'd better get home and well rested. Besides, you say you've an errand at Rugg's—to the shop there. You must make haste, or it will be closed."

"Ah! I didn't think o' that. Obleeged to ye much for remindin' me. I promised mother to get them grocery things the night, and wouldn't like to disappoint her—for a good deal."

"Pull in, then, quick, and tilt me out! And, Jack! not a word to any one about where I've been, or what doing. Keep that to yourself."

"I will, you may rely on me, Captain."

The boat is brought against the bank; Ryecroft leaps lightly to land, calls back,

"Good-night," and strikes off along the footpath.

Not a moment delays the waterman; but, shoving off, and setting head down stream, pulls with all his strength, stimulated by the fear of finding the shop shut.

He is in good time, however, and reaches Rugg's to see a light in the shop window, with its door standing open.

Going in, he gets the groceries, and is on return to the landing-place, where he has left his skiff, when he meets with a man who has come to the ferry on an errand somewhat similar to his own. It is Joseph Preece, "Old Joe," erst boatman of Llangorren Court; but now, as all his former fellow-servants, at large.

Though the acquaintance between him and Wingate is comparatively of recent date, a strong friendship has sprung up between them—stronger as the days passed, and each saw more of the other. For of late, in the exercise of their respective *metiers*, professionally alike, they have had many opportunities of being together, and more than one lengthened "confab" in the *Gwendoline's* dock.

It is days since they have met, and there is much to talk about, Joe being chief spokesman. And now that he has done his shopping, Jack can spare the time to listen. It will throw him a little later in reaching home; but his mother won't mind that. She saw him go up, and knows he will remember his errand.

So the two stand conversing till the gossipy Joseph has discharged himself of a budget of intelligence, taking nigh half an hour in delivery.

Then they part, the ex-Charon going about his own business, the waterman returning to his skiff.

Stepping into it, and seating himself, he pulls out and down.

A few strokes bring him opposite the chapel burying-ground; when all at once, as if stricken by a palsy, his arms cease moving, and the oar-blades drag deep in the water. There is not much current, and the skiff floats slowly.

He in it sits with eyes turned towards the graveyard. Not that he can see anything there, for the moon has gone down, and all is darkness. But he is not gazing—only thinking.

A thought, followed by an impulse leading to instantaneous action. A back stroke

or two of the starboard oar, then a strong tug, and the boat's bow is against the bank.

He steps ashore, ties the painter to a withy, and, climbing over the wall, proceeds to the spot so sacred to him.

Dark as is now the night, he has no difficulty in finding it. He has gone over that ground before, and remembers every inch of it. There are not many gravestones to guide him, for the little cemetery is of late consecration, and its humble monuments are few and far between. But he needs not their guidance. As a faithful dog by instinct finds the grave of his master, so he, with memories quickened by affection makes his way to the place where repose the remains of Mary Morgan.

Standing over her grave, he first gives himself up to an outpouring of grief, heartfelt as wild. Then, becoming calmer, he kneels down beside it, and says a prayer. It is the Lord's—he knows no other. Enough that it gives him relief; which it does, lightening his over-charged heart.

Feeling better, he is about to depart, and has again risen erect, when a thought stays him—a remembrance—"The flower of Love-lies-bleeding."

Is it growing? Not the flower, but the plant. He knows the former is faded, and must wait for the return of spring. But the latter—is it still alive and flourishing? In the darkness he cannot see, but will be able to tell by the touch.

Once more dropping upon his knees, and extending his hands over the grave, he gropes for it. He finds the spot, but not the plant. It is gone! Nothing left of it—not a remnant! A sacrilegious hand has been there, plucked it up, torn it out root and stalk, as the disturbed turf tells him!

In strange contrast with the prayerful words late upon his lips, are the angry exclamations to which he now gives utterance; some of them so profane as only under the circumstances to be excusable.

"It's that d—d rascal, Dick Dempsey, as ha' done it. Can't ha' been anybody else. An' if I can but get proof o't, I'll make him repent o' the despicable trick. I will, by the livin' G——!"

Thus angrily soliloquizing, he strides back to his skiff, and, getting in, rows off. But more than once, on the way homeward, he might be heard muttering words in the same wild strain—threats against Coracle Dick.



CHAPTER LIV.

A LATE TEA.

Mrs. Wingate is again growing impatient at her son's continued absence, now prolonged beyond all reasonable time. The Dutch dial on the kitchen wall shows it to be after ten; therefore two hours since the skiff passed upwards. Jack has often made the return trip to Rugg's in less than one, while the shopping should not occupy him more than ten minutes, or, making every allowance, not twenty. How is the odd time being spent by him?

Her impatience becomes uneasiness as she looks out of doors, and observes the hue of the sky. For the moon having gone down, it is now very dark, which always means danger on the river. The Wye is not a smooth swan-pond, and, flooded or not, annually claims its victims—strong men as women. And her son is upon it!

"Where?" she asks herself, becoming more and more anxious. He may have taken his fare on up to the town, in which case it will be still later before he can get back.

While thus conjecturing, a tinge of sadness steals over the widow's thoughts, with something of that weird feeling she experienced when once before waiting for him in the same way—on the occasion of his pretended errand after whipcord and pitch.

"Poor lad!" she says, recalling the little bit of deception she pardoned, and which now more than ever seems pardonable; "he hain't no need now deceivin' his old mother that way. I only wish he had."

"How black that sky do look!" she adds, rising from her seat, and going to the door; "an' threatenin' storm, if I bean't mistook. Lucky Jack ha' intimate acquaintance wi' the river 'tween here and Rugg's—if he hain't goed farther. What a blessin' the boy don't gi'e way to drink, an's otherways careful! Well, I s'pose there an't need for me feelin' uneasy. For all, I don't like his bein' so late. Mercy me! nigh on the stroke o' eleven? Ha! What's that? Him, I hope."

She steps hastily out, and behind the house, which, fronting the road, has its back

towards the river. On turning the corner, she hears a dull thump, as of a boat brought up against the bank; then a sharper concussion of timber striking timber—the sound of oars being unshipped. It comes from the *Mary*, at her mooring-place; as, in a few seconds after, Mrs. Wingate is made aware, by seeing her son approach with his arms full—in one of them a large brown paper parcel, while under the other are his oars. She knows it is his custom to bring the latter up to the shed—a necessary precaution due to the road running so near, and the danger of larking fellows taking a fancy to carry off his skiff.

Met by his mother outside, he delivers the grocery goods, and together they go in, when he is questioned as to the cause of delay.

"Whatever ha' kep' ye, Jack? Ye've been a wonderful long time goin' up to the ferry an' back!"

"The ferry! I went far beyond, up to the footpath over Squire Powell's meadow. There I set Captain out."

"Oh! that be it."

His answer being satisfactory, he is not further interrogated, for she has become busied with an earthen-ware teapot, into which have been dropped three spoonfuls of "Horniman's" just brought home—one for her son, another for herself, and the odd one for the pot—the orthodox quantity. It is a late hour for tea; but their regular evening meal was postponed by the coming of the Captain, and Mrs. Wingate would not consider supper, as it should be, wanting the beverage which cheers without intoxicating.

The pot set upon the hearthstone over some red-hot cinders, its contents are soon "mashed"; and, as nearly everything else had been got ready against Jack's arrival, it but needs for him to take seat by the table, on which one of the new composite candles, just lighted, stands in its stick.

Occupied with pouring out the tea, and creaming it, the good dame does not notice anything odd in the expression of her son's countenance; for she has not yet looked at it, in a good light, nor till she is handing the cup across to him. Then, the fresh-lit candle gleaming full in his face, she sees what gives her a start. Not the sad, melancholy cast to which she has of late been accustomed. That has seemingly gone off, replaced by sullen anger, as though he were brooding over some wrong done, or insult recently received!

"Whatever be the matter wi' ye, Jack?" she asks, the teacup still held in trembling hand. "There ha' something happened?"

"Oh! nothin' much, mother."

"Nothin' much! Then why be ye looking so black?"

"What makes you think I'm lookin' that way?"

"How can I help thinkin' it? Why, lad, your brow be clouded, same's the sky outside. Come now, tell the truth! Bean't there somethin' amiss?"

"Well, mother, since you axe me that way, I will tell the truth. Somethin' be amiss; or I ought better say, *missin'*."

"Missin'! Be't anybody ha' stoled the things out o' the boat? The balin' pan, or that bit o' cushion in the stern?"

"No, it ain't; no trifle o' that kind, nor anythin' stealed eyther. 'Stead, a thing as ha' been destroyed."

"What thing?"

"The flower—the plant."

"Flower! plant!"

"Yes; the Love-lies-bleedin' I set on Mary's grave the night after she wor laid in it. Ye remember my tellin' you, mother?"

"Yes—yes; I do."

"Well, it ain't there now."

"Ye ha' been into the chapel buryin' groun', then?"

"I have."

"But what made ye go there, Jack?"

"Well, mother, passin' the place, I took a notion to go in—a sort o' sudden inclinashun I couldn't resist. I thought that kneelin' beside her grave, an' sayin' a prayer, might do somethin' to left the weight off o' my heart. It would ha' done that, no doubt, but for findin' the flower wan't there. Fact, it had a good deal relieved me, till I discovered it wor gone."

"But how gone? Ha' the thing been cut off, or pulled up?"

"Clear plucked out by the roots. Not a vestige o' it left!"

"Maybe 'twere the sheep or goats. They often get into a graveyard; and if I bean't mistook, I've seen some in that o' the ferry chapel. They may have ate it up!"

The idea is new to him, and being plausible, he reflects on it, for a time misled. Not long, however, only till remembering what tells him it is fallacious; this, his having set the plant so firmly that no animal could have uprooted it. A sheep or goat might have eaten off the top, but nothing more.

"No, mother!" he at length rejoins; "it han't been done by eyther; but by a human hand—I ought better to say the claw o' a human tiger. No, not tiger; more o' a stinkin' cat!"

"Ye suspect somebody, then?"

"Suspect! I'm sure, as one can be without seein', that bit o' desecrashun ha' been the work o' Dick Dempsey. But I mean plantin' another in its place, an' watchin' it too. If he pluck it up, an' I know it, they'll need dig another grave in the Rogue's Ferry buryin' groun'—that for receivin' as big a rogue as ever wor buried there, or anywhere else, the d——d scoundrel!"

"Dear Jack! don't let your passion get the better o' ye, to speak so sinfully. Richard Dempsey be a bad man, no doubt; but the Lord will deal wi' him in His own way, an' sure punish him. So leave him to the Lord. After all, what do it matter—only a bit o' weed?"

"Weed! Mother, you mistake. That weed, as ye call it, wor like a silken string, bindin' my heart to Mary's. Settin' it in the sod o' her grave gied me a comfort I can't describe to ye. An' now to find it tore up brings the bitter all back again. In the spring I hoped to see it in bloom, to remind me o' her love as ha' been blighted, an', like it, lies bleedin'. But—well, it seems as I can't do nothin' for her now she's dead, as I warn't able while she wor livin'."

He covers his face with his hands to hide the tears now coursing down his cheeks.

"Oh, my son! don't take on so. Think that she be happy now—in heaven. Sure she is, from all I ha' heerd o' her."

"Yes, mother," he earnestly affirms, "she is. If ever woman went to the good place, she ha' goed there."

"Well, that ought to comfort ye."

"It do some. But to think of havin' lost her for good—never again to look at her sweet face. Oh! that be dreadful!"

"Sure it be. But think also that ye an't the only one as ha' to suffer. Nobody escape affliction o' that sort, some time or the other. It's the lot o' all—rich folks as well as we poor ones. Look at the Captain there! He be sufferin' like yourself. Poor man! I pity him, too."

"So do I, mother. An' I ought, so well understandin' how he feel, though he be too proud to let people see it. I seed it the day—several times noticed tears in his eyes when we wor talkin' about things that reminded him o' Miss Wynn. When a soldier—a grand fightin' soldier as he ha' been—gies way to weepin', the sorrow must be strong an' deep. No doubt he be 'most heart-broke, same's myself."

"But that an't right, Jack. It isn't intended we should always gie way to grief, no matter how dear they may a' been as are lost to us. Besides, it be sinful."

"Well, mother, I'll try to think more cheerful, submittin' to the will o' Heaven."

"Ah! There's a good lad! That's the way; an' be assured Heaven won't forsake, but comfort ye yet. Now, let's not say any more about it. You an't eating your supper!"

"I han't no great appetite after all."

"Never mind; ye must eat, and the tea 'll cheer ye. Hand me your cup, an' let me fill it again."

He passes the empty cup across the table, mechanically.

"It be very good tea," she says, telling a little untruth for the sake of abstracting his thoughts. "But I've something else for you that's better, before you go to bed."

"Ye take too much care o' me, mother."

"Nonsense, Jack. Ye've had a hard day's work o't. But ye hain't told me what the Captain tooked ye out for, nor where he went down the river. How far?"

"Only as far as Llangorren Court."

"But there be new people there now, ye sayed?"

"Yes; the Murdocks. Bad lot, both man an' wife, though he wor the cousin o' the good young lady as be gone."

"Sure, then, the Captain han't been to visit them?"

"No, not likely. He an't the kind to consort wi' such as they, for all o' their bein' big folks now."

"But there were other ladies livin' at Llangorren. What ha' become o' they?"

"They ha' gone to another house somewhere down the river—a smaller one, it's sayed. The old lady as wor Miss Wynn's aunt ha' money o' her own, and the other be livin' 'long wi' her. For the rest there's been a clean out—all the sarvints sent about their business; the only one kep' bein' a French girl who wor lady's-maid to the old mistress—that's the aunt. She's now the same to the new one, who be French, like herself."

"Where ha' ye heerd all this, Jack?"

"From Joseph Preece. I met him up at the Ferry, as I wor comin' away from the shop."

"He's out too, then?" asks Mrs. Wingate, who has of late come to know him.

"Yes; same's the others."

"Where be the poor man abidin' now?"

"Well, that's odd too. Where do you suppose, mother?"

"How should I know, my son? Where?"

"In the old house where Coracle Dick used to live!"

"What be there so odd in that?"

"Why, because Dick's now in his house; ha' got his place at the Court, an's goin' to be somethin' far grander than ever he wor—head keeper."

"Ah! poacher turned gamekeeper! That be settin' thief to catch thief!"

"Somethin' besides thief, he! A deal worse than that!"

"But," pursues Mrs. Wingate, without reference to the reflection on Coracle's character, "ye han't yet tolt me what the Captain took down the river."

"I an't at liberty to tell any one. Ye understand me, mother?"

"Yes, yes; I do."

"The Captain ha' made me promise to say nothin' o' his doin's; an', to tell truth, I don't know much about them myself. But what I do know, I'm honour bound to keep dark consarnin' it—even wi' you, mother."

She appreciates his nice sense of honour; and, with her own of delicacy, does not urge him to any further explanation.

"In time," he adds, "I'm like enough to know all o' what he's after. Maybe, the morrow."

"Ye're to see him the morrow, then?"

"Yes; he wants the boat."

"What hour?"

"He didn't say when, only that he might be needin' me all the day. So I may look out for him early—first thing in the mornin'."

"That case ye must get to your bed at oncst, an' ha' a good sleep, so's to start out fresh. First take this. It be the somethin' I promised ye—better than tea."

The something is a mug of mulled elderberry wine, which, whether or not better than tea, is certainly superior to port prepared in the same way.

Quaffing it down, and betaking himself to bed, under its somniferous influence, the Wye waterman is soon in the land of dreams. Not happy ones, alas! but visions of a river flood-swollen, with a boat upon its seething, frothy surface, borne rapidly on towards a dangerous eddy—then into it—at length capsized to a sad symphony—the shrieks of a drowning woman!



CHAPTER LV.

THE NEW MISTRESS OF THE MANSION.

At Llangorren Court all is changed, from owner down to the humblest domestic. Lewin Murdock has become its master, as the priest told him he some day might.

There was none to say nay. By the failure of Ambrose Wynne's heirs—in the line through his son, and bearing his name—the estate of which he was the original testator reverts to the children of his daughter, of whom Lewin Murdock, an only son, is the sole survivor. He of Glyngog is therefore indisputable heritor of Llangorren; and no one disputing it, he is now in possession, having entered upon it soon as the legal formularies could be gone through with. This they have been with a haste which causes invidious remark, if not actual scandal.

Lewin Murdock is not the man to care; and, in truth, he is now scarce ever sober enough to feel sensitive, could he have felt so at any time. But in his new and luxurious home, waited on by a staff of servants, with wine at will, so unlike the days of misery spent in the dilapidated manor house, he gives loose rein to his passion for drink; leaving the management of affairs to his dexterous better-half.

She has not needed to take much trouble in the matter of furnishing. Her husband, as nearest of kin to the deceased, has also come in for the personal effects, furniture included; all but some belongings of Miss Linton, which had been speedily removed by her—transferred to a little house of her own, not far off. Fortunately, the old lady is not left impecunious; but has enough to keep her in comfort, with an economy, however, that precludes all idea of longer indulging in a lady's maid, more especially one so expensive as Clarisse; who, as Jack Wingate said, has been dismissed from Miss Linton's establishment—at the same time discharging herself by notice formally given. That clever *demoiselle* was not meant for service in a ten-roomed cottage, even though a detached one; and through the intervention of her patron, the priest, she still remains at the Court, to dance attendance on the *ancien belle* of Mabile, as she did on the ancient toast of Cheltenham.

Pleasantly so far, her new mistress being in fine spirits, and herself delighted with everything. The French adventuress has attained the goal of an ambition

long cherished, though not so patiently awaited. Oft gazed she across the Wye at those smiling grounds of Llangorren, as the Fallen Angel back over its walls into the Garden of Eden; oft saw she there assemblages of people to her seeming as angels, not fallen, but in highest favour—ah! in her estimation, more than angels—women of rank and wealth, who could command what she coveted beyond any far-off joys celestial—the nearer pleasures of earth and sense.

Those favoured fair ones are not there now, but she herself is; owner of the very Paradise in which they disported themselves! Nor does she despair of seeing them at Llangorren again, and having them around her in friendly intercourse, as had Gwendoline Wynn. Brought up under the *regimé* of Louis and trained in the school of Eugenie, why need she fear either social slight or exclusion? True, she is in England, not France; but she thinks it is all the same. And not without some reason for so thinking. The ethics of the two countries, so different in days past, have of late become alarmingly assimilated—ever since that hand, red with blood spilled upon the boulevards of France, was affectionately clasped by a Queen on the dock head of Cherbourg. The taint of that touch felt throughout England, has spread over it like a plague; no local or temporary epidemic, but one which still abides, still emitting its noisome effluvia in a flood of prurient literature—novel-writers who know neither decency nor shame—newspaper scribblers devoid of either truth or sincerity—theatres little better than licensed *bagnios*, and Stock Exchange scandals smouching names once honoured in English history, with other scandals of yet more lamentable kind—all the old landmarks of England's morality being rapidly obliterated.

And all the better for Olympe, *née* Renault. Like her sort living by corruption, she instinctively rejoices at it, glories in the *monde immonde* of the Second Empire, and admires the abnormal monster who has done so much in sowing and cultivating the noxious crop. Seeing it flourish around her, and knowing it on the increase, the new mistress of Llangorren expects to profit by it. Nor has she slightest fear of failure in any attempt she may make to enter Society. It will not much longer taboo her. She knows that, with very little adroitness, £10,000 a year will introduce her into a Royal drawing-room—ay, take her to the steps of a throne; and none is needed to pass through the gates of Hurlingham nor those of Chiswick's Garden. In this last she would not be the only flower of poisonous properties and tainted perfume; instead, would brush skirts with scores of dames wonderfully like those of the Restoration and Regency, recalling the painted dolls of the Second Charles, and the Delilahs of the Fourth George; in bold effrontery and cosmetic brilliance equalling either.

The wife of Lewin Murdock hopes ere long to be among them—once more a *célébrité*, as she was in the Bois de Boulogne, and the *bals* of the demi-monde.

True, the county aristocracy have not yet called upon her. For by a singular perverseness—unlike Nature's laws in the animal and vegetable world—the outer tentacles of this called "Society" are the last to take hold. But they will yet. Money is all powerful in this free and easy age. Having that in sufficiency, it makes little difference whether she once sat by a sewing machine, or turned a mangle, as she once has done in the Faubourg Montmartre for her mother, *la blanchisseuse*. She is confident the gentry of the shire will in due time surrender, send in their cards and come of themselves; as they surely will, soon as they see her name in the *Court Journal* or *Morning Post*, in the list of Royal receptions:—"Mrs. Lewin Murdock, presented by the Countess of Devilacare."

And to a certainty they shall so read it, with much about her besides, if Jenkins be true to his instincts, she need not fear him—he will. She can trust his fidelity to the star scintillating in a field of plush, as to the Polar that of magnetic needle.

