THOMAS HARDY

A LAODICEAN: A STORY OF TO-DAY

Thomas Hardy

A Laodicean : A Story of To-day

Hardy T.

A Laodicean : A Story of To-day / T. Hardy — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Thomas Hardy
A Laodicean

PREFACE

The changing of the old order in country manors and mansions may be slow or sudden, may have many issues romantic or otherwise, its romantic issues being not necessarily restricted to a change back to the original order; though this admissible instance appears to have been the only romance formerly recognized by novelists as possible in the case. Whether the following production be a picture of other possibilities or not, its incidents may be taken to be fairly well supported by evidence every day forthcoming in most counties.

The writing of the tale was rendered memorable to two persons, at least, by a tedious illness of five months that laid hold of the author soon after the story was begun in a well-known magazine; during which period the narrative had to be strenuously continued by dictation to a predetermined cheerful ending.

As some of these novels of Wessex life address themselves more especially to readers into whose souls the iron has entered, and whose years have less pleasure in them now than heretofore, so “A Laodicean” may perhaps help to while away an idle afternoon of the comfortable ones whose lines have fallen to them in pleasant places; above all, of that large and happy section of the reading public which has not yet reached ripeness of years; those to whom marriage is the pilgrim’s Eternal City, and not a milestone on the way. T.H.

January 1896.

BOOK THE FIRST. GEORGE SOMERSET

I

The sun blazed down and down, till it was within half-an-hour of its setting; but the sketcher still lingered at his occupation of measuring and copying the chevroned doorway – a bold and quaint example of a transitional style of architecture, which formed the tower entrance to an English village church. The graveyard being quite open on its western side, the tweed-clad figure of the young draughtsman, and the tall mass of antique masonry which rose above him to a battlemented parapet, were fired to a great brightness by the solar rays, that crossed the neighbouring mead like a warp of gold threads, in whose mazes groups of equally lustrous gnats danced and wailed incessantly.

He was so absorbed in his pursuit that he did not mark the brilliant chromatic effect of which he composed the central feature, till it was brought home to his intelligence by the warmth of the moulded stonework under his touch when measuring; which led him at length to turn his head and gaze on its cause.

There are few in whom the sight of a sunset does not beget as much meditative melancholy as contemplative pleasure, the human decline and death that it illustrates being too obvious to escape the notice of the simplest observer. The sketcher, as if he had been brought to this reflection many hundreds of times before by the same spectacle, showed that he did not wish to pursue it just now, by turning away his face after a few moments, to resume his architectural studies.

He took his measurements carefully, and as if he reverenced the old workers whose trick he was endeavouring to acquire six hundred years after the original performance had ceased and the performers passed into the unseen. By means of a strip of lead called a leaden tape, which he pressed around and into the fillets and hollows with his finger and thumb, he transferred the exact contour of each moulding to his drawing, that lay on a sketching-stool a few feet distant; where were also a sketching-block, a small T-square, a bow-pencil, and other mathematical instruments. When he had marked down the line thus fixed, he returned to the doorway to copy another as before.

It being the month of August, when the pale face of the townsman and the stranger is to be seen among the brown skins of remotest uplanders, not only in England, but throughout the temperate zone, few of the homeward-bound labourers paused to notice him further than by a momentary turn of the head. They had beheld such gentlemen before, not exactly measuring the church so accurately as this one seemed to be doing, but painting it from a distance, or at least walking round the mouldy pile. At the same time the present visitor, even exteriorly, was not altogether commonplace. His features were good, his eyes of the dark deep sort called eloquent by the sex that ought to know, and with that ray of light in them which announces a heart susceptible to beauty of all kinds, – in woman, in art, and in inanimate nature. Though he would have been broadly characterized as a young man, his face bore contradictory testimonies to his precise age. This was conceivably owing to a too dominant speculative activity in him, which, while it had preserved the emotional side of his constitution, and with it the significant flexuousness of mouth and chin, had played upon his forehead and temples till, at weary moments, they exhibited some traces of being over-exercised. A youthfulness about the mobile features, a mature forehead – though not exactly what the world has been familiar with in past ages – is now growing common; and with the advance of juvenile introspection it probably must grow commoner still. Briefly, he had more of the beauty – if beauty it ought to be called – of the future human type than of the past; but not so much as to make him other than a nice young man.

His build was somewhat slender and tall; his complexion, though a little browned by recent exposure, was that of a man who spent much of his time indoors. Of beard he had but small show,

though he was as innocent as a Nazarite of the use of the razor; but he possessed a moustache all-sufficient to hide the subtleties of his mouth, which could thus be tremulous at tender moments without provoking inconvenient criticism.

Owing to his situation on high ground, open to the west, he remained enveloped in the lingering aureate haze till a time when the eastern part of the churchyard was in obscurity, and damp with rising dew. When it was too dark to sketch further he packed up his drawing, and, beckoning to a lad who had been idling by the gate, directed him to carry the stool and implements to a roadside inn which he named, lying a mile or two ahead. The draughtsman leisurely followed the lad out of the churchyard, and along a lane in the direction signified.

The spectacle of a summer traveller from London sketching mediaeval details in these neo-Pagan days, when a lull has come over the study of English Gothic architecture, through a re-awakening to the art-forms of times that more nearly neighbour our own, is accounted for by the fact that George Somerset, son of the Academician of that name, was a man of independent tastes and excursive instincts, who unconsciously, and perhaps unhappily, took greater pleasure in floating in lonely currents of thought than with the general tide of opinion. When quite a lad, in the days of the French Gothic mania which immediately succeeded to the great English-pointed revival under Britton, Pugin, Rickman, Scott, and other mediaevalists, he had crept away from the fashion to admire what was good in Palladian and Renaissance. As soon as Jacobean, Queen Anne, and kindred accretions of decayed styles began to be popular, he purchased such old-school works as Revett and Stuart, Chambers, and the rest, and worked diligently at the Five Orders; till quite bewildered on the question of style, he concluded that all styles were extinct, and with them all architecture as a living art. Somerset was not old enough at that time to know that, in practice, art had at all times been as full of shifts and compromises as every other mundane thing; that ideal perfection was never achieved by Greek, Goth, or Hebrew Jew, and never would be; and thus he was thrown into a mood of disgust with his profession, from which mood he was only delivered by recklessly abandoning these studies and indulging in an old enthusiasm for poetical literature. For two whole years he did nothing but write verse in every conceivable metre, and on every conceivable subject, from Wordsworthian sonnets on the singing of his tea-kettle to epic fragments on the Fall of Empires. His discovery at the age of five-and-twenty that these inspired works were not jumped at by the publishers with all the eagerness they deserved, coincided in point of time with a severe hint from his father that unless he went on with his legitimate profession he might have to look elsewhere than at home for an allowance. Mr. Somerset junior then awoke to realities, became intently practical, rushed back to his dusty drawing-boards, and worked up the styles anew, with a view of regularly starting in practice on the first day of the following January.

It is an old story, and perhaps only deserves the light tone in which the soaring of a young man into the empyrean, and his descent again, is always narrated. But as has often been said, the light and the truth may be on the side of the dreamer: a far wider view than the wise ones have may be his at that recalcitrant time, and his reduction to common measure be nothing less than a tragic event. The operation called lunging, in which a haltered colt is made to trot round and round a horsebreaker who holds the rope, till the beholder grows dizzy in looking at them, is a very unhappy one for the animal concerned. During its progress the colt springs upward, across the circle, stops, flies over the turf with the velocity of a bird, and indulges in all sorts of graceful antics; but he always ends in one way – thanks to the knotted whipcord – in a level trot round the lunger with the regularity of a horizontal wheel, and in the loss for ever to his character of the bold contours which the fine hand of Nature gave it. Yet the process is considered to be the making of him.

Whether Somerset became permanently made under the action of the inevitable lunge, or whether he lapsed into mere dabbling with the artistic side of his profession only, it would be premature to say; but at any rate it was his contrite return to architecture as a calling that sent him on the sketching excursion under notice. Feeling that something still was wanting to round off his

knowledge before he could take his professional line with confidence, he was led to remember that his own native Gothic was the one form of design that he had totally neglected from the beginning, through its having greeted him with wearisome iteration at the opening of his career. Now it had again returned to silence; indeed – such is the surprising instability of art 'principles' as they are facetiously called – it was just as likely as not to sink into the neglect and oblivion which had been its lot in Georgian times. This accident of being out of vogue lent English Gothic an additional charm to one of his proclivities; and away he went to make it the business of a summer circuit in the west.

The quiet time of evening, the secluded neighbourhood, the unusually gorgeous liveries of the clouds packed in a pile over that quarter of the heavens in which the sun had disappeared, were such as to make a traveller loiter on his walk. Coming to a stile, Somerset mounted himself on the top bar, to imbibe the spirit of the scene and hour. The evening was so still that every trifling sound could be heard for miles. There was the rattle of a returning waggon, mixed with the smacks of the waggoner's whip: the team must have been at least three miles off. From far over the hill came the faint periodic yell of kennelled hounds; while from the nearest village resounded the voices of boys at play in the twilight. Then a powerful clock struck the hour; it was not from the direction of the church, but rather from the wood behind him; and he thought it must be the clock of some mansion that way.

But the mind of man cannot always be forced to take up subjects by the pressure of their material presence, and Somerset's thoughts were often, to his great loss, apt to be even more than common truants from the tones and images that met his outer senses on walks and rides. He would sometimes go quietly through the queerest, gayest, most extraordinary town in Europe, and let it alone, provided it did not meddle with him by its beggars, beauties, innkeepers, police, coachmen, mongrels, bad smells, and such like obstructions. This feat of questionable utility he began performing now. Sitting on the three-inch ash rail that had been peeled and polished like glass by the rubbings of all the small-clothes in the parish, he forgot the time, the place, forgot that it was August – in short, everything of the present altogether. His mind flew back to his past life, and deplored the waste of time that had resulted from his not having been able to make up his mind which of the many fashions of art that were coming and going in kaleidoscopic change was the true point of departure from himself. He had suffered from the modern malady of unlimited appreciativeness as much as any living man of his own age. Dozens of his fellows in years and experience, who had never thought specially of the matter, but had blunderingly applied themselves to whatever form of art confronted them at the moment of their making a move, were by this time acquiring renown as new lights; while he was still unknown. He wished that some accident could have hemmed in his eyes between inexorable blinkers, and sped him on in a channel ever so worn.

Thus balanced between believing and not believing in his own future, he was recalled to the scene without by hearing the notes of a familiar hymn, rising in subdued harmonies from a valley below. He listened more heedfully. It was his old friend the 'New Sabbath,' which he had never once heard since the lisping days of childhood, and whose existence, much as it had then been to him, he had till this moment quite forgotten. Where the 'New Sabbath' had kept itself all these years – why that sound and hearty melody had disappeared from all the cathedrals, parish churches, minsters and chapels-of-ease that he had been acquainted with during his apprenticeship to life, and until his ways had become irregular and uncongregational – he could not, at first, say. But then he recollected that the tune appertained to the old west-gallery period of church-music, anterior to the great choral reformation and the rule of Monk – that old time when the repetition of a word, or half-line of a verse, was not considered a disgrace to an ecclesiastical choir.

Willing to be interested in anything which would keep him out-of-doors, Somerset dismounted from the stile and descended the hill before him, to learn whence the singing proceeded.

II

He found that it had its origin in a building standing alone in a field; and though the evening was not yet dark without, lights shone from the windows. In a few moments Somerset stood before the edifice. Being just then en rapport with ecclesiasticism by reason of his recent occupation, he could not help murmuring, 'Shade of Pugin, what a monstrosity!'

Perhaps this exclamation (rather out of date since the discovery that Pugin himself often nodded amazingly) would not have been indulged in by Somerset but for his new architectural resolves, which caused professional opinions to advance themselves officiously to his lips whenever occasion offered. The building was, in short, a recently-erected chapel of red brick, with pseudo-classic ornamentation, and the white regular joints of mortar could be seen streaking its surface in geometrical oppressiveness from top to bottom. The roof was of blue slate, clean as a table, and unbroken from gable to gable; the windows were glazed with sheets of plate glass, a temporary iron stovepipe passing out near one of these, and running up to the height of the ridge, where it was finished by a covering like a parachute. Walking round to the end, he perceived an oblong white stone let into the wall just above the plinth, on which was inscribed in deep letters: —

Erected 187-,
AT THE SOLE EXPENSE OF
JOHN POWER, ESQ., M.P.

The 'New Sabbath' still proceeded line by line, with all the emotional swells and cadences that had of old characterized the tune: and the body of vocal harmony that it evoked implied a large congregation within, to whom it was plainly as familiar as it had been to church-goers of a past generation. With a whimsical sense of regret at the secession of his once favourite air Somerset moved away, and would have quite withdrawn from the field had he not at that moment observed two young men with pitchers of water coming up from a stream hard by, and hastening with their burdens into the chapel vestry by a side door. Almost as soon as they had entered they emerged again with empty pitchers, and proceeded to the stream to fill them as before, an operation which they repeated several times. Somerset went forward to the stream, and waited till the young men came out again.

'You are carrying in a great deal of water,' he said, as each dipped his pitcher.

One of the young men modestly replied, 'Yes: we filled the cistern this morning; but it leaks, and requires a few pitcherfuls more.'

'Why do you do it?'

'There is to be a baptism, sir.'

Somerset was not sufficiently interested to develop a further conversation, and observing them in silence till they had again vanished into the building, he went on his way. Reaching the brow of the hill he stopped and looked back. The chapel was still in view, and the shades of night having deepened, the lights shone from the windows yet more brightly than before. A few steps further would hide them and the edifice, and all that belonged to it from his sight, possibly for ever. There was something in the thought which led him to linger. The chapel had neither beauty, quaintness, nor congeniality to recommend it: the dissimilitude between the new utilitarianism of the place and the scenes of venerable Gothic art which had occupied his daylight hours could not well be exceeded. But Somerset, as has been said, was an instrument of no narrow gamut: he had a key for other touches than the purely aesthetic, even on such an excursion as this. His mind was arrested by the intense and busy energy which must needs belong to an assembly that required such a glare of light to do its religion by; in the heaving of that tune there was an earnestness which made him thoughtful, and the shine of those windows he had characterized as ugly reminded him of the shining of the good deed in a naughty world. The chapel and its shabby plot of ground, from which the herbage was all trodden

away by busy feet, had a living human interest that the numerous minsters and churches knee-deep in fresh green grass, visited by him during the foregoing week, had often lacked. Moreover, there was going to be a baptism: that meant the immersion of a grown-up person; and he had been told that Baptists were serious people and that the scene was most impressive. What manner of man would it be who on an ordinary plodding and bustling evening of the nineteenth century could single himself out as one different from the rest of the inhabitants, banish all shyness, and come forward to undergo such a trying ceremony? Who was he that had pondered, gone into solitudes, wrestled with himself, worked up his courage and said, I will do this, though few else will, for I believe it to be my duty?

Whether on account of these thoughts, or from the circumstance that he had been alone amongst the tombs all day without communion with his kind, he could not tell in after years (when he had good reason to think of the subject); but so it was that Somerset went back, and again stood under the chapel-wall.

Instead of entering he passed round to where the stove-chimney came through the bricks, and holding on to the iron stay he put his toes on the plinth and looked in at the window. The building was quite full of people belonging to that vast majority of society who are denied the art of articulating their higher emotions, and crave dumbly for a fugleman – respectably dressed working people, whose faces and forms were worn and contorted by years of dreary toil. On a platform at the end of the chapel a haggard man of more than middle age, with grey whiskers ascetically cut back from the fore part of his face so far as to be almost banished from the countenance, stood reading a chapter. Between the minister and the congregation was an open space, and in the floor of this was sunk a tank full of water, which just made its surface visible above the blackness of its depths by reflecting the lights overhead.

Somerset endeavoured to discover which one among the assemblage was to be the subject of the ceremony. But nobody appeared there who was at all out of the region of commonplace. The people were all quiet and settled; yet he could discern on their faces something more than attention, though it was less than excitement: perhaps it was expectation. And as if to bear out his surmise he heard at that moment the noise of wheels behind him.

His gaze into the lighted chapel made what had been an evening scene when he looked away from the landscape night itself on looking back; but he could see enough to discover that a brougham had driven up to the side-door used by the young water-bearers, and that a lady in white-and-black half-mourning was in the act of alighting, followed by what appeared to be a waiting-woman carrying wraps. They entered the vestry-room of the chapel, and the door was shut. The service went on as before till at a certain moment the door between vestry and chapel was opened, when a woman came out clothed in an ample robe of flowing white, which descended to her feet. Somerset was unfortunate in his position; he could not see her face, but her gait suggested at once that she was the lady who had arrived just before. She was rather tall than otherwise, and the contour of her head and shoulders denoted a girl in the heyday of youth and activity. His imagination, stimulated by this beginning, set about filling in the meagre outline with most attractive details.

She stood upon the brink of the pool, and the minister descended the steps at its edge till the soles of his shoes were moistened with the water. He turned to the young candidate, but she did not follow him: instead of doing so she remained rigid as a stone. He stretched out his hand, but she still showed reluctance, till, with some embarrassment, he went back, and spoke softly in her ear.

She approached the edge, looked into the water, and turned away shaking her head. Somerset could for the first time see her face. Though humanly imperfect, as is every face we see, it was one which made him think that the best in woman-kind no less than the best in psalm-tunes had gone over to the Dissenters. He had certainly seen nobody so interesting in his tour hitherto; she was about twenty or twenty-one – perhaps twenty-three, for years have a way of stealing marches even upon beauty's anointed. The total dissimilarity between the expression of her lineaments and that of the countenances around her was not a little surprising, and was productive of hypotheses without

measure as to how she came there. She was, in fact, emphatically a modern type of maidenhood, and she looked ultra-modern by reason of her environment: a presumably sophisticated being among the simple ones – not wickedly so, but one who knew life fairly well for her age. Her hair, of good English brown, neither light nor dark, was abundant – too abundant for convenience in tying, as it seemed; and it threw off the lamp-light in a hazy lustre. And though it could not be said of her features that this or that was flawless, the nameless charm of them altogether was only another instance of how beautiful a woman can be as a whole without attaining in any one detail to the lines marked out as absolutely correct. The spirit and the life were there: and material shapes could be disregarded.

Whatever moral characteristics this might be the surface of, enough was shown to assure Somerset that she had some experience of things far removed from her present circumscribed horizon, and could live, and was even at that moment living, a clandestine, stealthy inner life which had very little to do with her outward one. The repression of nearly every external sign of that distress under which Somerset knew, by a sudden intuitive sympathy, that she was labouring, added strength to these convictions.

