HUBERT BLAND, ЭДИТ НЕСБИТ

THE PROPHET'S MANTLE

Эдит Несбит
Hubert Bland
The Prophet's Mantle

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=35007953
The Prophet's Mantle:

Содержание

Edith Nesbit, Hubert Bland
The Prophet's Mantle

PROLOGUE

TO be the son of a noble of high position, to be the heir to vast estates in a western province, and to a palace in the capital, to have large sums safely invested in foreign banks, to be surrounded by every luxury that to most men makes life worth living, to be carefully inoculated with all the most cherished beliefs of the territorial aristocracy, and as carefully guarded from all liberal influences; to be all this does not generally lead a man to be a social reformer as well. Such causes, as a rule, do not produce a very revolutionary effect. But in Russia, tyranny, officialism, and the supreme sway of ignorance and brutality, seem to have reversed all ordinary rules, and upset all ordinary calculations. There the 'gentlemen of the pavement' are nobles, with a longer lineage than the Romanoffs, and progressive views find some of their most doughty champions in the ranks of the old nobility. So Count Michael Litvinoff was not such a startling phenomenon, nor such a glaring anomaly, as he would have been in any other country. His parents died when he was about eighteen, and after their death he spent most of his time in close study of physics, philosophy, and of the 'dismal science,'

as expounded by its most advanced apostles. He wrote, too, extensively, though most of his works were published in countries where the censorship was not quite so strict as in his own. When he was about twenty-five, and was deep in the heart of his great work, 'The Social Enigma,' he woke up one morning with a conviction that all his last chapters were utter nonsense, and, what was worse, he couldn't for the life of him make out what they meant even when he read them over. Bewildered and anxious, he hastened to refer the matter to a personal friend and political ally, whose answer was brief and to the point.

'Nonsense? Why, the book's as clear as daylight, and as convincing as Euclid. You've been working too hard—overdoing it altogether. Go to the South of France for a month, and lose a few roubles at Monte Carlo. It will do you good.'

Michael Litvinoff took the first part of this advice; and though he did not take the second part, he did sometimes spend an hour in watching others lose their money.

One night he noticed a young man on whom fortune appeared to be frowning with more than her usual persistence and bitterness. Again and again he staked, and again and again he lost. At last he collected the few coins that remained of the good-sized heap with which he had begun, and staked them all. He lost again. He got up and walked out. Struck by the wild look in his eyes, Litvinoff followed him into the gardens of the Casino. At the end of a dark alley he stopped, pulled something from his breast, which might have been a cigar-case, opened it, and took

out something which Litvinoff saw was not a cigar. The Count sprang forward, and knocked the other's hand up just in time to send a tiny bullet whizzing through the orange trees.

'Damn you!' cried the other, in English, turning furiously on Litvinoff. 'What the devil do you mean?'

'Come to my rooms,' said the Count simply; and the other, after a moment's hesitation and a glance of sullen defiance, actually obeyed, and in silence the two walked side by side out of the gardens.

When the door of his sitting-room was closed upon them, Count Litvinoff waved his new acquaintance to an easy-chair, and, taking one himself, remarked,—

'You're a nice sort of sportsman, aren't you? Suppose you have some tea and a cigar.'

'The cigar with pleasure; but tea is not much in my line.'

'Ah, I forgot; you English don't worship tea as we Russians do. By-the-way, as there's no one else to perform the ceremony, I may as well introduce myself. My name is Michael Litvinoff.'

The other looked up.

'Let me withdraw my refusal of your offer just now. I must confess that it would be pleasant to me to drink tea, or anything else in reason, in the company of the man who has written "Hopes and Fears for Liberty."'

The tea was made, and before the cigar was finished Litvinoff had learned not only that his new friend was a political sympathiser, but also the main facts in the young man's personal

history.

His name was Armand Percival; his father English, his mother French. He had been brought up in Paris, and had been left an orphan with a small but sufficient property, which, with an energy and application worthy of a better cause, he had managed to scatter to the winds before a year was over. It was the last remnant of this little possession that he had brought to Monte Carlo in the desperate hope of retrieving his fallen fortunes, and with the fixed determination of accepting the ruling of fate and of ending his life, should that hope be unfulfilled.

'And really,' he ended, 'you would have done better to have been judiciously blind in the gardens just now, and have let the farce be played out. As it is, affairs are just as desperate as they were an hour ago, and I, perhaps thanks to your good tea, am not so desperate. When I leave you I must go and grovel under the orange trees till I find that pistol, for I haven't even the money to buy another.'

'It won't do to let the world lose a friend of liberty in this fashion. They are scarce enough. We can talk this over to-morrow. Stay here to-night. We'll hunt for your little toy by daylight if you like.'

They did find the pistol the next day. By that time they had had a good deal of talk together, and Armand Percival had become the private secretary of Count Michael Litvinoff.

Life on the ancestral estate of the Litvinoffs was utterly different from anything Percival had ever known before, but he

had conceived an unbounded admiration and affection for his friend and employer, and he threw himself into his new duties with an ardour which made boredom simply impossible, and with a perseverance almost equalling that which he had displayed in the dissipation of his little fortune.

He helped Litvinoff in all his literary work, and was soon admitted to his fullest confidence. His new life was wrapped in an atmosphere of romance, and it contained a spice of danger which was perfectly congenial to his nature. The most commonplace action ceases to be commonplace when one knows that one risks one's life in doing it. He soon made rapid progress in the Russian language—Swinburne was given up for Pouchkine, Tchernychewsky displaced Victor Hugo, and Percival revelled in the trenchant muscular style of Bakounin as he had once delighted in the voluptuous sweetness of Théophile Gautier. He had always had a leaning towards Democracy, and a fitful kind of enthusiasm for popular liberty. The strong personal influence, the much bigger enthusiasm, and the intense reality of Michael Litvinoff's convictions served to swell what had been a little stream into a flood with a tolerably strong current.