Her husband bears his new fortunes in a manner somewhat different; in one sense more soberly, as in another the reverse. If, during his adversity, he indulged in drink, in prosperity he does not spare it. But there is another passion to which he now gives loose—his old, unconquerable vice—gaming. Little cares he for the cards of visitor, while those of the gambler delight him: and though his wife has yet received none of the former, he has his callers to take a hand with him at the latter—more than enough to make up a rubber of whist. Besides, some of his old cronies of the "Welsh Harp," who have now *entrée* at Llangorren, several young swells of the neighbourhood—the black sheep of their respective flocks—are not above being of his company. Where the carrion is, the eagles congregate, as the vultures; and already two or three of the "leg" fraternity—in farther flight from London—have found their way into Herefordshire, and hover around the precincts of the Court.

Night after night, tables are there set out for loo, *écarté*, *rouge et noir*, or whatever may be called for—in a small way resembling the hells of Homburg, Baden, and Monaco—wanting only the women.



CHAPTER LVI.

THE GAMBLERS AT LLANGORREN.

Among the faces now seen at Llangorren—most of them new to the place, and not a few of forbidding aspect—there is one familiar to us. Sinister as any, since it is that of Father Rogier. At no rare intervals may it be there observed; but almost continuously. Frequent as were his visits to Glyngog, they are still more so to Llangorren, where he now spends the greater part of his time; his own solitary and somewhat humble dwelling at Rugg's Ferry seeing nothing of him for days together, while for nights its celibate bed is unslept in, the luxurious couch spread for him at the Court having greater attractions.

Whether made welcome to this unlimited hospitality or not, he comports himself as though he were; seeming noways backward in the reception of it; instead, as if demanding it. One ignorant of his relations with the master of the establishment might imagine *him* its master. Nor would the supposition be so far astray. As the King-maker controls the King, so can Gregoire Rogier the new Lord of Llangorren—influence him at his will.

And this does he; though not openly, or ostensibly. That would be contrary to the tactics taught him, and the practice to which he is accustomed. The sword of Loyola in the hands of his modern apostles has become a dagger—a weapon more suitable to Ultramontaniam. Only in Protestant countries to be wielded with secrecy, though elsewhere little concealed.

But the priest of Rugg's Ferry is not in France; and, under the roof of an English gentleman, though a Roman Catholic, bears himself with becoming modesty—before strangers and the eyes of the outside world. Even the domestics of the house see nothing amiss. They are new to their places, and as yet unacquainted with the relationships around them. Nor would they think it strange in a priest having control there or anywhere. They are all of his persuasion, else they would not be in service at Llangorren Court.

So proceed matters under its new administration.



On the same evening that Captain Ryecroft makes his quiet excursion down the river to inspect the traces on the cliff, there is a little dinner party at the Court, the diners taking seat by the table just about the time he was stepping into Wingate's skiff.

The hour is early; but it is altogether a bachelor affair, and Lewin Murdock's guests are men not much given to follow fashions. Besides, there is another reason; something to succeed the dinner, on which their thoughts are more bent than upon either eating or drinking. No spread of fruit, nor dessert of any kind, but a bout at card-playing, or dice for those who prefer it. On their way to the dining-room they have caught glimpse of another apartment where whist and loo tables are seen, with all the gambling paraphernalia upon them—packs of new cards still in their wrappers, ivory counters, dice boxes with their spotted cubes lying alongside.

Pretty sight to Mr. Murdock's lately picked up acquaintances; a heterogeneous circle, but all alike in one respect—each indulging in the pleasant anticipation that he will that night leave his host's house with more or less of that host's money in his pocket. Murdock has himself come easily by it, and why should he not be made as easily to part with it? If he has a plethora of cash, they have a determination to relieve him of at least a portion of it.

Hence dinner is eaten in haste, and with little appreciation of the dishes, however dainty; all so longing to be around those tables in another room, and get their fingers on the toys there displayed.

Their host, aware of the universal desire, does nought to frustrate it. Instead, he is as eager as any for the fray. As said, gambling is his passion, has been for most part of his life, and he could now no more live without it than go wanting drink. A hopeless victim to the last, he is equally a slave to the first. Soon, therefore, as dessert is brought in, and a glass of the heavier wines gone round, he looks significantly at his wife—the only lady at the table—who, taking the hint, retires.

The gentlemen, on their feet at her withdrawal, do not sit down again, but drink standing—only a *petit verre* of cognac by way of "corrector." Then they hurry off in an unseemly ruck towards the room containing metal more attractive, from which soon after proceed the clinking of coin and the rattle of ebony counters, with words now and then spoken not over nice, but rough, even profane, as though the speakers were playing skittles in the back yard of a London

beerhouse, instead of cards under the roof of a country gentleman's mansion!

While the new master of Llangorren is thus entertaining his amiable company, as much as any of them engrossed in the game, its new mistress is also playing a part, which may be more reputable, but certainly is more mysterious. She is in the drawing-room, though not alone—Father Rogier alone with her. He, of course, has been one of the dining guests, and said an unctuous grace over the table. In his sacred sacerdotal character it could hardly be expected of him to keep along with the company, though he could take a hand at cards, and play them with as much skill as any gamester of that gathering. But just now he has other fish to fry, and wishes a word in private with the mistress of Llangorren, about the way things are going on. However much he may himself like a little game with its master, and win money from him, he does not relish seeing all the world do the same; no more she. Something must be done to put a stop to it; and it is to talk over this something the two have planned their present interview, some words about it having previously passed between them.

Seated side by side on a lounge, they enter upon the subject. But before a dozen words have been exchanged, they are compelled to discontinue, and for the time forego it.

The interruption is caused by a third individual, who has taken a fancy to follow Mrs. Murdock into the drawing-room; a young fellow of the squire class, but as her husband late was, of somewhat damaged reputation and broken fortunes. For all having a whole eye to female beauty, which appears to him in great perfection in the face of the Frenchwoman, the rouge upon her cheeks looking the real rose-colour of that proverbial milkmaid nine times dipped in dew.

The wine he has been quaffing gives it this hue, for he enters half intoxicated, and with a slight stagger in his gait—to the great annoyance of the lady, and the positive chagrin of the priest, who regards him with scowling glances. But the intruder is too tipsy to notice them, and advancing, invites himself to a seat in front of Mrs. Murdock, at the same time commencing a conversation with her.

Rogier, rising, gives a significant side look, with a slight nod towards the window; then, muttering a word of excuse, saunters off out of the room.

She knows what it means, as where to follow and find him. Knows also how to disembarass herself of such as he who remained behind. Were it upon a bench of the Bois, or an arbour in the Jardin, she would make short work of it. But the ex-cocotte is now at the head of an aristocratic establishment, and must act in

accordance. Therefore she allows some time to elapse, listening to the speech of her latest admirer—some of it in compliments coarse enough to give offence to ears more sensitive than hers.

She at length gets rid of him on the plea of having a headache, and going upstairs to get something for it. She will be down again by-and-by; and so bows herself out of the gentleman's presence, leaving him in a state of fretful disappointment.

Once outside the room, instead of turning up the stairway, she glides along the corridor, then on through the entrance hall, and then out by the front door. Nor stays she an instant on the steps or carriage-sweep, but proceeds direct to the summer-house, where she expects to find the priest. For there have they more than once been together, conversing on matters of private and particular nature.

On reaching the place, she is disappointed—some little surprised. Rogier is not there, nor can she see him anywhere around.

For all that, the gentleman is very near, without her knowing it—only a few paces off, lying flat upon his face among ferns, but so engrossed with thoughts—just then of an exciting nature—he neither hears her light footsteps, nor his own name pronounced. Not loudly, though, since, while pronouncing it, she feared being heard by some other. Besides, she does not think it necessary. He will come yet, without calling.

She steps inside the pavilion, and there stands waiting. Still he does not come, nor sees she anything of him—only a boat on the river above, being rowed upwards; but without thought of its having anything to do with her or her affairs.

By this there is another boat in motion, for the priest has meanwhile forsaken his spying place upon the cliff, and proceeded down to the dock.

"Where can Gregoire have gone?" she asks herself, becoming more and more impatient.

Several times she puts the question without receiving answer, and is about starting on return to the house, when longer stayed by a rumbling noise which reaches her ears, coming up from the direction of the dock.

"Can it be he?"

Continuing to listen, she hears the stroke of oars. It cannot be the boat she has

seen rowing off above. That must now be far away, while this is near—in the bye-water just below her. But can it be the priest who is in it?

Yes, it is he, as she discovers, after stepping outside to the place he so late occupied, and looking over the cliff's edge; for then she had a view of his face, lit up by a lucifer match—itself looking like that of Lucifer.

What can he be doing down there? Why, examining those things he already knows all about, as she herself.

She would call down to him and inquire, but possibly better not. He may be engaged upon some matter calling for secrecy, as he often is. Other eyes besides hers may be near, and her voice might draw them on him. She will wait for his coming up.

And wait she does, at the boat's dock, on the top step of the stair, there receiving him, as he returns from his short, but still unexplained, excursion.

"What is it?" she asks, soon as he has mounted up to her. "*Quelque chose à tort?*"

"More than that. A veritable danger!"

"*Comment?* Explain!"

"There's a hound upon our track! One of sharpest scent."

"Who?"

"*Le Capitaine de hussards!*"

The dialogue that succeeds between Olympe Renault and Gregoire Rogier has no reference to Lewin Murdock gambling away his money, but the fear of his losing it in quite another way; which, for the rest of that night, gives them something else to think of, as also something to do.

CHAPTER LVII.

AN UNWILLING NOVICE.

"Am I myself? Dreaming? Or is it insanity?"

It is a young girl who thus strangely interrogates, a beautiful girl, woman grown, of tall stature, with bright face, and a wealth of hair, golden hued.

But what is beauty to her with all these adjuncts? As the flower born to blush unseen, eye of man may not look upon hers, though it is not wasting its sweetness on the desert air, but within the walls of a convent.

An English girl, though the convent is in France—in the city of Boulogne-sur-mer; the same in whose attached *pensionnat* the sister of Major Mahon is receiving education. She is not the girl, for Kate Mahon, though herself beautiful, is no blonde—instead, the very opposite. Besides, this creature of radiant complexion is not attending school: she is beyond the years for that. Neither is she allowed the freedom of the streets, but kept shut up within a cell in the innermost recesses of the establishment, where the *pensionnaires* are not permitted, save one or two who are favourites with the Lady Superior.

A small apartment the young girl occupies—bed-chamber and sitting-room in one; in short, a nun's cloister—furnished, as such are, in a style of austere simplicity: pallet bed along the one side, the other taken up by a plain deal dressing-table, a washstand with jug and basin—these little bigger than tea-bowl and ewer—and a couple of common rush-bottom chairs; that is all.

The walls are lime-washed, but most of their surface is concealed by pictures of saints, male and female; while the mother of all is honoured by an image, having a niche to itself, in a corner.

On the table are some four or five books, including a Testament and Missal; their bindings, with the orthodox cross stamped upon them, proclaiming the nature of the contents. A literature that cannot be to the liking of the present occupant of the cloister, since she has been there several days without turning over a single leaf, or even taking up one of the volumes to look at it.

That she is not there with her own will, but against it, can be told by her words, and as their tone, her manner while giving utterance to them. Seated upon the side of the bed, she has sprung to her feet, and with arms raised aloft and tossed about, strides distractedly over the floor. One seeing her thus might well imagine her to be, what she half fancies herself, insane!—a supposition strengthened by an unnatural lustre in her eyes, and a hectic flush on her cheeks, unlike the hue of health. Still, not as with one suffering bodily sickness, or any physical ailment, but more as from a mind diseased. Seen for only a moment—that particular moment—such would be the conclusion regarding her. But her speech coming after, tells she is in full possession of her senses, only under terrible agitation, distraught with some great trouble.

"It must be a convent! But how have I come into it? Into France, too; for surely am I there? The woman who brings my meals is French. So the other—Sister of Mercy, as she calls herself, though she speaks my own tongue. The furniture—bed, table, chairs, washstand—everything of French manufacture. And in all England there is not such a jug and basin as those!"

Regarding the lavatory utensils—so diminutive as to recall "Gulliver's travels in Lilliput," if ever read by her—she for a moment seems to forget her misery, even in its very midst, and keenest, at sight of the ludicrous and grotesque.

It is quickly recalled, as her glance, wandering around the room, again rests on the little statue—not of marble, but a cheap plaster of Paris cast—and she reads the inscription underneath, "*La Mère de Dieu.*" The symbols tell her she is inside a nunnery, and upon the soil of France!

"Oh, yes!" she exclaims, "'tis certainly so! I am no more in my native land, but have been carried across the sea!"

The knowledge, or belief, does nought to tranquillize her feelings, or explain the situation, to her all mysterious. Instead, it but adds to her bewilderment, and she once more exclaims, almost repeating herself,—

"Am I myself? Is it a dream? Or have my senses indeed forsaken me?"

She clasps her hands across her forehead, the white fingers threading the thick folds of her hair, which hangs dishevelled. She presses them against her temples, as if to make sure her brain is still untouched!

It is so, or she would not reason as she does.

"Everything around shows I am in France. But how came I to it? Who has brought me? What offence have I given God or man, to be dragged from home, from country, and confined—imprisoned! Convent, or whatever it be, imprisoned I am! The door constantly kept locked! That window, so high, I cannot see over its sill! The dim light it lets in telling it was not meant for enjoyment. Oh! Instead of cheering, it tantalizes—tortures me!"

Despairingly she reseats herself upon the side of the bed, and with head still buried in her hands, continues her soliloquy—no longer of things present, but reverting to the past.

"Let me think again! What can I remember? That night, so happy in its beginning, to end as it did! The end of my life, as I thought, if I had a thought at that time. It was not, though, or I shouldn't be here, but in heaven, I hope. Would I were in heaven now! When I recall *his* words—those last words and think ——"

"Your thoughts are sinful, child!"

The remark, thus interrupting, is made by a woman, who appears on the threshold of the door, which she had just pushed open. A woman of mature age, dressed in a floating drapery of deep black—the orthodox garb of the Holy Sisterhood, with all its insignia of girdle, bead-roll, and pendant crucifix. A tall, thin personage, with skin like shrivelled parchment, and a countenance that would be repulsive but for the nun's coif, which, partly concealing, tones down its sinister expression. Withal, a face disagreeable to gaze upon; not the less so from its air of sanctity, evidently affected. The intruder is Sister Ursule.

She has opened the door noiselessly—as cloister doors are made to open—and stands between its jambs, like a shadowy *silhouette* in its frame, one hand still holding the knob, while in the other is a small volume, apparently well thumbed. That she has had her ear to the keyhole before presenting herself is told by the rebuke having reference to the last words of the girl's soliloquy, in her excitement uttered aloud.

"Yes," she continues, "sinful—very sinful! You should be thinking of something else than the world and its wickedness, and of anything before that you have been thinking of—the wickedness of all."

She thus spoken to had neither started at the intrusion, nor does she show surprise at what is said. It is not the first visit of Sister Ursule to her cell, made in

like stealthy manner; nor the first austere speech she has heard from the same skinny lips. At the beginning she did not listen to it patiently; instead, with indignation—defiantly, almost fiercely, rejoicing. But the proudest spirit can be humbled. Even the eagle, when its wings are beaten to exhaustion against the bars of its cage, will become subdued, if not tamed. Therefore the imprisoned English girl makes reply meekly and appealingly,—

"Sister of Mercy, as you are called, have mercy upon me! Tell me why I am here?"

"For the good of your soul and its salvation."

"But how can that concern any one save myself?"

"Ah! there you mistake, child; which shows the sort of life you've been hitherto leading, and the sort of people surrounding you; who, in their sinfulness, imagine all as themselves. They cannot conceive that there are those who deem it a duty—nay, a direct command from God—to do all in their power for the redemption of lost sinners, and restoring them to his Divine favour. He is all-merciful."

"True—He is. I do not need to be told it. Only, who these redemptionists are that take such interest in my spiritual welfare, and how I have come to be here, surely I may know?"

"You shall in time, *ma fille*. Now you cannot—must not—for many reasons."

"What reasons?"

"Well, for one, you have been very ill—nigh unto death, indeed."

"I know that, without knowing how."

"Of course. The accident which came near depriving you of your life was of that sudden nature; and your senses——But I mustn't speak further about it. The doctor has given strict directions that you're to be kept quiet, and it might excite you. Be satisfied with knowing that they who placed you here are the same who saved your life, and would now rescue your soul from perdition. I've brought you this little volume for perusal. It will help to enlighten you."

She stretches out her long bony fingers, handing the book—one of those "Aids to Faith" relied upon by the apostles of the *Propaganda*.

The girl mechanically takes it, without looking at or thinking of it; still pondering upon the unknown benefactors, who, as she is told, have done so much for her.

"How good of them!" she rejoins, with an air of incredulity, and in tones that might be taken as derisive.

"How wicked of you!" retorts the other, taking it in this sense. "Positively ungrateful!" she adds, with the acerbity of a baffled proselytiser. "I am sorry, child, you still cling to your sinful thoughts, and keep up a rebellious spirit in face of all that is being done for your good. But I shall leave you now, and go and pray for you; hoping, on my next visit, to find you in a more proper frame of mind."

So saying, Sister Ursule glides out of the cloister, drawing to the door, and silently turning the key in its lock.

"O God!" groans the young girl in despair, flinging herself along the pallet, and for the third time interrogating, "Am I myself, and dreaming? Or am I mad? In mercy, Heaven, tell me what it means!"



CHAPTER LVIII.

A CHEERFUL KITCHEN.

Of all the domestics turned adrift from Llangorren, one alone interests us—Joseph Preece—"Old Joe," as his young mistress used familiarly to call him.

As Jack Wingate has made his mother aware, Joe has moved into the house formerly inhabited by Coracle Dick; so far changing places with the poacher, who now occupies the lodge in which the old man erewhile lived as one of the retainers of the Wynn family.

Beyond this the exchange has not extended. Richard Dempsey, under the new *regimé* at Llangorren, has been promoted to higher office than was ever held by Joseph Preece; who, on the other hand, has neither turned poacher, nor intends doing so. Instead, the versatile Joseph, as if to keep up his character for versatility, has taken to a new calling altogether—that of basket-making, with the construction of bird-cages, and other kinds of wicker-work. Rather is it the resumption of an old business to which he had been brought up, but abandoned long years ago on entering the service of Squire Wynn. Having considerable skill in this textile trade, he hopes in his old age to make it maintain him. Only in part; for, thanks to the generosity of his former master, and more still that of his late mistress, Joe has laid by a little *pecunium*, nearly enough for his needs; so that, in truth, he has taken to the wicker-working less from necessity than for the sake of having something to do. The old man of many *metiers* has never led an idle life, and dislikes leading it.

It is not by any accident he has drifted into the domicile late in the occupation of Dick Dempsey, though Dick had nothing to do with it. The poacher himself was but a week-to-week tenant, and of course cleared out soon as obtaining his promotion. Then, the place being to let, at a low rent, the ex-charon saw it would suit him; all the better because of a "withey bed" belonging to the same landlord, which was to let at the same time. This last being at the mouth of the dingle in which the solitary dwelling stands—and promising a convenient supply of the raw material for his projected manufacture—he has taken a lease of it along with the house.

Under his predecessor the premises having fallen into dilapidation—almost ruin—the old boatman had a bargain of them, on condition of his doing the repairs. He has done them; made the roof water-tight; given the walls a coat of plaster and whitewash; laid a new floor—in short, rendered the house habitable, and fairly comfortable.

Among other improvements, he has partitioned off a second sleeping apartment, and not only plastered but papered it. More still, neatly and tastefully furnished it, the furniture consisting of an iron bedstead, painted emerald green, with brass knobs; a new washstand, and dressing table with mahogany-framed glass on the top, three cane chairs, a towel horse, and other etceteras.

For himself? No; he has a bedroom besides. And this, by the style of the plenishing, is evidently intended for one of the fair sex. Indeed, one has already taken possession of it, as evinced by some female apparel suspended upon pegs against the wall; a pin-cushion, with a brooch in it, on the dressing table; bracelets and a necklace besides, with two or three scent bottles, and several other toilet trifles scattered about in front of the framed glass. They cannot be the belongings of "Old Joe's" wife nor yet his daughter; for among the many parts he has played in life, that of Benedict has not been. A bachelor he is, and a bachelor he intends staying to the end of the chapter.

Who, then, is the owner of the brooch, bracelets, and other bijouterie? In a word, his niece—a slip of a girl who was under-housemaid at Llangorren; like himself, set at large, and now transformed into a full-fledged housekeeper—his own. But before entering on parlour duties at the Court, she had seen service in the kitchen, under the cook; and some culinary skill, then and there acquired, now stands her old uncle in stead. By her deft manipulation, stewed rabbit becomes as jugged hare, so that it would be difficult to tell the difference; while she has at her fingers' ends many other feats of the *cuisine* that give him gratification. The old servitor of Squire Wynn is in his way a *gourmet*, and has a tooth for toothsome things.