'And you refuse?' said the astonished minister, as she still stood immovable on the brink of the pool. He persuasively took her sleeve between his finger and thumb as if to draw her; but she resented this by a quick movement of displeasure, and he released her, seeing that he had gone too far.

'But, my dear lady,' he said, 'you promised! Consider your profession, and that you stand in the eyes of the whole church as an exemplar of your faith.'

'I cannot do it!'

'But your father's memory, miss; his last dying request!'

'I cannot help it,' she said, turning to get away.

'You came here with the intention to fulfil the Word?'

'But I was mistaken.'

'Then why did you come?'

She tacitly implied that to be a question she did not care to answer. 'Please say no more to me,' she murmured, and hastened to withdraw.

During this unexpected dialogue (which had reached Somerset's ears through the open windows) that young man's feelings had flown hither and thither between minister and lady in a most capricious manner: it had seemed at one moment a rather uncivil thing of her, charming as she was, to give the minister and the water-bearers so much trouble for nothing; the next, it seemed like reviving the ancient cruelties of the ducking-stool to try to force a girl into that dark water if she had not a mind to it. But the minister was not without insight, and he had seen that it would be useless to say more. The crestfallen old man had to turn round upon the congregation and declare officially that the baptism was postponed.

She passed through the door into the vestry. During the exciting moments of her recusancy there had been a perceptible flutter among the sensitive members of the congregation; nervous Dissenters seeming to be at one with nervous Episcopalians in this at least, that they heartily disliked a scene during service. Calm was restored to their minds by the minister starting a rather long hymn in minims and semibreves, amid the singing of which he ascended the pulpit. His face had a severe and even denunciatory look as he gave out his text, and Somerset began to understand that this meant mischief to the young person who had caused the hitch.

'In the third chapter of Revelation and the fifteenth and following verses, you will find these words: —

'"'I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth… Thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.'"

The sermon straightway began, and it was soon apparent that the commentary was to be no less forcible than the text. It was also apparent that the words were, virtually, not directed forward in the line in which they were uttered, but through the chink of the vestry-door, that had stood slightly ajar since the exit of the young lady. The listeners appeared to feel this no less than Somerset did, for their eyes, one and all, became fixed upon that vestry door as if they would almost push it open by the force of their gazing. The preacher's heart was full and bitter; no book or note was wanted by him; never was spontaneity more absolute than here. It was no timid reproof of the ornamental kind, but a direct denunciation, all the more vigorous perhaps from the limitation of mind and language under which the speaker laboured. Yet, fool that he had been made by the candidate, there was nothing acrid in his attack. Genuine flashes of rhetorical fire were occasionally struck by that plain and simple man, who knew what straightforward conduct was, and who did not know the illimitable caprice of a woman's mind.

At this moment there was not in the whole chapel a person whose imagination was not centred on what was invisibly taking place within the vestry. The thunder of the minister's eloquence echoed, of course, through the weak sister's cavern of retreat no less than round the public assembly. What she was doing inside there – whether listening contritely, or haughtily hastening to put on her things and get away from the chapel and all it contained – was obviously the thought of each member. What changes were tracing themselves upon that lovely face: did it rise to phases of Raffaelesque resignation or sink so low as to flush and frown? was Somerset's inquiry; and a half-explanation occurred when, during the discourse, the door which had been ajar was gently pushed to.

Looking on as a stranger it seemed to him more than probable that this young woman's power of persistence in her unexpected repugnance to the rite was strengthened by wealth and position of some sort, and was not the unassisted gift of nature. The manner of her arrival, and her dignified bearing before the assembly, strengthened the belief. A woman who did not feel something extraneous to her mental self to fall back upon would be so far overawed by the people and the crisis as not to retain sufficient resolution for a change of mind.

The sermon ended, the minister wiped his steaming face and turned down his cuffs, and nods and sagacious glances went round. Yet many, even of those who had presumably passed the same ordeal with credit, exhibited gentler judgment than the preacher's on a tergiversation of which they had probably recognized some germ in their own bosoms when in the lady's situation.

For Somerset there was but one scene: the imagined scene of the girl herself as she sat alone in the vestry. The fervent congregation rose to sing again, and then Somerset heard a slight noise on his left hand which caused him to turn his head. The brougham, which had retired into the field to wait, was back again at the door: the subject of his rumination came out from the chapel – not in her mystic robe of white, but dressed in ordinary fashionable costume – followed as before by the attendant with other articles of clothing on her arm, including the white gown. Somerset fancied that the younger woman was drying her eyes with her handkerchief, but there was not much time to see: they quickly entered the carriage, and it moved on. Then a cat suddenly mewed, and he saw a white Persian standing forlorn where the carriage had been. The door was opened, the cat taken in, and the carriage drove away.

The stranger's girlish form stamped itself deeply on Somerset's soul. He strolled on his way quite oblivious to the fact that the moon had just risen, and that the landscape was one for him to linger over, especially if there were any Gothic architecture in the line of the lunar rays. The inference was that though this girl must be of a serious turn of mind, wilfulness was not foreign to her composition: and it was probable that her daily doings evinced without much abatement by religion the unbroken spirit and pride of life natural to her age.

The little village inn at which Somerset intended to pass the night lay a mile further on, and retracing his way up to the stile he rambled along the lane, now beginning to be streaked like a zebra with the shadows of some young trees that edged the road. But his attention was attracted to the other

side of the way by a hum as of a night-bee, which arose from the play of the breezes over a single wire of telegraph running parallel with his track on tall poles that had appeared by the road, he hardly knew when, from a branch route, probably leading from some town in the neighbourhood to the village he was approaching. He did not know the population of Sleeping-Green, as the village of his search was called, but the presence of this mark of civilization seemed to signify that its inhabitants were not quite so far in the rear of their age as might be imagined; a glance at the still ungrassed heap of earth round the foot of each post was, however, sufficient to show that it was at no very remote period that they had made their advance.

Aided by this friendly wire Somerset had no difficulty in keeping his course, till he reached a point in the ascent of a hill at which the telegraph branched off from the road, passing through an opening in the hedge, to strike across an undulating down, while the road wound round to the left. For a few moments Somerset doubted and stood still. The wire sang on overhead with dying falls and melodious rises that invited him to follow; while above the wire rode the stars in their courses, the low nocturn of the former seeming to be the voices of those stars,

'Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubim.'

Recalling himself from these reflections Somerset decided to follow the lead of the wire. It was not the first time during his present tour that he had found his way at night by the help of these musical threads which the post-office authorities had erected all over the country for quite another purpose than to guide belated travellers. Plunging with it across the down he came to a hedgeless road that entered a park or chase, which flourished in all its original wildness. Tufts of rushes and brakes of fern rose from the hollows, and the road was in places half overgrown with green, as if it had not been tended for many years; so much so that, where shaded by trees, he found some difficulty in keeping it. Though he had noticed the remains of a deer-fence further back no deer were visible, and it was scarcely possible that there should be any in the existing state of things: but rabbits were multitudinous, every hillock being dotted with their seated figures till Somerset approached and sent them limping into their burrows. The road next wound round a clump of underwood beside which lay heaps of faggots for burning, and then there appeared against the sky the walls and towers of a castle, half ruin, half residence, standing on an eminence hard by.

Somerset stopped to examine it. The castle was not exceptionally large, but it had all the characteristics of its most important fellows. Irregular, dilapidated, and muffled in creepers as a great portion of it was, some part – a comparatively modern wing – was inhabited, for a light or two steadily gleamed from some upper windows; in others a reflection of the moon denoted that unbroken glass yet filled their casements. Over all rose the keep, a square solid tower apparently not much injured by wars or weather, and darkened with ivy on one side, wherein wings could be heard flapping uncertainly, as if they belonged to a bird unable to find a proper perch. Hissing noises supervened, and then a hoot, proclaiming that a brood of young owls were residing there in the company of older ones. In spite of the habitable and more modern wing, neglect and decay had set their mark upon the outworks of the pile, unfitting them for a more positive light than that of the present hour.

He walked up to a modern arch spanning the ditch – now dry and green – over which the drawbridge once had swung. The large door under the porter's archway was closed and locked. While standing here the singing of the wire, which for the last few minutes he had quite forgotten, again struck upon his ear, and retreating to a convenient place he observed its final course: from the poles amid the trees it leaped across the moat, over the girdling wall, and thence by a tremendous stretch towards the keep where, to judge by sound, it vanished through an arrow-slit into the interior. This fossil of feudalism, then, was the journey's-end of the wire, and not the village of Sleeping-Green.

There was a certain unexpectedness in the fact that the hoary memorial of a stolid antagonism to the interchange of ideas, the monument of hard distinctions in blood and race, of deadly mistrust of one's neighbour in spite of the Church's teaching, and of a sublime unconsciousness of any other force than a brute one, should be the goal of a machine which beyond everything may be said to

symbolize cosmopolitan views and the intellectual and moral kinship of all mankind. In that light the little buzzing wire had a far finer significance to the student Somerset than the vast walls which neighboured it. But the modern fever and fret which consumes people before they can grow old was also signified by the wire; and this aspect of to-day did not contrast well with the fairer side of feudalism – leisure, light-hearted generosity, intense friendships, hawks, hounds, revels, healthy complexions, freedom from care, and such a living power in architectural art as the world may never again see.

Somerset withdrew till neither the singing of the wire nor the hisses of the irritable owls could be heard any more. A clock in the castle struck ten, and he recognized the strokes as those he had heard when sitting on the stile. It was indispensable that he should retrace his steps and push on to Sleeping-Green if he wished that night to reach his lodgings, which had been secured by letter at a little inn in the straggling line of roadside houses called by the above name, where his luggage had by this time probably arrived. In a quarter of an hour he was again at the point where the wire left the road, and following the highway over a hill he saw the hamlet at his feet.

III

By half-past ten the next morning Somerset was once more approaching the precincts of the building which had interested him the night before. Referring to his map he had learnt that it bore the name of Stancy Castle or Castle de Stancy; and he had been at once struck with its familiarity, though he had never understood its position in the county, believing it further to the west. If report spoke truly there was some excellent vaulting in the interior, and a change of study from ecclesiastical to secular Gothic was not unwelcome for a while.

The entrance-gate was open now, and under the archway the outer ward was visible, a great part of it being laid out as a flower-garden. This was in process of clearing from weeds and rubbish by a set of gardeners, and the soil was so encumbered that in rooting out the weeds such few hardy flowers as still remained in the beds were mostly brought up with them. The groove wherein the portcullis had run was as fresh as if only cut yesterday, the very tooling of the stone being visible. Close to this hung a bell-pull formed of a large wooden acorn attached to a vertical rod. Somerset's application brought a woman from the porter's door, who informed him that the day before having been the weekly show-day for visitors, it was doubtful if he could be admitted now.

'Who is at home?' said Somerset.

'Only Miss de Stancy,' the porteress replied.

His dread of being considered an intruder was such that he thought at first there was no help for it but to wait till the next week. But he had already through his want of effrontery lost a sight of many interiors, whose exhibition would have been rather a satisfaction to the inmates than a trouble. It was inconvenient to wait; he knew nobody in the neighbourhood from whom he could get an introductory letter: he turned and passed the woman, crossed the ward where the gardeners were at work, over a second and smaller bridge, and up a flight of stone stairs, open to the sky, along whose steps sunburnt Tudor soldiers and other renowned dead men had doubtless many times walked. It led to the principal door on this side. Thence he could observe the walls of the lower court in detail, and the old mosses with which they were padded – mosses that from time immemorial had been burnt brown every summer, and every winter had grown green again. The arrow-slit and the electric wire that entered it, like a worm uneasy at being unearthed, were distinctly visible now. So also was the clock, not, as he had supposed, a chronometer coeval with the fortress itself, but new and shining, and bearing the name of a recent maker.

The door was opened by a bland, intensely shaven man out of livery, who took Somerset's name and politely worded request to be allowed to inspect the architecture of the more public portions of

the castle. He pronounced the word ‘architecture’ in the tone of a man who knew and practised that art; ‘for,’ he said to himself, ‘if she thinks I am a mere idle tourist, it will not be so well.’

No such uncomfortable consequences ensued. Miss De Stancy had great pleasure in giving Mr. Somerset full permission to walk through whatever parts of the building he chose.

He followed the butler into the inner buildings of the fortress, the ponderous thickness of whose walls made itself felt like a physical pressure. An internal stone staircase, ranged round four sides of a square, was next revealed, leading at the top of one flight into a spacious hall, which seemed to occupy the whole area of the keep. From this apartment a corridor floored with black oak led to the more modern wing, where light and air were treated in a less gingerly fashion.

Here passages were broader than in the oldest portion, and upholstery enlisted in the service of the fine arts hid to a great extent the coldness of the walls.

Somerset was now left to himself, and roving freely from room to room he found time to inspect the different objects of interest that abounded there. Not all the chambers, even of the habitable division, were in use as dwelling-rooms, though these were still numerous enough for the wants of an ordinary country family. In a long gallery with a coved ceiling of arabesques which had once been gilded, hung a series of paintings representing the past personages of the De Stancy line. It was a remarkable array – even more so on account of the incredibly neglected condition of the canvases than for the artistic peculiarities they exhibited. Many of the frames were dropping apart at their angles, and some of the canvas was so dingy that the face of the person depicted was only distinguishable as the moon through mist. For the colour they had now they might have been painted during an eclipse; while, to judge by the webs tying them to the wall, the spiders that ran up and down their backs were such as to make the fair originals shudder in their graves.

He wondered how many of the lofty foreheads and smiling lips of this pictorial pedigree could be credited as true reflections of their prototypes. Some were wilfully false, no doubt; many more so by unavoidable accident and want of skill. Somerset felt that it required a profounder mind than his to disinter from the lumber of conventionality the lineaments that really sat in the painter’s presence, and to discover their history behind the curtain of mere tradition.

The painters of this long collection were those who usually appear in such places; Holbein, Jansen, and Vandyck; Sir Peter, Sir Geoffrey, Sir Joshua, and Sir Thomas. Their sitters, too, had mostly been sirs; Sir William, Sir John, or Sir George De Stancy – some undoubtedly having a nobility stamped upon them beyond that conferred by their robes and orders; and others not so fortunate. Their respective ladies hung by their sides – feeble and watery, or fat and comfortable, as the case might be; also their fathers and mothers-in-law, their brothers and remoter relatives; their contemporary reigning princes, and their intimate friends. Of the De Stancys pure there ran through the collection a mark by which they might surely have been recognized as members of one family; this feature being the upper part of the nose. Every one, even if lacking other points in common, had the special indent at this point in the face – sometimes moderate in degree, sometimes excessive.

While looking at the pictures – which, though not in his regular line of study, interested Somerset more than the architecture, because of their singular dilapidation, it occurred to his mind that he had in his youth been schoolfellow for a very short time with a pleasant boy bearing a surname attached to one of the paintings – the name of Ravensbury. The boy had vanished he knew not how – he thought he had been removed from school suddenly on account of ill health. But the recollection was vague, and Somerset moved on to the rooms above and below. In addition to the architectural details of which he had as yet obtained but glimpses, there was a great collection of old movables and other domestic art-work – all more than a century old, and mostly lying as lumber. There were suites of tapestry hangings, common and fine; green and scarlet leather-work, on which the gilding was still but little injured; venerable damask curtains; quilted silk table-covers, ebony cabinets, worked satin window-cushions, carved bedsteads, and embroidered bed-furniture which had apparently screened no sleeper for these many years. Downstairs there was also an interesting collection of armour,

together with several huge trunks and coffers. A great many of them had been recently taken out and cleaned, as if a long dormant interest in them were suddenly revived. Doubtless they were those which had been used by the living originals of the phantoms that looked down from the frames.

This excellent hoard of suggestive designs for wood-work, metal-work, and work of other sorts, induced Somerset to divert his studies from the ecclesiastical direction, to acquire some new ideas from the objects here for domestic application. Yet for the present he was inclined to keep his sketch-book closed and his ivory rule folded, and devote himself to a general survey. Emerging from the ground-floor by a small doorway, he found himself on a terrace to the north-east, and on the other side than that by which he had entered. It was bounded by a parapet breast high, over which a view of the distant country met the eye, stretching from the foot of the slope to a distance of many miles. Somerset went and leaned over, and looked down upon the tops of the bushes beneath. The prospect included the village he had passed through on the previous day: and amidst the green lights and shades of the meadows he could discern the red brick chapel whose recalcitrant inmate had so engrossed him.

Before his attention had long strayed over the incident which romanticized that utilitarian structure, he became aware that he was not the only person who was looking from the terrace towards that point of the compass. At the right-hand corner, in a niche of the curtain-wall, reclined a girlish shape; and asleep on the bench over which she leaned was a white cat – the identical Persian as it seemed – that had been taken into the carriage at the chapel-door.

Somerset began to muse on the probability or otherwise of the backsliding Baptist and this young lady resulting in one and the same person; and almost without knowing it he found himself deeply hoping for such a unity. The object of his inspection was idly leaning, and this somewhat disguised her figure. It might have been tall or short, curvilinear or angular. She carried a light sunshade which she fitfully twirled until, thrusting it back over her shoulder, her head was revealed sufficiently to show that she wore no hat or bonnet. This token of her being an inmate of the castle, and not a visitor, rather damped his expectations: but he persisted in believing her look towards the chapel must have a meaning in it, till she suddenly stood erect, and revealed herself as short in stature – almost dumpy – at the same time giving him a distinct view of her profile. She was not at all like the heroine of the chapel. He saw the dinted nose of the De Stancys outlined with Holbein shadowlessness against the blue-green of the distant wood. It was not the De Stancy face with all its original specialities: it was, so to speak, a defective reprint of that face: for the nose tried hard to turn up and deal utter confusion to the family shape.

As for the rest of the countenance, Somerset was obliged to own that it was not beautiful: Nature had done there many things that she ought not to have done, and left undone much that she should have executed. It would have been decidedly plain but for a precious quality which no perfection of chiselling can give when the temperament denies it, and which no facial irregularity can take away – a tender affectionateness which might almost be called yearning; such as is often seen in the women of Correggio when they are painted in profile. But the plain features of Miss De Stancy – who she undoubtedly was – were rather severely handled by Somerset's judgment owing to his impression of the previous night. A beauty of a sort would have been lent by the flexuous contours of the mobile parts but for that unfortunate condition the poor girl was burdened with, of having to hand on a traditional feature with which she did not find herself otherwise in harmony.