Both men worked hard, and at the end of some twenty months 'The Social Enigma' was published in London and Paris. In this, Litvinoff's great work, he managed to keep just on the right side of the hedge, but he indemnified himself for this self-denial by writing a little pamphlet, called 'A Prophetic Vision,' which was published by the Revolutionary Secret Press, and circulated

among the peasants, for whom it was specially written; and all those concerned in its publication flattered themselves that this time, at any rate, the chief of the secret police and his creatures, in spite of their having obtained a copy twenty-four hours after it was printed, were thoroughly off the track.

One night in winter the secretary sat at his old-fashioned desk in the oak-panelled room in the east wing of the mansion. Big logs glowed on the immense open hearth, in front of which a great hound stretched its lazy length. The secretary was correcting manuscripts in a somewhat desultory way, and varying the monotony of the penwork with frequent puffs of cigarette smoke. Some wine stood at his elbow.

Count Litvinoff had been away ten days, and would be away as long again. He had gone to a meeting of friends of the cause at Odessa, and Percival felt the strength of his enthusiasm beginning to give way before the appalling deadly dulness of his perfectly solitary life. There was not a creature to speak to within miles except the servants, and Russian servants, as a class, are not much of a resource against *ennui*.

He flung down his pen at last, leaned back in his chair, and poured himself out some more wine. He held it up to the light to admire its ruby colour, and then tasted it appreciatively.

'H'm! not bad. About the best thing in the place now its master's away. Heigho!—heigho! this is very slow, which, by-the-way, is rhyme.'

He spoke the words aloud, and the hound on the bearskin by

the fire rose, stretched itself, and came slowly to lay its great head on his knee.

'Well, old girl, I daresay you'd like a little hunting for a change. Upon my soul it's almost a pity we're so very clever in keeping our literary achievements dark. We should have something exciting then at anyrate, and I'd give anything for a little excitement.'

'You're likely to have as much as you care about, then,' said another voice, which made Percival leap to his feet as the purple curtains that hung across the arched entrance to the sleeping-room were flung back, and a tall figure, muffled in furs, strode forward. The dog sprang at it.

'Down, Olga! Quiet, quiet, old lady!'

The coat was thrown off, and fell with a flop to the ground; and Litvinoff held out his hand to his secretary, who had started back and caught up the manuscripts, and was holding them behind him.

'Good heavens!' said Percival. 'Litvinoff, what is it? Are they after you? How did you come in?'

'I came in the way we must go out before another half-hour. They've found out the distinguished author of the "Vision," and they're anxious to secure the wonder. Lock that door; we don't want the servants.'

'It is locked. I don't do work of this sort with unlocked doors.'

Litvinoff glanced at the manuscript on the oak writing-table.

'We must collect all this and burn it, though I don't think we could be deeper damned than we are, even if we left it alone.'

'But where have you come from?' asked Percival, laying his hand on the other's shoulder. 'You're wet through. Have a drink,' and he poured out a tumbler of the Burgundy.

Litvinoff took it, and as he set down the glass replied, 'I fell into some water. There was snow enough to hide the ice.'

'Well, then, the very first thing is to change your clothes. Shall I get you dry ones, or will you go?'

'No, no; neither of us must leave this room. There may be a traitor in the house for aught I know. No one saw me come in. I shall do well enough.'

'You may as well be executed at once as be frozen to death in the course of the night. You must make shift with some of my things. You change while I see to the papers. We can talk while you're changing.'

Each went deftly and swiftly about what he had to do, and neither seemed to be in the least thrown off his balance. There was much less fuss than there is in some families every morning when the 'City man' is hurrying to catch his train. Drawer after drawer was emptied out on the wide hearthstones, and as stern denunciations of tyranny and eloquent appeals to the spirit of freedom vanished in smoke and sparks up the great chimney, Percival, a little puffed by his exertions, asked, 'How soon *must* we go? What's the exact state of things?'

'Our friends at Odessa were warned. There's an order for my arrest. I was to have been taken at Odessa, and long before this they'll have found out that I'm not there, and will have started

after me here.'

'But how are we to go? Are we to walk, and fall into a succession of pools? Can't we get some horses from the stable?'

'I have a sleigh not a quarter of a mile off. Zabrousky is with it, waiting. We can reach Kilsen to-night, and get horses for the frontier. There is a revolver in the desk. The one in my belt is full of water. I've got two passports that will carry us over. You are Monsieur Mericourt of Paris, and I am Herr Baum of Düsseldorf, friends travelling.'

It was lucky that this room, the ordinary work-room of the friends, contained all their secrets and most of their 'portable property.'

'How about money?' asked the secretary.

'There are three hundred Napoleons in the cash-box. Those will be best to take. By-the-way, stick a French novel into your portmanteau, and throw in anything you can to fill it up. We have the frontier to pass. You know I am all right at Paris or Vienna.'

'Oh, yes,' rejoined Percival. 'If we get there we're all right. But these clothes of yours; we must hide them, or they'll tell tales.'

'Oh, bring them with you, and leave the room in order.'

'Yes, and I must take a revolver myself. We'll give a good account of a few of those brutes if they come too close.'

'Are we ready? I'll take the portmanteau, you carry those clothes. Now then, lights out. Give me your hand.'