His accomplished niece, with somewhat of his own cleverness, bears the pretty name of Amy—Amy Preece, for she is his brother's child. And she is pretty as her name, a bright, blooming girl, rose-cheeked, with form well rounded, and flesh firm as a Ribston pippin. Her cheerful countenance lights up the kitchen late shadowed by the presence and dark, scowling features of Coracle Dick—brightens it even more than the brand-new tin-ware, or the whitewash upon its walls.

Old Joe rejoices; and if we have a regret, it is that he had not long ago taken up housekeeping for himself. But this thought suggests another contradicting it. How could he while his young mistress lived? She so much beloved by him, whose many beneficences have made him, as he is, independent for the rest of his days, never more to be harassed by care or distressed by toil, one of her latest largesses, the very last, being to bestow upon him the pretty pleasure craft bearing her own name. This she had actually done on the morning of that day, the twenty-first anniversary of her birth, as it was the last of her life; thus by an act of grand generosity commemorating two events so strangely, terribly in contrast! And as though some presentiment forewarned her of her own sad fate, so soon to follow, she had secured the gift by a scrap of writing; thus at the change in the Llangorren household enabling its old boatman to claim the boat, and obtain it too. It is now lying just below, at the brook's mouth, by the withey bed, where Joe has made a mooring place for it. The handsome thing would fetch £50; and many a Wye waterman would give his year's earnings to possess it. Indeed, more than one has been after it, using arguments to induce its owner to dispose of it—pointing out how idle of him to keep a craft so little suited to his present calling!

All in vain. Old Joe would sooner sell his last shirt, or the newly-bought furniture of his house—sooner go begging—than part with that boat. It oft bore him beside his late mistress, so much lamented; it will still bear him lamenting her—ay, for the rest of his life. If he has lost the lady, he will cling to the souvenir which carries her honoured name!

But, however faithful the old family retainer, and affectionate in his memories, he does not let their sadness overpower him, nor always give way to the same. Only at times when something turns up more vividly than usual recalling Gwendoline Wynn to remembrance. On other and ordinary occasions he is cheerful enough, this being his natural habit. And never more than on a certain night shortly after that of his chance encounter with Jack Wingate, when both were a-shopping at Rugg's Ferry. For there and then, in addition to the multifarious news imparted to the young waterman, he gave the latter an invitation to visit him in his new home, which was gladly and off-hand accepted.

"A bit o' supper and a drop o' somethin' to send it down," were the old boatman's words specifying the entertainment.

The night has come round, and the "bit o' supper" is being prepared by Amy, who is acting as though she was never more called upon to practise the culinary

art; and, according to her own way of thinking, she never has been. For, to let out a little secret, the French lady's-maid was not the only feminine at Llangorren Court who had cast admiring eyes on the handsome boatman who came there rowing Captain Ryecroft. Raising the curtain still higher, Amy Preece's position is exposed; she, too, having been caught in that same net, spread for neither.

Not strange then, but altogether natural. She is now exerting herself to cook a supper that will give gratification to the expected guest. She would work her fingers off for Jack Wingate.

Possibly the uncle may have some suspicion of why she is moving about so alertly, and besides looking so pleased like. If not a suspicion, he has a wish and a hope. Nothing in life, now, would be so much to his mind as to see his niece married to the man he has invited to visit him. For never in all his life has old Joe met one he so greatly cottons to. His intercourse with the young waterman, though scarce six months old, seems as if it had been of twice as many years; so friendly and pleasant, he not only wants it continued, but wishes it to become nearer and dearer. If his niece be baiting a trap in the cooking of the supper, he has himself set that trap by the "invite" he gave to the expected guest.

A gentle tapping at the door tells him the triangle is touched; and, responding to the signal, he calls out,—

"That you, Jack Wingate? O' course it be. Come in!"

And in Jack Wingate comes.

CHAPTER LIX.

QUEER BRIC-A-BRAC.

Stepping over the threshold, the young waterman is warmly received by his older brother of the oar, and blushing by the girl, whose cheeks are already of a high colour, caught from the fire over which she has been stooping.

Old Joe, seated in the chimney corner, in a huge wicker chair of his own construction, motions Jack to another opposite, leaving the space in front clear for Amy to carry on her culinary operations. There are still a few touches to be added—a sauce to be concocted—before the supper can be served; and she is concocting it.

Host and guest converse without heeding her, chiefly on topics relating to the bore of the river, about which old Joe is an oracle. As the other, too, has spent all his days on Vaga's banks; but there have been more of them, and he longer resident in that particular neighbourhood. It is too early to enter upon subjects of a more serious nature, though a word now and then slips in about the late occurrence at Llangorren, still wrapped in mystery. If they bring shadows over the brow of the old boatman, these pass off, as he surveys the table which his niece has tastefully decorated with fruits and late autumn flowers. It reminds him of many a pleasant Christmas night in the grand servants' hall at the Court, under holly and mistletoe, besides bowls of steaming punch and dishes of blazing snapdragon.

His guest knows something of that same hall; but cares not to recall its memories. Better likes he the bright room he is now seated in. Within the radiant circle of its fire, and the other pleasant surroundings, he is for the time cheerful—almost himself again. His mother told him it was not good to be for ever grieving—not righteous, but sinful. And now, as he watches the graceful creature moving about, actively engaged—and all on his account—he begins to think there may be truth in what she said. At all events, his grief is more bearable than it has been for long days past. Not that he is untrue to the memory of Mary Morgan. Far from it. His feelings are but natural, inevitable. With that fair presence flitting before his eyes, he would not be man if it failed in some way to impress him.

But his feelings for Amy Preece do not go beyond the bounds of respectful admiration. Still is it an admiration that may become warmer, gathering strength as time goes on. It even does somewhat on this same night; for, in truth, the girl's beauty is a thing which cannot be glanced at without a wish to gaze upon it again. And she possesses something more than beauty—a gift not quite so rare, but perhaps as much prized by Jack Wingate—modesty. He has noted her shy, almost timid mien, ere now; for it is not the first time he has been in her company—contrasted it with the bold advances made to him by her former fellow-servant at the Court—Clarisse. And now, again, he observes the same bearing, as she moves about through that cheery place, in the light of glowing coals—best from the Forest of Dean.

And he thinks of it while seated at the supper table; she at its head, *vis-à-vis* to her uncle, and distributing the viands. These are no damper to his admiration of her, since the dishes she has prepared are of the daintiest. He has not been accustomed to eat such a meal, for his mother could not cook it; while, as already said, Amy is something of an *artiste de cuisine*. An excellent wife she would make, all things considered; and possibly at a later period, Jack Wingate might catch himself so reflecting; but not now—not to-night. Such a thought is not in his mind; could not be, with that sadder thought still overshadowing.

The conversation at the table is mostly between the uncle and himself, the niece only now and then putting in a word; and the subjects are still of a general character, in the main relating to boats and their management.

It continues so till the supper things have been cleared off; and in their place appear a decanter of spirits, a basin of lump sugar, and a jug of hot water, with a couple of tumblers containing spoons. Amy knows her uncle's weakness—which is a whisky toddy before going to bed; for it is the "barley bree" that sparkles in the decanter; and also aware that to-night he will indulge in more than one, she sets the kettle on its trivet against the bars of the grate.

As the hour has now waxed late, and the host is evidently longing for a more confidential chat with his guest, she asks if there is anything more likely to be wanted.

Answered in the negative, she bids both "Good-night," withdraws to the little chamber so prettily decorated for her, and goes to her bed.

But not immediately to fall asleep. Instead, she lies awake thinking of Jack Wingate, whose voice, like a distant murmur, she can now and then hear. The

femme de chambre would have had her cheek at the keyhole, to catch what he might say. Not so the young English girl, brought up in a very different school; and if she lies awake, it is from no prying curiosity, but kept so by a nobler sentiment.

On the instant of her withdrawal, old Joe, who has been some time showing in a fidget for it, hitches his chair closer to the table, desiring his guest to do the same; and the whisky punches having been already prepared, they also bring their glasses together.

"Yer good health, Jack."

"Same to yerself, Joe."

After this exchange, the ex-Charon, no longer constrained by the presence of a third party, launches out into a dialogue altogether different from that hitherto held between them—the subject being the late tenant of the house in which they are hobnobbing.

"Queer sort o' chap, that Coracle Dick! an't he, Jack?"

"Course he be. But why do ye ask? You knowed him afore, well enough."

"Not so well's now. He never comed about the Court, 'ceptin' once when fetched there—afore the old Squire on a poachin' case. Lor! what a change! He now head-keeper o' the estate."

"Ye say ye know him better than ye did? Ha' ye larned anythin' 'bout him o' late?"

"That hae I, an' a goodish deal too. More'n one thing as seems kewrous."

"If ye don't object tellin' me, I'd like to hear what they be."

"Well, one are, that Dick Dempsey ha' been in the practice of somethin' besides poachin'."

"That an't no news to me. I ha' long suspected him o' doin's worse than that."

"Amongst them did ye include forgin'?"

"No; because I never thought o' it. But I believe him to be capable o' it, or anything else. What makes ye think he ha' been a forger?"

"Well, I won't say forger, for he mayn't ha' made the things. But for sure he ha' been engaged in passin' them off."

"Passin' what off!"

"Them!" rejoins Joe, drawing a little canvas bag out of his pocket, and spilling its contents upon the table—over a score of coins, to all appearance half-crown pieces.

"Counterfeits—every one o' 'em!" he adds, as the other sits staring at them in surprise.

"Where did you find them?" asks Jack.

"In the corner o' an old cubbord. Furbishin' up the place, I comed across them—besides a goodish grist o' other kewrosities. What would ye think o' my predecessor here bein' a burglar as well as smasher?"

"I wouldn't think that nowadays strange neyther. As I've sayed already, I b'lieve Dick Dempsey to be a man who'd not mind takin' a hand at any mortal thing, howsomever bad—burglary, or even worse, if it wor made worth his while. But what led ye to think he ha' been also in the housebreakin' line?"

"These!" answers the old boatman, producing another and larger bag, the more ponderous contents of which he spills out on the floor—not the table—as he does so exclaiming, "Theere be a lot o' oddities! A complete set o' burglar's tools—far as I can understand them."

And so are they, jemmies, cold chisels, skeleton keys—in short, every implement of the cracksman's calling.

"And ye found them in the cubbert too?"

"No, not there, nor yet inside; but on the premises. The big bag, wi' its contents, wor crammed up into a hole in the rocks—the clift at the back o' the house."

"Odd, all o' it! An' the oddest his leavin' such things behind—to tell the tale o' his guilty doin's. I suppose bein' full o' his new fortunes, he's forgot all about them."

"But ye han't waited for me to gie the whole o' the cat'logue. There be somethin' more to come."

"What more?" asks the young waterman, surprisedly, and with renewed interest.

"A thing as seems kewrouser than all the rest. I can draw conclusions from the counterfeet coins, an' the housebreakin' implements; but the other beats me dead down, an' I don't know what to make o't. Maybe you can tell. I foun' it stuck up the same hole in the rocks, wi' a stone in front exact fittin' to an' fillin' its mouth."

While speaking, he draws open a chest, and takes from it a bundle of some white stuff—apparently linen—loosely rolled. Unfolding, and holding it up to the light, he adds,—

"Theer be the eydential article!"

No wonder he thought the thing strange, found where he had found it; for it is a *shroud!* White, with a cross and two letters in red stitched upon that part which, were it upon a body, both cross and lettering would lie over the breast!

"O God!" cries Jack Wingate, as his eyes rest upon the symbol. "That's the shroud Mary Morgan wor buried in! I can swear to 't. I seed her mother stitch on that cross an' them letters—the ineetials o' her name. An' I seed it on herself in the coffin 'fore 't wor closed. Heaven o' mercy! what do it mean?"

Amy Preece, lying awake in her bed, hears Jack Wingate's voice excitedly exclaiming, and wonders what that means. But she is not told; nor learns she aught of a conversation which succeeds in more subdued tone; prolonged to a much later hour—even into morning. For before the two men part, they mature a plan for ascertaining why that ghostly thing is still above ground instead of in the grave, where the body it covered is coldly sleeping!



CHAPTER LX.

A BRACE OF BODY-SNATCHERS.

What with the high hills that shut in the valley of the Wye, and the hanging woods that clothe their steep slopes, the nights there are often so dark as to justify the familiar saying, "You couldn't see your hand before you." I have been out on some, when a white kerchief held within three feet of the eye was absolutely invisible; and it required a skilful Jehu, with best patent lamps, to keep carriage wheels upon the causeway of the road.

Such a night has drawn down over Rugg's Ferry, shrouding the place in impenetrable gloom. Situated in a concavity—as it were, at the bottom of an extinct volcanic crater—the obscurity is deeper than elsewhere; to-night alike covering the Welsh Harp, detached dwelling houses, chapel, and burying-ground, as with a pall. Not a ray of light scintillates anywhere; for the hour is after midnight, and everybody has retired to rest; the weak glimmer of candles from cottage windows, as the stronger glare through those of the hotel-tavern, are no longer to be seen. In the last every lamp is extinguished, its latest-sitting guest—if it have any guest—having gone to bed.

Some of the poachers and night-netters may be astir. If so, they are abroad, and not about the place, since it is just at such hours they are away from it.

For all, two men are near by, seemingly moving with as much stealth as any trespassers after fish or game, and with even more mystery in their movements. The place occupied by them is the shadowed corner under the wall of the chapel cemetery, where Captain Rycroft saw three men embarking on a boat. These are also in a boat; but not one in the act of rowing off from the river's edge; instead, just being brought into it.

Soon as its cutwater strikes against the bank, one of the men, rising to his feet, leaps out upon the land, and attaches the painter to a sapling, by giving it two or three turns around the stem. Then facing back towards the boat, he says,—

"Hand me them things; an' look out not to let 'em rattle!"

"Ye need ha' no fear 'bout that," rejoins the other, who has now unshipped the

oars, and stowed them fore and aft along the thwarts, they not being the things asked for. Then, stooping down, he lifts something out of the boat's bottom, and passes it over the side, repeating the movement three or four times. The things thus transferred from one to the other are handled by both as delicately as though they were pheasant's or plover's eggs, instead of what they are—an ordinary set of grave-digger's tools—spade, shovel, and mattock. There is, besides, a bundle of something soft, which, as there is no danger of its making noise, is tossed up to the top of the bank.

He who has flung follows it; and the two gathering up the hardware, after some words exchanged in muttered tone, mount over the cemetery wall. The younger first leaps it, stretching back, and giving a hand to the other—an old man, who finds some difficulty in the ascent.

Inside the sacred precincts they pause, partly to apportion the tools, but as much to make sure that they have not hitherto been heard. Seen, they could not be, before or now.

Becoming satisfied that the coast is clear, the younger man says in a whisper,—

"It be all right, I think. Every livin' sinner—an' there be a good when o' that stripe 'bout here—have gone to bed. As for him, blackest o' the lot, who lives in the house adjoinin', ain't like he's at home. Good as sure down at Llangorren Court, where just now he finds quarters more comfortable. We hain't nothin' to fear, I take it. Let's on to the place. You lay hold o' my skirt, and I'll gie ye the lead. I know the way, every inch o' it."

Saying which he moves off, the other doing as directed, and following step for step.

A few paces further, and they arrive at a grave, beside which they again make stop. In daylight it would show recently made, though not altogether new. A month or so since the turf had been smoothed over it.

The men are now about to disturb it, as evinced by their movements and the implements brought along. But, before going further in their design—body-snatching, or whatever it be—both drop down upon their knees, and again listen intently, as though still in some fear of being interrupted.

Not a sound is heard save the wind, as it sweeps in mournful cadence through the trees along the hill slopes, and nearer below, the rippling of the river.

At length, convinced they have the cemetery to themselves, they proceed to their work, which begins by their spreading out a sheet on the grass close to and alongside the grave—a trick of body-stealers—so as to leave no traces of their theft. That done, they take up the sods with their hands, carefully, one after another; and, with like care, lay them down upon the sheet, the grass sides underneath. Then, seizing hold of the tools—spade and shovel—they proceed to scoop out the earth, placing it in a heap beside.

They have no need to make use of the mattock; the soil is loose, and lifts easily. Nor is their task as excavators of long continuance—even shorter than they anticipated. Within less than eighteen inches of the surface, their tools come into contact with a harder substance, which they can tell to be timber—the lid of a coffin.

Soon as striking it, the younger faces round to his companion, saying,—

"I tolt ye so—listen!"

With the spade's point he again gives the coffin a tap. It returns a hollow sound—too hollow for aught to be inside it!

"No body in there!" he adds.

"Hadn't we better keep on, an' make sure?" suggests the other.

"Sartint we had—an' will."

Once more they commence shovelling out the earth, and continue till it is all cleared from the coffin. Then, inserting the blade of the mattock under the edge of the lid, they raise it up; for it is not screwed down, only laid on loosely—the screws all drawn and gone!

Flinging himself on his face, and reaching forward, the younger man gropes inside the coffin—not expecting to feel any body there, but mechanically, and to see if there be aught else.

There is nothing—only emptiness. The house of the dead is untenanted—its tenant has been taken away!

"I know'd it!" he exclaims, drawing back. "I know'd my poor Mary wor no longer here!"

It is no body-snatcher who speaks thus, but Jack Wingate, his companion being

Joseph Preece.

After which, the young waterman says not another word in reference to the discovery they have both made. He is less sad than thoughtful now. But he keeps his thoughts to himself, an occasional whisper to his companion being merely by way of direction, as they replace the lid upon the coffin, cover all up as before, shake in the last fragments of loose earth from the sheet, and restore the grave turf—adjusting the sods with as much exactitude as though they were laying tessellated tiles!

Then, taking up their tools, they glide back to the boat, step into it, and shove off.

On return down stream they reflect in different ways, the old boatman of Llangorren still thinking it but a case of body-snatching, done by Coracle Dick, for the doctors, with a view to earning a dishonest penny.

Far otherwise the thoughts of Jack Wingate. He thinks, nay, hopes—almost happily believes—that the body exhumed was not dead—never has been—but that Mary Morgan still lives, breathes, and has being!



CHAPTER LXI.

IN WANT OF HELP.

"Drowned? No! Dead before she ever went under the water. Murdered, beyond the shadow of a doubt."

It is Captain Ryecroft who thus emphatically affirms. And to himself, being alone, within his room in the Wyese Hotel; for he is still in Herefordshire.

More in conjecture, he proceeds,—

"They first smothered, I suppose, or in some way rendered her insensible; then carried her to the place and dropped her in, leaving the water to complete their diabolical work? A double death, as it were; though she may not have suffered its agonies twice. Poor girl! I hope not."

In prosecuting the inquiry to which he has devoted himself, beyond certain unavoidable communications with Jack Wingate, he has not taken any one into his confidence. This partly from having no intimate acquaintances in the neighbourhood, but more because he fears the betrayal of his purpose. It is not ripe for public exposure, far less bringing before a court of justice. Indeed, he could not yet shape an accusation against any one, all that he has learnt now serving only to satisfy him that his original suspicions were correct; which it has done, as shown by his soliloquy.

He has since made a second boat excursion down the bye-channel—made it in the daytime, to assure himself there was no mistake in his observations under the light of the lamp. It was for this he had bespoken Wingate's skiff for the following day; for certain reasons reaching Llangorren at the earliest hour of dawn. There and then to see what surprised him quite as much as the unexpected discovery of the night before—a grand breakage from the brow of the cliff; but not any more misleading him. If the first "sign" observed there failed to blind him, so does that which has obliterated it. No natural rock-slide, was the conclusion he came to, soon as setting eyes upon it; but the work of human hands! And within the hour, as he could see by the clods of loosened earth still dropping down and making muddy the water underneath; while bubbles were ascending from the detached boulder lying invisible below!

Had he been there only a few minutes earlier, himself invisible, he would have seen a man upon the cliff's crest, busy with a crowbar, levering the rock from its bed, and tilting it over—then carefully removing the marks of the iron implement, as also his own footprints!

The man saw him through the blue-grey dawn, in his skiff, coming down the river; just as on the preceding night under the light of the moon. For he thus early astir and occupied in a task as that of Sisyphus, was no other than Father Rogier.

The priest had barely time to retreat and conceal himself, as the boat drew down to the eyot—not this time crouching among the ferns, but behind some evergreens, at a farther and safer distance. Still, near enough for him to observe the other's look of blank astonishment on beholding the *debâcle*, and note the expression change to one of significant intelligence as he continued gazing at it.

"*Un limier veritable!*" A hound that has scented blood, and's determined to follow it up, till he find the body whence it flowed. Aha! The game must be got out of his way. Llangorren will have to change owners once again, and the sooner, the better.

At the very moment these thoughts were passing through the mind of Gregoire Rogier, the "veritable bloodhound" was mentally repeating the same words he had used on the night before: "No accident—no suicide—murdered!" adding, as his eyes ranged over the surface of red sandstone, so altered in appearance, "This makes me all the more sure of it. Miserable trick! Not much Mr. Lewin Murdock will gain by it."

