REID MAYNE

THE DEATH SHOT: A STORY RETOLD

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Содержание

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Preface

Long time since this hand hath penned a preface. Now only to say, that this romance, as originally published, was written when the author was suffering severe affliction, both physically and mentally – the result of a gun-wound that brought him as near to death as Darke's bullet did Clancy.

It may be asked, Why under such strain was the tale written at all? A good reason could be given; but this, private and personal, need not, and should not be intruded on the public. Suffice it to say, that, dissatisfied with the execution of the work, the author has remodelled – almost rewritten it.

It is the same story; but, as he hopes and believes, better told.

Great Malvern, September, 1874.

Prologue

Plain, treeless, shrubless, smooth as a sleeping sea. Grass upon it; this so short, that the smallest quadruped could not cross over without being seen. Even the crawling reptile would not be concealed among its tufts.

Objects are upon it – sufficiently visible to be distinguished at some distance. They are of a character scarce deserving a glance from the passing traveller. He would deem it little worth while to turn his eyes towards a pack of prairie wolves, much less go in chase of them.

With vultures soaring above, he might be more disposed to hesitate, and reflect. The foul birds and filthy beasts seen consorting together, would be proof of prey – that some quarry had fallen upon the plain. Perhaps, a stricken stag, a prong-horn antelope, or a wild horse crippled by some mischance due to his headlong nature?

Believing it any of these, the traveller would reloosen his rein, and ride onward, – leaving the beasts and birds to their banquet.

There is no traveller passing over the prairie in question – no human being upon it. Nothing like life, save the coyotes grouped over the ground, and the buzzards swooping above.

They are not unseen by human eye. There is one sees – one who has reason to fear them.

Their eager excited movements tell them to be anticipating a repast; at the same time, that they have not yet commenced it.

Something appears in their midst. At intervals they approach it: the birds swoopingly from heaven, the beasts crouchingly along the earth. Both go close, almost to touching it; then suddenly withdraw, starting back as in affright!

Soon again to return; but only to be frayed as before. And so on, in a series of approaches, and recessions.

What can be the thing thus attracting, at the same time repelling them? Surely no common quarry, as the carcase of elk, antelope, or mustang? It seems not a thing that is dead. Nor yet looks it like anything alive. Seen from a distance it resembles a human head. Nearer, the resemblance is stronger. Close up, it becomes complete. Certainly, it *is* a human head —*the head of a man*!

Not much in this to cause surprise – a man's head lying upon a Texan prairie! Nothing, whatever, if scalpless. It would only prove that some ill-starred individual – traveller, trapper, or hunter of wild horses – has been struck down by Comanches; afterwards beheaded, and scalped.

But this head – if head it be – is *not* scalped. It still carries its hair – a fine chevelure, waving and profuse. Nor is it lying upon the ground, as it naturally should, after being severed from the body, and abandoned. On the contrary, it stands erect, and square, as if still on the shoulders from which it has been separated; the neck underneath, the chin just touching the surface. With cheeks pallid, or blood spotted, and eyes closed or glassy, the attitude could not fail to cause surprise. And yet more to note, that there is neither pallor, nor stain on the cheeks; and the eyes are neither shut, nor glassed. On the contrary, they are glancing – glaring – rolling. *By Heavens the head is alive*!

No wonder the wolves start back in affright; no wonder the vultures, after stooping low, ply their wings in quick nervous stroke, and soar up again! The odd thing seems to puzzle both beasts and birds; baffles their instinct, and keeps them at bay.

Still know they, or seem to believe, 'tis flesh and blood. Sight and scent tell them so. By both they cannot be deceived.

And living flesh it must be? A Death's head could neither flash its eyes, nor cause them to revolve in their sockets. Besides, the predatory creatures have other evidence of its being alive. At intervals they see opened a mouth, disclosing two rows of white teeth; from which come cries that, startling, send them afar.

These are only put forth, when they approach too threateningly near – evidently intended to drive them to a distance. They have done so for the greater part of a day.

Strange spectacle! The head of a man, without any body; with eyes in it that scintillate and see; a mouth that opens, and shows teeth; a throat from which issue sounds of human intonation; around this object of weird supernatural aspect, a group of wolves, and over it a flock of vultures!

Twilight approaching, spreads a purple tint over the prairie. But it brings no change in the attitude of assailed, or assailants. There is still light enough for the latter to perceive the flash of those fiery eyes, whose glances of menace master their voracious instincts, warning them back.

On a Texan prairie twilight is short. There are no mountains, or high hills intervening, no obliquity in the sun's diurnal course, to lengthen out the day. When the golden orb sinks below the horizon, a brief crepusculous light succeeds; then darkness, sudden as though a curtain of crape were dropped over the earth.

Night descending causes some change in the tableau described. The buzzards, obedient to their customary habit – not nocturnal – take departure from the spot, and wing their way to their usual roosting place. Different do the coyotes. These stay. Night is the time best suited to their ravening instincts. The darkness may give them a better opportunity to assail that thing of spherical shape, which by shouts, and scowling glances, has so long kept them aloof.

To their discomfiture, the twilight is succeeded by a magnificent moon, whose silvery effulgence falling over the plain almost equals the light of day. They see the head still erect, the eyes angrily glancing; while in the nocturnal stillness that cry, proceeding from the parted lips, affrights them as ever.

And now, that night is on, more than ever does the tableau appear strange – more than ever unlike reality, and more nearly allied to the spectral. For, under the moonlight, shimmering through a film that has spread over the plain, the head seems magnified to the dimensions of the Sphinx; while the coyotes – mere jackals of terrier size – look large as Canadian stags!

In truth, a perplexing spectacle – full of wild, weird mystery.

Who can explain it?

Chapter One.
Two sorts of Slave-Owners

In the old slave-owning times of the United States – happily now no more – there was much grievance to humanity; proud oppression upon the one side, with sad suffering on the other. It may be true, that the majority of the slave proprietors were humane men; that some of them were even philanthropic in their way, and inclined towards giving to the unholy institution a colour of *patriarchism*. This idea – delusive, as intended to delude – is old as slavery itself; at the same time, modern as Mormonism, where it has had its latest, and coarsest illustration.

Though it cannot be denied, that slavery in the States was, comparatively, of a mild type, neither can it be questioned, that among American masters occurred cases of lamentable harshness – even to inhumanity. There were slave-owners who were kind, and slave-owners who were cruel.

Not far from the town of Natchez, in the State of Mississippi, lived two planters, whose lives illustrated the extremes of these distinct moral types. Though their estates lay contiguous, their characters were as opposite, as could well be conceived in the scale of manhood and morality. Colonel Archibald Armstrong – a true Southerner of the old Virginian aristocracy, who had entered the Mississippi Valley before the Choctaw Indians evacuated it – was a model of the kind slave-master; while Ephraim Darke – a Massachusetts man, who had moved thither at a much later period – was as fair a specimen of the cruel. Coming from New England, of the purest stock of the Puritans – a people whose descendants have made much sacrifice in the cause of negro emancipation – this about Darke may seem strange. It is, notwithstanding, a common tale; one which no traveller through the Southern States can help hearing. For the Southerner will not fail to tell him, that the hardest task-master to the slave is either one, who has been himself a slave, or descended from the Pilgrim Fathers, whose feet first touched American soil by the side of Plymouth Rock!

Having a respect for many traits in the character of these same Pilgrim Fathers, I would fain think the accusation exaggerated – if not altogether untrue – and that Ephraim Darke was an exceptional individual.

To accuse *him* of inhumanity was no exaggeration whatever. Throughout the Mississippi valley there could be nothing more heartless than his treatment of the sable helots, whose luckless lot it was to have him for a master. Around his courts, and in his cotton-fields, the crack of the whip was heard habitually – its thong sharply felt by the victims of his caprice, or malice. The “cowhide” was constantly carried by himself, and his overseer. He had a son, too, who could wield it wickedly as either. None of the three ever went abroad without that pliant, painted, switch – a very emblem of devilish cruelty – in their hands; never returned home, without having used it in the castigation of some unfortunate “darkey,” whose evil star had caused him to stray across their track, while riding the rounds of the plantation.

A far different discipline was that of Colonel Armstrong; whose slaves seldom went to bed without a prayer poured forth, concluding with: “God bress de good massr;” while the poor whipped bondsmen of his neighbour, their backs oft smarting from the lash, nightly lay down, not always to sleep, but nearly always with curses on their lips – the name of the Devil coupled with that of Ephraim Darke.

The old story, of like cause followed by like result, must, alas! be chronicled in this case. The man of the Devil prospered, while he of God came to grief. Armstrong, open-hearted, free-handed, indulging in a too profuse hospitality, lived widely outside the income accruing from the culture of his cotton-fields, and in time became the debtor of Darke, who lived as widely within his.

Notwithstanding the proximity of their estates, there was but little intimacy, and less friendship, between the two. The Virginian – scion of an old Scotch family, who had been gentry in the colonial

times – felt something akin to contempt for his New England neighbour, whose ancestors had been steerage passengers in the famed "Mayflower." False pride, perhaps, but natural to a citizen of the Old Dominion – of late years brought low enough.

Still, not much of this influenced the conduct of Armstrong. For his dislike to Darke he had a better, and more honourable, reason – the bad behaviour of the latter. This, notorious throughout the community, made for the Massachusetts man many enemies; while in the noble mind of the Mississippian it produced positive aversion.

Under these circumstances, it may seem strange there should be any intercourse, or relationship, between the two men. But there was – that of debtor and creditor – a lien not always conferring friendship. Notwithstanding his dislike, the proud Southerner had not been above accepting a loan from the despised Northern, which the latter was but too eager to extend. The Massachusetts man had long coveted the Mississippian's fine estate; not alone from its tempting contiguity, but also because it looked like a ripe pear that must soon fall from the tree. With secret satisfaction he had observed the wasteful extravagance of its owner; a satisfaction increased on discovering the latter's impecuniosity. It became joy, almost openly exhibited, on the day when Colonel Armstrong came to him requesting a loan of twenty thousand dollars; which he consented to give, with an alacrity that would have appeared suspicious to any but a borrower.

If he gave the money in great *glee*, still greater was that with which he contemplated the mortgage deed taken in exchange. For he knew it to be the first entering of a wedge, that in due time would ensure him possession of the *fee-simple*. All the surer, from a condition in that particular deed: *Foreclosure, without time*. Pressure from other quarters had forced planter Armstrong to accept these terrible terms.

As, Darke, before locking it up in his drawer, glanced the document over, his eyes scintillating with the glare of greed triumphant, he said to himself, "This day's work has doubled the area of my acres, and the number of my niggers. Armstrong's land, his slaves, his houses, – everything he has, will soon be mine!"

Chapter Two.
A flat refusal

Two years have elapsed since Ephraim Darke became the creditor of Archibald Armstrong. Apparently, no great change has taken place in the relationship between the two men, though in reality much.

The twenty thousand dollars' loan has been long ago dissipated, and the borrower is once more in need.

It would be useless, idle, for him to seek a second mortgage in the same quarter; or in any other, since he can show no collateral. His property has been nearly all hypothecated in the deed to Darke; who perceives his long-cherished dream on the eve of becoming a reality. At any hour he may cause foreclosure, turn Colonel Armstrong out of his estate, and enter upon possession.

Why does he not take advantage of the power, with which the legal code of the United States, as that existing all over the world, provides him?

There is a reason for his not doing so, wide apart from any motive of mercy, or humanity. Or of friendship either, though something erroneously considered akin to it. Love hinders him from pouncing on the plantation of Archibald Armstrong, and appropriating it!

Not love in his own breast, long ago steeled against such a trifling affection. There only avarice has a home; cupidity keeping house, and looking carefully after the expenses.

But there is a spendthrift who has also a shelter in Ephraim Darke's heart – one who does much to thwart his designs, oft-times defeating them. As already said, he has a son, by name Richard; better known throughout the settlement as "Dick" – abbreviations of nomenclature being almost universal in the South-Western States. An only son – only child as well – motherless too – she who bore him having been buried long before the Massachusetts man planted his roof-tree in the soil of Mississippi. A hopeful scion he, showing no improvement on the paternal stock. Rather the reverse; for the grasping avarice, supposed to be characteristic of the Yankee, is not improved by admixture with the reckless looseness alleged to be habitual in the Southerner.

Both these bad qualities have been developed in Dick Darke, each to its extreme. Never was New Englander more secretive and crafty; never Mississippian more loose, or licentious.

Mean in the matter of personal expenditure, he is at the same time of dissipated and disorderly habits; the associate of the poker-playing, and cock-fighting, fraternity of the neighbourhood; one of its wildest spirits, without any of those generous traits oft coupled with such a character.

As only son, he is heir-presumptive to all the father's property – slaves and plantation lands; and, being thoroughly in his father's confidence, he is aware of the probability of a proximate reversion to the slaves and plantation lands belonging to Colonel Armstrong.

But much as Dick Darke may like money, there is that he likes more, even to covetousness – Colonel Armstrong's daughter. There are two of them – Helen and Jessie – both grown girls, – motherless too – for the colonel is himself a widower.

Jessie, the younger, is bright-haired, of blooming complexion, merry to madness; in spirit, the personification of a romping elf; in physique, a sort of Hebe. Helen, on the other hand, is dark as gipsy, or Jewess; stately as a queen, with the proud grandeur of Juno. Her features of regular classic type, form tall and magnificently moulded, amidst others she appears as a palm rising above the commoner trees of the forest. Ever since her coming out in society, she has been universally esteemed the beauty of the neighbourhood – as belle in the balls of Natchez. It is to her Richard Darke has extended his homage, and surrendered his heart.

He is in love with her, as much as his selfish nature will allow – perhaps the only unselfish passion ever felt by him.

His father sanctions, or at all events does not oppose it. For the wicked son holds a wonderful ascendancy over a parent, who has trained him to wickedness equalling his own.

With the power of creditor over debtor – a debt of which payment can be demanded at any moment, and not the slightest hope of the latter being able to pay it – the Darkes seem to have the vantage ground, and may dictate their own terms.

Helen Armstrong knows nought of the mortgage; no more, of herself being the cause which keeps it from foreclosure. Little does she dream, that her beauty is the sole shield imposed between her father and impending ruin. Possibly if she did, Richard Darke's attentions to her would be received with less slighting indifference. For months he has been paying them, whenever, and wherever, an opportunity has offered – at balls, *barbecues*, and the like. Of late also at her father's house; where the power spoken of gives him not only admission, but polite reception, and hospitable entertainment, at the hands of its owner; while the consciousness of possessing it hinders him from observing, how coldly his assiduities are met by her to whom they are so warmly addressed.

He wonders why, too. He knows that Helen Armstrong has many admirers. It could not be otherwise with one so splendidly beautiful, so gracefully gifted. But among them there is none for whom she has shown partiality.

He has, himself, conceived a suspicion, that a young man, by name Charles Clancy – son of a decayed Irish gentleman, living near – has found favour in her eyes. Still, it is only a suspicion; and Clancy has gone to Texas the year before – sent, so said, by his father, to look out for a new home. The latter has since died, leaving his widow sole occupant of an humble tenement, with a small holding of land – a roadside tract, on the edge of the Armstrong estate.

Rumour runs, that young Clancy is about coming back – indeed, every day expected.

That can't matter. The proud planter, Armstrong, is not the man to permit of his daughter marrying a "poor white" – as Richard Darke scornfully styles his supposed rival – much less consent to the so bestowing of her hand. Therefore no danger need be dreaded from that quarter.

Whether there need, or not, the suitor of Helen Armstrong at length resolves on bringing the affair to an issue. His love for her has become a strong passion, the stronger for being checked – restrained by her cold, almost scornful behaviour. This may be but coquetry. He hopes, and has a fancy it is. Not without reason. For he is far from being ill-favoured; only in a sense moral, not physical. But this has not prevented him from making many conquests among backwood's belles; even some city celebrities living in Natchez. All know he is rich; or will be, when his father fulfils the last conditions of his will – by dying.

So fortified, so flattered, Dick Darke cannot comprehend why Miss Armstrong has not at once surrendered to him. Is it because her haughty disposition hinders her from being too demonstrative? Does she really love him, without giving sign?

For months he has been cogitating in this uncertain way; and now determines upon knowing the truth.

One morning he mounts his horse; rides across the boundary line between the two plantations, and on to Colonel Armstrong's house. Entering, he requests an interview with the colonel's eldest daughter; obtains it; makes declaration of his love; asks her if she will have him for a husband; and in response receives a chilling negative.

As he rides back through the woods, the birds are trilling among the trees. It is their merry morning lay, but it gives him no gladness. There is still ringing in his ears that harsh monosyllable, "*no*." The wild-wood songsters appear to echo it, as if mockingly; the blue jay, and red cardinal, seem scolding him for intrusion on their domain!

Having recrossed the boundary between the two plantations, he reins up and looks back. His brow is black with chagrin; his lips white with rancorous rage. It is suppressed no longer. Curses come hissing through his teeth, along with them the words, —

"In less than six weeks these woods will be mine, and hang me, if I don't shoot every bird that has roost in them! Then, Miss Helen Armstrong, you'll not feel in such conceit with yourself. It will be different when you haven't a roof over your head". So good-bye, sweetheart! Good-bye to you.

"Now, dad!" he continues, in fancy apostrophising his father, "you can take your own way, as you've been long wanting. Yes, my respected parent; you shall be free to foreclose your mortgage; put in execution; sheriff's officers – anything you like."

Angrily grinding his teeth, he plunges the spur into his horse's ribs, and rides on – the short, but bitter, speech still echoing in his ears.

Chapter Three.
A Forest Post-Office

From the harsh treatment of slaves sprang a result, little thought of by the inhuman master; though greatly detrimental to his interests. It caused them occasionally to abscond; so making it necessary to insert an advertisement in the county newspaper, offering a reward for the runaway. Thus cruelty proved expensive.

In planter Darke's case, however, the cost was partially recouped by the cleverness of his son; who was a noted "nigger-catcher," and kept dogs for the especial purpose. He had a natural *penchant* for this kind of chase; and, having little else to do, passed a good deal of his time scouring the country in pursuit of his father's advertised runaways. Having caught them, he would claim the "bounty," just as if they belonged to a stranger. Darke, *père*, paid it without grudge or grumbling – perhaps the only disbursement he ever made in such mood. It was like taking out of one pocket to put into the other. Besides, he was rather proud of his son's acquitting himself so shrewdly.

Skirting the two plantations, with others in the same line of settlements, was a cypress swamp. It extended along the edge of the great river, covering an area of many square miles. Besides being a swamp, it was a network of creeksy bayous, and lagoons – often inundated, and only passable by means of skiff or canoe. In most places it was a slough of soft mud, where man might not tread, nor any kind of water-craft make way. Over it, at all times, hung the obscurity of twilight. The solar rays, however bright above, could not penetrate its close canopy of cypress tops, loaded with that strangest of parasitical plants – the *tillandsia usneoides*.