She glanced at him for a moment, and showed by an imperceptible movement that he had made his presence felt. Not to embarrass her Somerset hastened to withdraw, at the same time that she passed round to the other part of the terrace, followed by the cat, in whom Somerset could imagine a certain denominational cast of countenance, notwithstanding her company. But as white cats are much alike each other at a distance, it was reasonable to suppose this creature was not the same one as that possessed by the beauty.

IV

He descended the stone stairs to a lower story of the castle, in which was a crypt-like hall covered by vaulting of exceptional and massive ingenuity:

> ‘Built ere the art was known,
> By pointed aisle and shafted stalk
> The arcades of an alleyed walk
> To emulate in stone.’

It happened that the central pillar whereon the vaults rested, reputed to exhibit some of the most hideous grotesques in England upon its capital, was within a locked door. Somerset was tempted to ask a servant for permission to open it, till he heard that the inner room was temporarily used for plate, the key being kept by Miss De Stancy, at which he said no more. But afterwards the active housemaid redescended the stone steps; she entered the crypt with a bunch of keys in one hand, and in the other a candle, followed by the young lady whom Somerset had seen on the terrace.

‘I shall be very glad to unlock anything you may want to see. So few people take any real interest in what is here that we do not leave it open.’

Somerset expressed his thanks.

Miss De Stancy, a little to his surprise, had a touch of rusticity in her manner, and that forced absence of reserve which seclusion from society lends to young women more frequently than not. She seemed glad to have something to do; the arrival of Somerset was plainly an event sufficient to set some little mark upon her day. Deception had been written on the faces of those frowning walls in their implying the insignificance of Somerset, when he found them tenanted only by this little woman whose life was narrower than his own.

‘We have not been here long,’ continued Miss De Stancy, ‘and that’s why everything is in such a dilapidated and confused condition.’

Somerset entered the dark store-closet, thinking less of the ancient pillar revealed by the light of the candle than what a singular remark the latter was to come from a member of the family which appeared to have been there five centuries. He held the candle above his head, and walked round, and presently Miss De Stancy came back.

‘There is another vault below,’ she said, with the severe face of a young woman who speaks only because it is absolutely necessary. ‘Perhaps you are not aware of it? It was the dungeon: if you wish to go down there too, the servant will show you the way. It is not at all ornamental: rough, unhewn arches and clumsy piers.’

Somerset thanked her, and would perhaps take advantage of her kind offer when he had examined the spot where he was, if it were not causing inconvenience.

‘No; I am sure Paula will be glad to know that anybody thinks it interesting to go down there – which is more than she does herself.’

Some obvious inquiries were suggested by this, but Somerset said, ‘I have seen the pictures, and have been much struck by them; partly,’ he added, with some hesitation, ‘because one or two of them reminded me of a schoolfellow – I think his name was John Ravensbury?’

‘Yes,’ she said, almost eagerly. ‘He was my cousin!’

‘So that we are not quite strangers?’

‘But he is dead now… He was unfortunate: he was mostly spoken of as “that unlucky boy.”… You know, I suppose, Mr. Somerset, why the paintings are in such a decaying state! – it is owing to the peculiar treatment of the castle during Mr. Wilkins’s time. He was blind; so one can imagine he did not appreciate such things as there are here.’

'The castle has been shut up, you mean?'

'O yes, for many years. But it will not be so again. We are going to have the pictures cleaned, and the frames mended, and the old pieces of furniture put in their proper places. It will be very nice then. Did you see those in the east closet?'

'I have only seen those in the gallery.'

'I will just show you the way to the others, if you would like to see them?'

They ascended to the room designated the east closet. The paintings here, mostly of smaller size, were in a better condition, owing to the fact that they were hung on an inner wall, and had hence been kept free from damp. Somerset inquired the names and histories of one or two.

'I really don't quite know,' Miss De Stancy replied after some thought. 'But Paula knows, I am sure. I don't study them much – I don't see the use of it.' She swung her sunshade, so that it fell open, and turned it up till it fell shut. 'I have never been able to give much attention to ancestors,' she added, with her eyes on the parasol.

'These ARE your ancestors?' he asked, for her position and tone were matters which perplexed him. In spite of the family likeness and other details he could scarcely believe this frank and communicative country maiden to be the modern representative of the De Stancys.

'O yes, they certainly are,' she said, laughing. 'People say I am like them: I don't know if I am – well, yes, I know I am: I can see that, of course, any day. But they have gone from my family, and perhaps it is just as well that they should have gone… They are useless,' she added, with serene conclusiveness.

'Ah! they have gone, have they?'

'Yes, castle and furniture went together: it was long ago – long before I was born. It doesn't seem to me as if the place ever belonged to a relative of mine.'

Somerset corrected his smiling manner to one of solicitude.

'But you live here, Miss De Stancy?'

'Yes – a great deal now; though sometimes I go home to sleep.'

'This is home to you, and not home?'

'I live here with Paula – my friend: I have not been here long, neither has she. For the first six months after her father's death she did not come here at all.'

They walked on, gazing at the walls, till the young man said: 'I fear I may be making some mistake: but I am sure you will pardon my inquisitiveness this once. WHO is Paula?'

'Ah, you don't know! Of course you don't – local changes don't get talked of far away. She is the owner of this castle and estate. My father sold it when he was quite a young man, years before I was born, and not long after his father's death. It was purchased by a man named Wilkins, a rich man who became blind soon after he had bought it, and never lived here; so it was left uncared for.'

She went out upon the terrace; and without exactly knowing why, Somerset followed.

'Your friend – '

'Has only come here quite recently. She is away from home to-day… It was very sad,' murmured the young girl thoughtfully. 'No sooner had Mr. Power bought it of the representatives of Mr. Wilkins – almost immediately indeed – than he died from a chill caught after a warm bath. On account of that she did not take possession for several months; and even now she has only had a few rooms prepared as a temporary residence till she can think what to do. Poor thing, it is sad to be left alone!'

Somerset heedfully remarked that he thought he recognized that name Power, as one he had seen lately, somewhere or other.

'Perhaps you have been hearing of her father. Do you know what he was?'

Somerset did not.

She looked across the distant country, where undulations of dark-green foliage formed a prospect extending for miles. And as she watched, and Somerset's eyes, led by hers, watched also, a

white streak of steam, thin as a cotton thread, could be discerned ploughing that green expanse. ‘Her father made THAT,’ Miss De Stancy said, directing her finger towards the object.

‘That what?’

‘That railway. He was Mr. John Power, the great railway contractor. And it was through making the railway that he discovered this castle – the railway was diverted a little on its account.’

‘A clash between ancient and modern.’

‘Yes, but he took an interest in the locality long before he purchased the estate. And he built the people a chapel on a bit of freehold he bought for them. He was a great Nonconformist, a staunch Baptist up to the day of his death – a much stauncher one,’ she said significantly, ‘than his daughter is.’

‘Ah, I begin to spot her!’

‘You have heard about the baptism?’

‘I know something of it.’

‘Her conduct has given mortal offence to the scattered people of the denomination that her father was at such pains to unite into a body.’

Somerset could guess the remainder, and in thinking over the circumstances did not state what he had seen. She added, as if disappointed at his want of curiosity —

‘She would not submit to the rite when it came to the point. The water looked so cold and dark and fearful, she said, that she could not do it to save her life.’

‘Surely she should have known her mind before she had gone so far?’ Somerset’s words had a condemnatory form, but perhaps his actual feeling was that if Miss Power had known her own mind, she would have not interested him half so much.

‘Paula’s own mind had nothing to do with it!’ said Miss De Stancy, warming up to staunch partizanship in a moment. ‘It was all undertaken by her from a mistaken sense of duty. It was her father’s dying wish that she should make public profession of her – what do you call it – of the denomination she belonged to, as soon as she felt herself fit to do it: so when he was dead she tried and tried, and didn’t get any more fit; and at last she screwed herself up to the pitch, and thought she must undergo the ceremony out of pure reverence for his memory. It was very short-sighted of her father to put her in such a position: because she is now very sad, as she feels she can never try again after such a sermon as was delivered against her.’

Somerset presumed that Miss Power need not have heard this Knox or Bossuet of hers if she had chosen to go away?

‘She did not hear it in the face of the congregation; but from the vestry. She told me some of it when she reached home. Would you believe it, the man who preached so bitterly is a tenant of hers? I said, “Surely you will turn him out of his house?” – But she answered, in her calm, deep, nice way, that she supposed he had a perfect right to preach against her, that she could not in justice molest him at all. I wouldn’t let him stay if the house were mine. But she has often before allowed him to scold her from the pulpit in a smaller way – once it was about an expensive dress she had worn – not mentioning her by name, you know; but all the people are quite aware that it is meant for her, because only one person of her wealth or position belongs to the Baptist body in this county.’

Somerset was looking at the homely affectionate face of the little speaker. ‘You are her good friend, I am sure,’ he remarked.

She looked into the distant air with tacit admission of the impeachment. ‘So would you be if you knew her,’ she said; and a blush slowly rose to her cheek, as if the person spoken of had been a lover rather than a friend.

‘But you are not a Baptist any more than I?’ continued Somerset.

‘O no. And I never knew one till I knew Paula. I think they are very nice; though I sometimes wish Paula was not one, but the religion of reasonable persons.’

They walked on, and came opposite to where the telegraph emerged from the trees, leapt over the parapet, and up through the loophole into the interior.

'That looks strange in such a building,' said her companion.

'Miss Power had it put up to know the latest news from town. It costs six pounds a mile. She can work it herself, beautifully: and so can I, but not so well. It was a great delight to learn. Miss Power was so interested at first that she was sending messages from morning till night. And did you hear the new clock?'

'Is it a new one? – Yes, I heard it.'

'The old one was quite worn out; so Paula has put it in the cellar, and had this new one made, though it still strikes on the old bell. It tells the seconds, but the old one, which my very great grandfather erected in the eighteenth century, only told the hours. Paula says that time, being so much more valuable now, must of course be cut up into smaller pieces.'

'She does not appear to be much impressed by the spirit of this ancient pile.'

Miss De Stancy shook her head too slightly to express absolute negation.

'Do you wish to come through this door?' she asked. 'There is a singular chimney-piece in the kitchen, which is considered a unique example of its kind, though I myself don't know enough about it to have an opinion on the subject.'

When they had looked at the corbelled chimney-piece they returned to the hall, where his eye was caught anew by a large map that he had conned for some time when alone, without being able to divine the locality represented. It was called 'General Plan of the Town,' and showed streets and open spaces corresponding with nothing he had seen in the county.

'Is that town here?' he asked.

'It is not anywhere but in Paula's brain; she has laid it out from her own design. The site is supposed to be near our railway station, just across there, where the land belongs to her. She is going to grant cheap building leases, and develop the manufacture of pottery.'

'Pottery – how very practical she must be!'

'O no! no!' replied Miss De Stancy, in tones showing how supremely ignorant he must be of Miss Power's nature if he characterized her in those terms. 'It is GREEK pottery she means – Hellenic pottery she tells me to call it, only I forget. There is beautiful clay at the place, her father told her: he found it in making the railway tunnel. She has visited the British Museum, continental museums, and Greece, and Spain: and hopes to imitate the old fictile work in time, especially the Greek of the best period, four hundred years after Christ, or before Christ – I forget which it was Paula said… O no, she is not practical in the sense you mean, at all.'

'A mixed young lady, rather.'

Miss De Stancy appeared unable to settle whether this new definition of her dear friend should be accepted as kindly, or disallowed as decidedly sarcastic. 'You would like her if you knew her,' she insisted, in half tones of pique; after which she walked on a few steps.

'I think very highly of her,' said Somerset.

'And I! And yet at one time I could never have believed that I should have been her friend. One is prejudiced at first against people who are reported to have such differences in feeling, associations, and habit, as she seemed to have from mine. But it has not stood in the least in the way of our liking each other. I believe the difference makes us the more united.'

'It says a great deal for the liberality of both,' answered Somerset warmly. 'Heaven send us more of the same sort of people! They are not too numerous at present.'

As this remark called for no reply from Miss De Stancy, she took advantage of an opportunity to leave him alone, first repeating her permission to him to wander where he would. He walked about for some time, sketch-book in hand, but was conscious that his interest did not lie much in the architecture. In passing along the corridor of an upper floor he observed an open door, through which was visible a room containing one of the finest Renaissance cabinets he had ever seen. It was impossible, on close examination, to do justice to it in a hasty sketch; it would be necessary to measure every line if he would bring away anything of utility to him as a designer. Deciding to

reserve this gem for another opportunity he cast his eyes round the room and blushed a little. Without knowing it he had intruded into the absent Miss Paula's own particular set of chambers, including a boudoir and sleeping apartment. On the tables of the sitting-room were most of the popular papers and periodicals that he knew, not only English, but from Paris, Italy, and America. Satirical prints, though they did not unduly preponderate, were not wanting. Besides these there were books from a London circulating library, paper-covered light literature in French and choice Italian, and the latest monthly reviews; while between the two windows stood the telegraph apparatus whose wire had been the means of bringing him hither.

These things, ensconced amid so much of the old and hoary, were as if a stray hour from the nineteenth century had wandered like a butterfly into the thirteenth, and lost itself there.

The door between this ante-chamber and the sleeping-room stood open. Without venturing to cross the threshold, for he felt that he would be abusing hospitality to go so far, Somerset looked in for a moment. It was a pretty place, and seemed to have been hastily fitted up. In a corner, overhung by a blue and white canopy of silk, was a little cot, hardly large enough to impress the character of bedroom upon the old place. Upon a counterpane lay a parasol and a silk neckerchief. On the other side of the room was a tall mirror of startling newness, draped like the bedstead, in blue and white. Thrown at random upon the floor was a pair of satin slippers that would have fitted Cinderella. A dressing-gown lay across a settee; and opposite, upon a small easy-chair in the same blue and white livery, were a Bible, the Baptist Magazine, Wardlaw on Infant Baptism, Walford's County Families, and the Court Journal. On and over the mantelpiece were nicknacks of various descriptions, and photographic portraits of the artistic, scientific, and literary celebrities of the day.

A dressing-room lay beyond; but, becoming conscious that his study of ancient architecture would hardly bear stretching further in that direction, Mr. Somerset retreated to the outside, obliviously passing by the gem of Renaissance that had led him in.

'She affects blue,' he was thinking. 'Then she is fair.'

On looking up, some time later, at the new clock that told the seconds, he found that the hours at his disposal for work had flown without his having transferred a single feature of the building or furniture to his sketch-book. Before leaving he sent in for permission to come again, and then walked across the fields to the inn at Sleeping-Green, reflecting less upon Miss De Stancy (so little force of presence had she possessed) than upon the modern flower in a mediaeval flower-pot whom Miss De Stancy's information had brought before him, and upon the incongruities that were daily shaping themselves in the world under the great modern fluctuations of classes and creeds.

Somerset was still full of the subject when he arrived at the end of his walk, and he fancied that some loungers at the bar of the inn were discussing the heroine of the chapel-scene just at the moment of his entry. On this account, when the landlord came to clear away the dinner, Somerset was led to inquire of him, by way of opening a conversation, if there were many Baptists in the neighbourhood.

The landlord (who was a serious man on the surface, though he occasionally smiled beneath) replied that there were a great many – far more than the average in country parishes. 'Even here, in my house, now,' he added, 'when volks get a drop of drink into 'em, and their feelings rise to a zong, some man will strike up a hymn by preference. But I find no fault with that; for though 'tis hardly human nature to be so calculating in yer cups, a feller may as well sing to gain something as sing to waste.'

'How do you account for there being so many?'

'Well, you zee, sir, some says one thing, and some another; I think they does it to save the expense of a Christian burial for ther children. Now there's a poor family out in Long Lane – the husband used to smite for Jimmy More the blacksmith till 'a hurt his arm – they'd have no less than eleven children if they'd not been lucky t'other way, and buried five when they were three or four months old. Now every one of them children was given to the sexton in a little box that any journeyman could nail together in a quarter of an hour, and he buried 'em at night for a shilling a head; whereas 'twould have cost a couple of pounds each if they'd been christened at church… Of

course there's the new lady at the castle, she's a chapel member, and that may make a little difference; but she's not been here long enough to show whether 'twill be worth while to join 'em for the profit o't or whether 'twill not. No doubt if it turns out that she's of a sort to relieve volks in trouble, more will join her set than belongs to it already. "Any port in a storm," of course, as the saying is.'

'As for yourself, you are a Churchman at present, I presume?'

'Yes; not but I was a Methodist once – ay, for a length of time. 'Twas owing to my taking a house next door to a chapel; so that what with hearing the organ bizz like a bee through the wall, and what with finding it saved umbrellas on wet Zundays, I went over to that faith for two years – though I believe I dropped money by it – I wouldn't be the man to say so if I hadn't. Howsomever, when I moved into this house I turned back again to my old religion. Faith, I don't zee much difference: be you one, or be you t'other, you've got to get your living.'

'The De Stancys, of course, have not much influence here now, for that, or any other thing?'

'O no, no; not any at all. They be very low upon ground, and always will be now, I suppose. It was thoughted worthy of being recorded in history – you've read it, sir, no doubt?'

'Not a word.'

'O, then, you shall. I've got the history zomewhere. 'Twas gay manners that did it. The only bit of luck they have had of late years is Miss Power's taking to little Miss De Stancy, and making her her company-keeper. I hope 'twill continue.'

That the two daughters of these antipodean families should be such intimate friends was a situation which pleased Somerset as much as it did the landlord. It was an engaging instance of that human progress on which he had expended many charming dreams in the years when poetry, theology, and the reorganization of society had seemed matters of more importance to him than a profession which should help him to a big house and income, a fair Deiopeia, and a lovely progeny. When he was alone he poured out a glass of wine, and silently drank the healths of the two generous-minded young women who, in this lonely district, had found sweet communion a necessity of life, and by pure and instinctive good sense had broken down a barrier which men thrice their age and repute would probably have felt it imperative to maintain. But perhaps this was premature: the omnipotent Miss Power's character – practical or ideal, politic or impulsive – he as yet knew nothing of; and giving over reasoning from insufficient data he lapsed into mere conjecture.

V

The next morning Somerset was again at the castle. He passed some interval on the walls before encountering Miss De Stancy, whom at last he observed going towards a pony-carriage that waited near the door.

A smile gained strength upon her face at his approach, and she was the first to speak. 'I am sorry Miss Power has not returned,' she said, and accounted for that lady's absence by her distress at the event of two evenings earlier.