So thought he then. But now, days after, though still believing Murdock to be the murderer, he thinks differently about the "trick." For the evidence afforded by the former traces, though slight, and pointing to no one in particular, was, nevertheless, a substantial indication of guilt against somebody; and these being blotted out, there is but his own testimony of their having ever existed. Though himself convinced that Gwendoline Wynn has been assassinated, he cannot see his way to convince others—much less a legal tribunal. He is still far from being in a position openly to accuse, or even name the criminals who ought to be arraigned.

He now knows there are more than one, or so supposes, still believing that Murdock has been the principal actor in the tragedy; though others besides have borne part in it.

"The man's wife must know all about it," he says, going on in conjectural chain; "and that French priest—he probably the instigator of it. Ay! possibly had a hand in the deed itself. There have been such cases recorded—many of them. Exercising great authority at Llangorren—as Jack has learned from his friend Joe—there commanding everybody and everything! And the fellow Dempsey—poacher, and what not—he, too, become an important personage about the place! Why all this? Only intelligible on the supposition that they have had to do with a death by which they have been all benefited. Yes; all four, acting conjointly, have brought it about!

"And how am I to bring it home to them? 'Twill be difficult indeed, if at all possible. Even that slight sign destroyed has increased the difficulty.

"No use taking the 'great unpaid' into my confidence, nor yet the sharper stipendiaries. To submit my plans to either magistrate or policeman might be but to defeat them. 'Twould only raise a hue and cry, putting the guilty ones on their guard. That isn't the way—will not do!

"And yet I must have some one to assist me; for there is truth in the old saw, 'Two heads better than one,' Wingate is good enough in his way, and willing, but he can't help me in mine. I want a man of my own class; one who—Stay! George Shenstone? No! The young fellow is true as steel and brave as a lion, but—well, lacking brains. I could trust his heart, not his head. Where is he who has both to be relied upon? Ha! Mahon! The man—the very man! Experienced in the world's wickedness, courageous, cool—except when he gets his Irish blood up against the Sassenachs—above all, devoted to me, as I know; he has never forgotten that little service I did him at Delhi. And he has nothing to do—plenty of time at his disposal. Yes; the Major's my man!

"Shall I write and ask him to come over here. On second thoughts, no! Better for me to go thither; see him first, and explain all the circumstances. To Boulogne and back's but a matter of forty-eight hours, and a day or two can't make much difference in an affair like this. The scent's cold as it can be, and may be taken up weeks hence 's well as now. If we ever succeed in finding evidence of their guilt, it will, no doubt, be mainly of the circumstantial sort; and much will depend on the character of the individuals accused. Now I think of it, something may be learnt about it in Boulogne itself; or, at all events, of the priest. Since I've had a good look at his forbidding face, I feel certain it's the same I saw inside the doorway of that convent. If not, there are two of the sacerdotal tribe so like, it would be a toss up which is one and which t'other.

"In any case, there can be no harm in my making a scout across to Boulogne, and instituting inquiries about him. Mahon's sister being at school in the establishment will enable us to ascertain whether a priest named Rogier holds relations with it, and we may learn something of the repute he bears. Perchance, also, a trifle concerning Mr. and Mrs. Lewin Murdock. It appears that both husband and wife are well known at Homburg, Baden, and other like resorts. Gaming, if not game, birds, in some of their migratory flights they have made short sojourn at the French seaport, to get their hands in for those grander hells beyond. I'll go over to Boulogne!"

A knock at the door. On the permission to enter, called out, a hotel porter presents himself.

"Well?"

"Your waterman, sir, Wingate, says he'd like to see you, if convenient?"

"Tell him to step up!"

"What can Jack be coming after? Anyhow, I'm glad he has come. 'Twill save me the trouble of sending for him, as I'd better settle his account before starting off." [Jack has a new score against the Captain for boat hire, his services having been retained, exclusively, for some length of time past.] "Besides, there's something I wish to say—a long chapter of instructions to leave with him. Come in, Jack!"

This, as a shuffling in the corridor outside tells that the waterman is wiping his feet on the door-mat.

The door opening, displays him; but with an expression on his countenance very different from that of a man coming to dun for wages due. More like one entering to announce a death, or some event which greatly agitates him.

"What is it?" asks the Captain, observing his distraught manner.

"Somethin' queer, sir; very queer indeed."

"Ah! Let me hear it!" demands Ryecroft, with an air of eagerness, thinking it relates to himself and the matter engrossing his mind.

"I will, Captain. But it'll take time in the tellin'."

"Take as much as you like. I'm at your service. Be seated."

Jack clutches hold of a chair, and draws it up close to where the Captain is sitting —by a table. Then glancing over his shoulder, and all round the room, to assure himself there is no one within earshot, he says, in a grave, solemn voice,—

"I do believe, Captain, *she be still alive!*"



CHAPTER LXII.

STILL ALIVE.

Impossible to depict the expression on Vivian Ryecroft's face, as the words of the waterman fall upon his ear. It is more than surprise—more than astonishment—intensely interrogative, as though some secret hope once entertained, but long gone out of his heart, had suddenly returned to it.

"Still alive!" he exclaims, springing to his feet, and almost upsetting the table. "Alive!" he mechanically repeats. "What do you mean, Wingate? And who?"

"My poor girl, Captain. You know."

"*His* girl—not *mine*! Mary Morgan—not Gwendoline Wynn!" reflects Ryecroft within himself, dropping back upon his chair as one stunned by a blow.

"I'm almost sure she be still livin'," continues the waterman, in wonder at the emotion his words have called up, though little suspecting why.

Controlling it, the other asks, with diminished interest, still earnestly,—

"What leads you to think that way, Wingate? Have you a reason?"

"Yes, have I; more'n one. It's about that I ha' come to consult ye."

"You've come to astonish me! But proceed!"

"Well, sir, as I ha' sayed, it'll take a good bit o' tellin', and a lot o' explanation beside. But since ye've signified I'm free to your time, I'll try and make the story short's I can."

"Don't curtail it in any way. I wish to hear all!"

The waterman thus allowed latitude, launches forth into a full account of his own life—those chapters of it relating to his courtship of, and betrothal to, Mary Morgan. He tells of the opposition made by her mother, the rivalry of Coracle Dick, and the sinister interference of Father Rogier. In addition, the details of that meeting of the lovers under the elm—their last—and the sad episode soon after succeeding.

Something of all this Ryecroft has heard before, and part of it suspected. What he now hears new to him is the account of a scene in the farmhouse of Abergann, while Mary Morgan lay in the chamber of death, with a series of incidents that came under the observation of her sorrowing lover. The first, his seeing a shroud being made by the girl's mother, white, with a red cross, and the initial letters of her name braided over the breast: the same soon afterwards appearing upon the corpse. Then the strange behaviour of Father Rogier on the day of the funeral; the look with which he stood regarding the girl's face as she lay in her coffin; his abrupt exit out of the room; as afterwards his hurried departure from the side of the grave before it was finally closed up—a haste noticed by others as well as Jack Wingate.

"But what do you make of all that?" asks Ryecroft, the narrator having paused to gather himself for other and still stranger revelations. "How can it give you a belief in the girl being still alive? Quite its contrary, I should say."

"Stay, Captain! There be more to come."

The Captain does stay, listening on. To hear the story of the planted and plucked up flower; of another and later visit made by Wingate to the cemetery in daylight, then seeing what led him to suspect, that not only had the plant been destroyed, but all the turf on the grave disturbed! He speaks of his astonishment at this, with his perplexity. Then goes on to give account of the evening spent with Joseph Preece in his new home; of the waifs and strays there shown him; the counterfeit coins, burglars' tools, and finally the shroud—that grim remembrancer, which he recognised at sight!

His narrative concludes with his action taken after, assisted by the old boatman.

"Last night," he says, proceeding with the relation, "or I ought to say the same mornin'—for 'twar after midnight hour—Joe an' myself took the skiff, an' stole up to the chapel graveyard, where we opened her grave, an' foun' the coffin empty! Now, Captain, what do ye think o' the whole thing?"

"On my word, I hardly know what to think of it. Mystery seems the measure of the time! This you tell me of is strange—if not stranger than any! What are your own thoughts about it, Jack?"

"Well, as I've already sayed, my thoughts be, an' my hopes, that Mary's still in the land o' the livin'."

"I hope she is."

The tone of Ryecroft's rejoinder tells of his incredulity, further manifested by his questions following.

"But you saw her in her coffin? Waked for two days, as I understood you; then laid in her grave? How could she have lived throughout all that? Surely she was dead!"

"So I thought at the time, but don't now."

"My good fellow, I fear you are deceiving yourself. I'm sorry having to think so. Why the body has been taken up again is of itself a sufficient puzzle; but alive—that seems physically impossible!"

"Well, Captain, it's just about the possibility of the thing I come to ask your opinion; thinkin' ye'd be acquainted wi' the article itself."

"What article?"

"The new medicine; it as go by the name o' chloryform."

"Ha! you have a suspicion——"

"That she ha' been chloryformed, an' so kep' asleep—to be waked up when they wanted her. I've heerd say they can do such things."

"But then she was drowned also? Fell from a foot plank, you told me? And was in the water some time?"

"I don't believe it, a bit. It be true enough she got somehow into the water, an' wor took out insensible, or rather drifted out o' herself, on the bank just below, at the mouth o' the brook. But that wor short after, an' she might still ha' ben alive notwithstanding'. My notion be, that the priest had first put the chloryform into her, or did it then, an' knew all along she warn't dead, nohow."

"My dear Jack, the thing cannot be possible. Even if it were, you seem to forget that her mother, father—all of them—must have been cognizant of these facts—if facts?"

"I don't forget it, Captain. 'Stead, I believe they all wor cognizant o' them—leastways, the mother."

"But why should she assist in such a dangerous deception—at risk of her

daughter's life?"

"That's easy answered. She did it partly o' herself; but more at the biddin' o' the priest, whom she daren't disobey—the weak-minded creature, most o' her time given up to sayin' prayers and paternosters. They all knowed the girl loved me, and wor sure to be my wife, whatever they might say or do against it. Wi' her willin', I could a' defied the whole lot o' them. Bein' aware o' that, their only chance wor to get her out o' my way by some trick—as they ha' indeed got her. Ye may think it strange their takin' all that trouble; but if ye'd seen her, ye wouldn't. There worn't on all Wyeseide so good-lookin' a girl!"

Ryecroft again looks incredulous; not smilingly, but with a sad cast of countenance.

Despite its improbability, however, he begins to think there may be some truth in what the waterman says—Jack's earnest convictions sympathetically impressing him.

"And supposing her to be alive," he asks, "where do you think she is now? Have you any idea?"

"I have—leastways, a notion."

"Where?"

"Over the water—in France—the town o' Bolone."

"Boulogne!" exclaims the Captain, with a start. "What makes you suppose she is there?"

"Something, sir, I han't yet spoke to ye about. I'd a'most forgot the thing, an' might never ha' thought o't again, but for what ha' happened since. Ye'll remember the night we come up from the ball, my tellin' ye I had an engagement the next day to take the young Powells down the river?"

"I remember it perfectly."

"Well, I took them, as agreed; an' that day we went down's fur's Chepstow. But they wor bound for the Severn side a duck-shootin'; and next mornin' we started early, afore daybreak. As we were passin' the wharf below Chepstow Bridge, where there wor several craft lyin' in, I noticed one sloop-rigged ridin' at anchor a bit out from the rest, as if about clearin' to put to sea. By the light o' a lamp as

hung over the taffrail, I read the name on her stern, showin' she wor French, an' belonged to Bolone. I shouldn't ha' thought than anythin' odd, as there be many foreign craft o' the smaller kind puts in at Chepstow. But what did appear odd, an' gied me a start too, wor my seein' a boat by the sloop's side wi' a man in it, who I could a'most swears wor the Rogue's Ferry priest. There wor others in the boat besides, an' they appeared to be gettin' some sort o' bundle out o' it, an' takin' it up the man-ropes, aboard o' the sloop. But I didn't see anymore, as we soon passed out o' sight, goin' on down. Now, Captain, it's my firm belief that man must ha' been the priest, and that thing I supposed to be a bundle o' marchandise, neyther more nor less than the body o' Mary Morgan—not dead, but livin'!"

"You astound me, Wingate! Certainly a most singular circumstance! Coincidence too! Boulogne—Boulogne!"

"Yes, Captain; by the letterin' on her stern the sloop must ha' belonged there; an' *I'm goin' there myself.*"

"I too, Jack! We shall go together!"

CHAPTER LXIII.

A STRANGE FATHER CONFESSOR.

"He's gone away—given it up! Be glad, madame!"

Father Rogier so speaks on entering the drawing-room of Llangorren Court, where Mrs. Murdock is seated.

"What, Gregoire?" (Were her husband present, it would be "Père"; but she is alone.) "Who's gone away? And why am I to rejoice?"

"*Le Capitaine.*"

"Ha!" she ejaculates, with a pleased look, showing that the two words have answered all her questions in one.

"Are you sure of it? The news seems too good for truth."

"It's true, nevertheless; so far as his having gone away. Whether to stay away is another matter. We must hope he will."

"I hope it with all my heart."

"And well you may, madame; as I myself. We had more to fear from that *chien de chasse* than all the rest of the pack—ay, have still, unless he's found the scent too cold, and in despair abandoned the pursuit; which I fancy he has, thrown off by that little rock slide. A lucky chance my having caught him at his reconnaissance; and rather a clever bit of strategy so to baffle him! Wasn't it, *chérie?*"

"Superb! The whole thing from beginning to end! You've proved yourself a wonderful man, Gregoire Rogier."

"And I hope worthy of Olympe Renault?"

"You have."

"*Merci!* So far that's satisfactory; and your slave feels he has not been toiling in vain. But there's a good deal more to be done before we can take our ship safe

into port. And it must be done quickly, too. I pine to cast off this priestly garb—in which I've been so long miserably masquerading—and enter into the real enjoyments of life. But there's another, and more potent reason, for using despatch; breakers around us, on which we may be wrecked, ruined any day, any hour. Le Capitaine Ryecroft was not, or is not, the only one."

"Richard—*le braconnier*—you're thinking of?"

"No, no, no! Of him we needn't have the slightest fear. I hold his lips sealed, by a rope around his neck; whose noose I can draw tight at the shortest notice. I am far more apprehensive of Monsieur, *votre mari!*"

"In what way?"

"More than one; but for one, his tongue. There's no knowing what a drunken man may do or say in his cups; and Monsieur Murdock is hardly ever out of them. Suppose he gets to babbling, and lets drop something about—well, I needn't say what. There's still suspicion abroad—plenty of it,—and, like a spark applied to tinder, a word would set it ablaze."

"*C'est vrai!*"

"Fortunately, Mademoiselle had no very near relatives of the male sex, nor any one much interested in her fate, save the *fiancé* and the other lover—the rustic and rejected one—Shenstone *filis*. Of him we need take no account. Even if suspicious, he hasn't the craft to unravel a clue so cunningly rolled as ours; and for the *ancien hussard*, let us hope he has yielded to despair, and gone back whence he came. Luck, too, in his having no intimacies here, or, I believe, anywhere in the shire of Hereford. Had it been otherwise, we might not so easily have got disembarassed of him."

"And you do think he has gone for good?"

"I do; at least, it would seem so. On his second return to the hotel—in haste as it was—he had little luggage; and that he has all taken away with him. So I learnt from one of the hotel people, who professes our faith. Further, at the railway station, that he took ticket for London. Of course that means nothing. He may be *en route* for anywhere beyond—round the globe, if he feel inclined for circumnavigation. And I shall be delighted if he do."

He would not be much delighted had he heard at the railway station of what actually occurred—that in getting his ticket Captain Ryecroft had inquired

whether he could not be booked through for Boulogne. Still less might Father Rogier have felt gratification to know, that there were two tickets taken for London; a first-class for the Captain himself, and a second for the waterman Wingate—travelling together, though in separate carriages, as befitted their different rank in life.

Having heard nothing of this, the sham priest—as he has now acknowledged himself—is jubilant at the thought that another hostile pawn in the game he has been so skilfully playing has disappeared from the chess-board. In short, all have been knocked over, queen, bishops, knights, and castles. Alone the king stands, he tottering; for Lewin Murdock is fast drinking himself to death. It is of him the priest speaks as king,—

"Has he signed the will?"

"*Oui.*"

"When?"

"This morning, before he went out. The lawyer who drew it up came, with his clerk to witness——"

"I know all that," interrupts the priest, "as I should, having sent them. Let me have a look at the document. You have it in the house, I hope?"

"In my hand," she answers, diving into a drawer of the table by which she sits, and drawing forth a folded sheet of parchment: "*Le voilà!*"

She spreads it out, not to read what is written upon it—only to look at the signatures, and see they are right. Well knows he every word of that will, he himself having dictated it. A testament made by Lewin Murdock, which, at his death, leaves the Llangorren estate—as sole owner and last in tail he having the right so to dispose of it—to his wife Olympe—*née* Renault—for her life; then to his children, should there be any surviving; failing such, to Gregoire Rogier, Priest of the Roman Catholic Church; and in the event of his demise preceding that of the other heirs hereinbefore mentioned, the estate, or what remains of it, to become the property of the Convent of——, Boulogne-sur-mer, France.

"For that last clause, which is yours, Gregoire, the nuns of Boulogne should be grateful to you; or at all events, the abbess, Lady Superior, or whatever she's called."

"So she will," he rejoins, with a dry laugh, "when she gets the property so conveyed. Unfortunately for her, the reversion is rather distant, and having to pass through so many hands, there may be no great deal left of it, on coming into hers. Nay!" he adds, in exclamation, his jocular tone suddenly changing to the serious, "if some step be not taken to put a stop to what's going on, there won't be much of the Llangorren estate left for any one—not even for yourself, madame. Under the fingers of Monsieur, with the cards in them, it's being melted down as snow on the sunny side of a hill. Even at this self-same moment it may be going off in large slices—avalanches!"

"*Mon Dieu!*" she exclaims, with an alarmed air, quite comprehending the danger thus figuratively portrayed.

"I wouldn't be surprised," he continues, "if to-day he were made a thousand pounds the poorer. When I left the ferry, he was in the Welsh Harp, as I was told, tossing sovereigns upon its bar counter, 'Heads and tails, who wins?' Not he, you may be sure. No doubt he's now at a gaming-table inside, engaged with that gang of sharpers who have lately got around him, staking large sums on every turn of the cards—Jews' eyes, ponies, and monkeys, as these *chevaliers d'industrie* facetiously term their money. If we don't bring all this to a termination, that you will have in your hand won't be worth the price of the parchment it's written upon. *Comprenez-vous, chère?*"

"*Parfaitement!* But how is it to be brought to a termination. For myself, I haven't an idea. Has any occurred to you, Gregoire?"

As the ex-courtesan asks the question, she leans across the little table, and looks the false priest straight in the face. He knows the bent of her inquiry, told it by the tone and manner in which it has been put—both significant of something more than the words might otherwise convey. Still, he does not answer it directly. Even between these two fiends in human form, despite their mutual understanding of each other's wickedness, and the little reason either has for concealing it, there is a sort of intuitive reticence upon the matter which is in the minds of both. For it is murder—the murder of Lewin Murdock!

"*Le pauvre homme!*" ejaculates the man, with a pretence at compassionating, under the circumstances ludicrous. "The cognac is killin' him, not by inches, but ells; and I don't believe he can last much longer. It seems but a question of weeks; may be only days. Thanks to the school in which I was trained, I have sufficient medical knowledge to prognosticate that."

A gleam as of delight passes over the face of the woman—an expression almost demoniacal; for it is a wife hearing this about her husband!

"You think only *days*?" she asks, with an eagerness as if apprehensive about that husband's health. But the tone tells different, as the hungry look in her eye while awaiting the answer. Both proclaim she wishes it in the affirmative; as it is.

"Only days!" he says, as if his voice were an echo. "Still, days count in a thing of this kind—ay, even hours. Who knows but that in a fit of drunken bravado he may stake the whole estate on a single turn of cards or cast of dice? Others have done the like before now—gentlemen grander than he, with titles to their names—rich in one hour, beggars in the next. I can remember more than one."

"Ah! so can I."

"Englishmen, too, who usually wind up such matters by putting a pistol to their heads, and blowing out their brains. True, Monsieur hasn't very much to blow out; but that isn't a question which affects us—myself as well as you. I've risked everything—reputation, which I care least about, if the affair can be brought to a proper conclusion; but should it fail, then—I need not tell you. What we've done, if known, would soon make us acquainted with the inside of an English gaol. Monsieur, throwing away his money in this reckless fashion, must be restrained, or he'll bring ruin to all of us. Therefore some steps must be taken to restrain him, and promptly."

"*Vraiment!* I ask you again—have you thought of anything, Gregoire?"

He does not make immediate answer, but seems to ponder over, or hang back upon it. When at length given, it is itself an interrogation, apparently unconnected with what they have been speaking about.

"Would it greatly surprise you if to-night your husband didn't come home to you?"