This tract of forest offered a safe place of concealment for runaway slaves; and, as such, was it noted throughout the neighbourhood. A "darkey" absconding from any of the contiguous plantations, was as sure to make for the marshy expanse, as would a chased rabbit to its warren.

Sombre and gloomy though it was, around its edge lay the favourite scouting-ground of Richard Darke. To him the cypress swamp was a precious preserve – as a coppice to the pheasant shooter, or a scrub-wood to the hunter of foxes. With the difference, that his game was human, and therefore the pursuit more exciting.

There were places in its interior to which he had never penetrated – large tracts unexplored, and where exploration could not be made without great difficulty. But for him to reach them was not necessary. The runaways who sought asylum in the swamp, could not always remain within its gloomy recesses. Food must be obtained beyond its border, or starvation be their fate. For this reason the fugitive required some mode of communicating with the outside world. And usually obtained it, by means of a confederate – some old friend, and fellow-slave, on one of the adjacent plantations – privy to the secret of his hiding-place. On this necessity the negro-catcher most depended; often finding the stalk – or "still-hunt," in backwoods phraseology – more profitable than a pursuit with trained hounds.

About a month after his rejection by Miss Armstrong, Richard Darke is out upon a chase; as usual along the edge of the cypress swamp, rather should it be called a search: since he has found no traces of the human game that has tempted him forth. This is a fugitive negro – one of the best field-hands belonging to his father's plantation – who has absented himself, and cannot be recalled.

For several weeks "Jupiter" – as the runaway is named – has been missing; and his description, with the reward attached, has appeared in the county newspaper. The planter's son, having a suspicion that he is secreted somewhere in the swamp, has made several excursions thither, in the hope of lighting upon his tracks. But "Jupe" is an astute fellow, and has hitherto contrived to leave no sign, which can in any way contribute to his capture.

Dick Darke is returning home, after an unsuccessful day's search, in anything but a cheerful mood. Though not so much from having failed in finding traces of the missing slave. That is only a matter of money; and, as he has plenty, the disappointment can be borne. The thought embittering his spirit relates to another matter. He thinks of his scorned suit, and blighted love prospects.

The chagrin caused him by Helen Armstrong's refusal has terribly distressed, and driven him to more reckless courses. He drinks deeper than ever; while in his cups he has been silly enough to let his boon companions become acquainted with his reason for thus running riot, making not much secret, either, of the mean revenge he designs for her who has rejected him. She is to be punished through her father.

Colonel Armstrong's indebtedness to Ephraim Darke has become known throughout the settlement – all about the mortgage. Taking into consideration the respective characters of the mortgagor and mortgagee, men shake their heads, and say that Darke will soon own the Armstrong plantation. All the sooner, since the chief obstacle to the fulfilment of his long-cherished design has been his son, and this is now removed.

Notwithstanding the near prospect of having his spite gratified, Richard Darke keenly feels his humiliation. He has done so ever since the day of his receiving it; and as determinedly has he been nursing his wrath. He has been still further exasperated by a circumstance which has lately occurred – the return of Charles Clancy from Texas. Someone has told him of Clancy having been seen in company with Helen Armstrong – the two walking the woods *alone*!

Such an interview could not have been with her father's consent, but *clandestine*. So much the more aggravating to him – Darke. The thought of it is tearing his heart, as he returns from his fruitless search after the fugitive.

He has left the swamp behind, and is continuing on through a tract of woodland, which separates his father's plantation from that of Colonel Armstrong, when he sees something that promises relief to his perturbed spirit. It is a woman, making her way through the woods, coming towards him, from the direction of Armstrong's house.

She is not the colonel's daughter – neither one. Nor does Dick Darke suppose it either. Though seen indistinctly under the shadow of the trees, he identifies the approaching form as that of Julia – a mulatto maiden, whose special duty it is to attend upon the young ladies of the Armstrong family, "Thank God for the devil's luck!" he mutters, on making her out. "It's Jupiter's sweetheart; his Juno or Leda, yellow-hided as himself. *No* doubt she's on her way to keep an appointment with him? No more, that I shall be present at the interview. Two hundred dollars reward for old Jupe, and the fun of giving the damned nigger a good 'lamming,' once I lay hand on him. Keep on, Jule, girl! You'll track him up for me, better than the sharpest scented hound in my kennel."

While making this soliloquy, the speaker withdraws himself behind a bush; and, concealed by its dense foliage, keeps his eye on the mulatto wench, still wending her way through the thick standing tree trunks.

As there is no path, and the girl is evidently going by stealth, he has reason to believe she is on the errand conjectured.

Indeed he can have no doubt about her being on the way to an interview with Jupiter; and he is now good as certain of soon discovering, and securing, the runaway who has so long contrived to elude him.

After the girl has passed the place of his concealment – which she very soon does – he slips out from behind the bush, and follows her with stealthy tread, still taking care to keep cover between them.

Not long before she comes to a stop; under a grand magnolia, whose spreading branches, with their large laurel like leaves, shadow a vast circumference of ground.

Darke, who has again taken stand behind a fallen tree, where he has a full view of her movements, watches them with eager eyes. Two hundred dollars at stake – two hundred on his own

account – fifteen hundred for his father – Jupe's market value – no wonder at his being all eyes, all ears, on the alert!

What is his astonishment, at seeing the girl take a letter from her pocket, and, standing on tiptoe, drop it into a knot-hole in the magnolia!

This done, she turns shoulder towards the tree; and, without staying longer under its shadow, glides back along the path by which she has come – evidently going home again!

The negro-catcher is not only surprised, but greatly chagrined. He has experienced a double disappointment – the anticipation of earning two hundred dollars, and giving his old slave the lash: both pleasant if realised, but painful the thought in both to be foiled.

Still keeping in concealment, he permits Julia to depart, not only unmolested, but unchallenged. There may be some secret in the letter to concern, though it may not console him. In any case, it will soon be his.

And it soon is, without imparting consolation. Rather the reverse. Whatever the contents of that epistle, so curiously deposited, Richard Darke, on becoming acquainted with them, reels like a drunken man; and to save himself from falling, seeks support against the trunk of the tree!

After a time, recovering, he re-reads the letter, and gazes at a picture – a photograph – also found within the envelope.

Then from his lips come words, low-muttered – words of menace, made emphatic by an oath.

A man's name is heard among his mutterings, more than once repeated.

As Dick Darke, after thrusting letter and picture into his pocket, strides away from the spot, his clenched teeth, with the lurid light scintillating in his eyes, to this man foretell danger – maybe death.

Chapter Four.
Two good girls

The dark cloud, long lowering over Colonel Armstrong and his fortunes, is about to fall. A dialogue with his eldest daughter occurring on the same day – indeed in the same hour – when she refused Richard Darke, shows him to have been but too well aware of the prospect of impending ruin.

The disappointed suitor had not long left the presence of the lady, who so laconically denied him, when another appears by her side. A man, too; but no rival of Richard Darke – no lover of Helen Armstrong. The venerable white-haired gentleman, who has taken Darke's place, is her father, the old colonel himself. His air, on entering the room, betrays uneasiness about the errand of the planter's son – a suspicion there is something amiss. He is soon made certain of it, by his daughter unreservedly communicating the object of the interview. He says in rejoinder: —

"I supposed that to be his purpose; though, from his coming at this early hour, I feared something worse."

These words bring a shadow over the countenance of her to whom they are addressed, simultaneous with a glance of inquiry from her grand, glistening eyes.

First exclaiming, then interrogating, she says: —

"Worse! Feared! Father, what should you be afraid of?"

"Never mind, my child; nothing that concerns you. Tell me: in what way did you give him answer?"

"In one little word. I simply said *no*."

"That little word will, no doubt, be enough. O Heaven! what is to become of us?"

"Dear father!" demands the beautiful girl, laying her hand upon his shoulder, with a searching look into his eyes; "why do you speak thus? Are you angry with me for refusing him? Surely you would not wish to see me the wife of Richard Darke?"

"You do not love him, Helen?"

"Love him! Can you ask? Love that man!"

"You would not marry him?"

"Would not – could not. I'd prefer death."

"Enough; I must submit to my fate."

"Fate, father! What may be the meaning of this? There is some secret – a danger? Trust to me. Let me know all."

"I may well do that, since it cannot remain much longer a secret. There *is* danger, Helen —*the danger of debt*! My estate is mortgaged to the father of this fellow – so much as to put me completely in his power. Everything I possess, land, houses, slaves, may become his at any hour; this day, if he so will it. He is sure to will it now. Your little word 'no,' will bring about a big change – the crisis I've been long apprehending. Never mind! Let it come! I must meet it like a man. It is for you, daughter – you and your sister – I grieve. My poor dear girls; what a change there will be in your lives, as your prospects! Poverty, coarse fare, coarse garments to wear, and a log-cabin to live in! Henceforth, this must be your lot. I can hold out hope of no other."

"What of all that, father? I, for one, care not; and I'm sure sister will feel the same. But is there no way to – "

"Save me from bankruptcy, you'd say? You need not ask that. I have spent many a sleepless night thinking it there was. But no; there is only one – that one. It I have never contemplated, even for an instant, knowing it would not do. I was sure you did not love Richard Darke, and would not consent to marry him. You could not, my child?"

Helen Armstrong does not make immediate answer, though there is one ready to leap to her lips.

She hesitates giving it, from a thought, that it may add to the weight of unhappiness pressing upon her father's spirit.

Mistaking her silence, and perhaps with the spectre of poverty staring him in the face – oft inciting to meanness, even the noblest natures – he repeats the test interrogatory: —

"Tell me, daughter! Could you marry him?"

"Speak candidly," he continues, "and take time to reflect before answering. If you think you could not be contented – happy – with Richard Darke for your husband, better it should never be. Consult your own heart, and do not be swayed by me, or my necessities. Say, is the thing impossible?"

"I have said. *It is impossible*!"

For a moment both remain silent; the father drooping, spiritless, as if struck by a galvanic shock; the daughter looking sorrowful, as though she had given it.

She soonest recovering, makes an effort to restore him.

"Dear father!" she exclaims, laying her hand upon his shoulder, and gazing tenderly into his eyes; "you speak of a change in our circumstances – of bankruptcy and other ills. Let them come! For myself I care not. Even if the alternative were death, I've told you – I tell you again – I would rather that, than be the wife of Richard Darke."

"Then his wife you'll never be! Now, let the subject drop, and the ruin fall! We must prepare for poverty, and Texas!"

"Texas, if you will, but not poverty. Nothing of the kind. The wealth of affection will make you feel rich; and in a lowly log-hut, as in this grand house, you'll still have mine."

So speaking, the fair girl flings herself upon her father's breast, her hand laid across his forehead, the white fingers soothingly caressing it.

The door opens. Another enters the room – another girl, almost fair as she, but brighter, and younger. 'Tis Jessie.

"Not only my affection," Helen adds, at sight of the newcomer, "but hers as well. Won't he, sister?"

Sister, wondering what it is all about, nevertheless sees something is wanted of her. She has caught the word "affection," at the same time observing an afflicted cast upon her father's countenance. This decides her; and, gliding forward, in another instant she is by his side, clinging to the opposite shoulder, with an arm around his neck.

Thus grouped, the three figures compose a family picture expressive of purest love.

A pleasing tableau to one who knew nothing of what has thus drawn them together; or knowing it, could truly appreciate. For in the faces of all beams affection, which bespeaks a happy, if not prosperous, future – without any doubting fear of either poverty, or Texas.

Chapter Five.
A photograph in the forest

On the third day, after that on which Richard Darke abstracted the letter from the magnolia, a man is seen strolling along the edge of the cypress swamp. The hour is nearly the same, but the individual altogether different. Only in age does he bear any similarity to the planter's son; for he is also a youth of some three or four and twenty. In all else he is unlike Dick Darke, as one man could well be to another.

He is of medium size and height, with a figure pleasingly proportioned. His shoulders squarely set, and chest rounded out, tell of great strength; while limbs tersely knit, and a firm elastic tread betoken toughness and activity. Features of smooth, regular outline – the jaws broad, and well balanced; the chin prominent; the nose nearly Grecian – while eminently handsome, proclaim a noble nature, with courage equal to any demand that may be made upon it. Not less the glance of a blue-grey eye, unquailing as an eagle's.

A grand shock of hair, slightly curled, and dark brown in colour, gives the finishing touch to his fine countenance, as the feather to a Tyrolese hat.

Dressed in a sort of shooting costume, with jack-boots, and gaiters buttoned above them, he carries a gun; which, as can be seen, is a single-barrelled rifle; while at his heels trots a dog of large size, apparently a cross between stag-hound and mastiff, with a spice of terrier in its composition. Such mongrels are not necessarily curs, but often the best breed for backwoods' sport; where the keenness of scent required to track a deer, needs supplementing by strength and staunchness, when the game chances, as it often does, to be a bear, a wolf, or a panther.

The master of this trebly crossed canine is the man whose name rose upon the lips of Richard Darke, after reading the purloined epistle – Charles Clancy. To him was it addressed, and for him intended, as also the photograph found inside.

Several days have elapsed since his return from Texas, having come back, as already known, to find himself fatherless. During the interval he has remained much at home – a dutiful son, doing all he can to console a sorrowing mother. Only now and then has he sought relaxation in the chase, of which he is devotedly fond. On this occasion he has come down to the cypress swamp; but, having encountered no game, is going back with an empty bag.

He is not in low spirits at his ill success; for he has something to console him – that which gives gladness to his heart – joy almost reaching delirium. She, who has won it, loves him.

This she is Helen Armstrong. She has not signified as much, in words; but by ways equally expressive, and quite as convincing. They have met clandestinely, and so corresponded; the knot-hole in the magnolia serving them as a post-box. At first, only phrases of friendship in their conversation; the same in the letters thus surreptitiously exchanged. For despite Clancy's courage among men, he is a coward in the presence of women – in hers more than any.

For all this, at their latest interview, he had thrown aside his shyness, and spoken words of love – fervent love, in its last appeal. He had avowed himself wholly hers, and asked her to be wholly his. She declined giving him an answer *viva voce*, but promised it in writing. He will receive it in a letter, to be deposited in the place convened.

He feels no offence at her having thus put him off. He believes it to have been but a whim of his sweetheart – the caprice of a woman, who has been so much nattered and admired. He knows, that, like the Anne Hathaway of Shakespeare, Helen Armstrong "hath a way" of her own. For she is a girl of no ordinary character, but one of spirit, free and independent, consonant with the scenes and people that surrounded her youth. So far from being offended at her not giving him an immediate

answer, he but admires her the more. Like the proud eagle's mate, she does not condescend to be wooed as the soft cooing dove, nor yield a too easy acquiescence.

Still daily, hourly, does he expect the promised response. And twice, sometimes thrice, a day pays visit to the forest post-office.

Several days have elapsed since their last interview; and yet he has found no letter lying. Little dreams he, that one has been sent, with a *carte de visite* enclosed; and less of both being in the possession of his greatest enemy on earth.

He is beginning to grow uneasy at the delay, and shape conjectures as to the cause. All the more from knowing, that a great change is soon to take place in the affairs of the Armstrong family. A knowledge which emboldened him to make the proposal he has made.

And now, his day's hunting done, he is on his way for the tract of woodland in which stands the sweet trysting tree.

He has no thought of stopping, or turning aside; nor would he do so for any small game. But at this moment a deer – a grand antlered stag – comes "loping" along.

Before he can bring his gun to bear upon it, the animal is out of sight; having passed behind the thick standing trunks of the cypresses. He restrains his hound, about to spring off on the slot. The stag has not seen him; and, apparently, going unscared, he hopes to stalk, and again get sight of it.

He has not proceeded over twenty paces, when a sound fills his ears, as well as the woods around. It is the report of a gun, fired by one who cannot be far off. And not at the retreating stag, but himself!

He feels that the bullet has hit him. This, from a stinging sensation in his arm, like the touch of red-hot iron, or a drop of scalding water. He might not know it to be a bullet, but for the crack heard simultaneously – this coming from behind.

The wound, fortunately but a slight one, does not disable him; and, like a tiger stung by javelins, he is round in an instant, ready to return the fire.

There is no one in sight!

As there has been no warning – not a word – he can have no doubt of the intent: some one meaning to murder him!

He is sure about its being an attempt to assassinate him, as of the man who has made it. Richard Darke – certain, as if the crack of the gun had been a voice pronouncing the name.

Clancy's eyes, flashing angrily, interrogate the forest. The trees stand close, the spaces between shadowy and sombre. For, as said, they are cypresses, and the hour twilight.

He can see nothing save the huge trunks, and their lower limbs, garlanded with ghostly *tillandsia* here and there draping down to the earth. This baffles him, both by its colour and form. The grey gauze-like festoonery, having a resemblance to ascending smoke, hinders him from perceiving that of the discharged gun.

He can see none. It must have whiffed up suddenly, and become commingled with the moss?

It does not matter much. Neither the twilight obscurity, nor that caused by the overshadowing trees, can prevent his canine companion from discovering the whereabouts of the would-be assassin. On hearing the shot the hound has harked back; and, at some twenty paces off, brought up beside a huge trunk, where it stands fiercely baying, as if at a bear. The tree is buttressed, with "knees" several feet in height rising around. In the dim light, these might easily be mistaken for men.

Clancy is soon among them; and sees crouching between two pilasters, the man who meant to murder him – Richard Darke as conjectured.

Darke makes no attempt at explanation. Clancy calls for none. His rifle is already cocked; and, soon as seeing his adversary, he raises it to his shoulder, exclaiming: —

"Scoundrel! you've had the first shot. It's my turn now."

Darke does not remain inactive, but leaps – forth from his lurking-place, to obtain more freedom for his arms. The buttresses hinder him from having elbow room. He also elevates his gun;

but, perceiving it will be too late, instead of taking aim, he lowers the piece again, and dodges behind the tree.

The movement, quick and subtle, as a squirrel's bound, saves him. Clancy fires without effect. His ball but pierces through the skirt of Darke's coat, without touching his body.

With a wild shout of triumph, the latter advances upon his adversary, whose gun is now empty. His own, a double-barrel, has a bullet still undischarged. Deliberately bringing the piece to his shoulder, and covering the victim he is now sure of, he says derisively, —

"What a devilish poor shot you've made, Mister Charlie Clancy! A sorry marksman – to miss a man scarce six feet from the muzzle of your gun! I shan't miss you. Turn about's fair play. I've had the first, and I'll have the last. Dog! take your *death shot*!"

While delivering the dread speech, his finger presses the trigger; the crack comes, with the flash and fiery jet.

For some seconds Clancy is invisible, the sulphurous smoke forming a nimbus around him. When it ascends, he is seen prostrate upon the earth; the blood gushing from a wound in his breast, and spurting over his waistcoat.

He appears writhing in his death agony.

And evidently thinks so himself, from his words spoken in slow, choking utterance, —

"Richard Darke – you have killed – murdered me!"

"I meant to do it," is the unpitying response.