'But I have driven over to my father's – Sir William De Stancy's – house this morning,' she went on. 'And on mentioning your name to him, I found he knew it quite well. You will, will you not, forgive my ignorance in having no better knowledge of the elder Mr. Somerset's works than a dim sense of his fame as a painter? But I was going to say that my father would much like to include you in his personal acquaintance, and wishes me to ask if you will give him the pleasure of lunching with him to-day. My cousin John, whom you once knew, was a great favourite of his, and used to speak of you sometimes. It will be so kind if you can come. My father is an old man, out of society, and he would be glad to hear the news of town.'

Somerset said he was glad to find himself among friends where he had only expected strangers; and promised to come that day, if she would tell him the way.

That she could easily do. The short way was across that glade he saw there – then over the stile into the wood, following the path till it came out upon the turnpike-road. He would then be almost close to the house. The distance was about two miles and a half. But if he thought it too far for a walk, she would drive on to the town, where she had been going when he came, and instead of returning straight to her father's would come back and pick him up.

It was not at all necessary, he thought. He was a walker, and could find the path.

At this moment a servant came to tell Miss De Stancy that the telegraph was calling her.

'Ah – it is lucky that I was not gone again!' she exclaimed. 'John seldom reads it right if I am away.'

It now seemed quite in the ordinary course that, as a friend of her father's, he should accompany her to the instrument. So up they went together, and immediately on reaching it she applied her ear to the instrument, and began to gather the message. Somerset fancied himself like a person overlooking another's letter, and moved aside.

'It is no secret,' she said, smiling. '"Paula to Charlotte," it begins.'

'That's very pretty.'

'O – and it is about – you,' murmured Miss De Stancy.

'Me?' The architect blushed a little.

She made no answer, and the machine went on with its story. There was something curious in watching this utterance about himself, under his very nose, in language unintelligible to him. He conjectured whether it were inquiry, praise, or blame, with a sense that it might reasonably be the latter, as the result of his surreptitious look into that blue bedroom, possibly observed and reported by some servant of the house.

'"Direct that every facility be given to Mr. Somerset to visit any part of the castle he may wish to see. On my return I shall be glad to welcome him as the acquaintance of your relatives. I have two of his father's pictures."'

'Dear me, the plot thickens,' he said, as Miss De Stancy announced the words. 'How could she know about me?'

'I sent a message to her this morning when I saw you crossing the park on your way here – telling her that Mr. Somerset, son of the Academician, was making sketches of the castle, and that my father knew something of you. That's her answer.'

'Where are the pictures by my father that she has purchased?'

'O, not here – at least, not unpacked.'

Miss de Stancy then left him to proceed on her journey to Markton (so the nearest little town was called), informing him that she would be at her father's house to receive him at two o'clock. Just about one he closed his sketch-book, and set out in the direction she had indicated. At the entrance to the wood a man was at work pulling down a rotten gate that bore on its battered lock the initials 'W. De S.' and erecting a new one whose ironmongery exhibited the letters 'P. P.'

The warmth of the summer noon did not inconveniently penetrate the dense masses of foliage which now began to overhang the path, except in spots where a ruthless timber-felling had taken place in previous years for the purpose of sale. It was that particular half-hour of the day in which the birds of the forest prefer walking to flying; and there being no wind, the hopping of the smallest songster over the dead leaves reached his ear from behind the undergrowth. The track had originally been a well-kept winding drive, but a deep carpet of moss and leaves overlaid it now, though the general outline still remained to show that its curves had been set out with as much care as those of a lawn walk, and the gradient made easy for carriages where the natural slopes were great. Felled trunks occasionally lay across it, and alongside were the hollow and fungous boles of trees sawn down in long past years.

After a walk of three-quarters of an hour he came to another gate, where the letters 'P. P.' again supplanted the historical 'W. De S.' Climbing over this, he found himself on a highway which

presently dipped down towards the town of Markton, a place he had never yet seen. It appeared in the distance as a quiet little borough of a few thousand inhabitants; and, without the town boundary on the side he was approaching, stood half-a-dozen genteel and modern houses, of the detached kind usually found in such suburbs. On inquiry, Sir William De Stancy's residence was indicated as one of these.

It was almost new, of streaked brick, having a central door, and a small bay window on each side to light the two front parlours. A little lawn spread its green surface in front, divided from the road by iron railings, the low line of shrubs immediately within them being coated with pallid dust from the highway. On the neat piers of the neat entrance gate were chiselled the words 'Myrtle Villa.' Genuine roadside respectability sat smiling on every brick of the eligible dwelling.

Perhaps that which impressed Somerset more than the mushroom modernism of Sir William De Stancy's house was the air of healthful cheerfulness which pervaded it. He was shown in by a neat maidservant in black gown and white apron, a canary singing a welcome from a cage in the shadow of the window, the voices of crowing cocks coming over the chimneys from somewhere behind, and the sun and air riddling the house everywhere.

A dwelling of those well-known and popular dimensions which allow the proceedings in the kitchen to be distinctly heard in the parlours, it was so planned that a raking view might be obtained through it from the front door to the end of the back garden. The drawing-room furniture was comfortable, in the walnut-and-green-rep style of some years ago. Somerset had expected to find his friends living in an old house with remnants of their own antique furniture, and he hardly knew whether he ought to meet them with a smile or a gaze of condolence. His doubt was terminated, however, by the cheerful and tripping entry of Miss De Stancy, who had returned from her drive to Markton; and in a few more moments Sir William came in from the garden.

He was an old man of tall and spare build, with a considerable stoop, his glasses dangling against his waistcoat-buttons, and the front corners of his coat-tails hanging lower than the hinderparts, so that they swayed right and left as he walked. He nervously apologized to his visitor for having kept him waiting.

'I am so glad to see you,' he said, with a mild benevolence of tone, as he retained Somerset's hand for a moment or two; 'partly for your father's sake, whom I met more than once in my younger days, before he became so well-known; and also because I learn that you were a friend of my poor nephew John Ravensbury.' He looked over his shoulder to see if his daughter were within hearing, and, with the impulse of the solitary to make a confidence, continued in a low tone: 'She, poor girl, was to have married John: his death was a sad blow to her and to all of us. – Pray take a seat, Mr. Somerset.'

The reverses of fortune which had brought Sir William De Stancy to this comfortable cottage awakened in Somerset a warmer emotion than curiosity, and he sat down with a heart as responsive to each speech uttered as if it had seriously concerned himself, while his host gave some words of information to his daughter on the trifling events that had marked the morning just passed; such as that the cow had got out of the paddock into Miss Power's field, that the smith who had promised to come and look at the kitchen range had not arrived, that two wasps' nests had been discovered in the garden bank, and that Nick Jones's baby had fallen downstairs. Sir William had large cavernous arches to his eye-sockets, reminding the beholder of the vaults in the castle he once had owned. His hands were long and almost fleshless, each knuckle showing like a bamboo-joint from beneath his coat-sleeves, which were small at the elbow and large at the wrist. All the colour had gone from his beard and locks, except in the case of a few isolated hairs of the former, which retained dashes of their original shade at sudden points in their length, revealing that all had once been raven black.

But to study a man to his face for long is a species of ill-nature which requires a colder temperament, or at least an older heart, than the architect's was at that time. Incurious unobservance is the true attitude of cordiality, and Somerset blamed himself for having fallen into an act of inspection

even briefly. He would wait for his host's conversation, which would doubtless be of the essence of historical romance.

'The favourable Bank-returns have made the money-market much easier to-day, as I learn?' said Sir William.

'O, have they?' said Somerset. 'Yes, I suppose they have.'

'And something is meant by this unusual quietness in Foreign stocks since the late remarkable fluctuations,' insisted the old man. 'Is the current of speculation quite arrested, or is it but a temporary lull?'

Somerset said he was afraid he could not give an opinion, and entered very lamely into the subject; but Sir William seemed to find sufficient interest in his own thoughts to do away with the necessity of acquiring fresh impressions from other people's replies; for often after putting a question he looked on the floor, as if the subject were at an end. Lunch was now ready, and when they were in the dining-room Miss De Stancy, to introduce a topic of more general interest, asked Somerset if he had noticed the myrtle on the lawn?

Somerset had noticed it, and thought he had never seen such a full-blown one in the open air before. His eyes were, however, resting at the moment on the only objects at all out of the common that the dining-room contained. One was a singular glass case over the fireplace, within which were some large mediaeval door-keys, black with rust and age; and the others were two full-length oil portraits in the costume of the end of the last century – so out of all proportion to the size of the room they occupied that they almost reached to the floor.

'Those originally belonged to the castle yonder,' said Miss De Stancy, or Charlotte, as her father called her, noticing Somerset's glance at the keys. 'They used to unlock the principal entrance-doors, which were knocked to pieces in the civil wars. New doors were placed afterwards, but the old keys were never given up, and have been preserved by us ever since.'

'They are quite useless – mere lumber – particularly to me,' said Sir William.

'And those huge paintings were a present from Paula,' she continued. 'They are portraits of my great-grandfather and mother. Paula would give all the old family pictures back to me if we had room for them; but they would fill the house to the ceilings.'

Sir William was impatient of the subject. 'What is the utility of such accumulations?' he asked. 'Their originals are but clay now – mere forgotten dust, not worthy a moment's inquiry or reflection at this distance of time. Nothing can retain the spirit, and why should we preserve the shadow of the form? – London has been very full this year, sir, I have been told?'

'It has,' said Somerset, and he asked if they had been up that season. It was plain that the matter with which Sir William De Stancy least cared to occupy himself before visitors was the history of his own family, in which he was followed with more simplicity by his daughter Charlotte.

'No,' said the baronet. 'One might be led to think there is a fatality which prevents it. We make arrangements to go to town almost every year, to meet some old friend who combines the rare conditions of being in London with being mindful of me; but he has always died or gone elsewhere before the event has taken place… But with a disposition to be happy, it is neither this place nor the other that can render us the reverse. In short each man's happiness depends upon himself, and his ability for doing with little.' He turned more particularly to Somerset, and added with an impressive smile: 'I hope you cultivate the art of doing with little?'

Somerset said that he certainly did cultivate that art, partly because he was obliged to.

'Ah – you don't mean to the extent that I mean. The world has not yet learned the riches of frugality, says, I think, Cicero, somewhere; and nobody can testify to the truth of that remark better than I. If a man knows how to spend less than his income, however small that may be, why – he has the philosopher's stone.' And Sir William looked in Somerset's face with frugality written in every pore of his own, as much as to say, 'And here you see one who has been a living instance of those principles from his youth up.'

Somerset soon found that whatever turn the conversation took, Sir William invariably reverted to this topic of frugality. When luncheon was over he asked his visitor to walk with him into the garden, and no sooner were they alone than he continued: 'Well, Mr. Somerset, you are down here sketching architecture for professional purposes. Nothing can be better: you are a young man, and your art is one in which there are innumerable chances.'

'I had begun to think they were rather few,' said Somerset.

'No, they are numerous enough: the difficulty is to find out where they lie. It is better to know where your luck lies than where your talent lies: that's an old man's opinion.'

'I'll remember it,' said Somerset.

'And now give me some account of your new clubs, new hotels, and new men… What I was going to add, on the subject of finding out where your luck lies, is that nobody is so unfortunate as not to have a lucky star in some direction or other. Perhaps yours is at the antipodes; if so, go there. All I say is, discover your lucky star.'

'I am looking for it.'

'You may be able to do two things; one well, the other but indifferently, and yet you may have more luck in the latter. Then stick to that one, and never mind what you can do best. Your star lies there.'

'There I am not quite at one with you, Sir William.'

'You should be. Not that I mean to say that luck lies in any one place long, or at any one person's door. Fortune likes new faces, and your wisdom lies in bringing your acquisitions into safety while her favour lasts. To do that you must make friends in her time of smiles – make friends with people, wherever you find them. My daughter has unconsciously followed that maxim. She has struck up a warm friendship with our neighbour, Miss Power, at the castle. We are diametrically different from her in associations, traditions, ideas, religion – she comes of a violent dissenting family among other things – but I say to Charlotte what I say to you: win affection and regard wherever you can, and accommodate yourself to the times. I put nothing in the way of their intimacy, and wisely so, for by this so many pleasant hours are added to the sum total vouchsafed to humanity.'

It was quite late in the afternoon when Somerset took his leave. Miss De Stancy did not return to the castle that night, and he walked through the wood as he had come, feeling that he had been talking with a man of simple nature, who flattered his own understanding by devising Machiavellian theories after the event, to account for any spontaneous action of himself or his daughter, which might otherwise seem eccentric or irregular.

Before Somerset reached the inn he was overtaken by a slight shower, and on entering the house he walked into the general room, where there was a fire, and stood with one foot on the fender. The landlord was talking to some guest who sat behind a screen; and, probably because Somerset had been seen passing the window, and was known to be sketching at the castle, the conversation turned on Sir William De Stancy.

'I have often noticed,' observed the landlord, 'that volks who have come to grief, and quite failed, have the rules how to succeed in life more at their vingers' ends than volks who have succeeded. I assure you that Sir William, so full as he is of wise maxims, never acted upon a wise maxim in his life, until he had lost everything, and it didn't matter whether he was wise or no. You know what he was in his young days, of course?'

'No, I don't,' said the invisible stranger.

'O, I thought everybody knew poor Sir William's history. He was the star, as I may zay, of good company forty years ago. I remember him in the height of his jinks, as I used to zee him when I was a very little boy, and think how great and wonderful he was. I can seem to zee now the exact style of his clothes; white hat, white trousers, white silk handkerchief; and his jonnick face, as white as his clothes with keeping late hours. There was nothing black about him but his hair and his eyes – he wore no beard at that time – and they were black as slooes. The like of his coming on the race-

course was never seen there afore nor since. He drove his ikkipage hisself; and it was always hauled by four beautiful white horses, and two outriders rode in harness bridles. There was a groom behind him, and another at the rubbing-post, all in livery as glorious as New Jerusalem. What a 'stablishment he kept up at that time! I can mind him, sir, with thirty race-horses in training at once, seventeen coach-horses, twelve hunters at his box t'other side of London, four chargers at Budmouth, and ever so many hacks.'

'And he lost all by his racing speculations?' the stranger observed; and Somerset fancied that the voice had in it something more than the languid carelessness of a casual sojourner.

'Partly by that, partly in other ways. He spent a mint o' money in a wild project of founding a watering-place; and sunk thousands in a useless silver mine; so 'twas no wonder that the castle named after him vell into other hands… The way it was done was curious. Mr. Wilkins, who was the first owner after it went from Sir William, actually sat down as a guest at his table, and got up as the owner. He took off, at a round sum, everything saleable, furniture, plate, pictures, even the milk and butter in the dairy. That's how the pictures and furniture come to be in the castle still; wormeaten rubbish zome o' it, and hardly worth moving.'

'And off went the baronet to Myrtle Villa?'

'O no! he went away for many years. 'Tis quite lately, since his illness, that he came to that little place, in zight of the stone walls that were the pride of his forefathers.'

'From what I hear, he has not the manner of a broken-hearted man?'

'Not at all. Since that illness he has been happy, as you see him: no pride, quite calm and mild; at new moon quite childish. 'Tis that makes him able to live there; before he was so ill he couldn't bear a zight of the place, but since then he is happy nowhere else, and never leaves the parish further than to drive once a week to Markton. His head won't stand society nowadays, and he lives quite lonely as you zee, only zeeing his daughter, or his son whenever he comes home, which is not often. They say that if his brain hadn't softened a little he would ha' died – 'twas that saved his life.'

'What's this I hear about his daughter? Is she really hired companion to the new owner?'

'Now that's a curious thing again, these two girls being so fond of one another; one of 'em a dissenter, and all that, and t'other a De Stancy. O no, not hired exactly, but she mostly lives with Miss Power, and goes about with her, and I dare say Miss Power makes it wo'th her while. One can't move a step without the other following; though judging by ordinary volks you'd think 'twould be a cat-and-dog friendship rather.'

'But 'tis not?'

"Tis not; they be more like lovers than maid and maid. Miss Power is looked up to by little De Stancy as if she were a god-a'mighty, and Miss Power lets her love her to her heart's content. But whether Miss Power loves back again I can't zay, for she's as deep as the North Star.'

The landlord here left the stranger to go to some other part of the house, and Somerset drew near to the glass partition to gain a glimpse of a man whose interest in the neighbourhood seemed to have arisen so simultaneously with his own. But the inner room was empty: the man had apparently departed by another door.

VI

The telegraph had almost the attributes of a human being at Stancy Castle. When its bell rang people rushed to the old tapestried chamber allotted to it, and waited its pleasure with all the deference due to such a novel inhabitant of that ancestral pile. This happened on the following afternoon about four o'clock, while Somerset was sketching in the room adjoining that occupied by the instrument. Hearing its call, he looked in to learn if anybody were attending, and found Miss De Stancy bending over it.

She welcomed him without the least embarrassment. ‘Another message,’ she said. – ‘"Paula to Charlotte. – Have returned to Markton. Am starting for home. Will be at the gate between four and five if possible.”’

Miss De Stancy blushed with pleasure when she raised her eyes from the machine. ‘Is she not thoughtful to let me know beforehand?’

Somerset said she certainly appeared to be, feeling at the same time that he was not in possession of sufficient data to make the opinion of great value.

‘Now I must get everything ready, and order what she will want, as Mrs. Goodman is away. What will she want? Dinner would be best – she has had no lunch, I know; or tea perhaps, and dinner at the usual time. Still, if she has had no lunch – Hark, what do I hear?’

She ran to an arrow-slit, and Somerset, who had also heard something, looked out of an adjoining one. They could see from their elevated position a great way along the white road, stretching like a tape amid the green expanses on each side. There had arisen a cloud of dust, accompanied by a noise of wheels.

‘It is she,’ said Charlotte. ‘O yes – it is past four – the telegram has been delayed.’

‘How would she be likely to come?’

‘She has doubtless hired a carriage at the inn: she said it would be useless to send to meet her, as she couldn’t name a time… Where is she now?’

‘Just where the boughs of those beeches overhang the road – there she is again!’

Miss De Stancy went away to give directions, and Somerset continued to watch. The vehicle, which was of no great pretension, soon crossed the bridge and stopped: there was a ring at the bell; and Miss De Stancy reappeared.

‘Did you see her as she drove up – is she not interesting?’

‘I could not see her.’

‘Ah, no – of course you could not from this window because of the trees. Mr. Somerset, will you come downstairs? You will have to meet her, you know.’