The candles were blown out, and Litvinoff led the way through the bedroom and through a tiny door in the panelled wall, of

whose existence Percival had been up to this moment ignorant. They passed down a narrow staircase, in a niche of whose wall they left the wet garments, and, passing through a stone passage or two, suddenly came out into the ice-cold air at an angle of the house quite other than that at which Percival had expected to find himself.

Litvinoff shivered. 'I miss my cloak,' he said. 'However, there are plenty of skins in the sleigh.'

The snow fell lightly on them as they hurried quietly away; it did its best with its cold feathery veil to hide the footsteps of the fugitives.

'Is this exciting enough for you?' asked the Count as they strode along under cover of the trees.

'Quite, thanks—I think I should be able to submit to a little less excitement with equanimity. It won't be actually unpleasant to be out of the dominions of his sacred majesty.'

'This excitement is nothing to what we shall have in getting over the frontier,' said Litvinoff; 'that's where the tug of war will come. Percival,' he went on after a pause, 'I shall never forgive myself if you suffer in this business through me.'

'My dear fellow,' Percival answered cheerfully, 'if it had not been for you I should have been out of it all long ago, and if the worst comes to the worst, there's still a way out of it. As long as I have my trusty little friend here,' tapping the revolver in his breast pocket, 'I don't intend to see the inside of St Peter and St Paul.'

As he spoke they heard the sound of horses' restless hoofs.

'What's that?'

'All right!' returned Litvinoff. 'They're our horses.'

Behind a clump of fir trees the sleigh was waiting, and beside it a man on a horse.

The two friends entered the sleigh, and adjusted the furs about them, and Litvinoff took the reins.

'Good speed,' said Zabrousky; 'a safe journey, and a good deliverance.'

'Good-bye,' Litvinoff said. 'Don't stay here a moment. It may cost you your life.'

In another instant the horseman had turned and left them, and the jingling of the harness and the noise of the fleet hoofs were the only sounds that broke the dense night silence as the sleigh sped forward.

'Have you any idea what the time is?' said Litvinoff, when they had travelled smoothly over three or four miles of snow. 'It's too cold to get watches out, and too dark to see them if we did.'

'It must be past two,' said Percival. 'It must have been past midnight when you came in. I wonder what time those devils will reach the empty nest.'

'The later the better for us, and the servants will mix things a bit by telling them that I've not been home. At this rate we shall reach Eckovitch's place about four. We can stretch our legs there while he rubs the horses down a bit.'

'Will that be safe? Is he to be trusted?'

'My dear Percival, this line of retreat has been marked out a

long time. Eckovitch has been ready for me any time these three years.'

Nothing more was said. The situation was too grave for mere chatter, and there was nothing of importance that needed saying just then. Percival leaned back among the furs, which were by this time covered with snow, and Litvinoff seemed to be concentrating all his attention on his driving, using the horses as gently as possible, and continually leaning forward and peering into the darkness to make out the track, which was becoming no easy task, as the steady falling snow was fast obliterating the landmarks.

The secretary, overcome by that drowsiness which results from swift movement through bitterly cold air, was almost asleep, when the horses slackened speed, and the change in the motion roused him.

'What's up? What's wrong?' he asked.

'All right. Here's Eckovitch!' and as he spoke the sleigh drew up in front of a long, low wooden building. He handed the reins to Percival, sprang to the ground, and battered at the door. After a short pause a light could be seen within, and a voice asked,—

'Who's there?'

The Count answered with one word which had a Russian sound, but which Percival had never heard before.

The door was opened at once, and after a few low-spoken words between Litvinoff and someone within, a man came out and took the reins, and Percival left the sleigh and followed his

friend into the house.

A woman was already busy in fanning into new life the red ashes that had been covered over on the hearth. She flung on some chips and fir cones, and soon the crackling wood blazed up and showed the homely but not uncomfortable interior. As the two travellers shook the snow off their furs, Percival asked in English who this man was.

'A friend,' Litvinoff answered. 'He's supposed to be an innkeeper, but there aren't many travellers on this road. We make up deficiencies in his income.'

They drew seats up to the fire, and the woman brought them some glasses and a flask of vodka.

'You shall have some tea in a minute.'

'I hate this liquid fire,' said Percival, 'and I like tea better than I did at Monte Carlo. I'll wait for that.'

'Drink this, and don't be too particular. It'll help to keep us going, and we'll take the fag end of the flask with us,' Litvinoff answered.

When the tea was ready, and some sausage and bread were set before the strangers, the woman sat down on the other side of the hearth and looked at them as they ate, which they did with fairly good appetites.

Presently a low wailing cry arose from the further corner of the room, and the woman went and took up a funny old-fashioned looking little baby, and, returning to her seat by the fire, sat hushing it with low whispers of endearment. It was a strangely

peaceful little scene, between two acts of a sufficiently exciting drama, which, for aught any of the actors knew, might end as a tragedy.

The spell of silence which had been over them in the sleigh was broken now, and they chatted lightly over their hasty meal. The Count's demeanour in the face of danger was a thing after Percival's own heart, and he had never admired his friend so much as he did, when, the meal being over, Litvinoff leaned back nonchalantly, stroking his long fair moustache and stirring his final cup of tea.

The secretary's own calmness was really more remarkable, however, since he was in the position of a young soldier under fire for the first time, whereas Litvinoff had known for eight years that at any moment he might be arrested, or might have to fly.

'Your horses will do to get to Kilsen now,' said the man, opening the door; 'you were wise to give them this rest. They'd not have done without it.'

'Poor brutes,' said the Count, 'I wish we could give them longer, but every minute's of consequence.'