"O Heavens! You horrid wretch! Why – why – "

"Bah! what are you blubbering about? You know why. If not, I shall tell you —*Helen Armstrong*, After all, it isn't jealousy that's made me kill you; only your impudence, to suppose you had a chance with her. You hadn't; she never cared a straw for you. Perhaps, before dying, it may be some consolation for you to know she didn't. I've got the proof. Since it isn't likely you'll ever see herself again, it may give you a pleasure to look at her portrait. Here it is! The sweet girl sent it me this very morning, with her autograph attached, as you see. A capital likeness, isn't it?"

The inhuman wretch stooping down, holds the photograph before the eyes of the dying man, gradually growing dim.

But only death could hinder them from turning towards that sun-painted picture – the portrait of her who has his heart.

He gazes on it lovingly, but not long. For the script underneath claims his attention. In this he recognises her handwriting, well-known to him. Terrible the despair that sweeps through his soul, as he deciphers it: —

"*Helen Armstrong*. —*For him she loves*."

The picture is in the possession of Richard Darke. To him have the sweet words been vouchsafed!

"A charming creature!" Darke tauntingly continues, kissing the carte, and pouring the venomous speech into his victim's ear. "It's the very counterpart of her sweet self. As I said, she sent it me this morning. Come, Clancy! Before giving up the ghost, tell me what you think of it. Isn't it an excellent likeness?"

To the inhuman interrogatory Clancy makes no response – either by word, look, or gesture. His lips are mute, his eyes without light of life, his limbs and body motionless as the mud on which they lie.

A short, but profane, speech terminates the terrible episode; four words of most heartless signification: —

"Damn him; he's dead!"

Chapter Six.
A coon-chase interrupted

Notwithstanding the solitude of the place where the strife, apparently fatal, has occurred, and the slight chances of its being seen, its sounds have been heard. The shots, the excited speeches, and angry exclamations, have reached the ears of one who can well interpret them. This is a coon-hunter.

There is no district in the Southern States without its coon-hunter. In most, many of them; but in each, one who is noted. And, notedly, he is a negro. The pastime is too tame, or too humble, to tempt the white man. Sometimes the sons of "poor white trash" take part in it; but it is usually delivered over to the "darkey."

In the old times of slavery every plantation could boast of one, or more, of these sable Nimrods; and they are not yet extinct. To them coon-catching is a profit, as well as sport; the skins keeping them in tobacco – and whisky, when addicted to drinking it. The flesh, too, though little esteemed by white palates, is a *bonne-bouche* to the negro, with whom animal food is a scarce commodity. It often furnishes him with the substance for a savoury roast.

The plantation of Ephraim Darke is no exception to the general rule. It, too, has its coon-hunter – a negro named, or nicknamed, "Blue Bill;" the qualifying term bestowed, from a cerulean tinge, that in certain lights appears upon the surface of his sable epidermis. Otherwise he is black as ebony.

Blue Bill is a mighty hunter of his kind, passionately fond of the coon-chase – too much, indeed, for his own personal safety. It carries him abroad, when the discipline of the plantation requires him to be at home; and more than once, for so absenting himself, have his shoulders been scored by the "cowskin."

Still the punishment has not cured him of his proclivity. Unluckily for Richard Darke, it has not. For on the evening of Clancy's being shot down, as described, Blue Bill chances to be abroad; and, with a small cur, which he has trained to his favourite chase, is scouring the timber near the edge of the cypress swamp.

He has "treed" an old he-coon, and is just preparing to ascend to the creature's nest – a cavity in a sycamore high up – when a deer comes dashing by. Soon after a shot startles him. He is more disturbed at the peculiar crack, than by the mere fact of its being the report of a gun. His ear, accustomed to such sounds, tells him the report has proceeded from a fowling-piece, belonging to his young master – just then the last man he would wish to meet. He is away from the "quarter" without "pass," or permission of any kind.

His first impulse is, to continue the ascent of the sycamore, and conceal himself among its branches.

But his dog, remaining below – that will betray him?

While hurriedly reflecting on what he had best do, he hears a second shot. Then a third, coming quickly after; while preceding, and mingling with the reports are men's voices, apparently in mad expostulation. He hears, too, the angry growling of a hound, at intervals barking and baying.

"Gorramity!" mutters Blue Bill; "dar's a skrimmage goin' on dar – a *fight*, I reck'n, an' seemin' to be def! Clar enuf who dat fight's between. De fuss shot wa' Mass' Dick's double-barrel; de oder am Charl Clancy rifle. By golly! 'taint safe dis child be seen hya, no how. Whar kin a hide maseff?"

Again he glances upward, scanning the sycamore: then down at his dog; and once more to the trunk of the tree. This is embraced by a creeper – a gigantic grape-vine – up which an ascent may easily be made; so easily, there need be no difficulty in carrying the cur along. It was the ladder he intended using to get at the treed coon.

With the fear of his young master coming past – and if so, surely "cow-hiding" him – he feels there is no time to be wasted in vacillation.

Nor does he waste any. Without further stay, he flings his arm around the coon-dog: raises the unresisting animal from the earth; and “swarms” up the creeper, like a she-bear carrying her cub.

In ten seconds after, he is snugly ensconced in a crotch of the sycamore; screened from observation of any one who may pass underneath, by the profuse foliage of the parasite.

Feeling fairly secure, he once more sets himself to listen. And, listening attentively, he hears the same voices as before. But not any longer in angry ejaculation. The tones are tranquil, as though the two men were now quietly conversing. One says but a word or two; the other all. Then the last alone appears to speak, as if in soliloquy, or from the first failing to make response.

The sudden transition of tone has in it something strange – a contrast inexplicable.

The coon-hunter can tell, that he continuing to talk is his young master, Richard Darke; though he cannot catch, the words, much less make out their meaning. The distance is too great, and the current of sound interrupted by the thick standing trunks of the cypresses.

At length, also, the monologue ends; soon after, succeeded by a short exclamatory phrase, in voice louder and more earnest.

Then there is silence; so profound, that Blue Bill hears but his own heart, beating in loud sonorous thumps – louder from his ribs being contiguous to the hollow trunk of the tree.

Chapter Seven.
Murder without remorse

The breathless silence, succeeding Darke's profane speech, is awe-inspiring; death-like, as though every living creature in the forest had been suddenly struck dumb, or dead, too.

Unspeakably, incredibly atrocious is the behaviour of the man who has remained master of the ground. During the contest, Dick Darke has shown the cunning of the fox, combined with the fiercer treachery of the tiger; victorious, his conduct seems a combination of the jackal and vulture.

Stooping over his fallen foe, to assure himself that the latter no longer lives, he says, —

"Dead, I take it."

These are his cool words; after which, as though still in doubt, he bends lower, and listens. At the same time he clutches the handle of his hunting knife, as with the intent to plunge its blade into the body.

He sees there is no need. It is breathless, almost bloodless – clearly a corpse!

Believing it so, he resumes his erect attitude, exclaiming in louder tone, and with like profanity as before, —

"Yes, dead, damn him!"

As the assassin bends over the body of his fallen foe, he shows no sign of contrition, for the cruel deed he has done. No feeling save that of satisfied vengeance; no emotion that resembles remorse. On the contrary, his cold animal eyes continue to sparkle with jealous hate; while his hand has moved mechanically to the hilt of his knife, as though he meant to mutilate the form he has laid lifeless. Its beauty, even in death, seems to embitter his spirit!

But soon, a sense of danger comes creeping over him, and fear takes shape in his soul. For, beyond doubt, he has done murder.

"No!" he says, in an effort at self-justification. "Nothing of the sort. I've killed him; that's true; but he's had the chance to kill me. They'll see that his gun's discharged; and here's his bullet gone through the skirt of my coat. By thunder, 'twas a close shave!"

For a time he stands reflecting – his glance now turned towards the body, now sent searchingly through the trees, as though in dread of some one coming that way.

Not much likelihood of this. The spot is one of perfect solitude, as is always a cypress forest. There is no path near, accustomed to be trodden by the traveller. The planter has no business among those great buttressed trunks. The woodman will never assail them with his axe. Only a stalking hunter, or perhaps some runaway slave, is at all likely to stray thither.

Again soliloquising, he says, —

"Shall I put a bold face upon it, and confess to having killed him? I can say we met while out hunting; quarrelled, and fought – a fair fight; shot for shot; my luck to have the last. Will that story stand?"

A pause in the soliloquy; a glance at the prostrate form; another, which interrogates the scene around, taking in the huge unshapely trunks, their long outstretched limbs, with the pall-like festoonery of Spanish moss; a thought about the loneliness of the place, and its fitness for concealing a dead body.

Like the lightning's flashes, all this flits through the mind of the murderer. The result, to divert him from his half-formed resolution – perceiving its futility.

"It won't do," he mutters, his speech indicating the change. "No, that it won't! Better say nothing about what's happened. They're not likely to look for him here…"

Again he glances inquiringly around, with a view to secreting the corpse. He has made up his mind to this.

A sluggish creak meanders among the trees, some two hundred yards from the spot. At about a like distance below, it discharges itself into the stagnant reservoir of the swamp.

Its waters are dark, from the overshadowing of the cypresses, and deep enough for the purpose he is planning.

But to carry the body thither will require an effort of strength; and to drag it would be sure to leave traces.

In view of this difficulty, he says to himself, —

"I'll let it lie where it is. No one ever comes along hero – not likely. At the same time, I take it, there can be no harm in hiding him a little. So, Charley Clancy, if I have sent you to kingdom come, I shan't leave your bones unburied. Your ghost might haunt me, if I did. To hinder that you shall have interment."

In the midst of this horrid mockery, he rests his gun against a tree, and commences dragging the Spanish moss from the branches above. The beard-like parasite comes off in flakes – in armfuls. Half a dozen he flings over the still palpitating corpse; then pitches on top some pieces of dead wood, to prevent any stray breeze from sweeping off the hoary shroud.

After strewing other tufts around, to conceal the blood and boot tracks, he rests from his labour, and for a time stands surveying what he has done.

At length seeming satisfied, he again grasps hold of his gun; and is about taking departure from the place, when a sound, striking his ear, causes him to start. No wonder, since it seems the voice of one wailing for the dead!

At first he is affrighted, fearfully so; but recovers himself on learning the cause.

"Only the dog!" he mutters, perceiving Clancy's hound at a distance, among the trees.

On its master being shot down, the animal had scampered off – perhaps fearing a similar fate. It had not gone far, and is now returning – by little and little, drawing nearer to the dangerous spot.

The creature seems struggling between two instincts – affection for its fallen master, and fear for itself.

As Darke's gun is empty, he endeavours to entice the dog within reach of his knife. Despite his coaxing, it will not come!

Hastily ramming a cartridge into the right-hand barrel, he aims, and fires.

The shot takes effect; the ball passing through the fleshy part of the dog's neck. Only to crease the skin, and draw forth a spurt of blood.

The hound hit, and further frightened, gives out a wild howl, and goes off, without sign of return.

Equally wild are the words that leap from the lips of Richard Darke, as he stands gazing after.

"Great God!" he cries; "I've done an infernal foolish thing. The cur will go home to Clancy's house. That'll tell a tale, sure to set people searching. Ay, and it may run back here, guiding them to the spot. Holy hell!"

While speaking, the murderer turns pale. It is the first time for him to experience real fear. In such an out-of-the-way place he has felt confident of concealing the body, and along with it the bloody deed. Then, he had not taken the dog into account, and the odds were in his favour. Now, with the latter adrift, they are heavily against him.

It needs no calculation of chances to make this clear. Nor is it any doubt which causes him to stand hesitating. His irresolution springs from uncertainty as to what course he shall pursue.

One thing certain – he must not remain there. The hound has gone off howling. It is two miles to the widow Clancy's house; but there is an odd squatter's cabin and clearing between. A dog going in that guise, blood-bedraggled, in full cry of distress, will be sure of being seen – equally sure to raise an alarm.

On the probable, or possible, contingencies Dick Darke does not stand long reflecting. Despite its solitude, the cypress forest is not the place for tranquil thought – at least, not now for him. Far off through the trees he can hear the wail of the wounded Molossian.

Is it fancy, or does he also hear human voices?

He stays not to be sure. Beside that gory corpse, shrouded though it be, he dares not remain a moment longer.

Hastily shouldering his gun, he strikes off through the trees; at first in quick step; then in double; this increasing to a rapid run.

He retreats in a direction contrary to that taken by the dog. It is also different from the way leading to his father's house. It forces him still further into the swamp – across sloughs, and through soft mud, where he makes footmarks. Though he has carefully concealed Clancy's corpse, and obliterated all other traces of the strife, in his "scare," he does not think of those he is now making.

The murderer is only – cunning before the crime. After it, if he have conscience, or be deficient in coolness, he loses self-possession, and is pretty sure to leave behind something which will furnish a clue for the detective.

So is it with Richard Darke. As he retreats from the scene of his diabolical deed, his only thought is to put space between himself and the spot where he has shed innocent blood; to get beyond earshot of those canine cries, that seem commingled with the shouts of men – the voices of avengers!

Chapter Eight.
The coon-hunter cautious

During the time that Darke is engaged in covering up Clancy's body, and afterwards occupied in the attempt to kill his dog, the coon-hunter, squatted in the sycamore fork, sticks to his seat like "death to a dead nigger." And all the time trembling. Not without reason. For the silence succeeding the short exclamatory speech has not re-assured him. He believes it to be but a lull, denoting some pause in the action, and that one, or both, of the actors is still upon the ground. If only one, it will be his master, whose monologue was last heard. During the stillness, somewhat prolonged, he continues to shape conjectures and put questions to himself, as to what can have been the *fracas*, and its cause. Undoubtedly a "shooting scrape" between Dick Darke and Charles Clancy. But how has it terminated, or is the end yet come? Has one of the combatants been killed, or gone away? Or have both forsaken the spot where they have been trying to spill each other's blood?

While thus interrogating himself, a new sound disturbs the tranquillity of the forest – the same, which the assassin at first fancied was the voice of one wailing for his victim. The coon-hunter has no such delusion. Soon as hearing, he recognises the tongue of a stag-hound, knowing it to be Clancy's. He is only astray about its peculiar tone, now quite changed. The animal is neither barking nor baying; nor yet does it yelp as if suffering chastisement. The soft tremulous whine, that comes pealing in prolonged reverberation through the trunks of the cypresses, proclaims distress of a different kind – as of a dog asleep and dreaming!

And now, once more a man's voice, his master's. It too changed in tone. No longer in angry exclaim, or quiet conversation, but as if earnestly entreating; the speech evidently not addressed to Clancy, but the hound.

Strange all this; and so thinks the coon-hunter. He has but little time to dwell on it, before another sound waking the echoes of the forest, interrupts the current of his reflections. Another shot! This time, as twice before, the broad round boom of a smooth-bore, so different from the short sharp "spang" of a rifle.

Thoroughly versed in the distinction – indeed an adept – Blue Bill knows from whose gun the shot has been discharged. It is the double-barrel belonging to Richard Darke. All the more reason for him to hug close to his concealment.

And not the less to be careful about the behaviour of his own dog, which he is holding in hard embrace. For hearing the bound, the cur is disposed to give response; would do so but for the muscular fingers of its master closed chokingly around its throat, at intervals detached to give it a cautionary cuff.

After the shot the stag-hound continues its lugubrious cries; but again with altered intonation, and less distinctly heard; as though the animal had gone farther off, and were still making away.

But now a new noise strikes upon the coon-hunter's ears; one at first slight, but rapidly growing louder. It is the tread of footsteps, accompanied by a swishing among the palmettoes, that form an underwood along the edge of the swamp. Some one is passing through them, advancing towards the tree where he is concealed.

More than ever does he tremble on his perch; tighter than ever clutching the throat of his canine companion. For he is sure, that the man whose footsteps speak approach, is his master, or rather his master's son. The sounds seem to indicate great haste – a retreat rapid, headlong, confused. On which the peccant slave bases a hope of escaping observation, and too probable chastisement. Correct in his conjecture, as in the prognostication, in a few seconds after he sees Richard Darke coming between the trees; running as for very life – the more like it that he goes crouchingly; at intervals stopping to look back and listen, with chin almost touching his shoulder!

When opposite the sycamore – indeed under it – he makes pause longer than usual. The perspiration stands in beads upon his forehead, pours down his cheeks, over his eyebrows, almost blinding him. He whips a kerchief out of his coat pocket, and wipes it off. While so occupied, he does not perceive that he has let something drop – something white that came out along with the kerchief. Replacing the piece of cambric he hurries on again, leaving it behind; on, on, till the dull thud of his footfall, and the crisp rustling of the stiff fan-like leaves, become both blended with the ordinary noises of the forest.

Then, but not before, does Blue Bill think of forsaking the fork. Descending from his irksome seat, he approaches the white thing left lying on the ground – a letter enveloped in the ordinary way. He takes it up, and sees it has been already opened. He thinks not of drawing out the sheet folded inside. It would be no use; since the coon-hunter cannot read. Still, an instinct tells him, the little bit of treasure-trove may some time, and in some way, prove useful. So forecasting, he slips it into his pocket.

This done he stands reflecting. No noise to disturb him now. Darke's footsteps have died away in the distance, leaving swamp and cypress forest restored to their habitual stillness. The only sound, Blue Bill hears, is the beating of his own heart, yet loud enough.

No longer thinks he of the coon he has succeeded in treeing. The animal, late devoted to certain death, will owe its escape to an accident, and may now repose securely within its cave. Its pursuer has other thoughts – emotions, strong enough to drive coon-hunting clean out of his head. Among these are apprehensions about his own safety. Though unseen by Richard Darke – his presence there unsuspected – he knows that an unlucky chance has placed him in a position of danger. That a sinister deed has been done he is sure.

Under the circumstances, how is he to act? Proceed to the place whence the shots came, and ascertain what has actually occurred?

At first he thinks of doing this; but surrenders the intention. Affrighted by what is already known to him, he dares not know more. His young master may be a murderer? The way in which he was retreating almost said as much. Is he, Blue Bill, to make himself acquainted with the crime, and bear witness against him who has committed it? As a slave, he knows his testimony will count for little in a court of justice. And as the slave of Ephraim Darke, as little would his life be worth after giving it.

The last reflection decides him; and, still carrying the coon-dog under his arm, he parts from the spot, in timid skulking gait, never stopping, not feeling safe, till he finds himself inside the limits of the "negro quarter."

Chapter Nine.
An assassin in retreat

Athwart the thick timber, going as one pursued – in a track straight as the underwood will allow – breaking through it like a chased bear – now stumbling over a fallen log, now caught in a trailing grape-vine – Richard Darke flees from the place where he has laid his rival low.

He makes neither stop, nor stay. If so, only for a few instants, just long enough to listen, and if possible learn whether he is being followed.

Whether or not, he fancies it; again starting off, with terror in his looks, and trembling in his limbs. The *sangfroid* he exhibited while bending over the dead body of his victim, and afterwards concealing it, has quite forsaken him now. Then he was confident, there could be no witness of the deed – nothing to connect him with it as the doer. Since, there is a change – the unthought-of presence of the dog having produced it. Or, rather, the thought of the animal having escaped. This, and his own imagination.