Somerset felt an indescribable backwardness. ‘I will go on with my sketching,’ he said. ‘Perhaps she will not be – ’

‘O, but it would be quite natural, would it not? Our manners are easier here, you know, than they are in town, and Miss Power has adapted herself to them.’

A compromise was effected by Somerset declaring that he would hold himself in readiness to be discovered on the landing at any convenient time.

A servant entered. ‘Miss Power?’ said Miss De Stancy, before he could speak.

The man advanced with a card: Miss De Stancy took it up, and read thereon: ‘Mr. William Dare.’

‘It is not Miss Power who has come, then?’ she asked, with a disappointed face.

‘No, ma’am.’

She looked again at the card. ‘This is some man of business, I suppose – does he want to see me?’

‘Yes, miss. Leastwise, he would be glad to see you if Miss Power is not at home.’

Miss De Stancy left the room, and soon returned, saying, ‘Mr. Somerset, can you give me your counsel in this matter? This Mr. Dare says he is a photographic amateur, and it seems that he wrote some time ago to Miss Power, who gave him permission to take views of the castle, and promised to show him the best points. But I have heard nothing of it, and scarcely know whether I ought to take his word in her absence. Mrs. Goodman, Miss Power’s relative, who usually attends to these things, is away.’

‘I dare say it is all right,’ said Somerset.

‘Would you mind seeing him? If you think it quite in order, perhaps you will instruct him where the best views are to be obtained?’

Thereupon Somerset at once went down to Mr. Dare. His coming as a sort of counterfeit of Miss Power disposed Somerset to judge him with as much severity as justice would allow, and his manner for the moment was not of a kind calculated to dissipate antagonistic instincts. Mr. Dare was standing before the fireplace with his feet wide apart, and his hands in the pockets of his coat-tails, looking at a carving over the mantelpiece. He turned quickly at the sound of Somerset's footsteps, and revealed himself as a person quite out of the common.

His age it was impossible to say. There was not a hair on his face which could serve to hang a guess upon. In repose he appeared a boy; but his actions were so completely those of a man that the beholder's first estimate of sixteen as his age was hastily corrected to six-and-twenty, and afterwards shifted hither and thither along intervening years as the tenor of his sentences sent him up or down. He had a broad forehead, vertical as the face of a bastion, and his hair, which was parted in the middle, hung as a fringe or valance above, in the fashion sometimes affected by the other sex. He wore a heavy ring, of which the gold seemed fair, the diamond questionable, and the taste indifferent. There were the remains of a swagger in his body and limbs as he came forward, regarding Somerset with a confident smile, as if the wonder were, not why Mr. Dare should be present, but why Somerset should be present likewise; and the first tone that came from Dare's lips wound up his listener's opinion that he did not like him.

A latent power in the man, or boy, was revealed by the circumstance that Somerset did not feel, as he would ordinarily have done, that it was a matter of profound indifference to him whether this gentleman-photographer were a likeable person or no.

'I have called by appointment; or rather, I left a card stating that to-day would suit me, and no objection was made.' Somerset recognized the voice; it was that of the invisible stranger who had talked with the landlord about the De Stancys. Mr. Dare then proceeded to explain his business.

Somerset found from his inquiries that the man had unquestionably been instructed by somebody to take the views he spoke of; and concluded that Dare's curiosity at the inn was, after all, naturally explained by his errand to this place. Blaming himself for a too hasty condemnation of the stranger, who though visually a little too assured was civil enough verbally, Somerset proceeded with the young photographer to sundry corners of the outer ward, and thence across the moat to the field, suggesting advantageous points of view. The office, being a shadow of his own pursuits, was not uncongenial to Somerset, and he forgot other things in attending to it.

'Now in our country we should stand further back than this, and so get a more comprehensive coup d'oeil,' said Dare, as Somerset selected a good situation.

'You are not an Englishman, then,' said Somerset.

'I have lived mostly in India, Malta, Gibraltar, the Ionian Islands, and Canada. I there invented a new photographic process, which I am bent upon making famous. Yet I am but a dilettante, and do not follow this art at the base dictation of what men call necessity.'

'O indeed,' Somerset replied.

As soon as this business was disposed of, and Mr. Dare had brought up his van and assistant to begin operations, Somerset returned to the castle entrance. While under the archway a man with a professional look drove up in a dog-cart and inquired if Miss Power were at home to-day.

'She has not yet returned, Mr. Havill,' was the reply.

Somerset, who had hoped to hear an affirmative by this time, thought that Miss Power was bent on disappointing him in the flesh, notwithstanding the interest she expressed in him by telegraph; and as it was now drawing towards the end of the afternoon, he walked off in the direction of his inn.

There were two or three ways to that spot, but the pleasantest was by passing through a rambling shrubbery, between whose bushes trickled a broad shallow brook, occasionally intercepted in its course by a transverse chain of old stones, evidently from the castle walls, which formed a miniature waterfall. The walk lay along the river-brink. Soon Somerset saw before him a circular summer-house formed of short sticks nailed to ornamental patterns. Outside the structure, and immediately

in the path, stood a man with a book in his hand; and it was presently apparent that this gentleman was holding a conversation with some person inside the pavilion, but the back of the building being towards Somerset, the second individual could not be seen.

The speaker at one moment glanced into the interior, and at another at the advancing form of the architect, whom, though distinctly enough beheld, the other scarcely appeared to heed in the absorbing interest of his own discourse. Somerset became aware that it was the Baptist minister, whose rhetoric he had heard in the chapel yonder.

'Now,' continued the Baptist minister, 'will you express to me any reason or objection whatever which induces you to withdraw from our communion? It was that of your father, and of his father before him. Any difficulty you may have met with I will honestly try to remove; for I need hardly say that in losing you we lose one of the most valued members of the Baptist church in this district. I speak with all the respect due to your position, when I ask you to realize how irreparable is the injury you inflict upon the cause here by this lukewarm backwardness.'

'I don't withdraw,' said a woman's low voice within.

'What do you do?'

'I decline to attend for the present.'

'And you can give no reason for this?'

There was no reply.

'Or for your refusal to proceed with the baptism?'

'I have been christened.'

'My dear young lady, it is well known that your christening was the work of your aunt, who did it unknown to your parents when she had you in her power, out of pure obstinacy to a church with which she was not in sympathy, taking you surreptitiously, and indefensibly, to the font of the Establishment; so that the rite meant and could mean nothing at all… But I fear that your new position has brought you into contact with the Paedobaptists, that they have disturbed your old principles, and so induced you to believe in the validity of that trumpery ceremony!'

'It seems sufficient.'

'I will demolish the basis of that seeming in three minutes, give me but that time as a listener.'

'I have no objection.'

'Very well… First, then, I will assume that those who have influenced you in the matter have not been able to make any impression upon one so well grounded as yourself in our distinctive doctrine, by the stale old argument drawn from circumcision?'

'You may assume it.'

'Good – that clears the ground. And we now come to the New Testament.'

The minister began to turn over the leaves of his little Bible, which it impressed Somerset to observe was bound with a flap, like a pocket book, the black surface of the leather being worn brown at the corners by long usage. He turned on till he came to the beginning of the New Testament, and then commenced his discourse. After explaining his position, the old man ran very ably through the arguments, citing well-known writers on the point in dispute when he required more finished sentences than his own.

The minister's earnestness and interest in his own case led him unconsciously to include Somerset in his audience as the young man drew nearer; till, instead of fixing his eyes exclusively on the person within the summer-house, the preacher began to direct a good proportion of his discourse upon his new auditor, turning from one listener to the other attentively, without seeming to feel Somerset's presence as superfluous.

'And now,' he said in conclusion, 'I put it to you, sir, as to her: do you find any flaw in my argument? Is there, madam, a single text which, honestly interpreted, affords the least foothold for the Paedobaptists; in other words, for your opinion on the efficacy of the rite administered to you

in your unconscious infancy? I put it to you both as honest and responsible beings.' He turned again to the young man.

It happened that Somerset had been over this ground long ago. Born, so to speak, a High-Church infant, in his youth he had been of a thoughtful turn, till at one time an idea of his entering the Church had been entertained by his parents. He had formed acquaintance with men of almost every variety of doctrinal practice in this country; and, as the pleadings of each assailed him before he had arrived at an age of sufficient mental stability to resist new impressions, however badly substantiated, he inclined to each denomination as it presented itself, was

'Everything by starts, and nothing long,'

till he had travelled through a great many beliefs and doctrines without feeling himself much better than when he set out.

A study of fonts and their origin had qualified him in this particular subject. Fully conscious of the inexpediency of contests on minor ritual differences, he yet felt a sudden impulse towards a mild intellectual tournament with the eager old man – purely as an exercise of his wits in the defence of a fair girl.

'Sir, I accept your challenge to us,' said Somerset, advancing to the minister's side.

VII

At the sound of a new voice the lady in the bower started, as he could see by her outline through the crevices of the wood-work and creepers. The minister looked surprised.

'You will lend me your Bible, sir, to assist my memory?' he continued.

The minister held out the Bible with some reluctance, but he allowed Somerset to take it from his hand. The latter, stepping upon a large moss-covered stone which stood near, and laying his hat on a flat beech bough that rose and fell behind him, pointed to the minister to seat himself on the grass. The minister looked at the grass, and looked up again at Somerset, but did not move.

Somerset for the moment was not observing him. His new position had turned out to be exactly opposite the open side of the bower, and now for the first time he beheld the interior. On the seat was the woman who had stood beneath his eyes in the chapel, the 'Paula' of Miss De Stancy's enthusiastic eulogies. She wore a summer hat, beneath which her fair curly hair formed a thicket round her forehead. It would be impossible to describe her as she then appeared. Not sensuous enough for an Aphrodite, and too subdued for a Hebe, she would yet, with the adjunct of doves or nectar, have stood sufficiently well for either of those personages, if presented in a pink morning light, and with mythological scarcity of attire.

Half in surprise she glanced up at him; and lowering her eyes again, as if no surprise were ever let influence her actions for more than a moment, she sat on as before, looking past Somerset's position at the view down the river, visible for a long distance before her till it was lost under the bending trees.

Somerset turned over the leaves of the minister's Bible, and began: —

'In the First Epistle to the Corinthians, the seventh chapter and the fourteenth verse – '.

Here the young lady raised her eyes in spite of her reserve, but it being, apparently, too much labour to keep them raised, allowed her glance to subside upon her jet necklace, extending it with the thumb of her left hand.

'Sir!' said the Baptist excitedly, 'I know that passage well – it is the last refuge of the Paedobaptists – I foresee your argument. I have met it dozens of times, and it is not worth that snap of the fingers! It is worth no more than the argument from circumcision, or the Suffer-little-children argument.'

'Then turn to the sixteenth chapter of the Acts, and the thirty-third – '

'That, too,' cried the minister, 'is answered by what I said before! I perceive, sir, that you adopt the method of a special pleader, and not that of an honest inquirer. Is it, or is it not, an answer to my proofs from the eighth chapter of the Acts, the thirty-sixth and thirty-seventh verses; the sixteenth of Mark, sixteenth verse; second of Acts, forty-first verse; the tenth and the forty-seventh verse; or the eighteenth and eighth verse?'

'Very well, then. Let me prove the point by other reasoning – by the argument from Apostolic tradition.' He threw the minister's book upon the grass, and proceeded with his contention, which comprised a fairly good exposition of the earliest practice of the Church and inferences therefrom. (When he reached this point an interest in his off-hand arguments was revealed by the mobile bosom of Miss Paula Power, though she still occupied herself by drawing out the necklace.) Testimony from Justin Martyr followed; with inferences from Irenaeus in the expression, 'Omnes enim venit per semetipsum salvare; omnes inquam, qui per eum renascuntur in Deum, INFANTES et parvulos et pueros et juvenes.' (At the sound of so much seriousness Paula turned her eyes upon the speaker with attention.) He next adduced proof of the signification of 'renascor' in the writings of the Fathers, as reasoned by Wall; arguments from Tertullian's advice to defer the rite; citations from Cyprian, Nazianzen, Chrysostom, and Jerome; and briefly summed up the whole matter.

Somerset looked round for the minister as he concluded. But the old man, after standing face to face with the speaker, had turned his back upon him, and during the latter portions of the attack had moved slowly away. He now looked back; his countenance was full of commiserating reproach as he lifted his hand, twice shook his head, and said, 'In the Epistle to the Philippians, first chapter and sixteenth verse, it is written that there are some who preach in contention and not sincerely. And in the Second Epistle to Timothy, fourth chapter and fourth verse, attention is drawn to those whose ears refuse the truth, and are turned unto fables. I wish you good afternoon, sir, and that priceless gift, SINCERITY.'

The minister vanished behind the trees; Somerset and Miss Power being left confronting each other alone.

Somerset stepped aside from the stone, hat in hand, at the same moment in which Miss Power rose from her seat. She hesitated for an instant, and said, with a pretty girlish stiffness, sweeping back the skirt of her dress to free her toes in turning: 'Although you are personally unknown to me, I cannot leave you without expressing my deep sense of your profound scholarship, and my admiration for the thoroughness of your studies in divinity.'

'Your opinion gives me great pleasure,' said Somerset, bowing, and fairly blushing. 'But, believe me, I am no scholar, and no theologian. My knowledge of the subject arises simply from the accident that some few years ago I looked into the question for a special reason. In the study of my profession I was interested in the designing of fonts and baptisteries, and by a natural process I was led to investigate the history of baptism; and some of the arguments I then learnt up still remain with me. That's the simple explanation of my erudition.'

'If your sermons at the church only match your address to-day, I shall not wonder at hearing that the parishioners are at last willing to attend.'

It flashed upon Somerset's mind that she supposed him to be the new curate, of whose arrival he had casually heard, during his sojourn at the inn. Before he could bring himself to correct an error to which, perhaps, more than to anything else, was owing the friendliness of her manner, she went on, as if to escape the embarrassment of silence: —

'I need hardly say that I at least do not doubt the sincerity of your arguments.'

'Nevertheless, I was not altogether sincere,' he answered.

She was silent.

'Then why should you have delivered such a defence of me?' she asked with simple curiosity.

Somerset involuntarily looked in her face for his answer.

Paula again teased the necklace. ‘Would you have spoken so eloquently on the other side if I – if occasion had served?’ she inquired shyly.

‘Perhaps I would.’

Another pause, till she said, ‘I, too, was insincere.’

‘You?’

‘I was.’

‘In what way?

‘In letting him, and you, think I had been at all influenced by authority, scriptural or patristic.’

‘May I ask, why, then, did you decline the ceremony the other evening?’

‘Ah, you, too, have heard of it!’ she said quickly.

‘No.’

‘What then?’

‘I saw it.’

She blushed and looked down the river. ‘I cannot give my reasons,’ she said.

‘Of course not,’ said Somerset.

‘I would give a great deal to possess real logical dogmatism.’

‘So would I.’

There was a moment of embarrassment: she wanted to get away, but did not precisely know how. He would have withdrawn had she not said, as if rather oppressed by her conscience, and evidently still thinking him the curate: ‘I cannot but feel that Mr. Woodwell’s heart has been unnecessarily wounded.’

‘The minister’s?’

‘Yes. He is single-mindedness itself. He gives away nearly all he has to the poor. He works among the sick, carrying them necessaries with his own hands. He teaches the ignorant men and lads of the village when he ought to be resting at home, till he is absolutely prostrate from exhaustion, and then he sits up at night writing encouraging letters to those poor people who formerly belonged to his congregation in the village, and have now gone away. He always offends ladies, because he can’t help speaking the truth as he believes it; but he hasn’t offended me!’

Her feelings had risen towards the end, so that she finished quite warmly, and turned aside.

‘I was not in the least aware that he was such a man,’ murmured Somerset, looking wistfully after the minister… ‘Whatever you may have done, I fear that I have grievously wounded a worthy man’s heart from an idle wish to engage in a useless, unbecoming, dull, last-century argument.’

‘Not dull,’ she murmured, ‘for it interested me.’

Somerset accepted her correction willingly. ‘It was ill-considered of me, however,’ he said; ‘and in his distress he has forgotten his Bible.’ He went and picked up the worn volume from where it lay on the grass.

‘You can easily win him to forgive you, by just following, and returning the book to him,’ she observed.

‘I will,’ said the young man impulsively. And, bowing to her, he hastened along the river brink after the minister. He at length saw his friend before him, leaning over the gate which led from the private path into a lane, his cheek resting on the palm of his hand with every outward sign of abstraction. He was not conscious of Somerset’s presence till the latter touched him on the shoulder.

Never was a reconciliation effected more readily. When Somerset said that, fearing his motives might be misconstrued, he had followed to assure the minister of his goodwill and esteem, Mr. Woodwell held out his hand, and proved his friendliness in return by preparing to have the controversy on their religious differences over again from the beginning, with exhaustive detail. Somerset evaded this with alacrity, and once having won his companion to other subjects he found that the austere man had a smile as pleasant as an infant’s on the rare moments when he indulged in it; moreover, that he was warmly attached to Miss Power.

'Though she gives me more trouble than all the rest of the Baptist church in this district,' he said, 'I love her as my own daughter. But I am sadly exercised to know what she is at heart. Heaven supply me with fortitude to contest her wild opinions, and intractability! But she has sweet virtues, and her conduct at times can be most endearing.'

'I believe it!' said Somerset, with more fervour than mere politeness required.

'Sometimes I think those Stancy towers and lands will be a curse to her. The spirit of old papistical times still lingers in the nooks of those silent walls, like a bad odour in a still atmosphere, dulling the iconoclastic emotions of the true Puritan. It would be a pity indeed if she were to be tainted by the very situation that her father's indomitable energy created for her.'

'Do not be concerned about her,' said Somerset gently. 'She's not a Paedobaptist at heart, although she seems so.'

Mr. Woodwell placed his finger on Somerset's arm, saying, 'If she's not a Paedobaptist, or Episcopalian; if she is not vulnerable to the mediaeval influences of her mansion, lands, and new acquaintance, it is because she's been vulnerable to what is worse: to doctrines beside which the errors of Paaedobaptists, Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, are but as air.'

'How? You astonish me.'

'Have you heard in your metropolitan experience of a curious body of New Lights, as they think themselves?' The minister whispered a name to his listener, as if he were fearful of being overheard.

'O no,' said Somerset, shaking his head, and smiling at the minister's horror. 'She's not that; at least, I think not… She's a woman; nothing more. Don't fear for her; all will be well.'