"Certainly not—in the least. Why should it? It wouldn't be the first time by scores—hundreds—for him to stay all night away from me. Ay, and at that same Welsh Harp, too—many's the night."

"To your great annoyance, no doubt, if it did not make you dreadfully jealous?"

She breaks out into a laugh, hollow and heartless as was ever heard in an *allée* of the Jardin Mabille. When it is ended, she adds gravely,—

"The time was when he might have made me so; I may as well admit that; not now, as you know, Gregoire. Now, instead of feeling annoyed by it, I'd only be too glad to think I should never see his face again. *Le brute ivrogne!*"

To this monstrous declaration, Rogier laconically rejoins,—

"You may not." Then, placing his lips close to her ear, he adds in a whisper, "If all prosper, as planned, *you will not!*"

She neither starts, nor seeks to inquire further. She knows he has conceived some scheme to disembarass her of a husband she no longer cares for—to both become inconvenient. And from what has gone before, she can rely on Rogier with its execution.



CHAPTER LXIV.

A QUEER CATECHIST.

A boat upon the Wye, being pulled upward, between Llangorren Court and Rugg's Ferry. There are two men in it—not Vivian Ryecroft and Jack Wingate, but Gregoire Rogier and Richard Dempsey.

The *ci-devant* poacher is at the oars—for, in addition to his new post as gamekeeper, he has occasional charge of a skiff which has replaced the *Gwendoline*. This same morning he rowed his master up to Rugg's, leaving him there; and now, at night, he is on return to fetch him home.

The two places being on opposite sides of the river, and the road roundabout, besides difficult for wheeled vehicles, Lewin Murdock, moreover, an indifferent horseman, he prefers the water route, and often takes it, as he has done to-day.

It is the same on which Father Rogier held that dialogue of sinister innuendo with Madame, and the priest, aware of the boat having to return to the ferry, avails himself of a seat in it. Not that he dislikes walking, or is compelled to it; for he now keeps a cob, and does his rounds on horseback. But on this particular day he has left his roadster in its stable, and gone down to Llangorren afoot, knowing there would be the skiff to take him back.

No scheme of mere convenience dictated this arrangement to Gregoire Rogier. Instead, one of Satanic wickedness, preconceived, and all settled before holding that *tête-à-tête* with her he has called "chérie."

Though requiring a boat for its execution, and an oarsman of a peculiar kind—adroit at something besides the handling of oars—not a word of it has yet been imparted to the one who is rowing him. For all, the ex-poacher, accustomed to the priest's moods, and familiar with his ways, can see there is something unusual in his mind, and that he himself is on the eve of being called upon for some new service or sacrifice. No supply of poached fish or game. Things have gone higher than that, and he anticipates some demand of a more serious nature. Still, he has not the most distant idea of what it is to be, though certain interrogatories put to him are evidently leading up to it. The first is,—

"You're not afraid of water, are you, Dick?"

"Not partickler, your Reverence. Why should I?"

"Well, your being so little in the habit of washing your face—if I am right in my reckoning, only once a week—may plead my excuse for asking the question."

"Oh, Father Rogier! that wor only in the time past, when I lived alone, and the thing worn't worth while. Now, going more into respectable company, I do a little washin' every day."

"I'm glad to hear of your improved habits, and that they keep pace with the promotion you've had. But my inquiry had no reference to your ablutions—rather to your capabilities as a swimmer. If I mistake not, you can swim like a fish?"

"No, not equal to a fish. That ain't possible."

"An otter, then?"

"Somethin' nearer he, if ye like," answers Coracle, laughingly.

"I supposed as much. Never mind. About the degree of your natatory powers we needn't dispute. I take it they're sufficient for reaching either bank of this river, supposing the skiff to get capsized, and you in it?"

"Lor, Father Rogier! that wouldn't be nothin'! I could swim to eyther shore, if 'twor miles off."

"But could you as you are now, with clothes on, boots, and everything?"

"Sartin could I, and carry weight beside."

"That will do," rejoins the questioner, apparently satisfied; then lapsing into silence, and leaving Dick in a very desert of conjectures why he has been so interrogated.

The speechless interregnum is not for long. After a minute or two, Rogier, as if freshly awaking from a reverie, again asks,—

"Would it upset this skiff if I were to step on the side of it—I mean, bearing upon it with all the weight of my body?"

"That would it, your Reverence, though ye be but a light weight—tip it over like

a tub."

"Quite turn it upside down—as your old truckle, eh?"

"Well, not so ready as the truckle. Still, 'twould go bottom upward. Though a biggish boat, it be one o' the crankiest kind, and would sure capsize wi' the lightest o' men standin' on its gunn'l rail."

"And surer with a heavier one, as yourself, for instance?"

"I shouldn't like to try, your Reverence bein' wi' me in the boat."

"How would you like, somebody else being with you in it—*if made worth your while?*"

Coracle starts at this question, asked in a tone that makes more intelligible the others preceding it, and which have been hitherto puzzling him. He begins to see the drift of the *sub Jove* confessional to which he is being submitted.

"How'd I like it, your Reverence? Well enough, if, as you say, made worth my while. I don't mind a bit o' a wettin' when there's anythin' to be gained by it. Many's the one I've had on a chilly winter's night, as this same be, all for the sake o' a salmon I wor 'bleeged to sell at less'n half-price. If only showed the way to earn a honest penny by it, I wouldn't wait for the upsettin' o' the boat, but jump overboard at onest."

"That's game in you, Monsieur Dick. But to earn the honest penny you speak of, the upsetting of the boat might be a necessary condition."

"Be it so, your Reverence. I'm willing to fulfil that, if ye only bid me. Maybe," he continues, in a tone of confidential suggestion, "there be somebody as you think ought to get a duckin' beside myself?"

"There is somebody who ought," rejoins the priest, coming nearer to his point. "Nay, must," he continues; "for if he don't, the chances are we shall all go down together, and that soon."

Coracle skulls on without questioning. He more than half comprehends the figurative speech, and is confident he will ere long receive complete explanation of it.

He is soon led a little way further by the priest observing,—

"No doubt, *mon ancien braconnier*, you've been gratified by the change that's of late taken place in your circumstances. But perhaps it hasn't quite satisfied you, and you expect to have something more—as I have the wish you should. And you would ere this, but for one who obstinately sets his face against it."

"May I know who that one is, Father Rogier?"

"You may, and shall; though I should think you scarce need telling. Without naming names, it's he who will be in this boat with you going back to Llangorren."

"I thought so. An' if I an't astray, he be the one your Reverence thinks would not be any the worse o' a wettin'?"

"Instead, all the better for it. It may cure him of his evil courses—drinking, card-playing, and the like. If he's not cured of them by some means, and soon, there won't be an acre left him of the Llangorren lands, nor a shilling in his purse. He'll have to go back to beggary, as at Glyngog; while you, Monsieur Coracle, in place of being head-gamekeeper, with other handsome preferments in prospect, will be compelled to return to your shifty life of poaching, night netting, and all the etceteras. Would you desire that?"

"Daanged if I would! An' won't do it if I can help. Shan't, if your Reverence 'll only show me the way."

"There's but one I can think of."

"What may that be, Father Rogier?"

"Simply to set your foot on the side of this skiff, and tilt it bottom upwards."

"It shall be done. When, and where?"

"When you are coming back down. The where you may choose for yourself—such place as may appear safe and convenient. Only take care you don't drown yourself."

"No fear o' that. There an't water in the Wye as'll ever drown Dick Dempsey."

"No," jocularly returns the priest; "I don't suppose there is. If it be your fate to perish by asphyxia—as no doubt it is—strong tough hemp, and not weak water, will be the agent employed—that being more appropriate to the life you have led. Ha! ha! ha!"

Coracle laughs too, but with the grimace of wolf baying the moon. For the moonlight shining full in his face, shows him not over satisfied with the coarse jest. But remembering how he shifted that treacherous plank bridging the brook at Abergann, he silently submits to it. He, too, is gradually getting his hand upon a lever, which will enable him to have a say in the affairs of Llangorren Court, that they dwelling therein will listen to him, or, like the Philistines of Gaza, have it dragged down about their ears.

But the ex-poacher is not yet prepared to enact the *rôle* of Samson; and however galling the *jeu d'esprit* of the priest, he swallows it without showing chagrin, far less speaking it.

In truth there is no time for further exchange of speech—at least, in the skiff. By this time they have arrived at the Rugg's Ferry landing-place, where Father Rogier, getting out, whispers a few words in Coracle's ear, and then goes off.

His words were—

"A hundred pounds, Dick, if you do it. Twice that for your doing it adroitly!"



CHAPTER LXV.

ALMOST A "VERT."

Major Mahon is standing at one of the front windows of his house, waiting for his dinner to be served, when he sees a *fiacre* driven up to the door, and inside it the face of a friend.

He does not stay for the bell to be rung, but with genuine Irish impulsiveness rushes forth, himself opening the door.

"Captain Ryecroft!" he exclaims, grasping the new arrival by the hand, and hauling him out of the hackney. "Glad to see you back in Boulogne." Then adding, as he observes a young man leap down from the box where he has had seat beside the driver, "Part of your belongings, isn't he?"

"Yes, Major; my old Wye waterman, Jack Wingate, of whom I spoke to you. And if it be convenient to you to quarter both of us for a day or two——"

"Don't talk about convenience, and bar all mention of time. The longer you stay with me, you'll be conferring the greater favour. Your old room is gaping to receive you; and Murtagh will rig up a berth for your boatman. Murt!" to the ex-Royal Irish, who, hearing the *fracas*, has also come forth, "take charge of Captain Ryecroft's traps, along with Mr. Wingate here, and see all safely bestowed. Now, old fellow, step inside. They'll look after the things. You're just in time to do dinner with me. I was about sitting down to it *solus*, awfully lamenting my loneliness. Well, one never knows what luck's in the wind. Rather hard lines for you, however. If I mistake not, my pot's of the poorest this blessed day. But I know you're neither *gourmand* nor *gourmet*; and that's some consolation. In!"

In go they, leaving the old soldier to settle the *fiacre* fare, look after the luggage, and extend the hospitalities of the kitchen to Jack Wingate.



Soon as Captain Ryecroft has performed some slight ablutions—necessary after

a sea voyage however short—his host hurries him down to the dining-room.

When seated at the table, the Major asks,—

"What on earth has delayed you, Vivian? You promised to be back in a week at most. It's months now! Despairing of your return, I had some thought of advertising the luggage you left with me, 'if not claimed within a certain time, to be sold for the payment of expenses.' Ha! ha!"

Ryecroft echoes the laugh; but so faintly, his friend can see the cloud has not yet lifted; instead, lies heavy and dark as ever.

In hopes of doing something to dissipate it, the Major rolls on in his rich Hibernian brogue,—

"You've just come in time to save your chattels from the hammer. And now I have you here, I mean to keep you. So, old boy, make up your mind to an unlimited sojourn in Boulogne-sur-mer. You will, won't you?"

"It's very kind of you, Mahon; but that must depend on——"

"On what?"

"How I prosper in my errand."

"Oh! this time you *have* an errand? Some business?"

"I have."

"Well, as you had none before, it gives reason to hope that other matters may be also reversed, and instead of shooting off like a comet, you'll play the part of a fixed star; neither to shoot nor be shot at, as looked likely on the last occasion. But speaking seriously, Ryecroft, as you say you're on business, may I know its nature?"

"Not only may, but it's meant you should. Nay, more, Mahon; I want your help in it."

"That you can count upon, whatever it be—from pitch-and-toss up to manslaughter. Only say how I can serve you."

"Well, Major, in the first place I would seek your assistance in some inquiries that I am about to make here."

"Inquiries! Have they regard to that young lady you said was lost—missing from her home! Surely she has been found?"

"She has—found drowned!"

"Found drowned! God bless me!"

"Yes, Mahon. The home from which she was missing knows her no more. Gwendoline Wynn is now in her long home—in heaven!"

The solemn tone of voice, with the woe-begone expression on the speaker's face, drives all thoughts of hilarity out of the listener's mind. It is a moment too sacred for mirth; and between the two friends, old comrades in arms, for an interval even speech is suspended; only a word of courtesy as the host presses his guest to partake of the viands before them.

The Major does not question further, leaving the other to take up the broken thread of the conversation.

Which he at length does, holding it in hand, till he has told all that happened since they last sat at that table together.

He gives only the facts, reserving his own deductions from them. But Mahon, drawing them for himself, says searchingly—

"Then you have a suspicion there's been what's commonly called foul play?"

"More than a suspicion. I'm sure of it."

"The devil! But whom do you suspect?"

"Whom should I but he now in possession of the property—her cousin, Mr. Lewin Murdock. Though I've reason to believe there are others mixed up in it; one of them a Frenchman. Indeed, it's chiefly to make inquiry about him I've come over to Boulogne."

"A Frenchman. You know his name?"

"I do; at least, that he goes by on the other side of the Channel. You remember that night as we were passing the back entrance of the convent where your sister's at school, our seeing a carriage there—a hackney, or whatever it was?"

"Certainly I do."

"And my saying that the man who had just got out of it, and gone inside, resembled a priest I'd seen but a day or two before?"

"Of course I remember all that, and my joking you at the time as to the idleness of you fancying a likeness among sheep, where all are so nearly of the same hue—that black. Something of the sort I said. But what's your argument?"

"No argument at all, but a conviction, that the man we saw that night was my Herefordshire priest. I've seen him several times since—had a good square look at him—and feel sure 'twas he."

"You haven't yet told me his name?"

"Rogier—Father Rogier. So he is called upon the Wye."

"And, supposing him identified, what follows?"

"A great deal follows, or rather, depends on his identification."

"Explain, Ryecroft. I shall listen with patience."

Ryecroft does explain, continuing his narrative into a second chapter, which includes the doings of the Jesuit on Wyeseide, so far as known to him; the story of Jack Wingate's love and loss—the last so strangely resembling his own—the steps afterwards taken by the waterman; in short, everything he can think of that will throw light upon the subject.

"A strange tale, truly!" observes the Major, after hearing it to the end. "But does your boatman really believe the priest has resuscitated his dead sweetheart, and brought her over here with the intention of shutting her up in a nunnery?"

"He does all that; and certainly not without show of reason. Dead or alive, the priest or some one else has taken the girl out of her coffin, and her grave."

"'Twould be a wonderful story, if true—I mean the resuscitation, or resurrection; not the mere disinterment of a body. That's possible, and probable where priests of the Jesuitical school are concerned. And so should the other be, when one considers that they can make statues wink, and pictures shed tears. Oh! yes; Ultramontane magicians can do anything!"

"But why," asks Ryecroft, "should they have taken all this trouble about a poor girl—the daughter of a small Herefordshire farmer,—with possibly at the most a hundred pounds or so for her dowry? That's what mystifies me!"

"It needn't," laconically observes the Major. "These Jesuit gentry have often other motives than money for caging such birds in their convents. Was the girl good looking?" he asks, after musing a moment.

"Well, of myself I never saw her. By Jack's description she must have been a superb creature—on a par with the angels. True, a lover's judgment is not much to be relied on, but I've heard from others, that Miss Morgan was really a rustic belle—something beyond the common."

"Faith! and that may account for the whole thing. I know they like their nuns to be nice looking; prefer that stripe; I suppose, for purposes of proselytizing, if nothing more. They'd give a good deal to receive the services of my own sister in that way: have been already bidding for her. By Heavens! I'd rather see her laid in her grave!"

The Major's strong declaration is followed by a spell of silence; after which, cooling down a little, he continues,—

"You've come, then, to inquire into this convent matter, about—what's the girl's name?—ah! Morgan."

"More than the convent matter; though it's in the same connection. I've come to learn what can be learnt about this priest; get his character, with his antecedents. And, if possible, obtain some information respecting the past lives of Mr. Lewin Murdock and his French wife; for which I may probably go on to Paris, if not farther. To sum up everything, I've determined to sift this mystery to the bottom—unravel it to its last thread. I've already commenced unwinding the clue, and made some little progress. But I want one to assist me. Like a lone hunter on a lost trail, I need counsel from a companion—and help too. You'll stand by me, Mahon?"

"To the death, my dear boy! I was going to say the last shilling in my purse. As you don't need that, I say, instead, to the last breath in my body!"

"You shall be thanked with the last in mine."

"I'm sure of that. And now for a drop of the 'crayther,' to warm us to our work. Ho! there, Murt! bring in the 'matayreals.'"

Which Murtagh does, the dinner-dishes having been already removed.

Soon as punches have been mixed, the Major returns to the subject, saying,—

"Now then, to enter upon particulars. What step do you wish me to take first?"

"First, to find out who Father Rogier is, and what. That is, on this side; I know what he is on the other. If we can but learn his relations with the convent, it might give us a key capable of opening more than one lock."

"There won't be much difficulty in doing that, I take it. All the less, from my little sister Kate being a great pet of the Lady Superior, who has hopes of making a nun of her! Not if I know it! Soon as her schooling's completed, she walks out of that seminary, and goes to a place where the moral atmosphere is a trifle purer. You see, old fellow, I'm not very bigoted about our Holy Faith, and in some danger of becoming a 'vert.' As for my sister, were it not for a bit of a legacy left on condition of her being educated in a convent, she'd never have seen the inside of one with my consent; and never will again when out of this one. But money's money; and though the legacy isn't a large one, for her sake, I couldn't afford to forfeit it. You comprehend?"

"Quite. And you think she will be able to obtain the information, without in any way compromising herself?"

"Pretty sure of it. Kate's no simpleton, though she be but a child in years. She'll manage it for me, with the instructions I mean giving her. After all, it may not be so much trouble. In these nunneries, things which are secrets to the world without, are known to every mother's child of them—nuns and novices alike. Gossip's the chief occupation of their lives. If there's been an occurrence such as you speak of—a new bird caged there—above all, an English one—it's sure to have got wind—that is, inside the walls. And I can trust Kate to catch the breath, and blow it outside. So, Vivian, old boy, drink your toddy, and take things coolly. I think I can promise you that, before many days, or it may be only hours, you shall know whether such a priest as you speak of be in the habit of coming to that convent; and if so, what for, when he was there last, and everything about the reverend gentleman worth knowing."



Kate Mahon proves equal to the occasion, showing herself quick-witted, as her brother boasted her to be.

On the third day after, she is able to report to him, that some time previously—how long not exactly known—a young English girl came to the convent, brought

thither by a priest named Rogier. The girl is a candidate for the Holy Sisterhood—voluntary, of course—to take the veil, soon as her probation be completed. Miss Mahon has not seen the new novice—only heard of her as being a great beauty; for personal charms make noise even in a nunnery. Nor have any of the other *pensionnaires* been permitted to see or speak with her. All they as yet know is, that she is a blonde, with yellow hair—a grand wealth of it—and goes by the name of "Sœur Marie."

"Sister Mary!" exclaims Jack Wingate, as Ryecroft at second-hand communicates the intelligence—at the same time translating the "Sœur Marie." "It's Mary Morgan—my Mary! An' by the Heavens of Mercy," he adds, his arms angrily thrashing the air, "she shall come out o' that convent, or I'll lay my life down at its door."



CHAPTER LXVI.

THE LAST OF LEWIN MURDOCK.

Once more a boat upon the Wye, passing between Rugg's Ferry and Llangorren Court, but this time descending. It is the same boat, and, as before, with two men in it; though they are not both the same who went up. One of them is Coracle Dick, still at the oars; while Father Rogier's place in the stern is now occupied by another—not sitting upright, as was the priest, but lying along the bottom timbers with head coggled over, and somewhat uncomfortably supported by the thwart.

This man is Lewin Murdock, in a state of helpless inebriety—in common parlance, drunk. He has been brought to the boat landing by the landlord of the Welsh Harp, where he has been all day carousing, and delivered to Dempsey, who now, at a late hour of the night, is conveying him homeward. His hat is down by his feet, instead of upon his head; and the moonbeams, falling unobstructed on his face, show it of a sickly whitish hue; while his eyes, sunk deep in their sockets, have each a demilune of dark purplish colour underneath. But for an occasional twitching of the facial muscles, with a spasmodic movement of the lips, and at intervals, a raucous noise through his nostrils, he might pass for dead, as readily as dead drunk.

Verily is the priest's prognosis based upon reliable data; for by the symptoms now displayed, Lewin Murdock is doing his best to destroy himself—drinking suicidally!

For all, he is not destined thus to die. His end will come even sooner, and, it may be, easier.

It is not distant now, but ominously near, as may be told by looking into the eyes of the man who sits opposite, and recalling the conversation late exchanged between him and Father Rogier. For in those dark orbs a fierce light scintillates, such as is seen in the eyes of the assassin contemplating assassination, or the jungle tiger when within springing distance of its prey.

Nothing of all this sees the sot, but lies unconscious, every now and then giving out a snore, regardless of danger, as though everything around were innocent as

the pale moonbeams shimmering down upon his cadaverous cheeks.