'You'll cross the frontier at Ergratz, I suppose,' said the innkeeper, as they came out into the air. The weather had changed in the little time they had been in shelter. The snow was no longer falling; through a break in the clouds one or two stars twinkled frostily, and the wind was blowing the snow off the road in drifts.

As the sleigh glided away the man re-entered his house and

bolted the door, and in five minutes the fire was raked together and covered over, the light was extinguished, and no sign left to show that wayfarers had been entertained there that night.

'We'll take the horses easily a bit now,' said Litvinoff; 'there'll be some stiffish hills by-and-by.'

They seemed to have been on the road for about six nights instead of one, when, nearly half way up one of these same stiffish hills, Percival laid his hand on Litvinoff's shoulder. 'Stop a moment,' he said, 'I heard hoofs behind.'

They stopped, listened, and heard nothing.

'It must have been the echo of our own hoofs among these hills. If they are near enough to be heard, it's all up with us. They're sure to be well mounted. However, we'll do our best to get on to Kilsen, and get mounted ourselves before morning.'

But morning was beginning to break, and with it came fresh snow.

At the foot of the next hill the secretary spoke again.

'Litvinoff, I'm certain I hear hoofs, and a good many of them.'

'So do I. We'll whip on—they can't hear us, the wind blows from them. We'll try another chance presently. I don't think we can win by speed.' He urged on the tired horses with voice and whip, and the weary animals put forth their strength in a wilder gallop. They were now rushing very swiftly through the icy air, and every moment increased the pace.

They had to slacken a little in going up the last and highest hill, near the crown of which they turned back their heads, and

saw that what they had been flying from all night was close upon them now.

Over the brow of a lower hill immediately behind them came a band of horsemen, about a dozen strong as it seemed in the pale grey of the dawn.

'We must leave the sleigh,' said Litvinoff. 'Almost in a line across country to the left, not more than two versts off, is the house of Teliaboff; there we are safe for a day or two, if we can get there unseen. It's a desperate chance, but we must try it. Prop up the portmanteau and the furs to look like our figures. We'll tie the reins here, and get out just over the brow. They'll see us as we go over. Those Cossacks have eyes like eagles. We'll lash the horses on, and they'll go some distance without us; and when those devils find we're not in the sleigh they won't know exactly where to begin to search for us. Thank God, it's snowing harder and harder. That will help to hide our traces; and over this broken ground to the left our legs will serve us better than their horses will them.'

'There's barely a chance,' said the secretary. 'Let's stay and fight it out.'

'We'll fight if the worst comes to the worst; but as it is we've a very fair chance of escape. We have our revolvers.'

As they crossed the brow of the hill a wild shout borne by the wind told them that the Count had been right. They had been seen.

Litvinoff stopped the horses, and the two men got out, leaving

the counterfeit presentment of themselves, which the secretary's deft hands had invested with a very real appearance.

The Count gave two tremendous lashes, the horses sprang madly forward at three times the pace they had made hitherto, and the two fugitives plunged through the snow to the left of the road.

'Don't go too fast,' whispered Litvinoff; 'you'll need all your wind presently. We've a fair start now, and they can't follow on horseback.'

They had not gone two hundred yards before they heard the troop sweep by.

'We weren't a minute too soon,' the secretary said.

'There goes another of them,' said the Count, as again they caught the sound of a horse's snow-muffled hoofs.

On they went, struggling over rough ground, sometimes waist-deep in snowdrifts, sometimes tripping over concealed stones or broken wood.

'We shall do it now,' said Litvinoff.

'They're on us, by God!' cried the secretary at the same instant.

They turned; they had been tracked, but only by one man. One of the pursuers, who had been a little behind the others, either better trained in this sort of sport than his fellows, or guided by some sixth sense, seemed to have divined what they had done, and had dismounted just at the right place, and followed them on foot.

He gave a yell of triumph as he saw a grey figure struggling

up the incline before him.

'Aha, Mr Secretary,' he cried, and, raising his carbine, fired; the grey figure stumbled forward into the snow. '*You're* done for, at any rate!'

The Cossack's triumph was a short one. As he dashed forward to secure his fallen quarry, another figure sprang from the snowy brushwood a little ahead of him, walked calmly towards him, raised a revolver, and shot him through the heart.

A week or two later one of those short and inaccurate paragraphs which date from St Petersburg appeared in several European papers. It was to the effect that Count Michael Litvinoff had been captured, after a desperate struggle, near the frontier, and that his private secretary, a young Englishman, had been shot in the fray.

But the French papers knew better, and that report was promptly contradicted.

The *Débats*, while confirming the news of the secretary's death, asserted that Count Michael Litvinoff was at that moment at the Hôtel du Louvre, and his bankers would have confirmed the statement.

And in the rooms of the Count at the Hôtel du Louvre a haggard, weary-faced man, almost worn out by the desperate excitement and the horrors of the last few weeks, was pacing up and down, unable to get away from the picture, that was ever before his eyes, of his friend's dead face, bloodstained and upturned from the snow, in the cold, grey morning light; unable

to escape from that triumphant shout, 'Aha, Mr Secretary, *you're* done for, at any rate,' which seemed as if it would ring for ever in his ears.

'I would give ten years of my life to undo that night's work. I shall never meet another man quite like him. I wish the brute had shot me,' he said to himself over and over again.

CHAPTER I.
FATHER AND SONS

THE light was fading among the Derbyshire hills. The trees, now almost bare, were stirred by the fretful wind into what seemed like a passionate wail for their own lost loveliness, and on the wide bare stretch of moorland behind the house the strange weird cry of the plovers sounded like a dirge over the dead summer. The sharp, intermittent rain had beaten all the beauty out of the few late autumn flowers in the garden, and it was tender of the twilight to hasten to deepen into a darkness heavy enough to hide such a grey desolate picture.