For more than a mile he keeps on, in headlong reckless rushing. Until fatigue overtaking him, his terror becomes less impulsive, his fancies freer from exaggeration; and, believing himself far enough from the scene of danger, he at length desists from flight, and comes to a dead stop.

Sitting down upon a log, he draws forth his pocket-handkerchief, and wipes the sweat from his face. For he is perspiring at every pore, panting, palpitating. He now finds time to reflect; his first reflection being the absurdity of his making such precipitate retreat; his next, its imprudence.

"I've been a fool for it," he mutters. "Suppose that some one has seen me? 'Twill only have made things worse. And what have I been running away from? A dead body, and a living dog! Why should I care for either? Even though the adage be true – about a live dog better than a dead lion. Let me hope the hound won't tell a tale upon me. For certain the shot hit him. That's nothing. Who could say what sort of ball, or the kind of gun it came from? No danger in that. I'd be stupid to think there could be. Well, it's all over now, and the question is: what next?"

For some minutes he remains upon the log, with the gun resting across his knees, and his head bent over the barrels. He appears engaged in some abstruse calculation. A new thought has sprang up in his mind – a scheme requiring all his intellectual power to elaborate.

"I shall keep that tryst," he says, in soliloquy, seeming at length to have settled it. "Yes; I'll meet her under the magnolia. Who can tell what changes may occur in the heart of a woman? In history I had a royal namesake – an English king, with an ugly hump on his shoulders – as he's said himself, 'deformed, unfinished, sent into the world scarce half made up,' so that the 'dogs barked at *him*,' just as this brute of Clancy's has been doing at me. And this royal Richard, shaped 'so lamely and unfashionable,' made court to a woman, whose husband he had just assassinated – more than a woman, a proud queen – and more than wooed, he subdued her. This ought to encourage me; the better that I, Richard Darke, am neither halt, nor hunchbacked. No, nor yet unfashionable, as many a Mississippian girl says, and more than one is ready to swear.

"Proud Helen Armstrong may be, and is; proud as England's queen herself. For all that, I've got something to subdue her – a scheme, cunning as that of my royal namesake. May God, or the Devil, grant me like success!"

At the moment of giving utterance to the profane prayer, he rises to his feet. Then, taking out his watch, consults it.

It is too dark for him to see the dial; but springing open the glass, he gropes against it, feeling for the hands.

"Half-past nine," he mutters, after making out the time. "Ten is the hour of her assignation. No chance for me to get home before, and then over to Armstrong's wood-ground. It's more than two

miles from here. What matters my going home? Nor any need changing this dress. She won't notice the hole in the skirt. If she do, she wouldn't think of what caused it – above all it's being a bullet. Well, I must be off! It will never do to keep the young lady waiting. If she don't feel disappointed at seeing me, bless her! If she do, I shall curse her! What's passed prepares me for either event. In any case, I shall have satisfaction for the slight she's put upon me. By God I'll get that!"

He is moving away, when a thought occurs staying him. He is not quite certain about the exact hour of Helen Armstrong's tryst, conveyed in her letter to Clancy. In the madness of his mind ever since perusing that epistle, no wonder he should confuse circumstances, and forget dates.

To make sure, he plunges his hand into the pocket, where he deposited both letter and photograph – after holding the latter before the eyes of his dying foeman, and witnessing the fatal effect. With all his diabolical hardihood, he had been awed by this – so as to thrust the papers into his pocket, hastily, carelessly.

They are no longer there!

He searches in his other pockets – in all of them, with like result. He examines his bullet-pouch and gamebag. But finds no letter, no photograph, not a scrap of paper, in any! The stolen epistle, its envelope, the enclosed *carte de visite*– all are absent.

After ransacking his pockets, turning them inside out, he comes to the conclusion that the precious papers are lost.

It startles, and for a moment dismays him. Where are they? He must have let them fall in his hasty retreat through the trees; or left them by the dead body.

Shall he go back in search of them?

No – no – no! He does not dare to return upon that track. The forest path is too sombre, too solitary, now. By the margin of the dank lagoon, under the ghostly shadow of the cypresses, he might meet the ghost of the man murdered!

And why should he go back? After all, there is no need; nothing in the letter which can in any way compromise him. Why should he care to recover it?

"It may go to the devil, her picture along! Let both rot where I suppose I must have dropped them – in the mud, or among the palmettoes. No matter where. But it does matter, my being under the magnolia at the right time, to meet her. Then shall I learn my fate – know it, for better, for worse. If the former, I'll continue to believe in the story of Richard Plantagenet; if the latter, Richard Darke won't much care what becomes of him."

So ending his strange soliloquy, with a corresponding cast upon his countenance, the assassin rebuttons his coat – thrown open in search for the missing papers. Then, flinging the double-barrelled fowling-piece – the murder-gun – over his sinister shoulder, he strides off to keep an appointment not made for him, but for the man he has murdered!

Chapter Ten.
The eve of departure

The evil day has arrived; the ruin, foreseen, has fallen.

The mortgage deed, so long held in menace over the head of Archibald Armstrong – suspended, as it were, by a thread, like the sword of Damocles – is to be put into execution. Darke has demanded immediate payment of the debt, coupled with threat of foreclosure.

The demand is a month old, the threat has been carried out, and the foreclosure effected. The thread having been cut, the keen blade of adversity has come down, severing the tie which attached Colonel Armstrong to his property, as it to him. Yesterday, he was owner, reputedly, of one of the finest plantations along the line of the Mississippi river, an hundred able-bodied negroes hoeing cotton in his fields, with fifty more picking it from the pod, and "ginning" the staple clear of seed; to-day, he is but their owner in seeming, Ephraim Darke being this in reality. And in another day the apparent ownership will end: for Darke has given his debtor notice to yield up houses, lands, slaves, plantation-stock – in short, everything he possesses.

In vain has Armstrong striven against this adverse fate; in vain made endeavours to avert it. When men are falling, false friends grow falser; even true ones becoming cold. Sinister chance also against him; a time of panic – a crisis in the money-market – as it always is on such occasions, when interest runs high, and *second* mortgages are sneered at by those who grant loans.

As no one – neither friend nor financial speculator – comes to Armstrong's rescue, he has no alternative but submit.

Too proud, to make appeal to his inexorable creditor – indeed deeming it idle – he vouchsafes no answer to the notice of foreclosure, beyond saying: "Let it be done."

At a later period he gives ear to a proposal, coming from the mortgagee: to put a valuation upon the property, and save the expenses of a public sale, by disposing of it privately to Darke himself.

To this he consents; less with a view to the convenience of the last, than because his sensitive nature recoils from the vulgarism of the first. Tell me a more trying test to the delicate sensibilities of a gentleman, or his equanimity, than to see his gate piers pasted over with the black and white show bills of the auctioneer; a strip of stair carpet dangling down from one of his bedroom windows, and a crowd of hungry harpies clustered around his door-stoop; some entering with eyes that express keen concupiscence; others coming out with countenances more beatified, bearing away his Penates – jeering and swearing over them – insulting the Household Gods he has so long held in adoration. Ugh! A hideous, horrid sight – a spectacle of Pandemonium!

With a vision of such domestic iconoclasm flitting before his mind – not a dream, but a reality, that will surely arise by letting his estate go to the hammer – Colonel Armstrong accepts Darke's offer to deliver everything over in a lump, and for a lamp sum. The conditions have been some time settled; and Armstrong now knows the worst. Some half-score slaves he reserves; the better terms secured to his creditor by private bargain enabling him to obtain this concession.

Several days have elapsed since the settlement came to a conclusion – the interval spent in preparation for the change. A grand one, too; which contemplates, not alone leaving the old home, but the State in which it stands. The fallen man shrinks from further association with those who have witnessed his fall. Not but that he will leave behind many friends, faithful and true. Still to begin life again in their midst – to be seen humbly struggling at the bottom of the ladder on whose top he once proudly reposed – that would indeed be unendurable.

He prefers to carry out the design, he once thought only a dreamy prediction – migrating to Texas. There, he may recommence life with more hopeful energy, and lesser sense of humiliation.

The moving day has arrived, or rather the eve preceding it. On the morrow, Colonel Archibald Armstrong is called upon by the exigency of human laws, – oft more cruel, if not more inexorable, than those of Nature – to vacate the home long his.

'Tis night. Darkness has spread its sable pall over forest and field, and broods upon the brighter surface of the stream gliding between – the mighty Mississippi. All are equally obscured – from a thick veil of lead-coloured cloud, at the sun's setting, drawn over the canopy of the sky. Any light seen is that of the fire-flies, engaged in their nocturnal cotillon; while the sounds heard are nightly noises in a Southern States forest, semi-tropical, as the wild creatures who have their home in it. The green *cicada* chirps continuously, "Katy did – Katy did;" the *hyladae*, though reptiles, send forth an insect note; while the sonorous "gluck-gluck" of the huge *rana pipiens* mingles with the melancholy "whoo-whooa" of the great horned owl; which, unseen, sweeps on silent wing through the shadowy aisles of the forest, leading the lone traveller to fancy them peopled by departed spirits in torment from the pains of Purgatory.

Not more cheerful are the sounds aloft: for there are such, far above the tops of the tallest trees. There, the nightjar plies its calling, not so blind but that it can see in deepest darkness the smallest moth or midge, that, tired of perching on the heated leaves essays to soar higher. Two sorts of these goatsuckers, utter cries quite distinct; though both expressing aversion to "William." One speaks of him as still alive, mingling pity with its hostile demand: "Whippoor-Will!" The other appears to regard him as dead, and goes against his marital relict, at intervals calling out: "Chuck Will's widow!"

Other noises interrupt the stillness of a Mississippian night. High up in heaven the "honk" of a wild gander leading his flock in the shape of an inverted V; at times the more melodious note of a trumpeter swan; or from the top of a tall cottonwood, or cypress, the sharp saw-filing shriek of the white-headed eagle, angered by some stray creature coming too close, and startling it from its slumbers. Below, out of the swamp sedge, rises the mournful cry of the quabird – the American bittern – and from the same, the deep sonorous bellow of that ugliest animal on earth – the alligator.

Where fields adjoin the forest – plantation clearings – oft few and far between – there are sounds more cheerful. The song of the slave, his day's work done, sure to be preceded, or followed, by peals of loud jocund laughter; the barking of the house-dog, indicative of a well-watched home; with the lowing of cattle, and other domestic calls that proclaim it worth watching. A galaxy of little lights, in rows like street lamps, indicate the "negro quarter;" while in the foreground a half-dozen windows of larger size, and brighter sheen, show where stands the "big house" – the planter's own dwelling.

To that of Colonel Armstrong has come a night of exceptional character, when its lights are seen burning later than usual. The plantation clock has tolled nine, nearly an hour ago. Still light shines through the little windows of the negro cabins, while the larger ones of the "big house" are all aflame. And there are candles being carried to and fro, lighting up a scene of bustling activity: while the clack of voices – none of them in laughter – is heard commingled with the rattling of chains, and the occasional stroke of a hammer. The forms of men and women, are seen to flit athwart the shining windows, all busy about something.

There is no mystery in the matter. It is simply the planter, with his people, occupied in preparation for the morrow's moving. Openly, and without restraint: for, although so near the mid hour of night, it is no midnight flitting.

The only individual, who appears to act surreptitiously, is a young girl; who, coming out by the back door of the dwelling, makes away from its walls in gliding gait – at intervals glancing back over her shoulder, as if in fear of being followed, or observed.

Her style of dress also indicates a desire to shun observation; for she is cloaked and close hooded. Not enough to ensure disguise, though she may think so. The most stolid slave on all Colonel Armstrong's plantation, could tell at a glance whose figure is enfolded in the shapeless garment, giving it shape. He would at once identify it as that of his master's daughter. For no wrap however loosely

flung over it, could hide the queenly form of Helen Armstrong, or conceal the splendid symmetry of her person. Arrayed in the garb of a laundress, she would still look the lady.

Perhaps, for the first time in her life she is walking with stealthy step, crouched form, and countenance showing fear. Daughter of a large slave-owner – mistress over many slaves – she is accustomed to an upright attitude, and aristocratic bearing. But she is now on an errand that calls for more than ordinary caution, and would dread being recognised by the humblest slave on her father's estate.

Fortunately for her, none see; therefore no one takes note of her movements, or the mode of her apparel. If one did, the last might cause remark. A woman cloaked, with head hooded in a warm summer night, the thermometer at ninety!

Notwithstanding the numerous lights, she is not observed as she glides through their crossing coruscations. And beyond, there is but little danger – while passing through the peach orchard, that stretches rearward from the dwelling. Still less, after getting out through a wicket-gate, which communicates with a tract of woodland. For then she is among trees whose trunks stand close, the spaces between buried in deep obscurity – deeper from the night being a dark one. It is not likely so to continue: for, before entering into the timber, she glances up to the sky, and sees that the cloud canopy has broken; here and there stars scintillating in the blue spaces between. While, on the farther edge of the plantation clearing, a brighter belt along the horizon foretells the uprising of the moon.

She does not wait for this; but plunges into the shadowy forest, daring its darkness, regardless of its dangers.

Chapter Eleven.
Under the Trysting Tree

Still stooping in her gait, casting furtive glances to right, to left, before and behind – at intervals stopping to listen – Helen Armstrong continues her nocturnal excursion. Notwithstanding the obscurity, she keeps in a direct course, as if to reach some particular point, and for a particular reason.

What this is needs not be told. Only love could lure a young lady out at that late hour, and carry her along a forest path, dark, and not without dangers. And love unsanctioned, unallowed – perhaps forbidden, by some one who has ascendancy over her.

Just the first it is which has tempted her forth; while the last, not the cold, has caused her to cloak herself, and go close hooded. If her father but knew of the errand she is on, it could not be executed. And well is she aware of this. For the proud planter is still proud, despite his reverses, still clings to the phantom of social superiority; and if he saw her now, wandering through the woods at an hour near midnight, alone; if he could divine her purpose: to meet a man, who in time past has been rather coldly received at his house – because scarce ranking with his own select circle – had Colonel Armstrong but the gift of clairvoyance, in all probability he would at once suspend the preparations for departure, rush to his rifle, then off through the woods on the track of his erring daughter, with the intent to do a deed sanguinary as that recorded, if not so repulsive.

The girl has not far to go – only half a mile or so, from the house, and less than a quarter beyond the zigzag rail fence, which forms a boundary line between the maize fields and primeval forest. Her journey, when completed, will bring her under a tree – a grand magnolia, monarch of the forest surrounding. Well does she know it, as the way thither.

Arriving at the tree, she pauses beneath its far-stretching boughs. At the same time tossing back her hood, she shows her face unveiled.

She has no fear now. The place is beyond the range of night-strolling negroes. Only one in pursuit of 'possum, or 'coon, would be likely to come that way; a contingency too rare to give her uneasiness.

With features set in expectation, she stands. The fire-flies illuminate her countenance – deserving a better light. But seen, even under their pale fitful coruscation, its beauty is beyond question. Her features of gipsy cast – to which the cloak's hood adds characteristic expression – produce a picture appropriate to its framing – the forest.

Only for a few short moments does she remain motionless. Just long enough to get back her breath, spent by some exertion in making her way through the wood – more difficult in the darkness. Strong emotions, too, contribute to the pulsations of her heart.

She does not wait for them to be stilled. Facing towards the tree, and standing on tiptoe, she raises her hand aloft, and commences groping against the trunk. The fire-flies flicker over her snow-white fingers, as these stray along the bark, at length resting upon the edge of a dark disc – the knot-hole in the tree.

Into this her hand is plunged; then drawn out – empty!

At first there is no appearance of disappointment. On the contrary, the phosphoric gleam dimly disclosing her features, rather shows satisfaction – still further evinced by the phrase falling from her lips, with the tone of its utterance. She says, contentedly: – "*He has got it*!"

But by the same fitful light, soon after is perceived a change – the slightest expression of chagrin, as she adds, in murmured interrogatory, "Why hasn't he left an answer?"

Is she sure he has not? No. But she soon will be.

With this determination, she again faces towards the tree; once more inserts her slender fingers; plunges in her white hand up to the wrist – to the elbow; gropes the cavity all round; then draws out again, this time with an exclamation which tells of something more than disappointment. It is discontent – almost anger. So too a speech succeeding, thus: —

"He might at least have let me know, whether he was coming or not – a word to say, I might expect him. He should have been here before me. It's the hour – past it!"

She is not certain – only guessing. She may be mistaken about the time – perhaps wronging the man. She draws the watch from her waistbelt, and holds the dial up. By the moon, just risen, she can read it. Reflecting the rays, the watch crystal, the gold rings on her fingers, and the jewels gleam joyfully. But there is no joy on her countenance. On the contrary, a mixed expression of sadness and chagrin. For the hands indicate ten minutes after the hour of appointment.

There can be no mistake about the time – she herself fixed it. And none in the timepiece. Her watch is not a cheap one. No fabric of Germany, or Geneva; no pedlar's thing from Yankeeland, which as a Southron she would despise; but an article of solid English manufacture, *sun-sure*, like the machine-made watches of "Streeter."

In confidence she consults it; saying vexatiously:

"Ten minutes after, and he not here! No answer to my note! He must have received it: Surely Jule put it into the tree? Who but he could have taken it out? Oh, this is cruel! He comes not – I shall go home."

The cloak is once more closed, the hood drawn over her head. Still she lingers – lingers, and listens.

No footstep – no sound to break the solemn stillness – only the chirrup of tree-crickets, and the shrieking of owls.

She takes a last look at the dial, sadly, despairingly. The hands indicate full fifteen minutes after the hour she had named – going on to twenty.

She restores the watch to its place, beneath her belt, her demeanour assuming a sudden change. Some chagrin still, but no sign of sadness. This is replaced by an air of determination, fixed and stern. The moon's light, with that of the fire-flies, have both a response in flashes brighter than either – sparks from the eyes of an angry woman. For Helen Armstrong is this, now.

Drawing her cloak closer around, she commences moving off from the tree.

She is not got beyond the canopy of its branches, ere her steps are stayed. A rustling among the dead leaves – a swishing against those that live – a footstep with tread solid and heavy – the footfall of a man!

A figure is seen approaching; as yet only indistinctly, but surely that of a man. As surely the man expected?

"He's been detained – no doubt by some good cause," she reflects, her spite and sadness departing as he draws near.

They are gone, before he can get to her side. But woman-like, she resolves to make a grace of forgiveness, and begins by upbraiding him.

"So you're here at last. A wonder you condescended coming at all! There's an old adage 'Better late than never.' Perhaps, you think it befits present time and company? And, perhaps, you may be mistaken. Indeed you are, so far as I'm concerned. I've been here long enough, and won't be any longer. Good-night, sir! Good-night!"