Possibly he is dreaming, and if so, in all likelihood it is of a grand gas-lighted *salon*, with tables of *tapis vert*, carrying packs of playing cards, dice cubes, and ivory counters. Or the *mise en scène* of his visionary vagaries may be a drinking saloon, where he carouses with boon companions, their gambling limited to a simple tossing of odd and even, "heads or tails."

But if dreaming at all, it is not of what is near him; else, far gone as he is, he would be aroused—instinctively—to make a last struggle for life. For the thing so near is death.

The fiend who sits regarding him in this helpless condition—as it were holding Lewin Murdock's life, or the little left of it, in his hand—has unquestionably determined upon taking it. Why he does not do so at once is not because he is restrained by any motive of mercy, or reluctance to the spilling of blood. The heart of the *ci-devant* poacher, counterfeiter, and cracksman, has been long ago steeled against such silly and sensitive scruples. The postponement of his hellish purpose is due to a mere question of convenience. He dislikes the idea of having to trudge over miles of meadow in dripping garments!

True, he could drown the drunken man, and keep himself dry—every stitch. But that would not do; for there will be another coroner's inquest, at which he will have to be present. He has escaped the two preceding; but at this he will be surely called upon, and as principal witness. Therefore he must be able to say he was wet, and prove it as well. Into the river, then, will he go, along with his victim; though there is no need for his taking the plunge till he has got nearer to Llangorren.

So ingeniously contriving, he sits with arms mechanically working the oars; his eyes upon the doomed man, as those of a cat having a crippled mouse within easy reach of her claws, at any moment to be drawn in and destroyed!

Silently, but rapidly, he rows on, needing no steerer. Between Rugg's Ferry and Llangorren Court he is as familiar with the river's channel as a coachman with the carriage-drive to and from his master's mansion; knows its every curve and crook, every purl and pool, having explored them while paddling his little "truckle." And now, sculling the larger craft, it is all the same. And he pulls on, without once looking over his shoulder; his eyes alone given to what is directly in front of him—Lewin Murdock lying motionless at his feet.

As if himself moved by a sudden impulse—impatience, or the thought it might be as well to have the dangerous work over—he ceases pulling, and acts as though he were about to unship the oars.

But again he seems suddenly to change his intention; on observing a white fleck by the river's edge, which he knows to be the lime-washed walls of the widow Wingate's cottage, at the same time remembering that the main road passes by it.

What if there be some one on the road, or the river's bank, and be seen in the act of capsizing his own boat? True, it is after midnight, and not likely any one abroad—even the latest wayfarer. But there might be; and in such clear moonlight his every movement could be made out.

That place will not do for the deed of darkness he is contemplating; and he trembles to think how near he has been to committing himself!

Thus warned to the taking of precautions hitherto not thought of, he proceeds onward, summoning up before his mind the different turns and reaches of the river, all the while mentally anathematising the moon. For, besides convenience of place, time begins to press, even trouble him, as he recalls the proverb of the cup and the lip.

He is growing nervously impatient—almost apprehensive of failure, through fear of being seen—when, rounding a bend, he has before him the very thing he is in search of—the place itself. It is a short, straight reach, where the channel is narrow, with high banks on both sides, and trees overhanging, whose shadows, meeting across, shut off the hated light, shrouding the whole water surface in deep obscurity. It is but a little way above the lone farmhouse of Abergann, and the mouth of the brook which there runs in. But Coracle Dick is not thinking of either—only of the place being appropriate for his diabolical design.

And, becoming satisfied it is so, he delays no longer, but sets about its execution—carrying it out with an adroitness which should fairly entitle him to the double reward promised by the priest. Having unshipped the oars, he starts to his feet; and mounting upon the thwart, there for a second or two stands poised and balancing. Then, stepping to the side, he sets foot on the gunwale rail with his whole body's weight borne upon it.

In an instant over goes the boat, careening bottom upwards, and spilling Lewin Murdock, as himself, into the mad, surging river!

The drunken man goes down like a lump of lead; possibly without pain, or the consciousness of being drowned; only supposing it the continuation of his dream!

Satisfied he has gone down, the assassin cares not how. He has enough to think of in saving himself, enough to do swimming in his clothes, even to the boots.

He reaches the bank, nevertheless, and climbs up it, exhausted; shivering like a water spaniel, for snow has fallen on Plinlimmon, and its thaw has to do with the freshet in the stream.

But the chill of the Wye's water is nought compared with that sent through his flesh, to the very marrow of his bones, on discovering he has crawled out upon the spot—the self-same spot—where the waves gave back another body he had consigned to them—that of Mary Morgan!

For a moment he stands horror-struck, with hair on end, the blood curdling in his veins. Then, nerving himself to the effort, he hitches up his dripping trousers, and hurries away from the accursed place—by himself accursed—taking the direction of Llangorren, but giving a wide berth to Abergann.

He has no fear of approaching the former in wet garments; instead, knows that in this guise he will be all the more warmly welcomed—as he is!

Mrs. Murdock sits up late for Lewin—though with little expectation of his coming home. Looking out of the window, in the moonlight she sees a man, who comes striding across the carriage sweep, and up into the portico.

Rushing to the door to receive him, she exclaims, in counterfeit surprise,—

"You, Monsieur Richard! Not my husband!"

When Coracle Dick has told his sad tale, shaped to suit the circumstances, her half-hysterical ejaculation might be supposed a cry of distress. Instead, it is one of ecstatic delight she is unable to restrain at knowing herself now sole owner of the house over her head, and the land for miles around it!



CHAPTER LXVII.

A CHAPTER DIPLOMATIC.

Another day has dawned, another sun set upon Boulogne; and Major Mahon is again in his dining-room, with Captain Ryecroft, his sole guest.

The cloth has been removed, the Major's favourite after-dinner beverage brought upon the table, and, with punches "brewed" and cigars set alight, they have commenced conversation upon the incidents of the day—those especially relating to Ryecroft's business in Boulogne.

The Major has had another interview with his sister—a short one, snatched while she was out with her school companions for afternoon promenade. It has added some further particulars to those they had already learnt, both about the English girl confined within the nunnery, and the priest who conveyed her thither. That the latter was Father Rogier is placed beyond a doubt by a minute description of his person given to Miss Mahon, well known to the individual who gave it. To the nuns within that convent the man's name is familiar—even to his baptismal appellation, Gregoire; for although the Major has pronounced all the sacerdotal fraternity alike, in being black, this particular member of it is of a shade deeper than common—a circumstance of itself going a good way towards his identification. Even within that sacred precinct where he is admitted, a taint attaches to him; though what its nature the young lady has not yet been able to ascertain.

The information thus obtained tallies with the estimate of the priest's character, already formed; in correspondence, too, with the theory that he is capable of the crime Captain Ryecroft believes him to have abetted, if not actually committed. Nor is it contradicted by the fact of his being a frequent visitor to the nunnery, and a favourite with the administration thereof; indeed, an intimate friend of the Abbess herself. Something more, in a way accounting for all: that the new novice is not the first *agneau d'Angleterre* he has brought over to Boulogne, and guided into that same fold, more than one of them having ample means, not only to provision themselves, but a surplus for the support of the general sisterhood.

There is no word about any of these English lambs having been other than

voluntary additions to the French flock; but a whisper circulates within the convent walls, that Father Rogier's latest contribution is a recusant, and if she ever becomes a nun, it will be a *forced* one; that the thing is *contre cœur*—in short, she protests against it.

Jack Wingate can well believe that; still under full conviction that "Sœur Marie" is Mary Morgan; and, despite all its grotesque strangeness and wild improbability, Captain Ryecroft has pretty nearly come to the same conclusion; while the Major, with less knowledge of antecedent circumstances, but more of nunneries, never much doubted it.

"About the best way to get the girl out. What's your idea, Mahon?"

Ryecroft asks the question in no careless or indifferent way; on the contrary, with a feeling earnestness. For, although the daughter of the Wyeside farmer is nought to him, the Wye waterman is; and he has determined on seeing the latter through—to the end of the mysterious affair. In difficulties Jack Wingate has stood by him, and he will stand by Jack, *coûte-que-coûte*. Besides, figuratively speaking, they are still in the same boat. For if Wingate's dead sweetheart, so strangely returned to life, can be also restored to liberty, the chances are she may be the very one wanted to throw light on the other and, alas! surer death. Therefore, Captain Ryecroft is not all unselfish in backing up his boatman; nor, as he puts the question, being anxious about the answer.

"We'll have to use strategy," returns the Major; not immediately, but after taking a grand gulp out of his tumbler, and a vigorous draw at his *regalia*.

"But why should we?" impatiently demands the Captain. "If the girl have been forced in there, and's kept against her will—which, by all the probabilities, she is—surely she can be got out, on demand being made by her friends?"

"That's just what isn't sure—though the demand were made by her own mother, with the father to back it. You forget, old fellow, that you're in France, not England."

"But there's a British Consul in Boulogne."

"Ay, and a British Foreign Minister, who gives that Consul his instructions; with some queer ideas besides, neither creditable to himself nor his country. I'm speaking of that jaunty diplomat—the "judicious bottle-holder," who is accustomed to cajole the British public with his blarney about *civis Romanus*

sum."

"True; but does that bear upon our affair?"

"It does—almost directly."

"In what way? I do not comprehend."

"Because you're not up to what's passing over here—I mean at headquarters—the Tuilleries, or St. Cloud, if you prefer it. There the man—if man he can be called—is ruled by the woman; she in her turn the devoted partisan of Pio Nono and the unprincipled Antonelli."

"I can understand all that; still, I don't quite see its application, or how the English Foreign Minister can be interested in those you allude to!"

"I do. But for him, not one of the four worthies spoken of would be figuring as they are. In all probability France would still be a republic instead of an empire, wicked as the world ever saw; and Rome another republic—it may be all Italy—with either Mazzini or Garibaldi at its head. For, certain as you sit there, old boy, it was the judicious bottle-holder who hoisted Nap into an imperial throne, over that Presidential chair, so ungratefully spurned—scurvily kicked behind after it had served his purpose. A fact of which the English people appear to be yet in purblind ignorance! as they are of another, equally notable, and alike misunderstood: that it was this same *civis Romanus sum* who restored old Pio to his apostolic chair; those red-breeched ruffians, the Zouaves, being but so much dust thrown into people's eyes—a bone to keep the British bull-dog quiet. He would have growled then, and will yet, when he comes to understand all these transactions; when the cloak of that scoundrelly diplomacy which screens them has rotted into shreds, letting the light of true history shine upon them."

"Why, Mahon! I never knew you were such a politician! much less such a Radical!"

"Nothing much of either, old fellow; only a man who hates tyranny in every shape and form—whether religious or political. Above all, that which owes its existence to the cheapest, the very shabbiest, chicanery the world was ever bamboozled with. I like open dealing in all things."

"But you are not recommending it now—in this little convent matter?"

"Ah! that's quite a different affair! There are certain ends that justify certain

means—when the devil must be fought with his own weapons. Ours is of that kind, and we must either use strategy, or give the thing up altogether. By open measures there wouldn't be the slightest chance of our getting this girl out of the convent's clutches. Even then we may fail; but, if successful, it will only be by great craft, some luck, and possibly a good deal of time spent before we accomplish our purpose."

"Poor fellow!" rejoins Ryecroft, speaking of the Wye waterman, "he won't like the idea of long waiting. He's madly, terribly impatient. This afternoon, as we were passing the convent, I had a difficulty to restrain him from rushing up to its door, ringing the bell, and demanding an interview with the 'Sœur Marie'—having his Mary, as he calls her, restored to him on the instant."

"It's well you succeeded in hindering that little bit of rashness. Had he done so, 'twould have ended not only in the door being slammed in his face, but another door shut behind his back—that of a gaol, from which he would never have issued till embarking on a voyage to New Caledonia or Cayenne. Ay, both of you might have been so served. For would you believe it, Ryecroft, that you, an officer of the boasted H.B.R.A., rich, and with powerful friends—even you could be not only here imprisoned, but *deporté*, without any one who has interest in you being the wiser; or, if so, having no power to prevent it. France, under the *régime* of Napoleon le Petit, is not so very different from what it was under the rule of Louis le Grand, and *lettres de cachet* are now rife as then. Nay, more of them now written, consigning men to a hundred bastilles instead of one. Never was a people so enslaved as these Johnny Crapauds are at this present time; not only their speech fettered, but their very thoughts held in bondage, or so constrained, they may not impart them to one another. Even intimate friends forbear exchanging confidences, lest one prove false to the other! Nothing free but insincerity and sin; both fostered and encouraged from that knowledge intuitive among tyrants; that wickedness weakens a people, making them easier to rule and ride over. So, my boy, you perceive the necessity of our acting with caution in this business, whatever trouble or time it may take—don't you?"

"I do."

"After all," pursues the Major, "it seems to me that time isn't of so much consequence. As regards the girl, they're not going to eat her up. And for the other matters concerning yourself, they'll keep, too. As you say, the scent's become cold; and a few days more or less can't make any difference. Beside, the trails we intend following may in the end all run into one. I shouldn't be at all

surprised if this captive damsel has come to the knowledge of something connected with the other affair. Faith, that may be the very reason for their having her conveyed over here, to be cooped up for the rest of her life. In any case, the fact of her abduction, in such an odd, outrageous way, would of itself be damning collateral evidence against whoever has done it, showing him or them good for anything. So, the first work on our hands, as the surest, is to get the waterman's sweetheart out of the convent, and safe back to her home in Herefordshire."

"That's our course, clearly. But have you any thoughts as to how we should proceed?"

"I have; more than thoughts—hopes of success—and sanguine ones."

"Good! I'm glad to hear it. Upon what do you base them?"

"On that very near relative of mine—Sister Kate. As I've told you, she's a pet of the Lady Superior; admitted into the very *arcana* of the establishment. And with such privilege, if she can't find a way to communicate with any one therein closeted, she must have lost the mother wit born to her, and brought thither from the 'brightest gem of the say.' I don't think she has, or that it's been a bit blunted in Boulogne. Instead, somewhat sharpened by communion with these Holy Sisters; and I've no fear but that 'twill be sharp to serve us in the little scheme I've in part sketched out."

"Let me hear it, Mahon."

"Kate must obtain an interview with the English girl; or, enough if she can slip a note into her hand. That would go some way towards getting her out—by giving her intimation that friends are near."

"I see what you mean," rejoins the Captain, pulling away at his cigar, the other left to finish giving details of the plan he has been mentally projecting.

"We'll have to do a little bit of burglary, combined with abduction. Serve them out in their own coin; as it were, hoisting the priest on his own petard!"

"It will be difficult, I fear."

"Of course it will, and dangerous. Likely more the last than the first. But it'll have to be done, else we may drop the thing entirely."

"Never, Mahon! No matter what the danger, I for one am willing to risk it. And we can reckon on Jack Wingate. He'll be only too ready to rush into it."

"Ah! there might be more danger through his rashness. But it must be held in check. After all, I don't apprehend so much difficulty if things be dexterously managed. Fortunately there's a circumstance in our favour."

"What is it?"

"A window."

"Ah! Where?"

"In the convent, of course. That which gives light—not much of it either—to the cloister where the girl is confined. By a lucky chance my sister has learnt the particular one, and seen the window from the outside. It looks over the grounds where the nuns take recreation, now and then allowed intercourse with the school girls. She says it's high up, but not higher than the top of the garden wall; so a ladder that will enable us to scale the one should be long enough to reach the other. I'm more dubious about the dimensions of the window itself. Kate describes it as only a small affair, with an upright bar in the middle—iron, she believes. Wood or iron, we may manage to remove that; but if the Herefordshire bacon has made your farmer's daughter too big to screw herself through the aperture, then it'll be all up a tree with us. However, we must find out before making the attempt to extract her. From what sister has told me, I fancy we can see the window from the Ramparts above. If so, we may make a distant measurement of it by guess work. Now," continues the Major, coming to his programme of action, "what's got to be done first is that your Wye boatman write a *billet doux* to his old sweetheart—in the terms I shall dictate to him. Then my sister must contrive, in some way, to put it in the girl's hands, or see that she gets it."

"And what after?"

"Well, nothing much after; only that we must make preparations for the appointment the waterman will make in his epistle."

"It may as well be written now—may it not?"

"Certainly; I was just thinking of that. The sooner, the better. Shall I call him in?"

"Do as you think proper, Mahon. I trust everything to you."

The Major, rising, rings a bell, which brings Murtagh to the dining-room door.

"Murt, tell your guest in the kitchen we wish a word with him."

The face of the Irish soldier vanishes from view, soon after replaced by that of the Welsh waterman.

"Step inside, Wingate!" says the Captain; which the other does, and remains standing to hear what the word was wanted.

"You can write, Jack, can't you?"

It is Ryecroft who puts the inquiry.

"Well, Captain, I ain't much o' a penman, but I can scribble a sort o' rough hand after a fashion."

"A fair enough hand for Mary Morgan to read it, I dare say."

"Oh, sir, I only weesh there wor a chance o' her gettin' a letter from me!"

"There is a chance. I think we can promise that. If you'll take this pen and put down what my friend Major Mahon dictates to you, it will in all probability be in her hands ere long."

Never was pen more eagerly laid hold of than that offered to Jack Wingate. Then, sitting down to the table as directed, he waits to be told what he is to write.

The Major, bent over him, seems cogitating what it should be. Not so, however. Instead, he is occupied with an astronomical problem which is puzzling him. For its solution he appeals to Ryecroft, asking,—

"How about the moon?"

"The moon?"

"Yes. Which quarter is she in? For the life of me, I can't tell."

"Nor I," rejoins the Captain. "I never think of such a thing."

"She's in her last," puts in the boatman, accustomed to take note of lunar changes. "It be an old moon now shining all the night, when the sky an't clouded."

"You're right, Jack!" says Ryecroft. "Now I remember; it is the old moon."

"In which case," adds the Major, "we must wait for the new one. We want darkness after midnight—must have it—else we cannot act. Let me see; when will that be?"

"The day week," promptly responds the waterman. "Then she'll be goin' down, most as soon as the sun's self."

"That'll do," says the Major. "Now to the pen!"

Squaring himself to the table, and the sheet of paper spread before him, Wingate writes to dictation. No words of love, but what inspires him with a hope he may once more speak such in the ears of his beloved Mary!



CHAPTER LXVIII.

A QUICK CONVERSION.

"When is this horror to have an end? Only with my life? Am I, indeed, to pass the remainder of my days within this dismal cell? Days so happy, till that the happiest of all—its ill-starred night! And my love so strong, so confident—its reward seeming so nigh—all to be for nought—sweet dreams and bright hopes suddenly, cruelly extinguished! Nothing but darkness now; within my heart, in this gloomy place, everywhere around me! Oh, it is agony! When will it be over?"

It is the English girl who thus bemoans her fate—still confined in the convent, and the same cloister. Herself changed, however. Though but a few weeks have passed, the roses of her cheeks have become lilies, her lips wan, her features of sharper outline, the eyes retired in their sockets, with a look of woe unspeakable. Her form, too, has fallen away from the full ripe rounding that characterized it, though the wreck is concealed by a loose drapery of ample folds. For Sœur Marie now wears the garb of the Holy Sisterhood—hating it, as her words show.

She is seated on the pallet's edge while giving utterance to her sombre soliloquy; and without change of attitude, continues it,—

"Imprisoned I am—that's certain! And for no crime. It may be without hostility on the part of those who have done it. Perhaps, better it were so. Then there might be hope of my captivity coming to an end. As it is, there is none—none! I comprehend all now—the reason for bringing me here—keeping me—everything. And that reason remains—must, as long as I am alive! Merciful heaven!"

This exclamatory phrase is almost a shriek; despair sweeping through her soul, as she thinks of why she is there shut up. For hinging upon that is the hopelessness, almost a dead, drear certainty, she will never have deliverance!

Stunned by the terrible reflection, she pauses—even thought for the time stayed. But the throe passing, she again pursues her soliloquy, now in more conjectural strain,—

"Strange that no friend has come after me! No one caring for my fate—even to inquire! And *he*—no, that is not strange—only sadder, harder to think of. How could I expect or hope he would?"

"But surely it is not so. I may be wronging them all—friends—relatives—even him. They may not know where I am? Cannot! How could they? I know not myself! only that it is France, and in a nunnery. But what part of France, and how I came to it, likely they are ignorant as I.

"And they may never know—never find out! If not, oh! what is to become of me? Father in heaven! Merciful Saviour! help me in my helplessness!"

After this phrensied outburst, a calmer interval succeeds, in which human instincts as thoughts direct her. She thinks,—

"If I could but find means to communicate with my friends—make known to them where I am, and how, then—Ah! 'tis hopeless. No one allowed near me but the attendant and that Sister Ursule. For compassion from either, I might just as well make appeal to the stones of the floor! The Sister seems to take delight in torturing me—every day doing or saying some disagreeable thing. I suppose, to humble, break, bring me to her purpose—that the taking of the veil. A nun! Never! It is not in my nature, and I would rather die than dissemble it!"

"Dissemble!" she repeats in a different accent. "That word helps me to a thought. Why should I not dissemble? I *will*."