Inside Thornsett Edge another and a deeper darkness was falling. Old Richard Ferrier was sick unto death, and he alone of all the household knew it. He knew it, and he was not sorry. Yet he sighed.

'What is it, Richard? Can I get you anything?'

A woman sitting behind his bed-curtain leaned forward to put the question—a faded woman, with grey curls and a face marked with deep care lines. It was his sister.

'Where are the boys?'

'Gone to Aspinshaw.'

'Both of them?'

'Yes; I asked Dick to take a note for me, and Roland said he'd

go too.'

The old man looked pleased.

'Did you want either of them?' she asked.

'I want them both when they come in.'

'Suppose you are asleep?'

'I shall not sleep until I have seen my sons.'

'Art thee better to-night, Richard?' she asked in a tone of tender solicitude, dropping back, as people so often do in moments of anxiety, into the soft sing-song accent that had once been habitual to her.

'Ay, I'm better, lass,' he said, returning the pressure of the hand she laid on his.

'Wilt have a light?'

'Not yet a-bit,' he answered. 'I like to lie so, and watch the day right out,' and he turned his face towards the square of grey sky framed by the window.

There was hardly more pleasantness left in his life than in the dreary rain-washed garden outside. And yet his life had not been without its triumphs—as the world counts success. He had, when still young, married the woman he passionately loved, and work for her sake had seemed so easy that he had risen from poverty to competence, and from competence to wealth. Born in the poorest ranks of the workers in a crowded Stockport alley, he had started in life as a mill 'hand,' and he was ending it now a millowner, and master of many hands.

He had himself been taught in no school but that of life; but

he did not attribute his own success to his education any more than he did the fatuous failure of some University men to their peculiar training; so he had sent his sons to Cambridge, and had lived to see them leave their college well-grown and handsome, with not more than the average stock of prejudices and follies, and fit to be compared, not unfavourably, with any young men in the county.

But by some fatality he had never tasted the full sweetness of any of the fruit his life-tree had borne him. His parents had died in want and misery at a time when he himself was too poor to help them. His wife, who had bravely shared his earlier struggles, did not live to share their reward. She patiently bore the trials of their early married life, but in the comfort that was to follow she had no part. She died, and left him almost broken-hearted. Her memory would always be the dearest thing in the world to him; but a man's warm, living, beating heart needs something more than a memory to lavish its love upon. This something more he found in her children. In them all his hopes had been centred; for them all his efforts had been made. They were, individually, all that he had dreamed they might be, and they were both devoted to him; and yet, as he lay on his deathbed, his mind was ill at ease about them. Did he exaggerate? Was it weakness and illness, the beginning of the end, that had made him think, through these last few weeks, that there was growing up between these two beloved sons a coolness—a want of sympathy, an indisposition to run well in harness together—which might lead to sore trouble?

There certainly had been one or two slight quarrels between them which had been made up through his own intervention. How would it be, he wondered, when he was not there any more to smooth things over? Somehow he did not feel that he cared to live any longer, even to keep peace between his boys. That must be done some other way. Truth to say, he was very tired of being alive.

The October day faded, and presently the sick-room was lighted only by the red flickering glow of the fire, which threw strange fantastic shadows from the handsome commonplace furniture, and made the portraits on the walls seem to look out of their frames with quite new expressions.

Old Ferrier lay looking at the pictures in a tremor of expectation that made the time seem very long indeed. At last his strained sense caught the faint click of the Brahma lock as it was opened by a key from without, and the bang of the front door as it was closed somewhat hurriedly from within.

'There they are,' he said at once. 'Send them up, Letitia.'

As she laid her hand on the door to open it, another hand grasped the handle on the other side, and a tall, broad-shouldered young fellow came in, with the glisten of rain still on his brown moustache, and on his great-coat, seeming to bring with him a breath of freshness and the night air.

'Ah, Dick! I was just coming down for you. Where is Roland?'

'He stayed awhile at Aspinshaw. How's father?'

'Awake, and asking for you,' said his aunt, and went away,

closing the door softly.

'Well, dad, how goes it?' said the new-comer, stepping forward into the glow of the firelight.

'Light the candles,' said his father, without answering the question, and the young man lighted two in heavy silver candlesticks which stood on the dressing-table.

As their pale light fell on the white face lying against the hardly whiter pillow, Dick's eyes scrutinised it anxiously.

'You don't look any better,' he said, sitting down by the bed, and taking his father's hand. 'I wish I'd been at home when that doctor came yesterday.'

'I'm glad you weren't Dick; I'd rather tell you myself. I wish your brother were here.'

'I daresay he won't be long,' said the other, frowning a little, while the lines about his mouth grew hard and set; 'but what did the doctor say? Aunt Letitia didn't seem to know anything about it.'

'He told me I shouldn't live to see another birthday,' said the old man. He had rehearsed in his own mind over and over again how he should break this news to his boys, and now he was telling it in a way quite other than any that had been in his rehearsals.

'Not see another birthday!' echoed his son. 'Nonsense! Why, father,' he added, with a sudden start, 'your birthday's on Wednesday. How could he? I'll write to him.'

'My dear boy, I felt it before he told me. He only put into words what I've known ever since I've been lying here. There's

no getting over it. I'm going.'

Dick did not speak. He pressed his father's hand hard, and then, letting it fall, he walked over to the hearthrug, and stood with his hands behind him, looking into the fire.