The poor old man sighed. 'I love her as my own. I will say no more.'

Somerset was now in haste to go back to the lady, to ease her apparent anxiety as to the result of his mission, and also because time seemed heavy in the loss of her discreet voice and soft, buoyant look. Every moment of delay began to be as two. But the minister was too earnest in his converse to see his companion's haste, and it was not till perception was forced upon him by the actual retreat of Somerset that he remembered time to be a limited commodity. He then expressed his wish to see Somerset at his house to tea any afternoon he could spare, and receiving the other's promise to call as soon as he could, allowed the younger man to set out for the summer-house, which he did at a smart pace. When he reached it he looked around, and found she was gone.

Somerset was immediately struck by his own lack of social dexterity. Why did he act so readily on the whimsical suggestion of another person, and follow the minister, when he might have said that he would call on Mr. Woodwell to-morrow, and, making himself known to Miss Power as the visiting architect of whom she had heard from Miss De Stancy, have had the pleasure of attending her to the castle? 'That's what any other man would have had wit enough to do!' he said.

There then arose the question whether her despatching him after the minister was such an admirable act of good-nature to a good man as it had at first seemed to be. Perhaps it was simply a manoeuvre for getting rid of himself; and he remembered his doubt whether a certain light in her eyes when she inquired concerning his sincerity were innocent earnestness or the reverse. As the possibility of levity crossed his brain, his face warmed; it pained him to think that a woman so interesting could condescend to a trick of even so mild a complexion as that. He wanted to think her the soul of all that was tender, and noble, and kind. The pleasure of setting himself to win a minister's goodwill was a little tarnished now.

VIII

That evening Somerset was so preoccupied with these things that he left all his sketching implements out-of-doors in the castle grounds. The next morning he hastened thither to secure them from being stolen or spoiled. Meanwhile he was hoping to have an opportunity of rectifying Paula's

mistake about his personality, which, having served a very good purpose in introducing them to a mutual conversation, might possibly be made just as agreeable as a thing to be explained away.

He fetched his drawing instruments, rods, sketching-blocks and other articles from the field where they had lain, and was passing under the walls with them in his hands, when there emerged from the outer archway an open landau, drawn by a pair of black horses of fine action and obviously strong pedigree, in which Paula was seated, under the shade of a white parasol with black and white ribbons fluttering on the summit. The morning sun sparkled on the equipage, its newness being made all the more noticeable by the ragged old arch behind.

She bowed to Somerset in a way which might have been meant to express that she had discovered her mistake; but there was no embarrassment in her manner, and the carriage bore her away without her making any sign for checking it. He had not been walking towards the castle entrance, and she could not be supposed to know that it was his intention to enter that day.

She had looked such a bud of youth and promise that his disappointment at her departure showed itself in his face as he observed her. However, he went on his way, entered a turret, ascended to the leads of the great tower, and stepped out.

From this elevated position he could still see the carriage and the white surface of Paula's parasol in the glowing sun. While he watched the landau stopped, and in a few moments the horses were turned, the wheels and the panels flashed, and the carriage came bowling along towards the castle again.

Somerset descended the stone stairs. Before he had quite got to the bottom he saw Miss De Stancy standing in the outer hall.

'When did you come, Mr. Somerset?' she gaily said, looking up surprised. 'How industrious you are to be at work so regularly every day! We didn't think you would be here to-day: Paula has gone to a vegetable show at Markton, and I am going to join her there soon.'

'O! gone to a vegetable show. But I think she has altered her – '

At this moment the noise of the carriage was heard in the ward, and after a few seconds Miss Power came in – Somerset being invisible from the door where she stood.

'O Paula, what has brought you back?' said Miss De Stancy.

'I have forgotten something.'

'Mr. Somerset is here. Will you not speak to him?'

Somerset came forward, and Miss De Stancy presented him to her friend. Mr. Somerset acknowledged the pleasure by a respectful inclination of his person, and said some words about the meeting yesterday.

'Yes,' said Miss Power, with a serene deliberateness quite noteworthy in a girl of her age; 'I have seen it all since. I was mistaken about you, was I not? Mr. Somerset, I am glad to welcome you here, both as a friend of Miss De Stancy's family, and as the son of your father – which is indeed quite a sufficient introduction anywhere.'

'You have two pictures painted by Mr. Somerset's father, have you not? I have already told him about them,' said Miss De Stancy. 'Perhaps Mr. Somerset would like to see them if they are unpacked?'

As Somerset had from his infancy suffered from a plethora of those productions, excellent as they were, he did not reply quite so eagerly as Miss De Stancy seemed to expect to her kind suggestion, and Paula remarked to him, 'You will stay to lunch? Do order it at your own time, if our hour should not be convenient.'

Her voice was a voice of low note, in quality that of a flute at the grave end of its gamut. If she sang, she was a pure contralto unmistakably.

'I am making use of the permission you have been good enough to grant me – of sketching what is valuable within these walls.'

'Yes, of course, I am willing for anybody to come. People hold these places in trust for the nation, in one sense. You lift your hands, Charlotte; I see I have not convinced you on that point yet.'

Miss De Stancy laughed, and said something to no purpose.

Somehow Miss Power seemed not only more woman than Miss De Stancy, but more woman than Somerset was man; and yet in years she was inferior to both. Though becomingly girlish and modest, she appeared to possess a good deal of composure, which was well expressed by the shaded light of her eyes.

'You have then met Mr. Somerset before?' said Charlotte.

'He was kind enough to deliver an address in my defence yesterday. I suppose I seemed quite unable to defend myself.'

'O no!' said he. When a few more words had passed she turned to Miss De Stancy and spoke of some domestic matter, upon which Somerset withdrew, Paula accompanying his exit with a remark that she hoped to see him again a little later in the day.

Somerset retired to the chambers of antique lumber, keeping an eye upon the windows to see if she re-entered the carriage and resumed her journey to Markton. But when the horses had been standing a long time the carriage was driven round to the stables. Then she was not going to the vegetable show. That was rather curious, seeing that she had only come back for something forgotten.

These queries and thoughts occupied the mind of Somerset until the bell was rung for luncheon. Owing to the very dusty condition in which he found himself after his morning's labours among the old carvings he was rather late in getting downstairs, and seeing that the rest had gone in he went straight to the dining-hall.

The population of the castle had increased in his absence. There were assembled Paula and her friend Charlotte; a bearded man some years older than himself, with a cold grey eye, who was cursorily introduced to him in sitting down as Mr. Havill, an architect of Markton; also an elderly lady of dignified aspect, in a black satin dress, of which she apparently had a very high opinion. This lady, who seemed to be a mere dummy in the establishment, was, as he now learnt, Mrs. Goodman by name, a widow of a recently deceased gentleman, and aunt to Paula – the identical aunt who had smuggled Paula into a church in her helpless infancy, and had her christened without her parents' knowledge. Having been left in narrow circumstances by her husband, she was at present living with Miss Power as chaperon and adviser on practical matters – in a word, as ballast to the management. Beyond her Somerset discerned his new acquaintance Mr. Woodwell, who on sight of Somerset was for hastening up to him and performing a laboured shaking of hands in earnest recognition.

Paula had just come in from the garden, and was carelessly laying down her large shady hat as he entered. Her dress, a figured material in black and white, was short, allowing her feet to appear. There was something in her look, and in the style of her corsage, which reminded him of several of the bygone beauties in the gallery. The thought for a moment crossed his mind that she might have been imitating one of them.

'Fine old screen, sir!' said Mr. Havill, in a long-drawn voice across the table when they were seated, pointing in the direction of the traceried oak division between the dining-hall and a vestibule at the end. 'As good a piece of fourteenth-century work as you shall see in this part of the country.'

'You mean fifteenth century, of course?' said Somerset.

Havill was silent. 'You are one of the profession, perhaps?' asked the latter, after a while.

'You mean that I am an architect?' said Somerset. 'Yes.'

'Ah – one of my own honoured vocation.' Havill's face had been not unpleasant until this moment, when he smiled; whereupon there instantly gleamed over him a phase of meanness, remaining until the smile died away.

Havill continued, with slow watchfulness: —

'What enormous sacrileges are committed by the builders every day, I observe! I was driving yesterday to Toneborough where I am erecting a town-hall, and passing through a village on my way

I saw the workmen pulling down a chancel-wall in which they found imbedded a unique specimen of Perpendicular work – a capital from some old arcade – the mouldings wonderfully undercut. They were smashing it up as filling-in for the new wall.'

'It must have been unique,' said Somerset, in the too-readily controversial tone of the educated young man who has yet to learn diplomacy. 'I have never seen much undercutting in Perpendicular stone-work; nor anybody else, I think.'

'O yes – lots of it!' said Mr. Havill, nettled.

Paula looked from one to the other. 'Which am I to take as guide?' she asked. 'Are Perpendicular capitals undercut, as you call it, Mr. Havill, or no?'

'It depends upon circumstances,' said Mr. Havill.

But Somerset had answered at the same time: 'There is seldom or never any marked undercutting in moulded work later than the middle of the fourteenth century.'

Havill looked keenly at Somerset for a time: then he turned to Paula: 'As regards that fine Saxon vaulting you did me the honour to consult me about the other day, I should advise taking out some of the old stones and reinstating new ones exactly like them.'

'But the new ones won't be Saxon,' said Paula. 'And then in time to come, when I have passed away, and those stones have become stained like the rest, people will be deceived. I should prefer an honest patch to any such make-believe of Saxon relics.'

As she concluded she let her eyes rest on Somerset for a moment, as if to ask him to side with her. Much as he liked talking to Paula, he would have preferred not to enter into this discussion with another professional man, even though that man were a spurious article; but he was led on to enthusiasm by a sudden pang of regret at finding that the masterly workmanship in this fine castle was likely to be tinkered and spoilt by such a man as Havill.

'You will deceive nobody into believing that anything is Saxon here,' he said warmly. 'There is not a square inch of Saxon work, as it is called, in the whole castle.'

Paula, in doubt, looked to Mr. Havill.

'O yes, sir; you are quite mistaken,' said that gentleman slowly. 'Every stone of those lower vaults was reared in Saxon times.'

'I can assure you,' said Somerset deferentially, but firmly, 'that there is not an arch or wall in this castle of a date anterior to the year 1100; no one whose attention has ever been given to the study of architectural details of that age can be of a different opinion.'

'I have studied architecture, and I am of a different opinion. I have the best reason in the world for the difference, for I have history herself on my side. What will you say when I tell you that it is a recorded fact that this was used as a castle by the Romans, and that it is mentioned in Domesday as a building of long standing?'

'I shall say that has nothing to do with it,' replied the young man. 'I don't deny that there may have been a castle here in the time of the Romans: what I say is, that none of the architecture we now see was standing at that date.'

There was a silence of a minute, disturbed only by a murmured dialogue between Mrs. Goodman and the minister, during which Paula was looking thoughtfully on the table as if framing a question.

'Can it be,' she said to Somerset, 'that such certainty has been reached in the study of architectural dates? Now, would you really risk anything on your belief? Would you agree to be shut up in the vaults and fed upon bread and water for a week if I could prove you wrong?'

'Willingly,' said Somerset. 'The date of those towers and arches is matter of absolute certainty from the details. That they should have been built before the Conquest is as unlikely as, say, that the rustiest old gun with a percussion lock should be older than the date of Waterloo.'

'How I wish I knew something precise of an art which makes one so independent of written history!'

Mr. Havill had lapsed into a mannerly silence that was only sullenness disguised. Paula turned her conversation to Miss De Stancy, who had simply looked from one to the other during the discussion, though she might have been supposed to have a prescriptive right to a few remarks on the matter. A commonplace talk ensued, till Havill, who had not joined in it, privately began at Somerset again with a mixed manner of cordiality, contempt, and misgiving.

'You have a practice, I suppose, sir?'

'I am not in practice just yet.'

'Just beginning?'

'I am about to begin.'

'In London, or near here?'

'In London probably.'

'H'm… I am practising in Markton.'

'Indeed. Have you been at it long?'

'Not particularly. I designed the chapel built by this lady's late father; it was my first undertaking – I owe my start, in fact, to Mr. Power. Ever build a chapel?'

'Never. I have sketched a good many churches.'

'Ah – there we differ. I didn't do much sketching in my youth, nor have I time for it now. Sketching and building are two different things, to my mind. I was not brought up to the profession – got into it through sheer love of it. I began as a landscape gardener, then I became a builder, then I was a road contractor. Every architect might do worse than have some such experience. But nowadays 'tis the men who can draw pretty pictures who get recommended, not the practical men. Young prigs win Institute medals for a pretty design or two which, if anybody tried to build them, would fall down like a house of cards; then they get travelling studentships and what not, and then they start as architects of some new school or other, and think they are the masters of us experienced ones.'

While Somerset was reflecting how far this statement was true, he heard the voice of Paula inquiring, 'Who can he be?'

Her eyes were bent on the window. Looking out, Somerset saw in the mead beyond the dry ditch, Dare, with his photographic apparatus.

'He is the young gentleman who called about taking views of the castle,' said Charlotte.

'O yes – I remember; it is quite right. He met me in the village and asked me to suggest him some views. I thought him a respectable young fellow.'

'I think he is a Canadian,' said Somerset.

'No,' said Paula, 'he is from the East – at least he implied so to me.'

'There is Italian blood in him,' said Charlotte brightly. 'For he spoke to me with an Italian accent. But I can't think whether he is a boy or a man.'

'It is to be earnestly hoped that the gentleman does not prevaricate,' said the minister, for the first time attracted by the subject. 'I accidentally met him in the lane, and he said something to me about having lived in Malta. I think it was Malta, or Gibraltar – even if he did not say that he was born there.'

'His manners are no credit to his nationality,' observed Mrs. Goodman, also speaking publicly for the first time. 'He asked me this morning to send him out a pail of water for his process, and before I had turned away he began whistling. I don't like whistlers.'

'Then it appears,' said Somerset, 'that he is a being of no age, no nationality, and no behaviour.'

'A complete negative,' added Havill, brightening into a civil sneer. 'That is, he would be, if he were not a maker of negatives well known in Markton.'

'Not well known, Mr. Havill,' answered Mrs. Goodman firmly. 'For I lived in Markton for thirty years ending three months ago, and he was never heard of in my time.'

'He is something like you, Charlotte,' said Paula, smiling playfully on her companion.

All the men looked at Charlotte, on whose face a delicate nervous blush thereupon made its appearance.

'Pon my word there is a likeness, now I think of it,' said Havill.

Paula bent down to Charlotte and whispered: 'Forgive my rudeness, dear. He is not a nice enough person to be like you. He is really more like one or other of the old pictures about the house. I forget which, and really it does not matter.'

'People's features fall naturally into groups and classes,' remarked Somerset. 'To an observant person they often repeat themselves; though to a careless eye they seem infinite in their differences.'

The conversation flagged, and they idly observed the figure of the cosmopolite Dare as he walked round his instrument in the mead and busied himself with an arrangement of curtains and lenses, occasionally withdrawing a few steps, and looking contemplatively at the towers and walls.

IX

Somerset returned to the top of the great tower with a vague consciousness that he was going to do something up there – perhaps sketch a general plan of the structure. But he began to discern that this Stancy-Castle episode in his studies of Gothic architecture might be less useful than ornamental to him as a professional man, though it was too agreeable to be abandoned. Finding after a while that his drawing progressed but slowly, by reason of infinite joyful thoughts more allied to his nature than to his art, he relinquished rule and compass, and entered one of the two turrets opening on the roof. It was not the staircase by which he had ascended, and he proceeded to explore its lower part. Entering from the blaze of light without, and imagining the stairs to descend as usual, he became aware after a few steps that there was suddenly nothing to tread on, and found himself precipitated downwards to a distance of several feet.

Arrived at the bottom, he was conscious of the happy fact that he had not seriously hurt himself, though his leg was twisted awkwardly. Next he perceived that the stone steps had been removed from the turret, so that he had dropped into it as into a dry well; that, owing to its being walled up below, there was no door of exit on either side of him; that he was, in short, a prisoner.

Placing himself in a more comfortable position he calmly considered the best means of getting out, or of making his condition known. For a moment he tried to drag himself up by his arm, but it was a hopeless attempt, the height to the first step being far too great.

He next looked round at a lower level. Not far from his left elbow, in the concave of the outer wall, was a slit for the admission of light, and he perceived at once that through this slit alone lay his chance of communicating with the outer world. At first it seemed as if it were to be done by shouting, but when he learnt what little effect was produced by his voice in the midst of such a mass of masonry, his heart failed him for a moment. Yet, as either Paula or Miss De Stancy would probably guess his visit to the top of the tower, there was no cause for terror, if some for alarm.

He put his handkerchief through the window-slit, so that it fluttered outside, and, fixing it in its place by a large stone drawn from the loose ones around him, awaited succour as best he could. To begin this course of procedure was easy, but to abide in patience till it should produce fruit was an irksome task. As nearly as he could guess – for his watch had been stopped by the fall – it was now about four o'clock, and it would be scarcely possible for evening to approach without some eye or other noticing the white signal. So Somerset waited, his eyes lingering on the little world of objects around him, till they all became quite familiar. Spiders'-webs in plenty were there, and one in particular just before him was in full use as a snare, stretching across the arch of the window, with radiating threads as its ribs. Somerset had plenty of time, and he counted their number – fifteen. He remained so silent that the owner of this elaborate structure soon forgot the disturbance which had resulted in the breaking of his diagonal ties, and crept out from the corner to mend them. In watching the process, Somerset noticed that on the stonework behind the web sundry names and initials had

been cut by explorers in years gone by. Among these antique inscriptions he observed two bright and clean ones, consisting of the words 'De Stancy' and 'W. Dare,' crossing each other at right angles. From the state of the stone they could not have been cut more than a month before this date, and, musing on the circumstance, Somerset passed the time until the sun reached the slit in that side of the tower, where, beginning by throwing in a streak of fire as narrow as a corn-stalk, it enlarged its width till the dusty nook was flooded with cheerful light. It disclosed something lying in the corner, which on examination proved to be a dry bone. Whether it was human, or had come from the castle larder in bygone times, he could not tell. One bone was not a whole skeleton, but it made him think of Ginevra of Modena, the heroine of the Mistletoe Bough, and other cribbed and confined wretches, who had fallen into such traps and been discovered after a cycle of years.