Thus emphatically pronouncing, she springs to her feet, the expression of her features changing suddenly as her attitude. Then paces the floor to and fro, with hands clasped across her forehead, the white, attenuated fingers writhingly entwined in her hair.

"They want me to take the veil—the *black* one! So shall I, the blackest in all the convent's wardrobe if they wish it—ay, crape if they insist on it. Yes, I am resigned now—to that—anything. They can prepare the robes, vestments, all the adornments of their detested mummery; I am prepared, willing, to put them on. It's the only way—my only hope of regaining liberty. I see—am sure of it!"

She pauses, as if still but half resolved, then goes on,—

"I am compelled to this deception! Is it a sin? If so, God forgive me! But no—it cannot be! 'Tis justified by my wrongs—my sufferings!"

Another and longer pause, during which she seems profoundly to reflect. After it, saying,—

"I shall do so—pretend compliance; and begin this day—this very hour, if the opportunity arise. What should be my first pretence? I must think of it; practise, rehearse it. Let me see. Ah! I have it. The world has forsaken, forgotten me. Why then should I cling to it? Instead, why not in angry spite fling it off—as it has me? That's the way!"

A creaking at the cloister door tells of its key turning in the lock. Slight as is the sound, it acts on her as an electric shock, suddenly and altogether changing the cast of her countenance. The instant before half angry, half sad, it is now a picture of pious resignation. Her attitude different also. From striding tragically over the floor she has taken a seat, with a book in her hand, which she seems industriously perusing. It is that "Aid to Faith" recommended, but hitherto unread.

She is to all appearance so absorbed in its pages as not to notice the opening of the door, nor the footsteps of one entering. How natural her start, as she hears a voice, and, looking up, beholds Sœur Ursule!

"Ah!" ejaculates the latter, with an exultant air, as of a spider that sees a fly upon the edge of its web, "Glad, Marie, to find you so employed! It promises well, both for the peace of your mind and the good of your soul. You've been foolishly lamenting the world left behind: wickedly too. What is to compare with that to come? As dross-dirt, to gold or diamonds! The book you hold in your hand will tell you so. Doesn't it?"

"It does, indeed."

"Then profit by its instructions, and be sorry you have not sooner taken counsel from it."

"I am sorry, Sister Ursule."

"It would have comforted you—will now."

"It has already. Ah! so much! I would not have believed any book could give me the view of life it has done. I begin to understand what you've been telling me—to see the vanities of this earthly existence, how poor and empty they are in comparison with the bright joys of that other life. Oh! why did I not know it before?"

At this moment a singular tableau is exhibited within that convent cell—two female figures, one seated, the other standing—novice and nun; the former fair and young, the latter ugly and old. And still in greater contrast the expression upon their faces. That of the girl's downcast, demure lids over the eyes, less as if in innocence than repentant of some sin, while the glances of the woman show pleased surprise, struggling against incredulity!

Her suspicion still in the ascendant, Sœur Ursule stands regarding the disciple, so suddenly converted, with a look which seems to penetrate her very soul. It is borne without sign of quailing, and she at length comes to believe the penitence sincere, and that her proselytising powers have not been exerted in vain. Nor is it strange she should so deceive herself. It is far from being the first novice *contre cœur* she has broken upon the wheel of despair, and made content to taking a vow of lifelong seclusion from the world.

Convinced she has subdued the proud spirit of the English girl, and gloating over a conquest she knows will bring substantial reward to herself, she exclaims prayerfully, in mock-pious tone,—

"Blessed be Holy Mary for this new mercy! On your knees *ma fille*, and pray to her to complete the work she has begun!"

And upon her knees drops the novice, while the nun, as if deeming herself *de trop* in the presence of prayer, slips out of the cloister, silently shutting the door.

CHAPTER LXIX.

A SUDDEN RELAPSE.

For some time after the exit of Sœur Ursule, the English girl retains her seat, with the same demure look she had worn in the presence of the nun; while before her face the book is again open, as though she had returned to reading it. One seeing this might suppose her intensely interested in its contents. But she is not even thinking of them! Instead, of a sharp skinny ear, and a steel-grey eye—one or other of which she suspects to be covering the keyhole.

Her own ear is on the alert to catch sounds outside—the shuffling of feet, the rattle of rosary beads, or the swishing of a dress against the door.

She hears none; and at length satisfied that Sister Ursule's suspicions are spent, or her patience exhausted, she draws a free breath—the first since the *séance* commenced.

Then rising to her feet, she steps to a corner of the cell not commanded by the keyhole, and there dashes the book down, as though it had been burning her fingers!

"My first scene of deception," she mutters to herself—"first act of hypocrisy. Have I not played it to perfection?"

She draws a chair into the angle, and sits down upon it. For she is still not quite sure that the spying eye has been withdrawn from the aperture, or whether it may not have returned to it.

"Now that I've made a beginning," she murmurs on, "I must think what's to be done in continuance, and how the false pretence is to be kept up. What will *they* do?—and think? They'll be suspicious for a while, no doubt; look sharply after me, as ever! But that cannot last always; and surely they won't doom me to dwell for ever in this dingy hole! When I've proved my conversion real, by penance, obedience, and the like, I may secure their confidence, and by way of reward, get transferred to a more comfortable chamber. Ah! little care I for the comfort, if convenient,—with a window out of which one could look. Then I might have a hope of seeing—speaking to some one with heart less hard than Sister Ursule's,

and that other creature—a very hag!"

"I wonder where the place is? Whether in the country, or in a town among houses? It may be the last—in the very heart of a great city, for all this death-like stillness! They build these religious prisons with walls so thick! And the voices I from time to time hear are all women's. Not one of a man amongst them! They must be the convent people themselves! Nuns and novices! Myself one of the latter! Ha! ha! I shouldn't have known it if Sister Ursule hadn't informed me. Novice, indeed—soon to be a nun! No! but a free woman—or dead! Death would be better than life like this!"

The derisive smile that for a moment played upon her features passes off, replaced by the same forlorn woe-begone look, as despair comes back to her heart. For she again recalls what she has read in books—very different from that so contemptuously tossed aside—of girls young and beautiful as herself—high-born ladies—surreptitiously taken from their homes—shut up as she—never more permitted to look on the sun's light, or bask in its beams, save within the gloomy cloisters of a convent, or its dimly shadowed grounds.

The prospect of such future for herself appals her, eliciting an anguished sigh—almost a groan.

"Ha!" she exclaims the instant after, and again with altered air, as though something had arisen to relieve her. "There are voices now! Still of women! Laughter! How strange it sounds! So sweet! I've not heard such since I've been here. It's the voice of a girl! It must be—so clear, so joyous. Yes! Surely it cannot come from any of the sisters? They are never joyful—never laugh."

She remains listening, soon to hear the laughter again, a second voice joining in it, both with the cheery ring of school girls at play. The sound comes in with the light—it could not well enter otherwise—and aware of this, she stands facing that way, with eyes turned upward. For the window is far above her head.

"Would that I could see out! If I only had something on which to stand!"

She sweeps the cell with her eyes, to see only the pallet, the frail chairs, a little table with slender legs, and a washstand—all too low. Standing upon the highest, her eyes would still be under the level of the sill.

She is about giving it up, when an artifice suggests itself. With wits sharpened, rather than dulled by her long confinement—she bethinks her of a plan, by

which she may at least look out of the window. She can do that by upending the bedstead!

Rash, she would raise it on the instant. But she is not so; instead, considerate, more than ever cautious. And so proceeding, she first places a chair against the door in such position that its back blocks the keyhole. Then, dragging bed-clothes, mattress, and all to the floor, she takes hold of the wooden framework; and, exerting her whole strength, hoists it on end, tilted like a ladder against the wall. And as such it will answer her purpose, the strong webbing, crossed and stayed, to serve for steps.

A moment more, and she has mounted up, and stands, her chin resting on the window's ledge.

The window itself is a casement on hinges; one of those antique affairs, iron framed, with the panes set in lead. Small, though big enough for a human body to pass through, but for an upright bar centrally bisecting it.

She, balancing upon the bedstead, and looking out, thinks not of the bar now, nor takes note of the dimensions of the aperture. Her thoughts, as her glances, are all given to what she sees outside. At the first *coup d'œil*, the roofs and chimneys of houses, with all their appurtenances of patent smoke-curiers, weathercocks, and lightning conductors; among them domes and spires, showing it a town with several churches.

Dropping her eyes lower, they rest upon a garden, or rather a strip of ornamental grounds, tree shaded, with walks, arbours, and seats, girt by a grey massive wall, high almost as the houses.

At a glance she takes in these inanimate objects; but does not dwell on any of them. For, soon as looking below, her attention becomes occupied with living forms, standing in groups, or in twos or threes strolling about the grounds. They are all women, and of every age; most of them wearing the garb of the nunnery, loose-flowing robes of sombre hue. A few, however, are dressed in the ordinary fashion of young ladies at a boarding school; and such they are—the *pensionnaires* of the establishment.

Her eyes wandering from group to group, after a time become fixed upon two of the school-girls, who, linked arm in arm, are walking backward and forward directly in front. Why she particularly notices them, is that one of the two is acting in a singular manner; every time she passes under the window looking up

to it, as though with a knowledge of something inside, in which she feels an interest! Her glances interrogative, are at the same time evidently snatched by stealth—as in fear of being observed by the others. Even her promenading companion seems unaware of them.

She inside the cloister, soon as her first surprise is over, regards this young lady with a fixed stare, forgetting all the others.

"What can it mean?" she asks herself. "So unlike the rest! Surely not French! Can she be English? She is very—very beautiful!"

The last, at least, is true, for the girl is, indeed, a beautiful creature, with features quite different from those around—all of them being of the French facial type, while hers are pronouncedly Irish.

By this the two are once more opposite the window, and the girl again looking up, sees behind the glass—dim with dust and spiders' webs—a pale face, with a pair of bright eyes gazing steadfastly at her.

She starts; but quickly recovering, keeps on as before. Then as she faces round at the end of the walk, still within view of the window, she raises her hand, with a finger laid upon her lips, seeming to say, plain as words could speak it,—

"Keep quiet! I know all about you, and why you are there."

The gesture is not lost upon the captive. But before she can reflect upon its significance, the great convent bell breaks forth in noisy clangour, causing a flutter among the figures outside, with a scattering helter-skelter; for it is the first summons to vespers, soon followed by the tinier tinkle of the *angelus*.

In a few seconds the grounds are deserted by all save one—the school-girl with the Irish features and eyes. She, having let go her companion's arm, and lingering behind the rest, makes a quick slant towards the window she has been watching; as she approaches it, significantly exposing something white she holds half hidden between her fingers!

It needs no further gesture to make known her intent. The English girl has already guessed it, as told by the iron casement grating back on its rusty hinges, and left standing ajar. On the instant of its opening, the white object parts from the hand that has been holding it, and, like a flash of light, passes through into the darksome cell, falling with a thud upon the floor.

Not a word goes with it; for she who has shown such dexterity, soon as delivering the missile, glides away—so speedily, she is still in time to join the *queue* moving on towards the convent chapel.

Cautiously reclosing the window, Sœur Marie descends the steps of her improvised ladder, and takes up the thing that had been tossed in; which she finds to be a letter shotted inside!

Despite her burning impatience, she does not open it till after restoring the bedstead to the horizontal, and replacing all as before. For now, as ever, she has need to be circumspect, and with better reasons.

At length, feeling secure, all the more from knowing the nuns are at their vesper devotions, she tears off the envelope, and reads,—

"Mary,—Monday night next, after midnight, if you look out of your window, you will see friends—among them

"JACK WINGATE."

"Jack Wingate!" she exclaims, with a look of strange intelligence lighting up her face. "A voice from dear old Wyeside! Hope of delivery at last!"

And overcome by her emotion, she sinks down upon the pallet; no longer looking sad, but with an expression contented, and beatified as that of the most *devoté* nun in the convent.



CHAPTER LXX.

A JUSTIFIABLE ABDUCTION.

It is a moonless November night, and a fog drifting down from the *Pas de Calais* envelopes Boulogne in its damp, clammy embrace. The great cathedral clock is tolling twelve midnight, and the streets are deserted, the last wooden-heeled *soulier* having ceased clattering over their cobble-stone pavements. If a foot passenger be abroad, he is some belated individual groping his way home from the *Café de billars* he frequents, or the *Cercle* to which he belongs. Even the *sergens de ville* are scarcer than usual, those seen being huddled up under the shelter of friendly porches, while the invisible ones are making themselves yet more snug inside *cabarets*, whose openness beyond licensed hours they wink at in return for the accommodation afforded.

It is, in truth, a most disagreeable night: cold as dark, for the fog has frost in it. For all, there are three men in the streets of Boulogne who regard neither its chillness nor obscurity. Instead, this last is just what they desire, and for days past have been waiting for.

They who thus delight in darkness are Major Mahon, Captain Ryecroft, and the waterman, Wingate. Not because they have thoughts of doing evil, for their purpose is of the very opposite character—to release a captive from captivity. The night has arrived when, in accordance with the promise made on that sheet of paper so dexterously pitched into her cloister, the Sœur Marie is to see friends in front of her window. They are the friends about to attempt taking her out of it.

They are not going blindly about the thing. Unlikely old campaigners as Mahon and Ryecroft would. During the interval since that warning summons was sent in, they have made thorough reconnaissance of the ground, taken stock of the convent's precincts and surroundings; in short, considered every circumstance of difficulty and danger. They are therefore prepared with all the means and appliances for effecting their design.

Just as the last stroke of the clock ceases its booming reverberation, they issue forth from Mahon's house; and, turning up the Rue Tintelleries, strike along a narrower street, which leads on toward the ancient *cité*.

The two officers walk arm in arm, Rycroft, stranger to the place, needing guidance; while the boatman goes behind, with that carried aslant his shoulder, which, were it on the banks of the Wye, might be taken for a pair of oars. It is, nevertheless, a thing altogether different—a light ladder; though were it hundreds weight he would neither stagger nor groan under it. The errand he is upon knits his sinews, giving him the strength of a giant.

They proceed with extreme caution, all three silent as spectres. When any sound comes to their ears, as the shutting to of a door, or distant footfall upon the ill-paved *trottoirs*, they make instant stop, and stand listening—speech passing among themselves only in whispers. But as these interruptions are few, they make fair progress; and in less than twenty minutes after leaving the Major's house, they have reached the spot where the real action is to commence. This is in the narrow lane which runs along the *enciente* of the convent at back; a thoroughfare little used even in daytime, but after night solitary as a desert, and on this especial night dark as dungeon itself.

They know the *allée* well; have traversed it scores of times within the last few days and nights, and could go through it blindfold. And they also know the enclosure wall, with its exact height, just that of the cloister window beyond, and a little less than their ladder, which has been selected with an eye to dimensions.

While its bearer is easing it off his shoulder, and planting it firmly in place, a short whispered dialogue occurs between the other two, the Major saying,—

"We won't all three be needed for the work inside. One of us may remain here—nay, must! Those *sergens de ville* might be prowling about, or some of the convent people themselves: in which case we'll need warning before we dare venture back over the wall. If caught on the top of it, the petticoats obstructing—ay, or without them—'twould go ill with us."

"Quite true," assents the Captain. "Which of us do you propose staying here? Jack?"

"Yes, certainly. And for more reasons than one. Excited as he is now, once getting his old flame into his arms, he'd be all on fire—perhaps with noise enough to awake the whole sleeping sisterhood, and bring them clamouring around us, like crows about an owl that had intruded into the rookery. Besides, there's a staff of male servants—for they have such—half a score of stout fellows, who'd show fight. A big bell, too, by ringing which they can rouse the town. Therefore, Master Jack *must* remain here. You tell him he must."

Jack is told, with reasons given, though not exactly the real ones. Endorsing them, the Major says,—

"Don't be so impatient, my good fellow! It will make but a few seconds' difference; and then you'll have your girl by your side, sure. Whereas, acting inconsiderately, you may never set eyes on her. The fight in the front will be easy. Our greatest danger's from behind; and you can do better in every way, as for yourself, by keeping the rear-guard."

He thus counselled is convinced: and, though much disliking it, yields prompt obedience. How could he otherwise? He is in the hands of men his superiors in rank as experience. And is it not for him they are there; risking liberty—it may be life?

Having promised to keep his impulsiveness in check, he is instructed what to do: simply to lie concealed under the shadow of the wall, and should any one be outside when he hears a low whistle, he is *not* to reply to it.

The signal so arranged, Mahon and Ryecroft mount over the wall, taking the ladder along with them, and leaving the waterman to reflect, in nervous anxiety, how near his Mary is, and yet how far off she still may be!

Once inside the garden, the other two strike off along a walk leading in the direction of the spot which is their objective point. They go as if every grain of sand pressed by their feet had a friend's life in it. The very cats of the convent could not traverse its grounds more silently.

Their caution is rewarded; for they arrive at the cloister sought, without interruption, to see its casement open, with a pale face in it—a picture of Madonna on a background of black, through the white film looking as if it were veiled.

But though dense the fog, it does not hinder them from perceiving that the expression of that face is one of expectancy; nor her from recognising them as the friends who were to be under the window. With that voice from the Wyeside still echoing in her ears, she sees her deliverers at hand! They have indeed come.

A woman of weak nerves would, under the circumstances, be excited—possibly cry out. But Sœur Marie is not such; and without uttering a word, even the slightest ejaculation, she stands still, and patiently waits while a wrench is applied to the rotten bar of iron, soon snapping it from its support, as though it

were but a stick of macaroni.



A WRENCH IS APPLIED TO THE ROTTEN BAR OF IRON, SOON SNAPPING.

It is Ryecroft who performs this burglarious feat, and into his arms she delivers herself, to be conducted down the ladder; which is done without as yet a word having been exchanged between them.

Only after reaching the ground, and there is some feeling of safety, he whispers to her,—

"Keep up your courage, Mary! Your Jack is waiting for you outside the wall. Here, take my hand——"

"Mary! My Jack! And you—you——" Her voice becomes inaudible, and she totters back against the wall!

"She's swooning—has fainted!" mutters the Major; which Ryecroft already knows, having stretched out his arms, and caught her as she is sinking to the earth.

"It's the sudden change into the open air," he says. "We must carry her, Major. You go ahead with the ladder; I can manage the girl myself."

While speaking, he lifts the unconscious form, and bears it away. No light weight either, but to strength as his, only a feather.

The Major, going in advance with the ladder, guides him through the mist; and in a few seconds they reach the outer wall, Mahon giving a low whistle as he approaches. It is almost instantly answered by another from the outside, telling them the coast is clear.

And in three minutes after they are also on the outside, the girl still resting in Ryecroft's arms. The waterman wishes to relieve him, agonized by the thought that his sweetheart, who had passed unscathed, as it were, through the very gates of death, may, after all, be dead!

He urges it; but Mahon, knowing the danger of delay, forbids any sentimental interference, commanding Jack to re-shoulder the ladder, and follow as before.

Then striking off in Indian file, the Major first, the Captain with his burden in the centre, the boatman bringing up behind, they retrace their steps towards the Rue Tintalleries.

If Ryecroft but knew whom he is carrying, he would bear her, if not more tenderly, with far different emotions, and keener solicitude about her recovery from that swoon.

It is only after she is out of his arms, and lying upon a couch in Major Mahon's house—the hood drawn back, and the light shining on her face—that he experiences a thrill, strange and wild as ever felt by mortal man! No wonder—seeing it is Gwendoline Wynn!

"Gwen!" he exclaims, in a very ecstasy of joy, as her pulsing breast and opened eyes tell of returned consciousness.

"Vivian!" is the murmured rejoinder, their lips meeting in delirious contact.

Poor Jack Wingate!



CHAPTER LXXI.

STARTING ON A CONTINENTAL TOUR.

Lewin Murdock is dead, and buried—has been for days. Not in the family vault of the Wynns, though he had the right of having his body there laid. But his widow, who had control of the interment, willed it otherwise. She has repugnance to opening that receptacle of the dead, holding a secret she may well dread disclosure of.

There was no very searching inquiry into the cause of the man's death—none such seeming needed. A coroner's inquest, true; but of the most perfunctory kind. Several *habitués* of the Welsh Harp, with its staff of waiters, testified to having seen him at that hostelry till a late hour of the night on which he was drowned, and far gone in drink. The landlord advanced the narrative a stage, by telling how he conveyed him to the boat, and delivered him to his boatman, Richard Dempsey—all true enough; while Coracle capped the story by a statement of circumstances, in part facts, but the major part fictitious: how the inebriate gentleman, after lying awhile quiet at the bottom of the skiff, suddenly sprung upon his feet, and, staggering excitedly about, capsized the craft, spilling both into the water.

Some corroboration of this, in the boat having been found floating keel upwards, and the boatman arriving home at Llangorren soaking wet. To his having been in this condition, several of the Court domestics, at the time called out of their beds, with purpose *prepense*, were able to bear witness. But Dempsey's testimony is further strengthened, even to confirmation, by himself having since taken to bed, where he now lies dangerously ill of a fever, the result of a cold caught from that chilling *douche*.