Her speech is taunting in tone, and bitter in sense. She intends it to be both – only in seeming. But to still further impress a lesson on the lover who has slighted her, she draws closer the mantle, and makes as if moving away.

Mistaking her pretence for earnest, the man flings himself across her path – intercepting her. Despite the darkness she can see that his arms are in the air, and stretched towards her, as if appealingly. The attitude speaks apology, regret, contrition – everything to make her relent.

She relents; is ready to fling herself upon his breast, and there lie lovingly, forgivingly.

But again woman-like, not without a last word of reproach, to make more esteemed her concession, she says: —

"'Tis cruel thus to have tried me. Charles! Charles! why have you done it?"

As she utters the interrogatory a cloud comes over her countenance, quicker than ever shadow over sun. Its cause – the countenance of him standing *vis-à-vis*. A change in their relative positions has brought his face full under the moonlight. He is *not* the man she intended meeting!

Who he really is can be gathered from his rejoinder: —

"You are mistaken, Miss Armstrong. My name is not Charles, but Richard. I am *Richard Darke*."

Chapter Twelve.
The wrong man

Richard Darke instead of Charles Clancy!

Disappointment were far too weak a word to express the pang that shoots through the heart of Helen Armstrong, on discovering the mistake she has made. It is bitter vexation, commingled with a sense of shame. I or her speeches, in feigned reproach, have terribly compromised her.

She does not drop to the earth, nor show any sign of it. She is not a woman of the weak fainting sort. No cry comes from her lips – nothing to betray surprise, or even the most ordinary emotion.

As Darke stands before her with arms upraised, she simply says, —

"Well, sir; if you *are* Richard Darke, what then? Your being so matters not to me; and certainly gives you no right thus to intrude upon me. I wish to be alone, and must beg of you to leave me so."

The cool firm tone causes him to quail. He had hoped that the surprise of his unexpected appearance – coupled with his knowledge of her clandestine appointment – would do something to subdue, perhaps make her submissive.

On the contrary, the thought of the last but stings her to resentment, as he soon perceives.

His raised arms drop down, and he is about to step aside, leaving her free to pass. Though not before making an attempt to justify himself; instinct supplying a reason, with hope appended. He does so, saying, —

"If I've intruded, Miss Armstrong, permit me to apologise for it. I assure you it's been altogether an accident. Having heard you are about to leave the neighbourhood – indeed, that you start to-morrow morning – I was on the way to your father's house to say farewell. I'm sorry my coming along here, and chancing to meet you, should lay me open to the charge of intrusion. I shall still more regret, if my presence has spoiled any plans, or interfered with an appointment. Some one else expected, I presume?"

For a time she is silent – abashed, while angered, by the impudent interrogatory.

Recovering herself, she rejoins, —

"Even were it as you say, sir, by what authority do you question me? I've said I wish to be alone."

"Oh, if that's your wish, I must obey, and relieve you of my presence, apparently so disagreeable."

Saying this he steps to one side. Then continues, —

"As I've told you, I was on the way to your father's house to take leave of the family. If you're not going immediately home, perhaps I may be the bearer of a message for you?"

The irony is evident; but Helen Armstrong is not sensible of it. She does not even think of it. Her only thought is how to get disembarrassed of this man who has appeared at a moment so *mal apropos*. Charles Clancy – for he was the expected one – may have been detained by some cause unknown, a delay still possible of justification. She has a lingering thought he may yet come; and, so thinking, her eye turns towards the forest with a quick, subtle glance.

Notwithstanding its subtlety, and the obscurity surrounding them, Darke observes, comprehends it.

Without waiting for her rejoinder, he proceeds to say, —

"From the mistake you've just made, Miss Armstrong, I presume you took me for some one bearing the baptismal name of Charles. In these parts I know only one person who carries that cognomen – one Charles Clancy. If it be he you are expecting, I think I can save you the necessity of stopping out in the night air any longer. If you're staying for him you'll be disappointed; he will certainly not come."

"What mean you, Mr Darke? Why do you say that?"

His words carry weighty significance, and throw the proud girl off her guard. She speaks confusedly, and without reflection.

His rejoinder, cunningly conceived, designed with the subtlety of the devil, still further affects her, and painfully.

He answers, with assumed nonchalance, —

"Because I know it."

"How?" comes the quick, unguarded interrogatory.

"Well; I chanced to meet Charley Clancy this morning, and he told me he was going off on a journey. He was just starting when I saw him. Some affair of the heart, I believe; a little love-scrape he's got into with a pretty Creole girl, who lives t'other side of Natchez. By the way, he showed me a photograph of yourself, which he said you had sent him. A very excellent likeness, indeed. Excuse me for telling you, that he and I came near quarrelling about it. He had another photograph – that of his Creole *chère amie*– and would insist that she is more beautiful than you. I may own, Miss Armstrong, you've given me no great reason for standing forth as your champion. Still, I couldn't stand that; and, after questioning Clancy's taste, I plainly told him he was mistaken. I'm ready to repeat the same to him, or any one, who says you are not the most beautiful woman in the State of Mississippi."

At the conclusion of his fulsome speech Helen Armstrong cares but little for the proffered championship, and not much for aught else.

Her heart is nigh to breaking. She has given her affections to Clancy – in that last letter written, lavished them. And they have been trifled with – scorned! She, daughter of the erst proudest planter in all Mississippi State, has been slighted for a Creole girl; possibly, one of the "poor white trash" living along the bayous' edge. Full proof she has of his perfidy, or how should Darke know of it? More maddening still, the man so slighting her, has been making boast of it, proclaiming her suppliance and shame, showing her photograph, exulting in the triumph obtained! "O God!"

Not in prayer, but angry ejaculation, does the name of the Almighty proceed from her lips. Along with it a scarce-suppressed scream, as, despairingly, she turns her face towards home.

Darke sees his opportunity, or thinks so; and again flings himself before her – this time on his knees.

"Helen Armstrong!" he exclaims, in an earnestness of passion – if not pure, at least heartfelt and strong – "why should you care for a man who thus mocks you? Here am I, who love you, truly – madly – more than my own life! 'Tis not too late to withdraw the answer you have given me. Gainsay it, and there need be no change – no going to Texas. Your father's home may still be his, and yours. Say you'll be my wife, and everything shall be restored to him – all will yet be well."

She is patient to the conclusion of his appeal. Its apparent sincerity stays her; though she cannot tell, or does not think, why. It is a moment of mechanical irresolution.

But, soon as ended, again returns the bitterness that has just swept through her soul – torturing her afresh.

There is no balm in the words spoken by Dick Darke; on the contrary, they but cause increased rankling.

To his appeal she makes answer, as once before she has answered him – with a single word. But now repeated three times, and in a tone not to be mistaken.

On speaking it, she parts from the spot with proud haughty step, and a denying disdainful gesture, which tells him, she is not to be further stayed.

Spited, chagrined, angry, in his craven heart he feels also cowed, subdued, crestfallen. So much, he dares not follow her, but remains under the magnolia; from whose hollow trunk seems to reverberate the echo of her last word, in its treble repetition: "*never—never—never*!"

Chapter Thirteen.
The coon-hunter at home

Over the fields of Ephraim Darke's plantation a lingering ray of daylight still flickers, as Blue Bill, returning from his abandoned coon-hunt, gets back to the negro quarter. He enters it, with stealthy tread, and looking cautiously around.

For he knows that some of his fellow-slaves are aware of his having gone out "a-cooning," and will wonder at his soon return – too soon to pass without observation. If seen by them he may be asked for an explanation, which he is not prepared to give.

To avoid being called upon for it, he skulks in among the cabins; still carrying the dog under his arm, lest the latter may take a fancy to go smelling among the utensils of some other darkey's kitchen, and betray his presence in the "quarter."

Fortunately for the coon-hunter, the little "shanty" that claims him as its tenant stands at the outward extremity of the row of cabins – nearest the path leading to the plantation woodland. He is therefore enabled to reach, and re-enter it, without any great danger of attracting observation.

And as it chances, he is not observed; but gets back into the bosom of his family, no one being a bit the wiser.

Blue Bill's domestic circle consists of his wife, Phoebe, and several half-naked little "niggers," who, at his return, tackle on to his legs, and, soon as he sits down, clamber confusedly over his knees. So circumstanced, one would think he should now feel safe, and relieved from further anxiety. Far from it: he has yet a gauntlet to run.

His re-appearance so early, unexpected; his empty gamebag; the coon-dog carried under his arm; all have their effect upon Phoebe. She cannot help feeling surprise, accompanied by a keen curiosity.

She is not the woman to submit to it in silence.

Confronting her dark-skinned lord and master, with arms set akimbo, she says, —

"Bress de Lor', Bill! Wha' for you so soon home? Neider coon nor possum! An' de dog toated arter dat trange fashun! You ain't been gone more'n a hour! Who'd speck see you come back dat a way, empty-handed; nuffin, 'cep your own ole dog! 'Splain it, sah?"

Thus confronted, the coon-hunter lets fall his canine companion; which drops with a dump upon the floor. Then seats himself on a stool, but without entering upon the demanded explanation. He only says: —

"Nebba mind, Phoebe, gal; nebba you mind why I'se got home so soon. Dat's nuffin 'trange. I seed de night warn't a gwine to be fav'ble fo' trackin' de coon; so dis nigga konklood he'd leab ole cooney 'lone."

"Lookee hya, Bill!" rejoins the sable spouse, laying her hand upon his shoulder, and gazing earnestly into his eyes. "Dat ere ain't de correck explicashun. You's not tellin' me de troof!"

The coon-hunter quails under the searching glance, as if in reality a criminal; but still holds back the demanded explanation. He is at a loss what to say.

"Da's somethin' mysteerus 'bout dis," continues his better half. "You'se got a seecrit, nigga; I kin tell it by de glint ob yer eye. I nebba see dat look on ye, but I know you ain't yaseff; jess as ye use deseeve me, when you war in sich a way 'bout brown Bet."

"Wha you talkin 'bout, Phoebe? Dar's no brown Bet in de case. I swar dar ain't."

"Who sayed dar war? No, Bill, dat's all pass. I only spoked ob her 'kase ya look jess now like ye did when Bet used bamboozle ye. What I say now am dat you ain't yaseff. Dar's a cat in de bag, somewha; you better let her out, and confess de whole troof."

As Phoebe makes this appeal, her glance rests inquiringly on her husband's countenance, and keenly scrutinises the play of his features.

There is not much play to be observed. The coon-hunter is a pure-blooded African, with features immobile as those of the Sphinx. And from his colour nought can be deduced. As already said, it is the depth of its ebon blackness, producing a purplish iridescence over the epidermis, that has gained for him the sobriquet "Blue Bill."

Unflinchingly he stands the inquisitorial glance, and for the time Phoebe is foiled.

Only until after supper, when the frugality of the meal – made so by the barren chase – has perhaps something to do in melting his heart, and relaxing his tongue. Whether this, or whatever the cause, certain it is, that before going to bed, he unburdens himself to the partner of his joys, by making full confession of what he has heard and seen by the side of the cypress swamp.

He tells her, also, of the letter picked up; which, cautiously pulling out of his pocket, he submits to her inspection.

Phoebe has once been a family servant – an indoor domestic, and handmaiden to a white mistress. This in the days of youth – the halcyon days of her girlhood, in "Ole Varginny" – before she was transported west, sold to Ephraim Darke, and by him degraded to the lot of an ordinary outdoor slave. But her original owner taught her to read, and her memory still retains a trace of this early education – sufficient for her to decipher the script put into her hands.

She first looks at the photograph; as it is the first to come out of the envelope. There can be no mistaking whose likeness it is. A lady too conspicuously beautiful to have escaped notice from the humblest slave in the settlement.

The negress spends some seconds gazing upon the portrait, as she does so remarking, —

"How bewful dat young lady!"

"You am right 'bout dat, Phoebe. She bewful as any white gal dis nigga ebber sot eyes on. And she good as bewful. I'se sorry she gwine leab dis hya place. Dar's many a darkie 'll miss de dear young lady. An' won't Mass Charl Clancy miss her too! Lor! I most forgot; maybe he no trouble 'bout her now; maybe he's gone dead! Ef dat so, she miss *him*, a no mistake. She cry her eyes out."

"You tink dar war something 'tween dem two?"

"Tink! I'se shoo ob it, Phoebe. Didn't I see dem boaf down dar in de woodland, when I war out a-coonin. More'n once I seed em togedder. A young white lady an' genl'm don't meet dat way unless dar's a feelin' atween em, any more dan we brack folks. Besides, dis nigga know dey lub one noder – he know fo sartin. Jule, she tell Jupe; and Jupe hab trussed dat same seecret to me. Dey been in lub long time; afore Mass Charl went 'way to Texas. But de great Kurnel Armstrong, he don't know nuffin' 'bout it. Golly! ef he did, he shoo kill Charl Clancy; dat is, if de poor young man ain't dead arready. Le's hope 'tain't so. But, Phoebe, gal, open dat letter, an' see what de lady say. Satin it's been wrote by her. Maybe it trow some light on dis dark subjeck."

Phoebe, thus solicited, takes the letter from the envelope. Then spreading it out, and holding it close to the flare of the tallow dip, reads it from beginning to end.

It is a task that occupies her some considerable time; for her scholastic acquirements, not very bright at the best, have become dimmed by long disuse. For all, she succeeds in deciphering its contents and interpreting them to Bill; who listens with ears wide open and eyes in staring wonderment.

When the reading is at length finished, the two remain for some time silent, – pondering upon the strange circumstances thus revealed to them.

Blue Bill is the first to resume speech. He says: —

"Dar's a good deal in dat letter I know'd afore, and dar's odder points as 'pear new to me; but whether de old or de new, 'twon't do for us folk declar a single word o' what de young lady hab wrote in dat ere 'pistle. No, Phoebe, neery word must 'scape de lips ob eider o' us. We muss hide de letter, an' nebba let nob'dy know dar's sich a dockyment in our posseshun. And dar must be nuffin' know'd

’bout dis nigga findin’ it. Ef dat sakumstance war to leak out, I needn’t warn you what ’ud happen to me. Blue Bill ’ud catch de cowhide, – maybe de punishment ob de pump. So, Phoebe, gal, gi’e me yar word to keep dark, for de case am a dangersome, an a desprit one.”

The wife can well comprehend the husband’s caution, with the necessity of compliance; and the two retire to rest, in the midst of their black olive branches, with a mutual promise to be “mum.”

Chapter Fourteen.
Why comes he not?

Helen Armstrong goes to bed, with spiteful thoughts about Charles Clancy. So rancorous she cannot sleep, but turns distractedly on her couch, from time to time changing cheek upon the pillow.

At little more than a mile's distance from this chamber of unrest, another woman is also awake, thinking of the same man – not spitefully, but anxiously. It is his mother.

As already said, the road running north from Natchez leads past Colonel Armstrong's gate. A traveller, going in the opposite direction – that is towards the city – on clearing the skirts of the plantation, would see, near the road side, a dwelling of very different kind; of humble unpretentious aspect, compared with the grand mansion of the planter. It would be called a cottage, were this name known in the State of Mississippi – which it is not. Still it is not a log-cabin; but a "frame-house," its walls of "weather-boarding," planed and painted, its roof cedar-shingled; a style of architecture occasionally seen in the Southern States, though not so frequently as in the Northern – inhabited by men in moderate circumstances, poorer than planters, but richer, or more gentle, than the "white trash," who live in log-cabins.

Planters they are in social rank, though poor; perhaps owning a half-dozen slaves, and cultivating a small tract of cleared ground, from twenty to fifty acres. The frame-house vouches for their respectability; while two or three log structures at back – representing barn, stable, and other outbuildings – tell of land attached.

Of this class is the habitation referred to – the home of the widow Clancy.

As already known, her widowhood is of recent date. She still wears its emblems upon her person, and carries its sorrow in her heart.

Her husband, of good Irish lineage, had found his way to Nashville, the capital city of Tennessee; where, in times long past, many Irish families made settlements. There he had married her, she herself being a native Tennesseean – sprung from the old Carolina pioneer stock, that colonised the state near the end of the eighteenth century – the Robertsons, Hyneses, Hardings, and Bradfords – leaving to their descendants a patent of nobility, or at least a family name deserving respect, and generally obtaining it.

In America, as elsewhere, it is not the rule for Irishmen to grow rich; and still more exceptional in the case of Irish gentlemen. When these have wealth their hospitality is too apt to take the place of a spendthrift profuseness, ending in pecuniary embarrassment.

So was it with Captain Jack Clancy; who got wealth with his wife, but soon squandered it entertaining his own and his wife's friends. The result, a move to Mississippi, where land was cheaper, and his attenuated fortune would enable him to hold out a little longer.

Still, the property he had purchased in Mississippi State was but a poor one; leading him to contemplate a further flit into the rich red lands of North-Eastern Texas, just becoming famous as a field for colonisation. His son Charles sent thither, as said, on a trip of exploration, had spent some months in the Lone Star State, prospecting for the new home; and brought back a report in every way favourable.

But the ear, to which it was to have been spoken, could no more hear. On his return, he found himself fatherless; and to the only son there remains only a mother; whose grief, pressing heavily, has almost brought her to the grave. It is one of a long series of reverses which have sorely taxed her fortitude. Another of like heaviness, and the tomb may close over her.

Some such presentiment is in the mother's mind, on this very day, as the sun goes down, and she sits in her chamber beside a dim candle, with ear keenly bent to catch the returning footsteps of her son.

He has been absent since noon, having gone deer-stalking, as frequently before. She can spare him for this, and pardon his prolonged absence. She knows how fond he is of the chase; has been so from a boy.

But, on the present occasion, he is staying beyond his usual time. It is now night; the deer have sought their coverts; and he is not "torch-hunting."

Only one thing can she think of to explain the tardiness of his return. The eyes of the widowed mother have been of late more watchful than wont. She has noticed her son's abstracted air, and heard sighs that seemed to come from his inner heart. Who can mistake the signs of love, either in man or woman? Mrs Clancy does not. She sees that Charles has lapsed into this condition.

Rumours that seem wafted on the air – signs slight, but significant – perhaps the whisper of a confidential servant – these have given her assurance of the fact: telling her, at the same time, who has won his affections.

Mrs Clancy is neither dissatisfied nor displeased. In all the neighbourhood there is no one she would more wish to have for a daughter-in-law than Helen Armstrong. Not from any thought of the girl's great beauty, or high social standing. Caroline Clancy is herself too well descended to make much of the latter circumstance. It is the reputed noble character of the lady that influences her approval of her son's choice.

Thinking of this – remembering her own youth, and the stolen interviews with Charles Clancy's father – oft under the shadow of night – she could not, does not, reflect harshly on the absence of that father's son from home, however long, or late the hour.

It is only as the clock strikes twelve, she begins to think seriously about it. Then creeps over her a feeling of uneasiness, soon changing to apprehension. Why should he be staying out so late – after midnight? The same little bird, that brought her tidings of his love-affair, has also told her it is clandestine. Mrs Clancy may not like this. It has the semblance of a slight to her son, as herself – more keenly felt by her in their reduced circumstances. But then, as compensation, arises the retrospect of her own days of courtship carried on in the same way.