The sun's rays had travelled some way round the interior when Somerset's waiting ears were at last attracted by footsteps above, each tread being brought down by the hollow turret with great fidelity. He hoped that with these sounds would arise that of a soft voice he had begun to like well. Indeed, during the solitary hour or two of his waiting here he had pictured Paula straying alone on the terrace of the castle, looking up, noting his signal, and ascending to deliver him from his painful position by her own exertions. It seemed that at length his dream had been verified. The footsteps approached the opening of the turret; and, attracted by the call which Somerset now raised, began to descend towards him. In a moment, not Paula's face, but that of a dreary footman of her household, looked into the hole.

Somerset mastered his disappointment, and the man speedily fetched a ladder, by which means the prisoner of two hours ascended to the roof in safety. During the process he ventured to ask for the ladies of the house, and learnt that they had gone out for a drive together.

Before he left the castle, however, they had returned, a circumstance unexpectedly made known to him by his receiving a message from Miss Power, to the effect that she would be glad to see him at his convenience. Wondering what it could possibly mean, he followed the messenger to her room – a small modern library in the Jacobean wing of the house, adjoining that in which the telegraph stood. She was alone, sitting behind a table littered with letters and sketches, and looking fresh from her drive. Perhaps it was because he had been shut up in that dismal dungeon all the afternoon that he felt something in her presence which at the same time charmed and refreshed him.

She signified that he was to sit down; but finding that he was going to place himself on a straight-backed chair some distance off she said, 'Will you sit nearer to me?' and then, as if rather oppressed by her dignity, she left her own chair of business and seated herself at ease on an ottoman which was among the diversified furniture of the apartment.

'I want to consult you professionally,' she went on. 'I have been much impressed by your great knowledge of castellated architecture. Will you sit in that leather chair at the table, as you may have to take notes?'

The young man assented, expressed his gratification, and went to the chair she designated.

'But, Mr. Somerset,' she continued, from the ottoman – the width of the table only dividing them – 'I first should just like to know, and I trust you will excuse my inquiry, if you are an architect in practice, or only as yet studying for the profession?'

'I am just going to practise. I open my office on the first of January next,' he answered.

'You would not mind having me as a client – your first client?' She looked curiously from her sideway face across the table as she said this.

'Can you ask it!' said Somerset warmly. 'What are you going to build?'

'I am going to restore the castle.'

'What, all of it?' said Somerset, astonished at the audacity of such an undertaking.

'Not the parts that are absolutely ruinous: the walls battered by the Parliament artillery had better remain as they are, I suppose. But we have begun wrong; it is I who should ask you, not you me… I fear,' she went on, in that low note which was somewhat difficult to catch at a distance, 'I fear

what the antiquarians will say if I am not very careful. They come here a great deal in summer and if I were to do the work wrong they would put my name in the papers as a dreadful person. But I must live here, as I have no other house, except the one in London, and hence I must make the place habitable. I do hope I can trust to your judgment?'

'I hope so,' he said, with diffidence, for, far from having much professional confidence, he often mistrusted himself. 'I am a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, and a Member of the Institute of British Architects – not a Fellow of that body yet, though I soon shall be.'

'Then I am sure you must be trustworthy,' she said, with enthusiasm. 'Well, what am I to do? – How do we begin?'

Somerset began to feel more professional, what with the business chair and the table, and the writing-paper, notwithstanding that these articles, and the room they were in, were hers instead of his; and an evenness of manner which he had momentarily lost returned to him. 'The very first step,' he said, 'is to decide upon the outlay – what is it to cost?'

He faltered a little, for it seemed to disturb the softness of their relationship to talk thus of hard cash. But her sympathy with his feeling was apparently not great, and she said, 'The expenditure shall be what you advise.'

'What a heavenly client!' he thought. 'But you must just give some idea,' he said gently. 'For the fact is, any sum almost may be spent on such a building: five thousand, ten thousand, twenty thousand, fifty thousand, a hundred thousand.'

'I want it done well; so suppose we say a hundred thousand? My father's solicitor – my solicitor now – says I may go to a hundred thousand without extravagance, if the expenditure is scattered over two or three years.'

Somerset looked round for a pen. With quickness of insight she knew what he wanted, and signified where one could be found. He wrote down in large figures —

100,000.

It was more than he had expected; and for a young man just beginning practice, the opportunity of playing with another person's money to that extent would afford an exceptionally handsome opening, not so much from the commission it represented, as from the attention that would be bestowed by the art-world on such an undertaking.

Paula had sunk into a reverie. 'I was intending to intrust the work to Mr. Havill, a local architect,' she said. 'But I gathered from his conversation with you to-day that his ignorance of styles might compromise me very seriously. In short, though my father employed him in one or two little matters, it would not be right – even a morally culpable thing – to place such an historically valuable building in his hands.'

'Has Mr. Havill ever been led to expect the commission?' he asked.

'He may have guessed that he would have it. I have spoken of my intention to him more than once.'

Somerset thought over his conversation with Havill. Well, he did not like Havill personally; and he had strong reasons for suspecting that in the matter of architecture Havill was a quack. But was it quite generous to step in thus, and take away what would be a golden opportunity to such a man of making both ends meet comfortably for some years to come, without giving him at least one chance? He reflected a little longer, and then spoke out his feeling.

'I venture to propose a slightly modified arrangement,' he said. 'Instead of committing the whole undertaking to my hands without better proof of my ability to carry it out than you have at present, let there be a competition between Mr. Havill and myself – let our rival plans for the restoration and enlargement be submitted to a committee of the Royal Institute of British Architects – and let the choice rest with them, subject of course to your approval.'

'It is indeed generous of you to suggest it.' She looked thoughtfully at him; he appeared to strike her in a new light. 'You really recommend it?' The fairness which had prompted his words seemed to incline her still more than before to resign herself entirely to him in the matter.

'I do,' said Somerset deliberately.

'I will think of it, since you wish it. And now, what general idea have you of the plan to adopt? I do not positively agree to your suggestion as yet, so I may perhaps ask the question.'

Somerset, being by this time familiar with the general plan of the castle, took out his pencil and made a rough sketch. While he was doing it she rose, and coming to the back of his chair, bent over him in silence.

'Ah, I begin to see your conception,' she murmured; and the breath of her words fanned his ear. He finished the sketch, and held it up to her, saying —

'I would suggest that you walk over the building with Mr. Havill and myself, and detail your ideas to us on each portion.'

'Is it necessary?'

'Clients mostly do it.'

'I will, then. But it is too late for me this evening. Please meet me to-morrow at ten.'

X

At ten o'clock they met in the same room, Paula appearing in a straw hat having a bent-up brim lined with plaited silk, so that it surrounded her forehead like a nimbus; and Somerset armed with sketch-book, measuring-rod, and other apparatus of his craft.

'And Mr. Havill?' said the young man.

'I have not decided to employ him: if I do he shall go round with me independently of you,' she replied rather brusquely.

Somerset was by no means sorry to hear this. His duty to Havill was done.

'And now,' she said, as they walked on together through the passages, 'I must tell you that I am not a mediaevalist myself; and perhaps that's a pity.'

'What are you?'

'I am Greek – that's why I don't wish to influence your design.'

Somerset, as they proceeded, pointed out where roofs had been and should be again, where gables had been pulled down, and where floors had vanished, showing her how to reconstruct their details from marks in the walls, much as a comparative anatomist reconstructs an antediluvian from fragmentary bones and teeth. She appeared to be interested, listened attentively, but said little in reply. They were ultimately in a long narrow passage, indifferently lighted, when Somerset, treading on a loose stone, felt a twinge of weakness in one knee, and knew in a moment that it was the result of the twist given by his yesterday's fall. He paused, leaning against the wall.

'What is it?' said Paula, with a sudden timidity in her voice.

'I slipped down yesterday,' he said. 'It will be right in a moment.'

'I – can I help you?' said Paula. But she did not come near him; indeed, she withdrew a little. She looked up the passage, and down the passage, and became conscious that it was long and gloomy, and that nobody was near. A curious coy uneasiness seemed to take possession of her. Whether she thought, for the first time, that she had made a mistake – that to wander about the castle alone with him was compromising, or whether it was the mere shy instinct of maidenhood, nobody knows; but she said suddenly, 'I will get something for you, and return in a few minutes.'

'Pray don't – it has quite passed!' he said, stepping out again.

But Paula had vanished. When she came back it was in the rear of Charlotte De Stancy. Miss De Stancy had a tumbler in one hand, half full of wine, which she offered him; Paula remaining in the background.

He took the glass, and, to satisfy his companions, drank a mouthful or two, though there was really nothing whatever the matter with him beyond the slight ache above mentioned. Charlotte was going to retire, but Paula said, quite anxiously, 'You will stay with me, Charlotte, won't you? Surely you are interested in what I am doing?'

'What is it?' said Miss De Stancy.

'Planning how to mend and enlarge the castle. Tell Mr. Somerset what I want done in the quadrangle – you know quite well – and I will walk on.'

She walked on; but instead of talking on the subject as directed, Charlotte and Somerset followed chatting on indifferent matters. They came to an inner court and found Paula standing there.

She met Miss De Stancy with a smile. 'Did you explain?' she asked.

'I have not explained yet.' Paula seated herself on a stone bench, and Charlotte went on: 'Miss Power thought of making a Greek court of this. But she will not tell you so herself, because it seems such dreadful anachronism.

'I said I would not tell any architect myself,' interposed Paula correctingly. 'I did not then know that he would be Mr. Somerset.'

'It is rather startling,' said Somerset.

'A Greek colonnade all round, you said, Paula,' continued her less reticent companion. 'A peristyle you called it – you saw it in a book, don't you remember? – and then you were going to have a fountain in the middle, and statues like those in the British Museum.'

'I did say so,' remarked Paula, pulling the leaves from a young sycamore-tree that had sprung up between the joints of the paving.

From the spot where they sat they could see over the roofs the upper part of the great tower wherein Somerset had met with his misadventure. The tower stood boldly up in the sun, and from one of the slits in the corner something white waved in the breeze.

'What can that be?' said Charlotte. 'Is it the fluff of owls, or a handkerchief?'

'It is my handkerchief,' Somerset answered. 'I fixed it there with a stone to attract attention, and forgot to take it away.'

All three looked up at the handkerchief with interest. 'Why did you want to attract attention?' said Paula.

'O, I fell into the turret; but I got out very easily.'

'O Paula,' said Charlotte, turning to her friend, 'that must be the place where the man fell in, years ago, and was starved to death!'

'Starved to death?' said Paula.

'They say so. O Mr. Somerset, what an escape!' And Charlotte De Stancy walked away to a point from which she could get a better view of the treacherous turret.

'Whom did you think to attract?' asked Paula, after a pause.

'I thought you might see it.'

'Me personally?' And, blushing faintly, her eyes rested upon him.

'I hoped for anybody. I thought of you,' said Somerset.

She did not continue. In a moment she arose and went across to Miss De Stancy. 'Don't YOU go falling down and becoming a skeleton,' she said – Somerset overheard the words, though Paula was unaware of it – after which she clasped her fingers behind Charlotte's neck, and smiled tenderly in her face.

It seemed to be quite unconsciously done, and Somerset thought it a very beautiful action. Presently Paula returned to him and said, 'Mr. Somerset, I think we have had enough architecture for to-day.'

The two women then wished him good-morning and went away. Somerset, feeling that he had now every reason for prowling about the castle, remained near the spot, endeavouring to evolve some plan of procedure for the project entertained by the beautiful owner of those weather-scathed walls.

But for a long time the mental perspective of his new position so excited the emotional side of his nature that he could not concentrate it on feet and inches. As Paula's architect (supposing Havill not to be admitted as a competitor), he must of necessity be in constant communication with her for a space of two or three years to come; and particularly during the next few months. She, doubtless, cherished far too ambitious views of her career to feel any personal interest in this enforced relationship with him; but he would be at liberty to feel what he chose: and to be the victim of an unrequited passion, while afforded such splendid opportunities of communion with the one beloved, deprived that passion of its most deplorable features. Accessibility is a great point in matters of love, and perhaps of the two there is less misery in loving without return a goddess who is to be seen and spoken to every day, than in having an affection tenderly reciprocated by one always hopelessly removed.

With this view of having to spend a considerable time in the neighbourhood Somerset shifted his quarters that afternoon from the little inn at Sleeping-Green to a larger one at Markton. He required more rooms in which to carry out Paula's instructions than the former place afforded, and a more central position. Having reached and dined at Markton he found the evening tedious, and again strolled out in the direction of the castle.

When he reached it the light was declining, and a solemn stillness overspread the pile. The great tower was in full view. That spot of white which looked like a pigeon fluttering from the loophole was his handkerchief, still hanging in the place where he had left it. His eyes yet lingered on the walls when he noticed, with surprise, that the handkerchief suddenly vanished.

Believing that the breezes, though weak below, might have been strong enough at that height to blow it into the turret, and in no hurry to get off the premises, he leisurely climbed up to find it, ascending by the second staircase, crossing the roof, and going to the top of the treacherous turret. The ladder by which he had escaped still stood within it, and beside the ladder he beheld the dim outline of a woman, in a meditative attitude, holding his handkerchief in her hand.

Somerset softly withdrew. When he had reached the ground he looked up. A girlish form was standing at the top of the tower looking over the parapet upon him – possibly not seeing him, for it was dark on the lawn. It was either Miss De Stancy or Paula; one of them had gone there alone for his handkerchief and had remained awhile, pondering on his escape. But which? 'If I were not a faint-heart I should run all risk and wave my hat or kiss my hand to her, whoever she is,' he thought. But he did not do either.

So he lingered about silently in the shades, and then thought of strolling to his rooms at Markton. Just at leaving, as he passed under the inhabited wing, whence one or two lights now blinked, he heard a piano, and a voice singing 'The Mistletoe Bough.' The song had probably been suggested to the romantic fancy of the singer by her visit to the scene of his captivity.

XI

The identity of the lady whom he had seen on the tower and afterwards heard singing was established the next day.

'I have been thinking,' said Miss Power, on meeting him, 'that you may require a studio on the premises. If so, the room I showed you yesterday is at your service. If I employ Mr. Havill to compete with you I will offer him a similar one.'

Somerset did not decline; and she added, 'In the same room you will find the handkerchief that was left on the tower.'

'Ah, I saw that it was gone. Somebody brought it down?'

'I did,' she shyly remarked, looking up for a second under her shady hat-brim.

'I am much obliged to you.'

'O no. I went up last night to see where the accident happened, and there I found it. When you came up were you in search of it, or did you want me?'

'Then she saw me,' he thought. 'I went for the handkerchief only; I was not aware that you were there,' he answered simply. And he involuntarily sighed.

It was very soft, but she might have heard him, for there was interest in her voice as she continued, 'Did you see me before you went back?'

'I did not know it was you; I saw that some lady was there, and I would not disturb her. I wondered all the evening if it were you.'

Paula hastened to explain: 'We understood that you would stay to dinner, and as you did not come in we wondered where you were. That made me think of your accident, and after dinner I went up to the place where it happened.'

Somerset almost wished she had not explained so lucidly.

And now followed the piquant days to which his position as her architect, or, at worst, as one of her two architects, naturally led. His anticipations were for once surpassed by the reality. Perhaps Somerset's inherent unfitness for a professional life under ordinary circumstances was only proved by his great zest for it now. Had he been in regular practice, with numerous other clients, instead of having merely made a start with this one, he would have totally neglected their business in his exclusive attention to Paula's.

The idea of a competition between Somerset and Havill had been highly approved by Paula's solicitor, but she would not assent to it as yet, seeming quite vexed that Somerset should not have taken the good the gods provided without questioning her justice to Havill. The room she had offered him was prepared as a studio. Drawing-boards and Whatman's paper were sent for, and in a few days Somerset began serious labour. His first requirement was a clerk or two, to do the drudgery of measuring and figuring; but for the present he preferred to sketch alone. Sometimes, in measuring the outworks of the castle, he ran against Havill strolling about with no apparent object, who bestowed on him an envious nod, and passed by.

'I hope you will not make your sketches,' she said, looking in upon him one day, 'and then go away to your studio in London and think of your other buildings and forget mine. I am in haste to begin, and wish you not to neglect me.'

'I have no other building to think of,' said Somerset, rising and placing a chair for her. 'I had not begun practice, as you may know. I have nothing else in hand but your castle.'

'I suppose I ought not to say I am glad of it; but it is an advantage to have an architect all to one's self. The architect whom I at first thought of told me before I knew you that if I placed the castle in his hands he would undertake no other commission till its completion.'

'I agree to the same,' said Somerset.

'I don't wish to bind you. But I hinder you now – do pray go on without reference to me. When will there be some drawing for me to see?'

'I will take care that it shall be soon.'

He had a metallic tape in his hand, and went out of the room to take some dimension in the corridor. The assistant for whom he had advertised had not arrived, and he attempted to fix the end of the tape by sticking his penknife through the ring into the wall. Paula looked on at a distance.

'I will hold it,' she said.

She went to the required corner and held the end in its place. She had taken it the wrong way, and Somerset went over and placed it properly in her fingers, carefully avoiding to touch them. She obediently raised her hand to the corner again, and stood till he had finished, when she asked, 'Is that all?'

'That is all,' said Somerset. 'Thank you.' Without further speech she looked at his sketch-book, while he marked down the lines just acquired.

'You said the other day,' she observed, 'that early Gothic work might be known by the under-cutting, or something to that effect. I have looked in Rickman and the Oxford Glossary, but I cannot quite understand what you meant.'

It was only too probable to her lover, from the way in which she turned to him, that she HAD looked in Rickman and the Glossary, and was thinking of nothing in the world but of the subject of her inquiry.

'I can show you, by actual example, if you will come to the chapel?' he returned hesitatingly.

'Don't go on purpose to show me – when you are there on your own account I will come in.'

'I shall be there in half-an-hour.'

'Very well,' said Paula. She looked out of a window, and, seeing Miss De Stancy on the terrace, left him.

Somerset stood thinking of what he had said. He had no occasion whatever to go into the chapel of the castle that day. He had been tempted by her words to say he would be there, and 'half-an-hour' had come to his lips almost without his knowledge. This community of interest – if it were not anything more tender – was growing serious. What had passed between them amounted to an appointment; they were going to meet in the most solitary chamber of the whole solitary pile. Could it be that Paula had well considered this in replying with her friendly 'Very well?' Probably not.

Somerset proceeded to the chapel and waited. With the progress of the seconds towards the half-hour he began to discover that a dangerous admiration for this girl had risen within him. Yet so imaginative was his passion that he hardly knew a single feature of her countenance well enough to remember it in her absence. The meditative judgment of things and men which had been his habit up to the moment of seeing her in the Baptist chapel seemed to have left him – nothing remained but a distracting wish to be always near her, and it was quite with dismay that he recognized what immense importance he was attaching to the question whether she would keep the trifling engagement or not.