'Come back; come here!' said the wavering voice from the bed. 'I want you, Dick.'

'Can't I do something for you, dad?' he said, in very much lower tones than usual, as he sat down again by the bed. He kept his face in the shadow of the curtain.

'We've always got on very well together, Dick.'

'Yes—we've been very good friends.'

'I wish you were as good friends with your brother as you are with your old father.'

'I'm not bad friends with him; and, after all, your father's your father, and that makes all the difference.'

'Your brother will soon be the nearest thing in the world to you. Oh, my boy,' said old Ferrier, suddenly raising himself on his elbow, and clasping Dick's strong right hand in both his, 'for God's sake, don't quarrel with him! If you ever cared for me, keep friends with him. If you and he weren't friends, I couldn't lie easy in my grave. And it's been a long life—I should like to lie easy at last!'

'I don't quarrel with him, father.'

'Well, lad—well, I've thought you did; perhaps I'm wrong. Anyway, don't quarrel—if it's only for your old dad's sake. I've loved you both so dearly.'

'I will try to do everything you wish.'

'I know you will, Dick. You always have done that. Was that Roland just came in? If it is, send him to me.'

The young man stood silently for a few moments. Then he bent down over his father and kissed his forehead twice. When he left the room he met a servant on the landing.

'Is Mr Roland at home yet?'

'Yes, sir; he's just come in.'

'Tell him Mr Ferrier wishes to see him at once.'

'Miss Ferrier told him, sir, directly he came in.'

He turned and went to his own room.

A quarter of an hour later Roland stood outside his father's door. He opened it gently, and entered, his slippered feet treading the floor of the sick-room as silently as a nurse's.

As he stood a moment in the dim light, eyes less keen and less expectant than those looking at him from the bed might have easily mistaken him for his brother. The slight difference in breadth of shoulder and depth of chest was concealed by the loose indoor jacket he wore. There was no trace about him of his wet and muddy walk, and he looked altogether a much fitter occupant for the easy-chair that stood at the sick man's bedside than the stalwart, weather-stained, and unsympathetic-looking figure that had last sat in it.

'Rowley, why didn't you come before?' began the old man.

'Oh, I couldn't, father. It is a beastly night. I was awfully wet and muddy. I only waited to change my things, and make myself

presentable. How are you to-night?'

'Your brother came up wet enough,' was all the answer.

'Did he? What a careless fellow he is. He never seems to think of that sort of thing.'

'Oh, well, I suppose you didn't know.'

'Know what, father?'

'How much I wanted to see you.'

'Why, no, of course I didn't,' said Roland in an altered tone, and with a look of new anxiety in his face. 'What is it, father? I thought you were better to-day.'

'I shall never be better, lad. Doctor Gibson told me so, and I know he's right. You and Dick will soon be masters here. But don't worry, Rowley,' he added, catching both his son's arms; 'it was bound to come some day.'

For a moment the young man had hardly seemed to realise what the words meant; but now a long, anxious, eager look at his father's face made the truth clear to him. An intense anguish came into his face, and throwing his arms round the other's neck, he fell on his knees in a burst of passionate tears.

'Oh, father, father, no, no—not yet—don't say that—I can't do without you. Oh, why have I left you since you have been ill?'

The old man caressed him silently. There was a sort of pleasure in feeling oneself regretted with this passion of sorrow and longing. After a while.

'Rowley,' said he, as the sobs grew less frequent and less violent, 'I'm going to ask you to do something for me.'

'Anything you like, father—the harder the better.'

'It ought not to be very hard to you, my son. Promise me that you will always keep good friends with Dick.'

'Yes—yes—I will, indeed.'

But little more was said. Roland seemed unable to utter anything save incoherent protestations of love and sorrow.

At last, warned by the weariness that was creeping into his father's face, he bade him a very tender and lingering good-night.

'Have me called at once if you are worse—or if I can do anything,' were his last words as he left the room.

The watchful woman's face was by the bed again in an instant.

'I want—' the old man began.

'You want your beef tea, Richard, and here it is.'

As he took it he asked,—

'Is it too late to send for Gates?'

'Oh, no; and it's such a little way for him to come.'

Mr Gates was a member of a firm of Stockport solicitors, and his country house was but a stone's-throw from Thornsett Edge. It was not long before he in his turn occupied that chair by the bed. He bore with him an atmosphere of jollity which even the hush of that sick-room was powerless to dispel. He was not unsympathetic either, by any means, but he seemed made up of equal parts of kindheartedness and high spirits, and looked much more like an ideal country squire than like the ordinary legal adviser. As a matter of fact, he was more at home on the moor side or in the stubble than among dusty documents and

leather-bound Acts of Parliament. It was his boast that he only had eight clients, and that he lived on them, and, judging by his appearance, they furnished uncommonly good living. He had a genial, hearty way with him which made him a favourite with every man, woman and child he came across, and he knew quite enough law to fully justify the confidence of the eight above mentioned.

'What, Mr Ferrier, still in bed! Why, we thought old Gibson would have had you on your legs again in no time. I quite expected to see you driving over to the Wirksvale wakes to-morrow.'

'I shall never go behind any but the black horses again, Gates. It's no use. I'm settled, and I want you to alter my will.'

'I'll alter your will with pleasure, if you like. Though I must say it's so much more sensible than most people's wills that I wonder you want to alter it; but you mustn't talk of black horses and that sort of thing for another ten years. Don't lose heart; you'll live to alter your will a score of times yet.'