Still, at that hour the young lady cannot – dares not – be abroad. All the more unlikely, that the Armstrongs are moving off – as all the neighbourhood knows – and intend starting next day, at an early hour.

The plantation people will long since have retired to rest; therefore an interview with his sweetheart can scarce be the cause of her son's detention. Something else must be keeping him. What? So run the reflections of the fond mother.

At intervals she starts up from her seat, as some sound reaches her; each time gliding to the door, and gazing out – again to go back disappointed.

For long periods she remains in the porch, her eye interrogating the road that runs past the cottage-gate; her ear acutely listening for footsteps.

Early in the night it has been dark; now there is a brilliant moonlight. But no man, no form moving underneath it. No sound of coming feet; nothing that resembles a footfall.

One o'clock, and still silence; to the mother of Charles Clancy become oppressive, as with increased anxiety she watches and waits.

At intervals she glances at the little "Connecticut" clock that ticks over the mantel. A pedlar's thing, it may be false, as the men who come south selling "sech." It is the reflection of a Southern woman, hoping her conjecture may be true.

But, as she lingers in the porch, and looks at the moving moon, she knows the hour must be late.

Certain sounds coming from the forest, and the farther swamp, tell her so. As a backwoods woman she can interpret them. She hears the call of the turkey "gobbler." She knows it means morning.

The clock strikes two; still she hears no fall of footstep – sees no son returning!

"Where is my Charles? What can be detaining him?"

Phrases almost identical with those that fell from the lips of Helen Armstrong, but a few hours before, in a different place, and prompted by a different sentiment – a passion equally strong, equally pure!

Both doomed to disappointment, alike bitter and hard to bear. The same in cause, but dissimilar in the impression produced. The sweetheart believing herself slighted, forsaken, left without a lover; the mother tortured with the presentiment, she no longer has a son!

When, at a yet later hour – or rather earlier, since it is nigh daybreak – a dog, his coat disordered, comes gliding through the gate, and Mrs Clancy recognises her son's favourite hunting hound, she has still only a presentiment of the terrible truth. But one which to the maternal heart, already filled with foreboding, feels too like certainty.

And too much for her strength. Wearied with watching, prostrated by the intensity of her vigil, when the hound crawls up the steps, and under the dim light she sees his bedraggled body – blood as well as mud upon it – the sight produces a climax – a shock apparently fatal.

She swoons upon the spot, and is carried inside the house by a female slave – the last left to her.

Chapter Fifteen.
A moonlight moving

While the widowed mother, now doubly bereft – stricken down by the blow – is still in a state of syncope, the faithful negress doing what she can to restore her, there are sounds outside unheard by either. A dull rumble of wheels, as of some heavy vehicle coming along the main road, with the occasional crack of a whip, and the sonorous "wo-ha" of a teamster.

Presently, a large "Conestoga" wagon passes the cottage-gate, full freighted with what looks like house furniture, screened under canvas. The vehicle is drawn by a team of four strong mules, driven by a negro; while at the wagon's tail, three or four other darkeys follow afoot.

The cortege, of purely southern character, has scarce passed out of sight, and not yet beyond hearing, when another vehicle comes rolling along the road. This, of lighter build, and proceeding at a more rapid rate, is a barouche, drawn by a pair of large Kentucky horses. As the night is warm, and there is no need to spring up the leathern hood – its occupants can all be seen, and their individuality made out. On the box-seat is a black coachman; and by his side a young girl whose tawny complexion, visible in the whiter moonbeams, tells her to be a mulatto. Her face has been seen before, under a certain forest tree – a magnolia – its owner depositing a letter in the cavity of the trunk. She who sits alongside the driver is "Jule."

In the barouche, behind, is a second face that has been seen under the same tree, but with an expression upon it sadder and more disturbed. For of the three who occupy the inside seats one is Helen Armstrong; the others her father, and sister. They are *en route* for the city of Natchez, the port of departure for their journey south-westward into Texas; just starting away from their old long-loved dwelling, whose gates they have left ajar, its walls desolate behind thorn.

The wagon, before, carries the remnant of the planter's property, – all his inexorable creditor allows him to take along. No wonder he sits in the barouche, with bowed head, and chin between his knees, not caring to look back. For the first time in his life he feels truly, terribly humiliated.

This, and no flight from creditors, no writ, nor pursuing sheriff, will account for his commencing the journey at so early an hour. To be seen going off in the open daylight would attract spectators around; it may be many sympathisers. But in the hour of adversity his sensitive nature shrinks from the glance of sympathy, as he would dread the stare of exultation, were any disposed to indulge in it.

But besides the sentiment, there is another cause for their night moving – an inexorable necessity as to time. The steamboat, which is to take them up Red River, leaves Natchez at sunrise. He must be aboard by daybreak.

If the bankrupt planter be thus broken-spirited, his eldest daughter is as much cast down as he, and far more unhappily reflecting.

Throughout all that night Helen Armstrong has had no sleep; and now, in the pale moonlight of the morning, her cheeks show white and wan, while a dark shadow broods upon her brow, and her eyes glisten with wild unnatural light, as one in a raging fever. Absorbed in thought, she takes no heed of anything along the road; and scarce makes answer to an occasional observation addressed to her by her sifter, evidently with the intention to cheer her. It has less chance of success, because of Jessie herself being somewhat out of sorts. Even she, habitually merry, is for the time sobered; indeed saddened at the thought of that they are leaving behind, and what may be before them. Possibly, as she looks back at the gate of their grand old home, through which they will never again go, she may be reflecting on the change from their late luxurious life, to the log-cabin and coarse fare, of which her father had forewarned them.

If so, the reflection is hers – not Helen's. Different with the latter, and far more bitter the emotion that stirs within her person, scalding her heart. Little cares she what sort of house she is hitherto to dwell in, what she will have to wear, or eat. The scantiest raiment, or coarsest food, can give no discomfort now. She could bear the thought of sheltering under the humblest roof in Texas – ay, think of it with cheerfulness – had Charles Clancy been but true, to share its shelter along with her. He has not, and that is an end of it.

Is it? No; not for her, though it may be for him. In the company of his Creole girl he will soon cease to think of her – forget the solemn vows made, and the sweet words spoken, beneath the magnolia – tree, in her retrospect seeming sadder than yew, or cypress.

Will she ever forget him? Can she? No; unless in that land, whither her face is set, she find the fabled Lethean stream. Oh! it is bitter – keenly bitter!

It reaches the climax of its bitterness, when the barouche rolling along opens out a vista between the trees, disclosing a cottage – Clancy's. Inside it sleeps the man, who has made her life a misery! Can he sleep, after what he has done?

While making this reflection she herself feels, as if never caring to close her eyelids more – except in death!

Her emotions are terribly intense, her anguish so overpowering, she can scarce conceal it – indeed does not try, so long as the house is in sight. Perhaps fortunate that her father is absorbed in his own particular sadness. But her sister observes all, guessing – nay, knowing the cause. She says nothing. Such sorrow is too sacred to be intruded on. There are times, when even a sister may not attempt consolation.

Jessie is glad when the carriage, gliding on, again enters among trees, and the little cottage of the Clancys, like their own great house, is forever lost to view.

Could the eyes of Helen Armstrong, in passing, have penetrated through the walls of that white painted dwelling – could she have rested them upon a bed with a woman laid astretch upon it, apparently dead, or dying – could she have looked on another bed, unoccupied, untouched, and been told how he, its usual occupant, was at that moment lying in the middle of a chill marsh, under the sombre canopy of cypresses – it would have caused a revulsion in her feelings, sudden, painful, and powerful as the shock already received.

There would still be sadness in her breast, but no bitterness. The former far easier to endure; she would sooner believe Clancy dead, than think of his traitorous defection.

But she is ignorant of all that has occurred; of the sanguinary scene enacted – played out complete – on the edge of the cypress swamp, and the sad one inside the house – still continuing. Aware of the one, or witness of the other, while passing that lone cottage, as with wet eyes she takes a last look at its walls, she would still be shedding tears – not of spite, but sorrow.

Chapter Sixteen.
What has become of Clancy?

The sun is up – the hour ten o'clock, morning. Around the residence of the widow Clancy a crowd of people has collected. They are her nearest neighbours; while those who dwell at a distance are still in the act of assembling. Every few minutes two or three horsemen ride up, carrying long rifles over their shoulders, with powder-horns and bullet-pouches strapped across their breasts. Those already on the ground are similarly armed, and accoutred.

The cause of this warlike muster is understood by all. Some hours before, a report has spread throughout the plantations that Charles Clancy is missing from his home, under circumstances to justify suspicion of foul play having befallen him. His mother has sent messengers to and fro; hence the gathering around her house.

In the South-Western States, on occasions of this kind, it does not do for any one to show indifference, whatever his station in life. The wealthiest, as well as the poorest, is expected to take part in the administration of backwoods' justice – at times not strictly *en règle* with the laws of the land.

For this reason Mrs Clancy's neighbours, far and near, summoned or not summoned, come to her cottage. Among them Ephraim Darke, and his son Richard.

Archibald Armstrong is not there, nor looked for. Most know of his having moved away that same morning. The track of his waggon wheels has been seen upon the road; and, if the boat he is to take passage by, start at the advertised hour, he should now be nigh fifty miles from the spot, and still further departing. No one is thinking of him, or his; since no one dreams of the deposed planter, or his family, having ought to do with the business that brings them together.

This is to search for Charles Clancy, still absent from his home. The mother's story has been already told, and only the late comers have to hear it again.

In detail she narrates what occurred on the preceding night; how the hound came home wet, and wounded. Confirmatory of her speech, the animal is before their eyes, still in the condition spoken of. They can all see it has been shot – the tear of the bullet being visible on its back, having just cut through the skin. Coupled with its master's absence, this circumstance strengthens the suspicion of something amiss.

Another, of less serious suggestion, is a piece of cord knotted around the dog's neck – the loose end looking as though gnawed by teeth, and then broken off with a pluck; as if the animal had been tied up, and succeeded in setting itself free.

But why tied? And why has it been shot? These are questions that not anybody can answer.

Strange, too, in the hound having reached home at the hour it did. As Clancy went out about the middle of the day, he could not have gone to such a distance for his dog to have been nearly all night getting back.

Could he himself have fired the bullet, whose effect is before their eyes?

A question almost instantly answered in the negative; by old backwoodsmen among the mustered crowd – hunters who know how to interpret "sign" as surely as Champollion an Egyptian hieroglyph. These having examined the mark on the hound's skin, pronounce the ball that made it to have come from a *smooth-bore, and not a rifle*. It is notorious, that Charles Clancy never carried a smooth-bore, but always a rifled gun. His own dog has not been shot by him.

After some time spent in discussing the probabilities and possibilities of the case, it is at length resolved to drop conjecturing, and commence search for the missing man. In the presence of his mother no one speaks of searching for his *dead body*; though there is a general apprehension, that this will be the thing found.

She, the mother, most interested of all, has a too true foreboding of it. When the searchers, starting off, in kindly sympathy tell her to be of good cheer, her heart more truly says, she will never see her son again.

On leaving the house, the horsemen separate into two distinct parties, and proceed in different directions.

With one and the larger, goes Clancy's hound; an old hunter, named Woodley, taking the animal along. He has an idea it may prove serviceable, when thrown on its master's track – supposing this can be discovered.

Just as conjectured, the hound does prove of service. Once inside the woods, without even setting nose to the ground, it starts off in a straight run – going so swiftly, the horsemen find it difficult to keep pace with it.

It sets them all into a gallop; this continued for quite a couple of miles through timber thick and thin, at length ending upon the edge of the swamp.

Only a few have followed the hound thus far, keeping close. The others, straggling behind, come up by twos and threes.

The hunter, Woodley, is among the foremost to be in at the death; for *death* all expect it to prove. They are sure of it, on seeing the stag-hound stop beside something, as it does so loudly baying.

Spurring on towards the spot, they expect to behold the dead body of Charles Clancy. They are disappointed.

There is no body there – dead or alive. Only a pile of Spanish moss, which appears recently dragged from the trees; then thrown into a heap, and afterwards scattered.

The hound has taken stand beside it; and there stays, giving tongue. As the horsemen dismount, and get their eyes closer to the ground, they see something red; which proves to be blood. It is dark crimson, almost black, and coagulated. Still is it blood.

From under the edge of the moss-heap protrudes the barrel of a gun. On kicking the loose cover aside, they see it is a rifle – not of the kind common among backwoodsmen. But they have no need to waste conjecture on the gun. Many present identify it as the yäger usually carried by Clancy.

More of the moss being removed, a hat is uncovered – also Clancy's. Several know it as his – can swear to it.

A gun upon the ground, abandoned, discharged as they see; a hat alongside it; blood beside both – there must have been shooting on the spot – some one wounded, if not actually killed? And who but Charles Clancy? The gun is his, the hat too, and his must be the blood.

They have no doubt of its being his, no more of his being dead; the only question asked is "Where's his body?"

While those first up are mutually exchanging this interrogatory, others, later arriving, also put it in turn. All equally unable to give a satisfactory answer – alike surprised by what they see, and puzzled to explain it.

There is one man present who could enlighten them in part, though not altogether – one who comes lagging up with the last. It is Richard Darke.

Strange he should be among the stragglers. At starting out he appeared the most zealous of all!

Then he was not thinking of the dog; had no idea how direct, and soon, the instinct of the animal would lead them to the spot where he had given Clancy his death shot.

The foremost of the searchers have dismounted and are standing grouped around it. He sees them, and would gladly go back, but dares not. Defection now would be damning evidence against him. After all, what has he to fear? They will find a dead body – Clancy's – a corpse with a bullet-hole in the breast. They can't tell who fired the fatal shot – how could they? There were no witnesses save the trunks of the cypresses, and the dumb brute of a dog – not so dumb but that it now makes the woods resound with its long-drawn continuous whining. If it could but shape this into articulate speech, then he might have to fear. As it is, he need not.

Fortified with these reflections, he approaches the spot, by himself made bloody. Trembling, nevertheless, and with cheeks pale. *Not* strange. He is about being brought face to face with the man he has murdered – with his corpse!

Nothing of the kind. There is no murdered man there, no corpse! Only a gun, a hat, and some blotches of crimson!

Does Darke rejoice at seeing only this? Judging by his looks, the reverse. Before, he only trembled slightly, with a hue of pallor on his cheeks. Now his lips show white, his eyes sunken in their sockets, while his teeth chatter and his whole frame shivers as if under an ague chill!

Luckily for the assassin this tale-telling exhibition occurs under the shadow of the great cypress, whose gloomy obscurity guards against its being observed. But to counteract this little bit of good luck there chances to be present a detective that trusts less to sight, than scent. This is Clancy's dog. As Darke presents himself in the circle of searchers collected around it, the animal perceiving, suddenly springs towards him with the shrill cry of an enraged cat, and the elastic leap of a tiger!

But for Simeon Woodley seizing the hound, and holding it back, the throat of Richard Darke would be in danger.

It is so, notwithstanding.

Around the blood-stained spot there is a pause; the searchers forming a tableau strikingly significant. They have come up, to the very last lagger; and stand in attitudes expressing astonishment, with glances that speak inquiry. These, not directed to the ground, nor straying through the trees, but fixed upon Dick Darke.

Strange the antipathy of the dog, which all observe! For the animal, soon as let loose, repeats its hostile demonstrations, and has to be held off again. Surely it signifies something, and this bearing upon the object of their search? The inference is unavoidable.

Darke is well aware their eyes are upon him, as also their thoughts. Fortunate for him, that night-like shadow surrounding. But for it, his blanched lips, and craven cast of countenance, would tell a tale to condemn him at once – perhaps to punishment on the spot.

As it if, his scared condition is not unnoticed. It is heard, if not clearly seen. Two or three, standing close to him, can hear his teeth clacking like castanets!

His terror is trebly intensified – from a threefold cause. Seeing no body first gave him a shock of surprise; soon followed by superstitious awe; this succeeded by apprehension of another kind. But he had no time to dwell upon it before being set upon by the dog, which drove the more distant danger out of his head.

Delivered also from this, his present fear is about those glances regarding him. In the obscurity he cannot read them, but for all that can tell they are sternly inquisitorial. *En revanche*, neither can they read his; and, from this drawing confidence, he recovers his habitual coolness – knowing how much he now needs it.

The behaviour of the hound must not pass unspoken of. With a forced laugh, and in a tone of assumed nonchalance, he says:

"I can't tell how many scores of times that dog of Clancy's has made at me in the same way. It's never forgiven me since the day I chastised it, when it came after one of our sluts. I'd have killed the cur long ago, but spared it through friendship for its master."

An explanation plausible, and cunningly conceived; though not satisfactory to some. Only the unsuspicious are beguiled by it. However, it holds good for the time; and, so regarded, the searchers resume their quest.

It is no use for them to remain longer by the moss-heap. There they but see blood; they are looking for a body. To find this they must go farther.

One taking up the hat, another the abandoned gun, they scatter off, proceeding in diverse directions.

For several hours they go tramping among the trees, peering under the broad fan-like fronds of the saw-palmettoes, groping around the buttressed trunks of the cypresses, sending glances into the shadowed spaces between – in short, searching everywhere.

For more than a mile around they quarter the forest, giving it thorough examination. The swamp also, far as the treacherous ooze will allow them to penetrate within its *gloomy* portals – fit abode of death – place appropriate for the concealment of darkest crime.

Notwithstanding their zeal, prompted by sympathising hearts, as by a sense of outraged justice, the day's search proves fruitless – bootless. No body can be found, dead or living; no trace of the missing man. Nothing beyond what they have already obtained – his hat and gun.

Dispirited, tired out, hungry, hankering after dinners delayed, as eve approaches they again congregate around the gory spot; and, with a mutual understanding to resume search on the morrow, separate, and set off – each to his own home.

Chapter Seventeen.
A bullet extracted

Not all of the searching party leave the place. Two remain, staying as by stealth. Some time before the departure of the others, these had slipped aside, and sauntered off several hundred yards, taking their horses along with them.

Halting in an out-of-the-way spot, under deepest shadow, and then dismounting, they wait till the crowd shall disperse. To all appearance impatiently, as if they wanted to have the range of the forest to themselves, and for some particular reason. Just this do they, or at least one of them does; making his design known to the other, soon as he believes himself beyond earshot of those from whom they separated.

It is the elder that instructs; who, in addition to the horse he is holding, has another animal by his side – a dog. For it is the hunter, Woodley, still in charge of Clancy's hound.

The man remaining with him is one of his own kind and calling; younger in years, but, like himself, a professional follower of the chase – by name, Heywood.