The chapel of Stancy Castle was a silent place, heaped up in corners with a lumber of old panels, framework, and broken coloured glass. Here no clock could be heard beating out the hours of the day – here no voice of priest or deacon had for generations uttered the daily service denoting how the year rolls on. The stagnation of the spot was sufficient to draw Somerset's mind for a moment from the subject which absorbed it, and he thought, 'So, too, will time triumph over all this fervour within me.'

Lifting his eyes from the floor on which his foot had been tapping nervously, he saw Paula standing at the other end. It was not so pleasant when he also saw that Mrs. Goodman accompanied her. The latter lady, however, obligingly remained where she was resting, while Paula came forward, and, as usual, paused without speaking.

'It is in this little arcade that the example occurs,' said Somerset.

'O yes,' she answered, turning to look at it.

'Early piers, capitals, and mouldings, generally alternated with deep hollows, so as to form strong shadows. Now look under the abacus of this capital; you will find the stone hollowed out wonderfully; and also in this arch-mould. It is often difficult to understand how it could be done without cracking off the stone. The difference between this and late work can be felt by the hand even better than it can be seen.' He suited the action to the word and placed his hand in the hollow.

She listened attentively, then stretched up her own hand to test the cutting as he had done; she was not quite tall enough; she would step upon this piece of wood. Having done so she tried again, and succeeded in putting her finger on the spot. No; she could not understand it through her glove even now. She pulled off her glove, and, her hand resting in the stone channel, her eyes became abstracted in the effort of realization, the ideas derived through her hand passing into her face.

'No, I am not sure now,' she said.

Somerset placed his own hand in the cavity. Now their two hands were close together again. They had been close together half-an-hour earlier, and he had sedulously avoided touching hers. He dared not let such an accident happen now. And yet – surely she saw the situation! Was the inscrutable seriousness with which she applied herself to his lesson a mockery? There was such a bottomless depth in her eyes that it was impossible to guess truly. Let it be that destiny alone had ruled that their hands should be together a second time.

All rumination was cut short by an impulse. He seized her forefinger between his own finger and thumb, and drew it along the hollow, saying, 'That is the curve I mean.'

Somerset's hand was hot and trembling; Paula's, on the contrary, was cool and soft as an infant's.

'Now the arch-mould,' continued he. 'There – the depth of that cavity is tremendous, and it is not geometrical, as in later work.' He drew her unresisting fingers from the capital to the arch, and laid them in the little trench as before.

She allowed them to rest quietly there till he relinquished them. 'Thank you,' she then said, withdrawing her hand, brushing the dust from her finger-tips, and putting on her glove.

Her imperception of his feeling was the very sublimity of maiden innocence if it were real; if not, well, the coquetry was no great sin.

'Mr. Somerset, will you allow me to have the Greek court I mentioned?' she asked tentatively, after a long break in their discourse, as she scanned the green stones along the base of the arcade, with a conjectural countenance as to his reply.

'Will your own feeling for the genius of the place allow you?'

'I am not a mediaevalist: I am an eclectic.'

'You don't dislike your own house on that account.'

'I did at first – I don't so much now… I should love it, and adore every stone, and think feudalism the only true romance of life, if – '

'What?'

'If I were a De Stancy, and the castle the long home of my forefathers.'

Somerset was a little surprised at the avowal: the minister's words on the effects of her new environment recurred to his mind. 'Miss De Stancy doesn't think so,' he said. 'She cares nothing about those things.'

Paula now turned to him: hitherto her remarks had been sparingly spoken, her eyes being directed elsewhere: 'Yes, that is very strange, is it not?' she said. 'But it is owing to the joyous freshness of her nature which precludes her from dwelling on the past – indeed, the past is no more to her than it is to a sparrow or robin. She is scarcely an instance of the wearing out of old families, for a younger mental constitution than hers I never knew.'

'Unless that very simplicity represents the second childhood of her line, rather than her own exclusive character.'

Paula shook her head. 'In spite of the Greek court, she is more Greek than I.'

'You represent science rather than art, perhaps.'

'How?' she asked, glancing up under her hat.

'I mean,' replied Somerset, 'that you represent the march of mind – the steamship, and the railway, and the thoughts that shake mankind.'

She weighed his words, and said: 'Ah, yes: you allude to my father. My father was a great man; but I am more and more forgetting his greatness: that kind of greatness is what a woman can never truly enter into. I am less and less his daughter every day that goes by.'

She walked away a few steps to rejoin the excellent Mrs. Goodman, who, as Somerset still perceived, was waiting for Paula at the discreetest of distances in the shadows at the farther end of the building. Surely Paula's voice had faltered, and she had turned to hide a tear?

She came back again. 'Did you know that my father made half the railways in Europe, including that one over there?' she said, waving her little gloved hand in the direction whence low rumbles were occasionally heard during the day.

'Yes.'

'How did you know?'

'Miss De Stancy told me a little; and I then found his name and doings were quite familiar to me.'

Curiously enough, with his words there came through the broken windows the murmur of a train in the distance, sounding clearer and more clear. It was nothing to listen to, yet they both listened; till the increasing noise suddenly broke off into dead silence.

'It has gone into the tunnel,' said Paula. 'Have you seen the tunnel my father made? the curves are said to be a triumph of science. There is nothing else like it in this part of England.'

'There is not: I have heard so. But I have not seen it.'

'Do you think it a thing more to be proud of that one's father should have made a great tunnel and railway like that, than that one's remote ancestor should have built a great castle like this?'

What could Somerset say? It would have required a casuist to decide whether his answer should depend upon his conviction, or upon the family ties of such a questioner. 'From a modern point of view, railways are, no doubt, things more to be proud of than castles,' he said; 'though perhaps I myself, from mere association, should decide in favour of the ancestor who built the castle.' The serious anxiety to be truthful that Somerset threw into his observation, was more than the circumstance required. 'To design great engineering works,' he added musingly, and without the least eye to the disparagement of her parent, 'requires no doubt a leading mind. But to execute them, as he did, requires, of course, only a following mind.'

His reply had not altogether pleased her; and there was a distinct reproach conveyed by her slight movement towards Mrs. Goodman. He saw it, and was grieved that he should have spoken so. 'I am going to walk over and inspect that famous tunnel of your father's,' he added gently. 'It will be a pleasant study for this afternoon.'

She went away. 'I am no man of the world,' he thought. 'I ought to have praised that father of hers straight off. I shall not win her respect; much less her love!'

XII

Somerset did not forget what he had planned, and when lunch was over he walked away through the trees. The tunnel was more difficult of discovery than he had anticipated, and it was only after considerable winding among green lanes, whose deep ruts were like canyons of Colorado in miniature, that he reached the slope in the distant upland where the tunnel began. A road stretched over its crest, and thence along one side of the railway-cutting.

He there unexpectedly saw standing Miss Power's carriage; and on drawing nearer he found it to contain Paula herself, Miss De Stancy, and Mrs. Goodman.

'How singular!' exclaimed Miss De Stancy gaily.

'It is most natural,' said Paula instantly. 'In the morning two people discuss a feature in the landscape, and in the afternoon each has a desire to see it from what the other has said of it. Therefore they accidentally meet.'

Now Paula had distinctly heard Somerset declare that he was going to walk there; how then could she say this so coolly? It was with a pang at his heart that he returned to his old thought of her being possibly a finished coquette and dissembler. Whatever she might be, she was not a creature starched very stiffly by Puritanism.

Somerset looked down on the mouth of the tunnel. The popular commonplace that science, steam, and travel must always be unromantic and hideous, was not proven at this spot. On either slope of the deep cutting, green with long grass, grew drooping young trees of ash, beech, and other flexible varieties, their foliage almost concealing the actual railway which ran along the bottom, its thin steel rails gleaming like silver threads in the depths. The vertical front of the tunnel, faced with brick that had once been red, was now weather-stained, lichened, and mossed over in harmonious rusty-browns, pearly greys, and neutral greens, at the very base appearing a little blue-black spot like a mouse-hole – the tunnel's mouth.

The carriage was drawn up quite close to the wood railing, and Paula was looking down at the same time with him; but he made no remark to her.

Mrs. Goodman broke the silence by saying, 'If it were not a railway we should call it a lovely dell.'

Somerset agreed with her, adding that it was so charming that he felt inclined to go down.

'If you do, perhaps Miss Power will order you up again, as a trespasser,' said Charlotte De Stancy. 'You are one of the largest shareholders in the railway, are you not, Paula?'

Miss Power did not reply.

'I suppose as the road is partly yours you might walk all the way to London along the rails, if you wished, might you not, dear?' Charlotte continued.

Paula smiled, and said, 'No, of course not.'

Somerset, feeling himself superfluous, raised his hat to his companions as if he meant not to see them again for a while, and began to descend by some steps cut in the earth; Miss De Stancy asked Mrs. Goodman to accompany her to a barrow over the top of the tunnel; and they left the carriage, Paula remaining alone.

Down Somerset plunged through the long grass, bushes, late summer flowers, moths, and caterpillars, vexed with himself that he had come there, since Paula was so inscrutable, and humming the notes of some song he did not know. The tunnel that had seemed so small from the surface was a vast archway when he reached its mouth, which emitted, as a contrast to the sultry heat on the slopes of the cutting, a cool breeze, that had travelled a mile underground from the other end. Far away in the darkness of this silent subterranean corridor he could see that other end as a mere speck of light.

When he had conscientiously admired the construction of the massive archivault, and the majesty of its nude ungarnished walls, he looked up the slope at the carriage; it was so small to the eye that it might have been made for a performance by canaries; Paula's face being still smaller, as she leaned back in her seat, idly looking down at him. There seemed something roguish in her attitude of criticism, and to be no longer the subject of her contemplation he entered the tunnel out of her sight.

In the middle of the speck of light before him appeared a speck of black; and then a shrill whistle, dulled by millions of tons of earth, reached his ears from thence. It was what he had been on his guard against all the time, – a passing train; and instead of taking the trouble to come out of the tunnel he stepped into a recess, till the train had rattled past and vanished onward round a curve.

Somerset still remained where he had placed himself, mentally balancing science against art, the grandeur of this fine piece of construction against that of the castle, and thinking whether Paula's father had not, after all, the best of it, when all at once he saw Paula's form confronting him at the entrance of the tunnel. He instantly went forward into the light; to his surprise she was as pale as a lily.

'O, Mr. Somerset!' she exclaimed. 'You ought not to frighten me so – indeed you ought not! The train came out almost as soon as you had gone in, and as you did not return – an accident was possible!'

Somerset at once perceived that he had been to blame in not thinking of this.

'Please do forgive my thoughtlessness in not reflecting how it would strike you!' he pleaded. 'I – I see I have alarmed you.'

Her alarm was, indeed, much greater than he had at first thought: she trembled so much that she was obliged to sit down, at which he went up to her full of solicitousness.

'You ought not to have done it!' she said. 'I naturally thought – any person would – '

Somerset, perhaps wisely, said nothing at this outburst; the cause of her vexation was, plainly enough, his perception of her discomposure. He stood looking in another direction, till in a few moments she had risen to her feet again, quite calm.

'It would have been dreadful,' she said with faint gaiety, as the colour returned to her face; 'if I had lost my architect, and been obliged to engage Mr. Havill without an alternative.'

'I was really in no danger; but of course I ought to have considered,' he said.

'I forgive you,' she returned good-naturedly. 'I knew there was no GREAT danger to a person exercising ordinary discretion; but artists and thinkers like you are indiscreet for a moment sometimes. I am now going up again. What do you think of the tunnel?'

They were crossing the railway to ascend by the opposite path, Somerset keeping his eye on the interior of the tunnel for safety, when suddenly there arose a noise and shriek from the contrary direction behind the trees. Both knew in a moment what it meant, and each seized the other as they rushed off the permanent way. The ideas of both had been so centred on the tunnel as the source of danger, that the probability of a train from the opposite quarter had been forgotten. It rushed past them, causing Paula's dress, hair, and ribbons to flutter violently, and blowing up the fallen leaves in a shower over their shoulders.

Neither spoke, and they went up several steps, holding each other by the hand, till, becoming conscious of the fact, she withdrew hers; whereupon Somerset stopped and looked earnestly at her; but her eyes were averted towards the tunnel wall.

'What an escape!' he said.

'We were not so very near, I think, were we?' she asked quickly. 'If we were, I think you were – very good to take my hand.'

They reached the top at last, and the new level and open air seemed to give her a new mind. 'I don't see the carriage anywhere,' she said, in the common tones of civilization.

He thought it had gone over the crest of the hill; he would accompany her till they reached it.

'No – please – I would rather not – I can find it very well.' Before he could say more she had inclined her head and smiled and was on her way alone.

The tunnel-cutting appeared a dreary gulf enough now to the young man, as he stood leaning over the rails above it, beating the herbage with his stick. For some minutes he could not criticize or weigh her conduct; the warmth of her presence still encircled him. He recalled her face as it had looked out at him from under the white silk puffing of her black hat, and the speaking power of her eyes at the moment of danger. The breadth of that clear-complexioned forehead – almost concealed by the masses of brown hair bundled up around it – signified that if her disposition were oblique and insincere enough for trifling, coquetting, or in any way making a fool of him, she had the intellect to do it cruelly well.

But it was ungenerous to ruminate so suspiciously. A girl not an actress by profession could hardly turn pale artificially as she had done, though perhaps mere fright meant nothing, and would have arisen in her just as readily had he been one of the labourers on her estate.

The reflection that such feeling as she had exhibited could have no tender meaning returned upon him with masterful force when he thought of her wealth and the social position into which she had drifted. Somerset, being of a solitary and studious nature, was not quite competent to estimate precisely the disqualifying effect, if any, of her nonconformity, her newness of blood, and other things, among the old county families established round her; but the toughest prejudices, he thought, were not likely to be long invulnerable to such cheerful beauty and brightness of intellect as Paula's. When she emerged, as she was plainly about to do, from the seclusion in which she had been living since her father's death, she would inevitably win her way among her neighbours. She would become the local topic. Fortune-hunters would learn of her existence and draw near in shoals. What chance would there then be for him?

The points in his favour were indeed few, but they were just enough to keep a tantalizing hope alive. Modestly leaving out of count his personal and intellectual qualifications, he thought of his family. It was an old stock enough, though not a rich one. His great-uncle had been the well-known Vice-admiral Sir Armstrong Somerset, who served his country well in the Baltic, the Indies, China, and the Caribbean Sea. His grandfather had been a notable metaphysician. His father, the Royal Academician, was popular. But perhaps this was not the sort of reasoning likely to occupy the mind of a young woman; the personal aspect of the situation was in such circumstances of far more import.

He had come as a wandering stranger – that possibly lent some interest to him in her eyes. He was installed in an office which would necessitate free communion with her for some time to come; that was another advantage, and would be a still greater one if she showed, as Paula seemed disposed to do, such artistic sympathy with his work as to follow up with interest the details of its progress.

The carriage did not reappear, and he went on towards Markton, disinclined to return again that day to the studio which had been prepared for him at the castle. He heard feet brushing the grass behind him, and, looking round, saw the Baptist minister.

'I have just come from the village,' said Mr. Woodwell, who looked worn and weary, his boots being covered with dust; 'and I have learnt that which confirms my fears for her.'

'For Miss Power?'

'Most assuredly.'

'What danger is there?' said Somerset.

'The temptations of her position have become too much for her! She is going out of mourning next week, and will give a large dinner-party on the occasion; for though the invitations are partly in the name of her relative Mrs. Goodman, they must come from her. The guests are to include people of old cavalier families who would have treated her grandfather, sir, and even her father, with scorn for their religion and connections; also the parson and curate – yes, actually people who believe in the Apostolic Succession; and what's more, they're coming. My opinion is, that it has all arisen from her friendship with Miss De Stancy.'

'Well,' cried Somerset warmly, 'this only shows liberality of feeling on both sides! I suppose she has invited you as well?'

'She has not invited me!.. Mr. Somerset, not withstanding your erroneous opinions on important matters, I speak to you as a friend, and I tell you that she has never in her secret heart forgiven that sermon of mine, in which I likened her to the church at Laodicea. I admit the words were harsh, but I was doing my duty, and if the case arose to-morrow I would do it again. Her displeasure is a deep grief to me; but I serve One greater than she… You, of course, are invited to this dinner?'

'I have heard nothing of it,' murmured the young man.

Their paths diverged; and when Somerset reached the hotel he was informed that somebody was waiting to see him.

'Man or woman?' he asked.

The landlady, who always liked to reply in person to Somerset's inquiries, apparently thinking him, by virtue of his drawing implements and liberality of payment, a possible lord of Burleigh, came forward and said it was certainly not a woman, but whether man or boy she could not say. 'His name is Mr. Dare,' she added.

'O – that youth,' he said.

Somerset went upstairs, along the passage, down two steps, round the angle, and so on to the rooms reserved for him in this rambling edifice of stage-coach memories, where he found Dare waiting. Dare came forward, pulling out the cutting of an advertisement.

'Mr. Somerset, this is yours, I believe, from the Architectural World?'

Somerset said that he had inserted it.

'I think I should suit your purpose as assistant very well.'

'Are you an architect's draughtsman?'

'Not specially. I have some knowledge of the same, and want to increase it.'

'I thought you were a photographer.'

'Also of photography,' said Dare with a bow. 'Though but an amateur in that art I can challenge comparison with Regent Street or Broadway.'

Somerset looked upon his table. Two letters only, addressed in initials, were lying there as answers to his advertisement. He asked Dare to wait, and looked them over. Neither was satisfactory. On this account he overcame his slight feeling against Mr. Dare, and put a question to test that

gentleman's capacities. 'How would you measure the front of a building, including windows, doors, mouldings, and every other feature, for a ground plan, so as to combine the greatest accuracy with the greatest despatch?'

'In running dimensions,' said Dare.

As this was the particular kind of work he wanted done, Somerset thought the answer promising. Coming to terms with Dare, he requested the would-be student of architecture to wait at the castle the next day, and dismissed him.

A quarter of an hour later, when Dare was taking a walk in the country, he drew from his pocket eight other letters addressed to Somerset in initials, which, to judge by their style and stationery, were from men far superior to those two whose communications alone Somerset had seen. Dare looked them over for a few seconds as he strolled on, then tore them into minute fragments, and, burying them under the leaves in the ditch, went on his way again.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.