In this latest inquest the finding of the jury is set forth in two simple words, "Drowned accidentally." No suspicion attaches to any one; and his widow, now wearing the weeds of sombre hue, sorrows profoundly.

But her grief is great only in the eyes of the outside world, and the presence of the Llangorren domestics. Alone within her chamber she shows little signs of sorrow; and, if possible, less when Gregoire Rogier is her companion; which he

almost constantly is. If more than half his time at the Court while Lewin Murdock was alive, he is now there nearly the whole of it—no longer as a guest, but as much its master as she is its mistress! For that matter, indeed, more; if inference may be drawn from a dialogue occurring between them some time after her husband's death.

They are in the library, where there is a strong chest, devoted to the safe keeping of legal documents, wills, leases, and the like—all the paraphernalia of papers relating to the administration of the estate.

Rogier is at a table upon which many of these lie, with writing materials besides. A sheet of foolscap is before him, on which he has just scribbled the rough copy of an advertisement intended to be sent to several newspapers.

"I think this will do," he says to the widow, who, in an easy chair drawn up in front of the fire, is sipping Chartreuse, and smoking paper cigarettes. "Shall I read it to you?"

"No. I don't want to be bothered with the thing in detail. Enough, if you let me hear its general purport."

He gives her this in briefest epitome:—

"The Llangorren estates to be sold by public auction, with all the appurtenances, mansion, park, ornamental grounds, home and out farms, manorial rights, presentation to church living, etc., etc."

"*Tres-bien!* Have you put down the date? It should be soon."

"You're right, *chère*. Should, and must be. So soon, I fear we won't realize three-fourths of the value. But there's no help for it, with the ugly thing threatening—hanging over our necks like a very sword of Damocles."

"You mean the tongue of *le braconnier*?"

She has reason to dread it.

"No, I don't; not in the slightest. There's a sickle too near his own—in the hands of the reaper, Death."

"He's dying, then?"

She speaks with an earnestness in which there is no feeling of compassion, but

the very reverse.

"He is," the other answers, in like un pitying tone. "I've just come from his bedside."

"From the cold he caught that night, I suppose?"

"Yes; that's partly the cause. But," he adds, with a diabolical grin, "more the medicine he has taken for it."

"What mean you, Gregoire?"

"Only that Monsieur Dick has been delirious, and I saw danger in it. He was talking too wildly."

"You've done something to keep him quiet?"

"I have."

"What?"

"Given him a sleeping draught."

"But he'll wake up again, and then——"

"Then I'll administer another dose of the anodyne."

"What sort of anodyne?"

"A *hypodermic*."

"Hypodermic! I've never heard of the thing—not even the name!"

"A wonderful cure it is—for noisy tongues!"

"You excite one's curiosity. Tell me something of its nature."

"Oh, it's very simple—exceedingly so. Only a drop of liquid introduced into the blood—not in the common roundabout way, by pouring down the throat, but direct injection into the veins. The process in itself is easy enough, as every medical practitioner knows. The skill consists in the *kind* of liquid to be injected. That's one of the occult sciences I learnt in Italy, land of Lucrezia and Tophana, where such branches of knowledge still flourish. Elsewhere it's not much known. And perhaps it's well it isn't, or there might be more widowers, with a still larger proportion of widows."

"Poison!" she exclaims involuntarily, adding, in a timid whisper, "Was it, Gregoire?"

"Poison!" he echoes, protestingly. "That's too plain a word, and the idea it conveys too vulgar, for such a delicate scientific operation as that I've performed. Possibly, in Monsieur Coracle's case, the effect will be somewhat similar, but not the after symptoms. If I haven't made miscalculation as to quantity, ere three days are over, it will send him to his eternal sleep; and I'll defy all the medical experts in England to detect traces of poison in him. So don't inquire further, *chère*. Be satisfied to know the hypodermic will do you a service. And," he adds, with sardonic smile, "grateful if it be never given to yourself."

She starts, recoiling in horror—not at the repulsive confessions she has listened to, but more through personal fear. Though herself steeped in crime, he beside her seems its very incarnation! She has long known him morally capable of anything, and now fancies he may have the power of the famed basilisk, to strike her dead with a glance of his eyes!

"Bah!" he exclaims, observing her trepidation, but pretending to construe it otherwise. "Why all this emotion about such a *misérable*? He'll have no widow to lament him—inconsolable like yourself. Ha! ha! Besides, for our safety—both of us—his death is as much needed as was the other. After killing the bird that threatened to devour our crops, it would be blind buffoonery to keep the scarecrow standing. I only wish there were nothing but he between us and complete security."

"But is there still?" she asks, her alarm taking a new turn, as she observes a slight shade of apprehension pass over his face.

"Certainly there is."

"What?"

"That little convent matter."

"*Mon Dieu!* I supposed it arranged beyond the possibility of danger."

"Probability is the word you mean. In this sweet world there's nothing sure except money—that, too, in hard cash coin. Even at the best we'll have to sacrifice a large slice of the estate to satisfy the greed of those who have assisted us—*Messieurs les Jesuites*. If I could only, as by some magician's wand, convert

these clods of Herefordshire into a portable shape, I'd cheat them yet; as I've done already, in making them believe me one of their most ardent *doctrinaires*. Then, *chère amie*, we could at once move from Llangorren Court to a palace by some lake of Como, glassing softest skies, with whispering myrtles, and all the other fal-lals, by which Monsieur Bulwer's sham prince humbugged the Lyonesse shopkeeper's daughter. Ha! ha! ha!"

"But why can't it be done?"

"Ah! There the word *impossible*, if you like. What! Convert a landed estate of several thousand acres into cash, *presto-instanter*, as though one were but selling a flock of sheep! The thing can't be accomplished anywhere, least of all in this slow-moving Angleterre, where men look at their money twice—twenty times—before parting with it. Even a mortgage couldn't be managed for weeks—maybe months—without losing quite the moiety of value. But a *bonâ fide* sale, for which we must wait, and with that cloud hanging over us! Oh, it's damnable! The thing's been a blunder from beginning to end, all through the squeamishness of Monsieur, *votre mari*. Had he agreed to what I first proposed, and done with Mademoiselle what should have been done, he might himself still—the simpleton, sot, soft-heart, and softer head! Well, it's of no use reviling him now. He paid the forfeit for being a fool. And 'twill do no good our giving way to apprehensions, that after all may turn out shadows, however dark. In the end everything may go right, and we can make our midnight flitting in a quiet, comfortable way. But what a flutter there'll be among my flock at the Rugg's Ferry Chapel, when they wake up some fine morning, and rub their eyes, only to see that their good shepherd has forsaken them! A comical scene, of which I'd like being a spectator. Ha! ha! ha!"

She joins him in the laugh, for the sally is irresistible. And while they are still ha-ha-ing, a touch at the door tells of a servant seeking admittance.

It is the butler who presents himself, salver in hand, on which rests a chrome-coloured envelope—at a glance seen to be a telegraphic despatch.

It bears the address "Rev. Gregoire Rogier, Rugg's Ferry, Herefordshire," and when opened, the telegram is seen to have been sent from Folkestone. Its wording is,—

"*The bird has escaped from its cage. Prenez garde!*"

Well for the pseudo-priest and his *chère amie* that before they read it the butler

had left the room. For though figurative the form of expression, and cabalistic the words, both man and woman seem instantly to comprehend them; and with such comprehension, as almost to drive them distracted. He is silent, as if struck dumb, his face showing blanched and bloodless, while she utters a shriek, half terrified, half in frenzied anger.

It is the last loud cry, or word, to which she gives utterance at Llangorren. And no longer there speaks the priest loudly, or authoritatively. The after hours of that night are spent by both of them, not as the owners of the house, but burglars in the act of breaking it.

Up till the hour of dawn, the two might be seen silently flitting from room to room—attended only by Clarisse, who carries the candle—ransacking drawers and secretares, selecting articles of *bijouterie* and *vertu*, of little weight, but large value, and packing them in trunks and travelling bags; all of which under the grey light of morning are taken to the nearest railway station in one of the Court carriages—a large drag-barouche—inside which ride Rogier and Madame Murdock *veuve*; her *femme de chambre* having a seat beside the coachman, who has been told they are starting on a continental tour.



And so were they; but it was a tour from which they never returned. Instead, it was extended to a greater distance than they themselves designed, and in a direction neither dreamt of; since their career, after a year's interval, ended in *deportation* to Cayenne, for some crime committed by them in the South of France. So said the *Semaphore* of Marseilles.



CHAPTER LXXII.

CORACLE DICK ON HIS DEATH-BED.

As next morning's sun rises over Llangorren Court, it shows a mansion without either master or mistress!

Not long to remain so. If the old servants of the establishment had short notice of dismissal, still more brief is that given to its latest retinue. About meridian of that day, after the departure of their mistress, while yet in wonder where she has gone, they receive another shock of surprise, and a more unpleasant one, at seeing a hackney carriage drive up to the hall door, out of which step two men, evidently no friends to her from whom they have their wages. For one of the men is Captain Ryecroft, the other a police superintendent; who, after the shortest possible parley, directs the butler to parade the complete staff of his fellow-domestics, male and female. This with an air and in a tone of authority which precludes supposition that the thing is a jest.

Summoned from all quarters, cellar to garret, and outdoors as well, their names, with other particulars, are taken down; and they are told that their services will be no longer required at Llangorren. In short, they are one and all dismissed, without a word about the month's wages or warning! If they get either, 'twill be only as a grace.

Then they receive orders to pack up and be off; while Joseph Preece, ex-Charon, who has crossed the river in his boat, with appointment to meet the hackney there, is authorized to take temporary charge of the place; Jack Wingate, similarly bespoke, having come down in his skiff, to stand by him in case of any opposition.

None arises. However chagrined by their hasty *sans façon* discharge, the outgoing domestics seem not so greatly surprised at it. From what they have observed for some time going on, as also something whispered about, they had no great reliance on their places being permanent. So, in silence all submit, though somewhat sulkily; and prepare to vacate quarters they had found fairly snug.

There is one, however, who cannot be thus conveniently, or unceremoniously,

dismissed—the head gamekeeper, Richard Dempsey. For, while the others are getting their *mandamus* to move, the report is brought in that he is lying on his death-bed! So the parish doctor has prognosticated. Also, that he is just then delirious, and saying queer things; some of which repeated to the police "super," tell him his proper place at that precise moment is by the bedside of the sick man.

Without a second's delay, he starts off towards the lodge in which Coracle has been of late domiciled—under the guidance of its former occupant, Joseph Preece—accompanied by Captain Ryecroft and Jack Wingate.

The house being but a few hundred yards distant from the Court, they are soon inside it, and standing over the bed on which lies the fevered patient; not at rest, but tossing to and fro—at intervals, in such violent manner as to need restraint.

The superintendent at once sees it would be idle putting questions to him. If asked his own name, he could not declare it; for he knows not himself—far less those who are around.

His face is something horrible to behold. It would but harrow sensitive feelings to give a portraiture of it. Enough to say, it is more like that of demon than man.

And his speech, poured as in a torrent from his lips, is alike horrifying—admission of many and varied crimes, in the same breath denying them and accusing others, his contradictory ravings garnished with blasphemous ejaculations.

A specimen will suffice, omitting the blasphemy.

"It's a lie!" he cries out, just as they are entering the room. "A lie, every word o't! I didn't murder Mary Morgan. Served her right if I had, the jade! She jilted me; an' for that wasp Wingate—dog—cur! I didn't kill her. No; only fixed the plank. If she wor fool enough to step on't, that warn't my fault. She did—she did! Ha! ha! ha!"

For a while he keeps up the horrid cachinnation, as the glee of Satan exulting over some feat of foul *diablerie*. Then his thoughts changing to another crime, he goes on,—

"The grand girl—the lady! She arn't drowned; nor dead eyther! The priest carried her off in that French schooner. I had nothing to do with it. 'Twar the priest and Mr. Murdock. Ha! Murdock! I *did* drown *him*. No, I didn't. That's

another lie! T'was himself upset the boat. Let me see—was it? No! he couldn't—he was too drunk. I stood up on the skiff's rail. Slap over it went. What a duckin' I had for it, and a devil o' a swim too! But I did the trick—neatly! Didn't I, your Reverence? Now for the hundred pounds. And you promised to double it—you did! Keep to your bargain, or I'll peach upon you—on all the lot of you—the woman, too—the French woman! She kept that fine shawl—Indian they said it wor. She's got it now. She wanted the diamonds, too, but daren't keep *them*. The shroud! Ha! the shroud! That's all they left *me*. I ought to 'a burnt it. But then the devil would 'a been after and burned me! How fine Mary looked in that grand dress, wi' all them gewgaws, rings,—chains an' bracelets, all pure gold! But I drowneded her, an' she deserved it, that she did. Drowneded her twice—ha—ha—ha!"

Again he breaks off with a peal of demoniac laughter, long continued.

More than an hour they remain listening to his delirious ramblings, and with interest intense. For, despite its incoherence, the disconnected threads joined together make up a tale they can understand; though so strange, so brimful of atrocities, as to seem incredible.

All the while he is writhing about on the bed; till at length, exhausted, his head droops over upon the pillow, and he lies for a while quiet—to all appearance dead!

But no; there is another throe yet—one horrible as any that has preceded. Looking up, he sees the superintendent's uniform and silver buttons—a sight which produces a change in the expression of his features, as though it had recalled him to his senses. With arms flung out as in defence, he shrieks,—

"Keep back, you —— policeman! Hands off, or I'll brain you! Hach! You've got the rope round my neck! Curse the thing! It's choking me. Hach!"

And with his fingers clutching at his throat, as if to undo a noose, he gasps out in husky voice,—

"Gone, by G——."

At this he drops over dead, his last word an oath, his last thought a fancy that there is a rope around his neck!

What he has said in his unconscious confessions lays open many seeming mysteries of this romance, hitherto unrevealed. How the pseudo-priest, Father

Rogier, observing a likeness between Miss Wynn and Mary Morgan—causing him that start as he stood over the coffin, noticed by Jack Wingate—had exhumed the dead body of the latter, the poacher and Murdock assisting him. Then how they had taken it down in the boat to Dempsey's house; soon after, going over to Llangorren, and seizing the young lady, as she stood in the summer-house, having stifled her cries by chloroform. Then, how they carried her across to Dempsey's, and substituted the corpse for the living body—the grave-clothes changed for the silken dress with all its adornments—this the part assigned to Mrs. Murdock, who had met them at Coracle's cottage. Then, Dick himself hiding away the shroud, hindered by superstitious fear from committing it to the flames. In fine, how Gwendoline Wynn, drugged and still kept in a state of coma, was taken down in a boat to Chepstow, and there put aboard the French schooner *La Chouette*; carried across to Boulogne, to be shut up in a convent for life! All these delicate matters, managed by Father Rogier, backed by *Messieurs les Jesuites*, who had furnished him with the means!

One after another the astounding facts come forth as the raving man continues his involuntary admissions. Supplemented by others already known to Rycroft and the rest, with the deductions drawn, they complete the unities of a drama, iniquitous as ever enacted.

Its motives declare themselves—all wicked save one: this a spark of humanity that had still lingered in the breast of Lewin Murdock, but for which Gwendoline Wynn would never have seen the inside of a nunnery. Instead, while under the influence of the narcotic, her body would have been dropped into the Wye, just as was that wearing her ball dress! And that same body is now wearing another dress, supposed to have been prepared for her—another shroud—reposing in the tomb where all believed Gwen Wynn to have been laid!

This last fact is brought to light on the following day, when the family vault of the Wynns is re-opened, and Mrs. Morgan—by marks known only to herself—identifies the remains found there as those of her own daughter!



CHAPTER LXXIII.

THE CALM AFTER THE STORM.

Twelve months after the events recorded in this romance of the Wye, a boat-tourist descending the picturesque river, and inquiring about a pagoda-like structure he will see on its western side, would be told it is a summer-house, standing in the ornamental grounds of a gentleman's residence. If he ask who the gentleman is, the answer would be, Captain Vivian Rycroft! For the ex-officer of Hussars is now the master of Llangorren; and, what he himself values higher, the husband of Gwendoline Wynn, once more its mistress.

Were the tourist an acquaintance of either, and on his way to make call at the Court, bringing in by the little dock, he would there see a row boat, on its stern board, in gold lettering, "*The Gwendoline*." For the pretty pleasure craft has been restored to its ancient moorings. Still, however, remaining the property of Joseph Preece, who no longer lives in the cast-off cottage of Coracle Dick, but, like the boat itself, is again back and in service at Llangorren.

If the day be fine, this venerable and versatile individual will be loitering beside it, or seated on one of its thwarts, pipe in mouth, indulging in the *dolce far niente*. And little besides has he to do, since his pursuits are no longer varied, but now exclusively confined to the calling of waterman to the Court. He and his craft are under charter for the remainder of his life, should he wish it so—as he surely will.

The friendly visitor keeping on up to the house, if at the hour of luncheon, will in all likelihood there meet a party of old acquaintances—ours, if not his. Besides the beautiful hostess at the table's head, he will see a lady of the "antique brocaded type," who herself once presided there, by name Miss Dorothea Linton; another known as Miss Eleanor Lees; and a fourth, youngest of the quartette, *yclept* Kate Mahon. For the school girl of the Boulogne Convent has escaped from its austere studies, and is now most part of her time resident with the friend she helped to escape from its cloisters.

Men there will also be at the Llangorren luncheon table; likely three of them, in addition to the host himself. One will be Major Mahon; a second the Reverend

William Musgrave; and the third, Mr. George Shenstone! Yes; George Shenstone, under the roof, and seated at the table of Gwendoline Wynn, now the wife of Vivian Rycroft!

To explain a circumstance seemingly so singular, it is necessary to call in the aid of a saying, culled from that language richest of all others in moral and metaphysical imagery—the Spanish. It has a proverb, *un claco saca otro claco*—"one nail drives out the other." And, watching the countenance of the baronet's son, so long sad and clouded, seeing how, at intervals, it brightens up—these intervals when his eyes meet those of Kate Mahon—it were easy predicting that in his case the adage will ere long have additional verification.



Were the same tourist to descend the Wye at a date posterior, and again make a call at Llangorren, he would find that some changes had taken place in the interval of his absence. At the boat dock Old Joe would likely be. But not as before in sole charge of the pleasure craft; only pottering about, as a pensioner retired on full pay; the acting and active officer being a younger man, by name Wingate, who is now waterman to the Court. Between these two, however, there is no spite about the displacement—no bickerings nor heartburnings. How could there, since the younger addresses the older as "uncle"; himself in return being styled "nevvv"?

No need to say that this relationship has been brought about by the bright eyes of Amy Preece. Nor is it so new. In the lodge where Jack and Joe live together is a brace of chubby chicks; one of them a boy—the possible embryo of a Wye waterman—who, dandled upon old Joe's knees, takes delight in weeding his frosted whiskers, while calling him "good granddaddy."

As Jack's mother—who is also a member of this happy family—forewarned him, the wildest grief must in time give way, and Nature's laws assert their supremacy. So has he found it; and though still holding Mary Morgan in sacred, honest remembrance, he—as many a true man before, and others as true to come—has yielded to the inevitable.

Proceeding on to the Court, the friendly visitor will at certain times there meet the same people he met before; but the majority of them having new names or titles. An added number in two interesting olive branches there also, with

complexions struggling between *blonde* and *brunette*, who call Captain and Mrs. Ryecroft their papa and mamma; while the lady who was once Eleanor Lees—the "companion"—is now Mrs. Musgrave, life companion, not to the *curate* of Llangorren Church, but its *rector*. The living having become vacant, and in the bestowal of Llangorren's heiress, has been worthily bestowed on the Reverend William.

Two other old faces, withal young ones, the returned tourist will see at Llangorren—their owners on visit as himself. He might not know either of them by the names they now bear—Sir George and Lady Shenstone—for when he last saw them, the gentleman was simply Mr. Shenstone, and the lady Miss Mahon. The old baronet is dead, and the young one, succeeding to the title, has also taken upon himself another title—that of husband—proving the Spanish apothegm true, both in the spirit and to the letter.

If there be any nail capable of driving out another, it is that sent home by the glance of an Irish girl's eye—at least, so thinks Sir George Shenstone, with good reason for thinking it.

There are two other individuals, who come and go at the Court—the only ones holding out, and likely to hold, against change of any kind. For Major Mahon is still Major Mahon, rolling on in his rich Irish brogue, as ever abhorrent of matrimony. No danger of his becoming a benedict! And as little of Miss Linton being transformed into a sage woman. It would be strange if she should, with the love novels she continues to devour, and the "Court Intelligence" she gulps down, keeping alive the hallucination that she is still a belle at Bath and Cheltenham.

So ends our "Romance of the Wye"—a drama of happy *denouement* to most of the actors in it; and, as hoped, satisfactory to all who have been spectators.

THE END

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