Giving his reason for the step he is taking, Woodley says, "We kin do nothin' till them greenhorns air gone. Old Dan Boone hisself kedn't take up trail, wi' sich a noisy clanjamfry aroun him. For myself I hain't hardly tried, seein' 'twar no use till they'd clar off out o' the way. And now the darned fools hev' made the thing more diffeequilt, trampin about, an' blottin' out every shadder o' sign, an everything as looks like a futmark. For all, I've tuk notice to somethin' none o' them seed. Soon's the coast is clar we kin go thar, an' gie it a more pertikler examinashun."

The younger hunter nods assent, adding a word, signifying readiness to follow his older confrère.

For some minutes they remain; until silence restored throughout the forest tells them it is forsaken. Then, leaving their horses behind, with bridles looped around branches – the hound also attached to one of the stirrups – they go back to the place, where the hat and gun were found.

They do not stay there; but continue a little farther on, Woodley leading.

At some twenty paces distance, the old hunter comes to a halt, stopping by the side of a cypress "knee"; one of those vegetable monstrosities that perplex the botanist – to this hour scientifically unexplained. In shape resembling a ham, with the shank end upwards; indeed so like to this, that the Yankee bacon-curers have been accused, by their southern customers, of covering them with canvas, and selling them for the real article!

It may be that the Mississippian backwoodsman, Woodley, could give a better account of these singular excrescences than all the closet scientists in the world.

He is not thinking of either science, or his own superior knowledge, while conducting his companion to the side of that "cypress knee." His only thought is to show Heywood something he had espied while passing it in the search; but of which he did not then appear to take notice, and said nothing, so long as surrounded by the other searchers.

The time has come to scrutinise it more closely, and ascertain if it be what he suspects it.

The "knee" in question is one which could not be palmed off for a porker's ham. Its superior dimensions forbid the counterfeit. As the two hunters halt beside it, its bulk shows bigger than either of their own bodies, while its top is at the height of their heads.

Standing in front of it, Woodley points to a break in the bark – a round hole, with edge slightly ragged. The fibre appears freshly cut, and more than cut – encrimsoned! Twenty-four hours may have elapsed, but not many more, since that hole was made. So believe the backwoodsmen, soon as setting their eyes on it.

Speaking first, Woodley asks, —

"What d'ye think o' it, Ned?"

Heywood, of taciturn habit, does not make immediate answer, but stands silently regarding the perforated spot. His comrade continues: —

"Thar's a blue pill goed in thar', which jedgin' by the size and shape o' the hole must a kum out a biggish gun barrel. An', lookin' at the red stain 'roun' its edge, that pill must a been blood-coated."

"Looks like blood, certainly."

"*It air blood*– the real red thing itself; the blood o' Charley Clancy. The ball inside thar' has first goed through his body. It's been deadened by something and don't appear to hev penetrated a great way into the timmer, for all o' that bein' soft as sapwood."

Drawing out his knife, the old hunter inserts the point of its blade into the hole, probing it.

"Jest as I sayed. Hain't entered the hul o' an inch. I kin feel the lead ludged thar'."

"Suppose you cut it out, Sime?"

"Precisely what I intend doin'. But not in a careless way. I want the surroundin' wood along wi' it. The two thegither will best answer our purpiss. So hyar goes to git 'em thegither."

Saying this, he inserts his knife-blade into the bark, and first makes a circular incision around the bullet-hole. Then deepens it, taking care not to touch the ensanguined edge of the orifice, or come near it.

The soft vegetable substance yields to his keen steel, almost as easily as if he were slicing a Swedish turnip; and soon he detaches a pear-shaped piece, but bigger than the largest prize "Jargonelle."

Holding it in his hand, and apparently testing its ponderosity, he says:

"Ned; this chunk o' timmer encloses a bit o' lead as niver kim out o' a rifle. Thar's big eends o' an ounce weight o' metal inside. Only a smooth-bore barrel ked a tuk it; an' from sech it's been dischurged."

"You're right about that," responds Heywood, taking hold of the piece of wood, and also trying its weight. "It's a smooth-bore ball – no doubt of it."

"Well, then, who carries a smooth-bore through these hyar woods? Who, Ned Heywood?"

"I know only one man that does."

"Name him! Name the damned rascal!"

"Dick Darke."

"Ye kin drink afore me, Ned. That's the skunk I war a-thinkin' 'bout, an' hev been all the day. I've seed other sign beside this – the which escaped the eyes o' the others. An' I'm gled it did: for I didn't want Dick Darke to be about when I war follerin' it up. For that reezun I drawed the rest aside – so as none o' 'em shed notice it. By good luck they didn't."

"You saw other sign! What, Sime?"

"Tracks in the mud, clost in by the edge o' the swamp. They're a good bit from the place whar the poor young fellur's blood's been spilt, an' makin' away from it. I got only a glimp at 'em, but ked see they'd been made by a man runnin'. You bet yur life on't they war made by a pair o' boots I've seen on Dick Darke's feet. It's too gloomsome now to make any thin' out o' them. So let's you an' me come back here by ourselves, at the earliest o' daybreak, afore the people git about. Then we kin gie them tracks a thorrer scrutination. If they don't prove to be Dick Darke's, ye may call Sime Woodley a thick-headed woodchuck."

"If we only had one of his boots, so that we might compare it with the tracks."

"*If*! Thar's no if. We *shall* hev one o' his boots – ay, both – I'm boun' to hev 'em."

"But how?"

"Leave that to me. I've thought o' a plan to git purssession o' the scoundrel's futwear, an' everythin' else belongin' to him that kin throw a ray o' daylight unto this darksome bizness. Come, Ned! Le's go to the widder's house, an' see if we kin say a word to comfort the poor lady – for a lady she air. Belike enough this thing'll be the death o' her. She warn't strong at best, an' she's been

a deal weaker since the husban' died. Now the son's goed too – ah! Come along, an' le's show her, she ain't forsook by everybody."

With the alacrity of a loyal heart, alike leaning to pity, the young hunter promptly responds to the appeal, saying: —

"I'm with you, Woodley!"

Chapter Eighteen.
"To the sheriff!"

A day of dread, pitiless suspense to the mother of Charles Clancy, while they are abroad searching for her son.

Still more terrible the night after their return – not without tidings of the missing man. Such tidings! The too certain assurance of his death – of his murder – with the added mystery of their not having been able to find his body. Only his hat, his gun, his blood!

Her grief, hitherto held in check by a still lingering hope, now escapes all trammels, and becomes truly agonising. Her heart seems broken, or breaking.

Although without wealth, and therefore with but few friends, in her hour of lamentation she is not left alone. It is never so in the backwoods of the Far West; where, under rough home-wove coats, throb hearts gentle and sympathetic, as ever beat under the finest broadcloth.

Among Mrs Clancy's neighbours are many of this kind; chiefly "poor whites," – as scornfully styled by the prouder planters. Some half-score of them determine to stay by her throughout the night; with a belief their presence may do something to solace her, and a presentiment that ere morning they may be needed for a service yet more solemn. She has retired to her chamber – taken to her bed; she may never leave either alive.

As the night chances to be a warm one – indeed stifling hot, the men stay outside, smoking their pipes in the porch, or reclining upon the little grass plot in front of the dwelling, while within, by the bedside of the bereaved widow, are their wives, sisters, and daughters.

Needless to say, that the conversation of those without relates exclusively to the occurrences of the day, and the mystery of the murder. For this, they all believe it to have been; though utterly unable to make out, or conjecture a motive.

They are equally perplexed about the disappearance of the body; though this adds not much to the mystery.

They deem it simply a corollary, and consequence, of the other. He, who did the foul deed, has taken steps to conceal it, and so far succeeded. It remains to be seen whether his astuteness will serve against the search to be resumed on the morrow.

Two questions in chief, correlative, occupy them: "Who killed Clancy?" and "What has been the motive for killing him?"

To the former, none of them would have thought of answering "Dick Darke," – that is when starting out on the search near noon.

Now that night is on, and they have returned from it, his name is on every lip. At first only in whispers, and guarded insinuations; but gradually pronounced in louder tone, and bolder speech – this approaching accusation.

Still the second question remains unanswered: —

"Why should Dick Darke have killed Charley Clancy?"

Even put in this familiar form it receives no reply. It is an enigma to which no one present holds the key. For none know aught of a rivalry having existed between the two men – much less a love-jealousy, than which no motive more inciting to murder ever beat in human breast.

Darke's partiality for Colonel Armstrong's eldest daughter has been no secret throughout the settlement. He himself, childishly, in his cups, long since made all scandal-mongers acquainted with that. But Clancy, of higher tone, if not more secretive habit, has kept his love-affair to himself; influenced by the additional reason of its being clandestine.

Therefore, those, sitting up as company to his afflicted parent, have no knowledge of the tender relations that existed between him and Helen Armstrong, any more than of their being the cause of that disaster for which the widow now weeps.

She herself alone knows of them; but, in the first moment of her misfortune, completely prostrated by it, she has not yet communicated aught of this to the sympathetic ears around her. It is a family secret, too sacred for their sympathy; and, with some last lingering pride of superior birth, she keeps it to herself. The time has not come for disclosing it.

But it soon will – she knows that. All must needs be told. For, after the first throes of the overwhelming calamity, in which her thoughts alone dwelt on the slain son, they turned towards him suspected as the slayer. In her case with something stronger than suspicion – indeed almost belief, based on her foreknowledge of the circumstances; these not only accounting for the crime, but pointing to the man who must have committed it.

As she lies upon her couch, with tears streaming down her cheeks, and sighs heaved from the very bottom of her breast – as she listens to the kind voices vainly essaying to console her – she herself says not a word. Her sorrow is too deep, too absorbing, to find expression in speech. But in her thoughts are two men – before, her distracted fancy two faces – one of a murdered man, the other his murderer – the first her own son, the second that of Ephraim Darke.

Notwithstanding ignorance of all these circumstances, the thoughts of her sympathising neighbours – those in council outside – dwell upon Dick Darke; while his name is continuously upon their tongues. His unaccountable conduct during the day – as also the strange behaviour of the hound – is now called up, and commented upon.

Why should the dog have made such demonstration? Why bark at him above all the others – selecting him out of the crowd – so resolutely and angrily assailing him?

His own explanation, given at the time, appeared lame and unsatisfactory.

It looks lamer now, as they sit smoking their pipes, more coolly and closely considering it.

While they are thus occupied, the wicket-gate, in front of the cottage, is heard turning upon its hinges, and two men are seen entering the enclosure.

As these draw near to the porch, where a tallow dip dimly burns, its light is reflected from the features of Simeon Woodley and Edward Heywood.

The hunters are both well-known to all upon the ground; and welcomed, as men likely to make a little less irksome that melancholy midnight watch.

If the new-comers cannot contribute cheerfulness, they may something else, as predicted by the expression observed upon their faces, at stepping into the porch. Their demeanour shows them possessed of some knowledge pertinent to the subject under discussion, as also important.

Going close to the candle, and summoning the rest around, Woodley draws from the ample pocket of his large, loose coat a bit of wood, bearing resemblance to a pine-apple, or turnip roughly peeled.

Holding it to the light, he says: “Come hyar, fellurs! fix yar eyes on this.”

All do as desired.

“Kin any o’ ye tell what it air?” the hunter asks.

“A bit of tree timber, I take it,” answers one.

“Looks like a chunk carved out of a cypress knee,” adds a second.

“It ought,” assents Sime, “since that’s jest what it air; an’ this child air he who curved it out. Ye kin see thar’s a hole in the skin-front; which any greenhorn may tell’s been made by a bullet: an’ he’d be still greener in the horn as kedn’t obsarve a tinge o’ red roun’ thet hole, the which air nothin’ more nor less than blood. Now, boys! the bullet’s yit inside the wud, for me an’ Heywood here tuk care not to extract it till the proper time shed come.”

“It’s come now; let’s hev it out!” exclaims Heywood; the others endorsing the demand.

"Thet ye shall. Now, fellurs; take partikler notice o' what sort o' *egg* hez been hatchin' in this nest o' cypress knee."

While speaking, Sime draws his large-bladed knife from its sheath; and, resting the piece of wood on the porch bench, splits it open. When cleft, it discloses a thing of rounded form and metallic lustre, dull leaden – a gun-bullet, as all expected.

There is not any blood upon it, this having been brushed off in its passage through the fibrous texture of the wood. But it still preserves its spherical shape, perfect as when it issued from the barrel of the gun that discharged, or the mould that made it.

Soon as seeing it they all cry out, "A bullet!" several adding, "The ball of a smooth-bore."

Then one asks, suggestingly:

"Who is there in this neighbourhood that's got a shooting-iron of such sort?"

The question is instantly answered by another, though not satisfactorily.

"Plenty of smooth-bores about, though nobody as I knows of hunts with them."

A third speaks more to the point, saying: —

"Yes; there's one does."

"Name him!" is the demand of many voices.

"*Dick Darke*!"

The statement is confirmed by several others, in succession repeating it.

After this succeeds silence – a pause in the proceedings – a lull ominous, not of further speech but, action.

Daring its continuance, Woodley replaces the piece of lead in the wood, just as it was before; then laying the two cleft pieces together, and tying them with a string, he returns the chunk to his pocket.

This done, he makes a sign to the chiefs of the conclave to follow him as if for further communication.

Which they do, drawing off out of the porch, and taking stand upon grass plot below at some paces distant from the dwelling.

With heads close together, they converse for a while, *sotto voce*.

Not so low, but that a title, the terror of all malefactors, can be heard repeatedly pronounced.

And also a name; the same, which, throughout all the evening has been upon their lips, bandied about, spoken of with gritting teeth and brows contracted.

Not all of those, who watch with the widow are admitted to this muttering council. Simon Woodley, who presides over it, has his reasons for excluding some. Only men take part in it who can be relied on for an emergency, such as that the hunter has before him.

Their conference closed, four of them, as if by agreement with the others, separate from the group, glide out through the wicket-gate, and on to their horses left tied to the roadside rail fence.

"Unhitching" these, they climb silently into their saddles, and as silently slip away; only some muttered words passing between them, as they ride along the road.

Among these may be heard the name of a man, conjoined to a speech, under the circumstances significant: —

"*Let's straight to the Sheriff*!"

Chapter Nineteen.
The "Belle of Natchez."

While search is still being made for the body of the murdered man, and he suspected of the crime is threatened with a prison cell, she, the innocent cause of it, is being borne far away from the scene of its committal.

The steamboat, carrying Colonel Armstrong and his belongings, having left port punctually at the hour advertised, has forsaken the "Father of Waters," entered the Red River of Louisiana, and now, on the second day after, is cleaving the current of this ochre-tinted stream, some fifty miles from its mouth.

The boat is the "Belle of Natchez." Singular coincidence of name; since one aboard bears also the distinctive sobriquet.

Oft have the young "bloods" of the "City of the Bluffs," while quaffing their sherry cobblers, or champagne, toasted Helen Armstrong, with this appellation added.

Taking quality into account, she has a better right to it than the boat. For this, notwithstanding the proud title bestowed upon it, is but a sorry craft; a little "stern-wheel" steamer, such as, in those early days, were oft seen ploughing the bosom of the mighty Mississippi, more often threading the intricate and shallower channels of its tributaries. A single set of paddles, placed where the rudder acts in other vessels, and looking very much like an old-fashioned mill-wheel, supplies the impulsive power – at best giving but poor speed.

Nevertheless, a sort of craft with correct excuse, and fair *raison d'être*; as all know, who navigate narrow rivers, and their still narrower reaches, with trees from each side outstretching, as is the case with many of the streams of Louisiana.

Not that the noble Red River can be thus classified; nor in any sense spoken of as a narrow stream. Broad, and deep enough, for the biggest boats to navigate to Natchitoches – the butt of Colonel Armstrong's journey by water.

Why the broken planter has taken passage on the little "stern-wheeler" is due to two distinct causes. It suited him as to time, and also expense.

On the Mississippi, and its tributaries, a passage in "crack" boats is costly, in proportion to their character for "crackness." The "Belle of Natchez," being without reputation of this kind, carries her passengers at a reasonable rate.

But, indeed, something beyond ideas of opportune time, or economy, influenced Colonel Armstrong in selecting her. The same thought which hurried him away from his old home under the shadows of night, has taken him aboard a third-rate river steamboat. Travelling thus obscurely, he hopes to shun encounter with men of his own class; to escape not only observation, but the sympathy he shrinks from.

In this hope he is disappointed, and on both horns of his fancied, not to say ridiculous, dilemma. For it so chances, that the "bully" boat, which was to leave Natchez for Natchitoches on the same day with the "Belle," has burst one of her boilers. As a consequence, the smaller steamer has started on her trip, loaded down to the water-line with freight, her state-rooms and cabins crowded with passengers – many of these the best, bluest blood of Mississippi and Louisiana.

Whatever of chagrin this *contretemps* has caused Colonel Armstrong – and, it may be, the older of his daughters – to the younger it gives gladness. For among the supernumeraries forced to take passage in the stern-wheel steamer, is a man she has met before. Not only met, but danced with; and not only danced but been delighted with; so much, that souvenirs of that night, with its saltative enjoyment, have since oft occupied her thoughts, thrilling her with sweetest reminiscence.

He, who has produced this pleasant impression, is a young planter, by name Luis Dupré. A Louisianian by birth, therefore a "Creole." And without any taint of the African; else he would not be a Creole *pur sang*.

The English reader seems to need undeceiving about this, constantly, repeatedly. In the Creole, simply so-called, there is no admixture of negro blood.

Not a drop of it in the veins of Luis Dupré; else Jessie Armstrong could not have danced with him at a Natchez ball; nor would her father, fallen as he is, permit her to keep company with him on a Red River steamboat.

In this case, there is no condescension on the part of the ex-Mississippian planter. He of Louisiana is his equal in social rank, and now his superior in point of wealth, by hundreds, thousands. For Luis Dupré is one of the largest landowners along the line of Red River plantations, while his slaves number several hundred field-hands, and house domestics: the able-bodied of both, without enumerating the aged, the imbecile, and piccaninnies, more costly than profitable.

If, in the presence of such a prosperous man, Colonel Armstrong reflects painfully upon his own reduced state, it is different with his daughter Jessie.

Into her ear Luis Dupré has whispered sweet words – a speech telling her, that not only are his lands, houses, and slaves at her disposal, but along with them his heart and hand.

It is but repeating what he said on the night of the Natchez ball; his impulsive Creole nature having then influenced him to speak as he felt.

Now, on the gliding steamboat, he reiterates the proposal, more earnestly pressing for an answer.

And he gets it in the affirmative. Before the "Belle of Natchez" has reached fifty miles from the Red River's mouth, Luis Dupré and Jessie Armstrong have mutually confessed affection, clasped hands, let lips meet, and tongues swear, never more to live asunder. That journey commenced upon the Mississippi is to continue throughout life.

In their case, there is no fear of aught arising to hinder the consummation of their hopes; no stern parent to stand in the way of their life's happiness. By the death of both father and mother, Luis Dupré has long since been emancipated from parental authority, and is as much his own master as he is of his many slaves.

On the other side, Jessie Armstrong is left free to her choice; because she has chosen well. Her father has given ready consent; or at all events said enough to ensure his doing so.