In an eager, tremulous voice Ferrier begged the other to believe that his fate was sealed, and that whatever was done must be done quickly. Then he proceeded to explain the changes he wished to have made in the will. He told the lawyer, without any of that reserve which ordinarily characterised him, all his fears about his sons, and then unfolded the scheme by which he thought to bind the two together. He wished their worldly interests to be so strongly bound up in their relations to each

other that a quarrel *à outrance* would mean ruin to both of them; and to this end he proposed to leave the mill to them jointly, on condition that they worked it together, and both took an active part in the management of it. Should they dissolve partnership before twenty-one years, or should either retire with consent of the other, the personal property was not to be touched by either, and at end of ten years—if they were both alive and still separated—the whole was to go to the Manchester Infirmary.

Mr Gates noted this extraordinary scheme down on the back of an old letter, and when Mr Ferrier had ended, read his notes through and shook his head.

'Far better leave it alone, Mr Ferrier; they seem the best of friends, and legacies like this never help matters much, anyhow.'

'I can't leave it alone, Gates. I've very little time left. The will is in that despatch-box, and there are pen and ink somewhere about.'

'Do be advised,' began Gates, his jolly face considerably graver than usual.

'I tell you I must have it done, and done at once. I'm deadly tired, and I want it over.'

Mr Gates shrugged his shoulders, got out the will, and settled himself at the round table, on whose crimson velvet-pile cloth stood a *papier-maché* inkstand, a recent purchase of Miss Letitia's.

He sat there biting his pen, and making aimless little scribbles on a sheet of blank paper. After some minutes he leaned forward,

and for a little time no sound was heard but the squeak of his pen. At last he flung down the quill and rose.

'It is the only way it can be done, sir,' he said, and read it out.

It carried out Ferrier's plans, but placed the personal property in the hands of trustees, who were to pay to Roland and Richard the interest thereof so long as they worked the mill together. If at the end of twenty-one years there had been no dissolution between them, the money was to pass unconditionally to them, in equal shares, or to the survivor of them, or to their heirs if they were both dead. If they quarrelled, the interest was to be allowed to accumulate for ten years, and then, if the brothers were still not on friendly terms, it should go, with the capital, to the Infirmary.

'That's right,' said old Richard, in a voice so changed as to convince the solicitor that he was right in saying he had not much more time to spend.

The codicil was signed, duly attested, and attached to the will, and Ferrier lay back exhausted, but with a light of new contentment in his eyes.

'I'm right down tired out,' he said; 'I shall sleep now.'

And sleep he did till the cold hour of the dawn, when there came a brief waking interval, before the longest, soundest sleep of all.

He opened his eyes then.

'It's nearly over,' he said; 'my boys—my boys!'

He called for them both, but it was Dick on whose broad breast the dying head rested. It was Dick who caught the last loving,

whispered words, felt the last faint hand pressure, soothed the last pang, caught the last look.

For when Aunt Letitia hurried to their rooms, it was Dick who opened his door before she reached it, and, fully dressed, sprang to his father's bedside.

Roland was in the sound sleep that often follows violent emotion, and it was hard to rouse him. He came in softly just as his brother laid gently down on the pillow the worn old face, at rest at last, and closed the kindly eyes that would never meet Roland's any more. Never any more!

CHAPTER II.
A NARROW ESCAPE

THE curtain had fallen on the last scene of the most popular play in London. The appreciative criticism of the pit and the tearful sympathy of the upper boxes were alike merging in one common thought, that of 'something nice for supper.' The gallery was already empty. Its occupants were thirstier and more prompt of action than the loungers in the stalls and boxes. Ladies, a little flushed by the exertion of fighting their way through the ranks of their peers, were silently disputing for precedence in front of the looking-glasses in the cloak-rooms, while their cavaliers, already invested with overcoat and wrapper, were pacing the carpeted corridor outside with a very poor show of patience. The most impatient of them all was a stout, rubicund old gentleman in a dark coat, who trotted fretfully up and down, and now and then even ventured to peep in through the door at the chaos of silks and laces, raised shawls, and suspended bonnets, in some component part of which he evidently had an interest.

His very manifest objection to being kept waiting made his fellow-sufferers glance at him with some amusement. A young man who had been going leisurely towards the outer door actually stopped and leaned against the wall while he rolled himself a cigarette, and from time to time glanced with a certain interest at

him. He looked very handsome leaning there; his light overcoat was open, and showed the gleam of some rather good diamonds in his shirt front. His pose was graceful—his face had less of boredom in it than is usually worn by young men who go to theatres alone. This, with his large dark eyes, Greek nose, and long drooping blonde moustache, gave him a rather striking appearance. He might have been a foreigner but for his want of skill in making cigarettes. The white hands seemed absolutely awkward in their manipulation. Just as his persevering efforts were crowned with success, and the cigarette was placed between his lips, a white muffled figure emerged from the tossing rainbow sea, and a little hand was slipped through the old gentleman's arm.

'Desperately tired of waiting, I suppose, papa?' said a very sweet voice.

'I should think so. What a time you've been, my dear! I thought I had lost you. All the cabs will be gone.'

'Oh no, dear; the theatre isn't half empty. I was quite the first lady to come out, I'm sure.'

'You may have been the first to go in, but there have been lots of ladies come out while I've been waiting—dozens, I should say.'

'Couldn't we walk back, papa?' said the girl. 'It's a lovely night, and the streets are so interesting. It isn't far, is it?'

'No, no—the idea! Make haste, and we'll get a cab right enough. Mamma will never let us have a trip together again if I take you back with a cold.'

By this time they had passed down the stairs, and the tall cigarette-maker sauntered streetwards also.