The huge "high-pressure" steam craft which ply upon the western rivers of America bear but a very slight resemblance to the black, long, low – hulled leviathans that plough the briny waste of ocean. The steamboat of the Mississippi more resembles a house, two stories in height, and, not unfrequently, something of a third – abode of mates and pilots. Rounded off at stern, the structure, of oblong oval shape, is universally painted chalk-white; the second, or cabin story, having on each face a row of casement windows, with Venetian shutters, of emerald green. These also serve as outside doors to the state-rooms – each having its own. Inside ones, opposite them, give admission to the main cabin, or "saloon;" which extends longitudinally nearly the whole length of the vessel. Figured glass folding-doors cut it into three compartments; the ladies' cabin aft, the dining saloon amidships, with a third division forward, containing clerk's office and "bar," the last devoted to male passengers for smoking, drinking, and, too often, gambling. A gangway, some three feet in width, runs along the outside façade, forming a balcony to the windows of the state-rooms. It is furnished with a balustrade, called "guard-rail," to prevent careless passengers from stepping overboard. A projection of the roof, yclept "hurricane-deck," serves as an awning to this continuous terrace, shading it from the sun.

Two immense twin chimneys – "funnels" as called – tower above all, pouring forth a continuous volume of whitish wood-smoke; while a smaller cylinder – the "scape-pipe" – intermittently vomits a vapour yet whiter, the steam; at each emission with a hoarse belching bark, that can be heard reverberating for leagues along the river.

Seen from the bank, as it passes, the Mississippi steamboat looks like a large hotel, or mansion of many windows, set adrift and moving majestically – "walking the water like a thing of life," as it has been poetically described. Some of the larger ones, taking into account their splendid interior decoration, and, along with it their sumptuous table fare, may well merit the name oft bestowed upon them, of "floating palaces."

Only in point of size, some inferiority in splendour, and having a stern-wheel instead of side-paddles, does the "Belle of Natchez" differ from other boats seen upon the same waters. As them, she has her large central saloon, with ladies' cabin astern; the flanking rows of state-rooms; the casements with green jalousies; the gangway and guard-rail; the twin funnels, pouring forth their fleecy cloud, and the scape-pipe, coughing in regular repetition.

In the evening hour, after the day has cooled down, the balcony outside the state-room windows is a pleasant place to stand, saunter, or sit in. More especially that portion of it contiguous to the stern, and exclusively devoted to lady passengers – with only such of the male sex admitted as can claim relationship, or liens of a like intimate order.

On this evening – the first after leaving port – the poop deck of the little steamer is so occupied by several individuals; who stand gazing at the scene that passes like a panorama before their eyes. The hot southern sun has disappeared behind the dark belt of cypress forest, which forms, far and near, the horizon line of Louisiana; while the soft evening breeze, laden with the mixed perfumes of the *liquid ambar*, and *magnolia grandiflora*, is wafted around them, like incense scattered from a censer.

Notwithstanding its delights, and loveliness, Nature does not long detain the saunterers outside. Within is a spell more powerful, and to many of them more attractive. It is after dinner hour; the cabin tables have been cleared, and its lamps lit. Under the sheen of brilliant chandeliers the passengers are drawing together in groups, and coteries; some to converse, others to play *écarté* or *vingt-un*; here and there a solitary individual burying himself in a book; or a pair, almost as unsocial, engaging in the selfish duality of chess.

Three alone linger outside; and of these only two appear to do so with enjoyment. They are some paces apart from the third, who is now left to herself: for it is a woman. Not that they are unacquainted with her, or in any way wishing to be churlish. But, simply, because neither can spare word or thought for any one, save their two sweet selves.

It scarce needs telling who is the couple thus mutually engrossed. An easy guess gives Jessie Armstrong and Luis Dupré. The young Creole's handsome features, black eyes, brunette complexion, and dark curly hair have made havoc with the heart of Armstrong's youngest daughter; while, *en revanche*, her contrasting colours of red, blue, and gold have held their own in the amorous encounter. They are in love with one another to their finger tips.

As they stand conversing in soft whispers, the eyes of the third individual are turned towards them. This only at intervals, and with nought of jealousy in the glance. For it is Jessie's own sister who gives it. Whatever of that burn in Helen's breast, not these, nor by them, has its torch been kindled. The love that late occupied her heart has been plucked therefrom, leaving it lacerated, and lorn. It was the one love of her life, and now crushed out, can never be rekindled. If she have a thought about her sister's new-sprung happiness, it is only to measure it against her own misery – to contrast its light of joy, with the shadow surrounding herself.

But for a short moment, and with transient glance, does she regard them. Aside from any sentiment of envy, their happy communion calls up a reminiscence too painful to be dwelt upon. She remembers how she herself stood talking in that same way, with one she cannot, must not, know more. To escape recalling the painful souvenir, she turns her eyes from the love episode, and lowers them to look upon the river.

Chapter Twenty.
Saved by a sister

The boat is slowly forging its course up-stream, its wheel in constant revolution, churning the ochre-coloured water into foam. This, floating behind, dances and simmers upon the surface, forming a wake-way of white tinted with red. In Helen Armstrong's eyes it has the appearance of blood-froth – such being the hue of her thoughts.

Contemplating it for a time, not pleasantly, and then, turning round, she perceives that she is alone. The lovers have stepped inside a state-room, or the ladies' cabin, or perhaps gone on to the general saloon, to take part in the sports of the evening. She sees the lights shimmering through the latticed windows, and can hear the hum of voices, all merry. She has no desire to join in that merriment, though many may be wishing her. Inside she would assuredly become the centre of an admiring circle; be addressed in courtly speeches, with phrases of soft flattery. She is aware of this, and keeps away from it. Strange woman!

In her present mood the speeches would but weary, the flattery fash her. She prefers solitude; likes better the noise made by the ever-turning wheel. In the tumult of the water there is consonance with that agitating her own bosom.

Night is now down; darkness has descended upon forest and river, holding both in its black embrace. Along with it a kindred feeling creeps over her – a thought darker than night, more sombre than forest shadows. It is that which oft prompts to annihilation; a memory of the past, which, making the future unendurable, calls for life to come to an end. The man to whom she has given her heart – its firstlings, as its fulness – a heart from which there can be no second gleanings, and she knows it – he has made light of the offering. A sacrifice grand, as complete; glowing with all the interests of her life. The life, too, of one rarely endowed; a woman of proud spirit, queenly and commanding, beyond air beautiful.

She does not think thus of herself, as, leaning over the guard-rail, with eyes mechanically bent upon the wheel, she watches it whipping the water into spray. Her thoughts are not of lofty pride, but low humiliation. Spurned by him at whose feet she has flung herself, so fondly, so rashly – ay, recklessly – surrendering even that which woman deems most dear, and holds back to the ultimate moment of rendition – the word which speaks it!

To Charles Clancy she has spoken it. True, only in writing; but still in terms unmistakeable, and with nothing reserved. And how has he treated them? No response – not even denial! Only contemptuous silence, worse than outspoken scorn!

No wonder her breast is filled with chagrin, and her brow burning with shame!

Both may be ended in an instant. A step over the low rail – a plunge into the red rolling river – a momentary struggle amidst its seething waters – not to preserve life, but destroy it – this, and all will be over! Sadness, jealousy, the pangs of disappointed love – these baleful passions, and all others alike, can be soothed, and set at rest, by one little effort – a leap into oblivion!

Her nerves are fast becoming strung to the taking it. The past seems all dark, the future yet darker. For her, life has lost its fascinations, while death is divested of its terrors.

Suicide in one so young, so fair, so incomparably lovely; one capable of charming others, no longer to be charmed herself! A thing fearful to reflect upon.

And yet is she contemplating it!

She stands close to the rail, wavering, irresolute. It is no lingering love of life which causes her to hesitate. Nor yet fear of death, even in the horrid form, she cannot fail to see before her, spring she but over that slight railing.

The moon has arisen, and now courses across the blue canopy of sky, in full effulgence, her beams falling bright upon the bosom of the river. At intervals the boat, keeping the deeper channel, is forced close to either bank. Then, as the surging eddies set the floating but stationary logs in motion, the huge saurian asleep on them can be heard giving a grunt of anger for the rude arousing, and pitching over into the current with dull sullen plash.

She sees, and hears all this. It should shake her nerves, and cause shivering throughout her frame.

It does neither. The despair of life has deadened the dread of death – even of being devoured by an alligator!

Fortunately, at this moment, a gentle hand is laid on her shoulder, and a soft voice sounds in her ear. They are the hand and voice of her sister.

Jessie, coming out of her state-room, has glided silently up. She sees Helen prepossessed, sad, and can somewhat divine the cause. But she little suspects, how near things have been to a fatal climax, and dreams not of the diversion her coming has caused.

"Sister!" she says, in soothing tone, her arms extended caressingly, "why do you stay out here? The night is chilly; and they say the atmosphere of this Red River country is full of miasma, with fevers and ague to shake the comb out of one's hair! Come with me inside! There's pleasant people in the saloon, and we're going to have a round game at cards —*vingt-un*, or something of the sort. Come!"

Helen turns round trembling at the touch, as if she felt herself a criminal, and it was the sheriff's hand laid upon her shoulder!

Jessie notices the strange, strong emotion. She could not fail to do so. Attributing it to its remotest cause, long since confided to her, she says: —

"Be a woman, Helen! Be true to yourself, as I know you will; and don't think of him any more. There's a new world, a new life, opening to both of us. Forget the sorrows of the old, as I shall. Pluck Charles Clancy from your heart, and fling every memory, every thought of him, to the winds! I say again, be a woman – be yourself! Bury the past, and think only of the future —*of our father*!"

The last words act like a galvanic shock, at the same time soothing as balm. For in the heart of Helen Armstrong they touch a tender chord – that of filial affection.

And it vibrates true to the touch. Flinging her arms around Jessie's neck, she cries: —

"Sister; you have saved me!"

Chapter Twenty One.
Seized by spectral arms

"Sister, you have saved me!"

On giving utterance to the ill-understood speech, Helen Armstrong imprints a kiss upon her sister's cheek, at the same time bedewing it with her tears. For she is now weeping – convulsively sobbing.

Returning the kiss, Jessie looks not a little perplexed. She can neither comprehend the meaning of the words, nor the strange tone of their utterance. Equally is she at a loss to account for the trembling throughout her sister's frame, continued while their bosoms stay in contact.

Helen gives her no time to ask questions.

"Go in!" she says, spinning the other round, and pushing her towards the door of the state-room. Then, attuning her voice to cheerfulness, she adds: —

"In, and set the game of *vingt-un* going. I'll join you by the time you've got the cards shuffled."

Jessie, glad to see her sister in spirits unusually gleeful, makes no protest, but glides towards the cabin door.

Soon as her back is turned, Helen once more faces round to the river, again taking stand by the guard-rail. The wheel still goes round, its paddles beating the water into bubbles, and casting the crimson-white spray afar over the surface of the stream.

But now, she has no thought of flinging herself into the seething swirl, though she means to do so with something else.

"Before the game of *vingt-un* begins," she says in soliloquy, "I've got a pack of cards to be dealt out here – among them a knave."

While speaking, she draws forth a bundle of letters – evidently old ones – tied in a bit of blue ribbon. One after another, she drags them free of the fastening – just as if dealing out cards. Each, as it comes clear, is rent right across the middle, and tossed disdainfully into the stream.

At the bottom of the packet, after the letters have been all disposed of, is something seeming different. A piece of cardboard – a portrait – in short, a *carte de visite*. It is the likeness of Charles Clancy, given her on one of those days when he flung himself affectionately at her feet.

She does not tear it in twain, as she has the letters; though at first this is nearest her intent. Some thought restraining her, she holds it up in the moon's light, her eyes for a time resting on, and closely scanning it. Painful memories, winters of them, pass through her soul, shown upon her countenance, while she makes scrutiny of the features so indelibly graven upon her heart. She is looking her last upon them – not with a wish to remember, but the hope to forget – of being able to erase that image of him long-loved, wildly worshipped, from the tablets of her memory, at once and for ever.

Who can tell what passed through her mind at that impending moment? Who could describe her heart's desolation? Certainly, no writer of romance.

Whatever resolve she has arrived at, for a while she appears to hesitate about executing it. —

Then, like an echo heard amidst the rippling waves, return to her ear the words late spoken by her sister —

"Let us think only of the future —*of our father*."

The thought decides her; and, stepping out to the extremest limit the guard-rail allows, she flings the photograph upon the paddles of the revolving wheel, as she does so, saying —

"Away, image of one once loved – picture of a man who has proved false! Be crushed, and broken, as he has broken my heart!"

The sigh that escapes her, on letting drop the bit of cardboard, more resembles a subdued scream – a stifled cry of anguish, such as could only come from what she has just spoken of – a broken heart.

As she turns to re-enter the cabin, she appears ill-prepared for taking part, or pleasure, in a game of cards.

And she takes not either. That round of *vingt-un* is never to be played – at least not with her as one of the players.

Still half distraught with the agony through which her soul has passed – the traces of which she fancies must be observable on her face – before making appearance in the brilliantly-lighted saloon, she passes around the corner of the ladies' cabin, intending to enter her own state-room by the outside door.

It is but to spend a moment before her mirror, there to arrange her dress, the plaiting of her hair – perhaps the expression of her face – all things that to men may appear trivial, but to women important – even in the hour of sadness and despair. No blame to them for this. It is but an instinct – the primary care of their lives – the secret spring of their power.

In repairing to her toilette, Helen Armstrong is but following the example of her sex.

She does not follow it far – not even so far as to get to her looking-glass, or even inside her state-room. Before entering it, she makes stop by the door, and tarries with face turned towards the river's bank.

The boat, tacking across stream, has sheered close in shore; so close that the tall forest trees shadow her track – the tips of their branches almost touching the hurricane-deck. They are cypresses, festooned with grey-beard moss, that hangs down like the drapery of a death-bed. She sees one blighted, stretching forth bare limbs, blanched white by the weather, desiccated and jointed like the arms of a skeleton.

'Tis a ghostly sight, and causes her weird thoughts, as under the clear moonbeams the steamer sweeps past the place.

It is a relief to her, when the boat, gliding on, gets back into darkness.

Only momentary; for there under the shadow of the cypresses, lit up by the flash of the fire-flies, she sees, or fancies it, a face! It is that of a man – him latest in her thoughts – Charles Clancy!

It is among the trees high up, on a level with the hurricane-deck.

Of course it can be but a fancy? Clancy could not be there, either in the trees, or on the earth. She knows it is but a deception of her senses – an illusive vision – such as occur to clairvoyantes, at times deceiving themselves.

Illusion or not, Helen Armstrong has no time to reflect upon it. Ere the face of her false lover fades from view; a pair of arms, black, sinewy, and stiff, seem reaching towards her!

More than seem; it is a reality. Before she can stir from the spot, or make effort to avoid them, she feels herself roughly grasped around the waist, and lifted aloft into the air.

Chapter Twenty Two.
Up and down

Whatever has lifted Helen Armstrong aloft, for time holds her suspended. Only for a few seconds, during which she sees the boat pass on beneath, and her sister rush out to the stern rail, sending forth a scream responsive to her own.

Before she can repeat the piercing cry, the thing grasping her relaxes its hold, letting her go altogether, and she feels herself falling, as from a great height. The sensation of giddiness is succeeded by a shock, which almost deprives her of consciousness. It is but the fall, broken by a plunge into water. Then there is a drumming in her ears, a choking in the throat; in short, the sensation that precedes drowning.

Notwithstanding her late suicidal thoughts, the instinctive aversion to death is stronger than her weariness of life, and instinctively does she strive to avert it.

No longer crying out; she cannot; her throat is filled with the water of the turbid stream. It stifles, as if a noose were being drawn around her neck, tighter and tighter. She can neither speak nor shout, only plunge and struggle.

Fortunately, while falling, the skirt of her dress, spreading as a parachute, lessened the velocity of the descent. This still extended, hinders her from sinking. As she knows not how to swim, it will not sustain her long; itself becoming weighted with the water.

Her wild shriek, with that of her sister responding – the latter still continued in terrified repetition – has summoned the passengers from the saloon, a crowd collecting on the stern-guards.

“Some one overboard!” is the cry sent all over the vessel.

It reaches the ear of the pilot; who instantly rings the stop-bell, causing the paddles to suspend revolution, and bringing the boat to an almost instantaneous stop. The strong current, against which they are contending, makes the movement easy of execution.

The shout of, “some one overboard!” is quickly followed by another of more particular significance. “It’s a lady!”

This announcement intensifies the feeling of regret and alarm. Nowhere in the world more likely to do so, than among the chivalric spirits sure to be passengers on a Mississippian steamboat. Half a dozen voices are heard simultaneously asking, not “who is the lady?” but “where?” while several are seen pulling off their coats, as if preparing to take to the water.

Foremost among them is the young Creole, Dupré. He knows who the lady is. Another lady has met him frantically, exclaiming —

“’Tis Helen! She has fallen, or *leaped* overboard.”

The ambiguity of expression appears strange; indeed incomprehensible, to Dupré, as to others who overhear it. They attributed it to incoherence, arising from the shock of the unexpected catastrophe.

This is its cause, only partially: there is something besides.

Confused, half-frenzied, Jessie continues to cry out:

“My sister! Save her! save her!”

“We’ll try; show us where she is,” respond several.

“Yonder – there – under that tree. She was in its branches above, then dropped down upon the water. I heard the plunge, but did not see her after. She has gone to the bottom. Merciful heavens! O Helen! where are you?”

The people are puzzled by these incoherent speeches – both the passengers above, and the boatmen on the under-deck. They stand as if spell-bound.

Fortunately, one of the former has retained presence of mind, and along with it coolness. It is the young planter, Dupré. He stays not for the end of her speech, but springing over the guards, swims towards the spot pointed out.

"Brave fellow!" is the thought of Jessie Armstrong, admiration for her lover almost making her forget her sister's peril.

She stands, as every one else upon the steamer, watching with earnest eyes. Hers are more; they are flashing with feverish excitement, with glances of anxiety – at times the fixed gaze of fear.

No wonder at its being so. The moon has sunk to the level of the tree-tops, and the bosom of the river is in dark shadow; darker by the bank where the boat is now drifting. But little chance to distinguish an object in the water – less for one swimming upon its surface. And the river is deep, its current rapid, the "reach" they are in, full of dangerous eddies. In addition, it is a spot infested, as all know – the favourite haunt of that hideous reptile the alligator, with the equally-dreaded gar-fish – the shark of the South-western rivers. All these things are in Jessie Armstrong's thoughts.

Amidst these dangers are the two dearest to her on earth; her sister, her lover. Not strange that her apprehension is almost an agony!

Meanwhile the steamer's boat has been manned, and set loose as quickly as could be done. It is rowed towards the spot, where the swimmer was last seen; and all eyes are strained upon it – all ears listening to catch any word of cheer.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.