But getting a cab was not so easy. That white chenille wrap had taken too long to arrange, and now there were so many people ready and waiting for cabs that a man not at home in this Babel had hardly a chance.

'Papa' was so intent on hailing a four-wheeler himself that he was deaf to the offers of assistance from the ragged battalions that infest the theatre doors, and seem to get their living, not by calling cabs, which they seldom if ever do, but by shutting the doors and touching their hats when people have called cabs for themselves.

He was a little short-sighted, and made several attempts to get into other people's broughams, under the impression that they were unattached 'growlers,' and was only restrained by his daughter's energetic interference.

At last, driven from the field by the crowds who knew their way about better than he did, he yielded to the girl's entreaties, and walked towards the Strand, hoping to be able to hail a passing vehicle. They advanced slowly, for the pavement was crowded.

'We really had better walk,' she was saying again, when the crowd round them was suddenly thrown into a state of disturbance and excitement, and they were pushed backwards against the wall.

'Oh, dear, what is it?' she cried.

'Look out, miss!' said a rough-looking man, in a fur cap,

catching her shoulders, and pulling her back so violently that her hand was torn from her father's arm, and at the same moment the crowd separated to right and left.

Then she saw what it was. A pair of spirited carriage horses had either taken fright, or had grown tired of the commonplace routine of wood pavement and asphalte, and had decided to try a short cut home through the houses, utterly regardless of the coachman, who was straining with might and main at the reins.

Their dreadful prancing hoofs were half-way across the pavement, and the pole of the carriage was close to someone's chest—good heavens! her father's—and he, standing there bewildered, seemed not to see it. She would have sprung forward, but the rough man held her back.

'Papa! papa!' she screamed, and at the sound of her voice he started, and seemed to see for the first time what threatened him. He saw it too late—the pole was within six inches of his breast-bone. But someone else had seen it to more purpose, and at that instant the head of the off horse was caught in a grasp of iron, and the pair were dragged round, to the imminent danger of some score of lives, while the carriage was forced back on to a hansom cab, whose driver disappeared into the night in a cloud of blasphemy.

'Well, I'm damned!' remarked the gentleman in the fur cap, who had snatched the girl out of danger; 'it's the nearest shave as ever I see.'

It had been a near shave; but the old gentleman was unhurt,

though considerably flustered, and immeasurably indignant.

'Hurt? No, I'm not hurt—no thanks to that fool of a driver; such idiots ought to be hanged. But I ought to thank the gentleman who saved me.'

As he spoke the young man came forward deadly pale and without a hat.

'I do hope you're not hurt,' he said, in a singularly low, soft voice, speaking with a little catching of the breath. It was he who had leaned against the wall in the theatre. His hands were evidently good for something better than twisting tobacco. 'I hope the pole did not touch you? I am afraid I was hardly quick enough, but I couldn't get through the people before.'

'My dear sir, you were quick enough to save me from being impaled against this wall; but I really feel quite upset. I must get my daughter home. She looks rather queer.'

She was holding his arm tightly between her hands.

'Do let's go home,' she whispered.

'I'll get you a cab,' said the hero. 'You'll probably get one easily now the mischief's done.'

'He's lost his hat,' observed the rescued one, as the other disappeared. 'Do you feel very bad, my pet? Pull yourself together. Here he comes.'

A hansom drew up in front of them, and their new acquaintance threw back the apron himself.

'You'd better take it yourself,' said papa. 'You seem rather lame, and your hat's gone.'

'It doesn't matter at all. I can get another cab in an instant. Pray jump in.'

'No; but look here. I haven't half thanked you. After all, you saved my life, you know. Come and see me to-morrow evening, will you, and let me thank you properly. Here's my card—I'm at Morley's.'

'I will come with pleasure to see if you are all right after it, but please don't talk any more about thanks, Mr—Stanley. Here's my card. Good night—Morley's Hotel,' he shouted to the cabman, and as they drove off he mechanically raised his hand to the place where his hat should have been. Have you ever seen a man do that when hat there was none? The effect is peculiar—much like a rustic pulling a forelock when t'squire goes by.

'I hope he *will* come to-morrow,' said Mr Stanley as the hansom drove off.

'Why, I think he's staying at our hotel, papa. I am almost sure I've seen him at the *table d'hôte*.'

'Dear, dear! How extraordinary.'

Clare was more than 'almost sure' in fact, she knew perfectly well that this handsome stranger was not only staying at the hotel, but that he in his turn was quite aware of their presence there. Of her presence he could hardly be oblivious, since his eyes had been turned on her without much intermission all through dinner every evening since she had been in town.

Before Clare went to her room that night she managed to possess herself of the slip of cardboard on which was engraved

—Michael Litvinoff.

What an uncommon name! How strange that he of all people should have been the one to come forward at the critical moment.

Yes, but not quite so strange as it seemed to Miss Stanley; for Litvinoff had gone to the theatre for no other purpose than to be near her. It was not only to gaze at her fair face that he thus followed her; but because he was determined to catch at any straw which might lead to an introduction, and the fates had favoured him, as they had often done before, in a degree beyond his wildest hopes. He was well contented to have lost his hat, and did not care much about his bruised foot. These were a cheap price to pay for admittance to the acquaintance of the girl who had occupied most of his thoughts during the few days that had passed since he had first seen her.

'A very fair beginning. The gods have certainly favoured me so far; and now, O Jupiter, aid us! or rather Cupid, for I suppose he's the proper deity to invoke in an emergency like this.'

And Michael Litvinoff stretched out his slippered feet to the blazing fire in his bedroom.

'By-the-way, I might as well look at the address. I know it's somewhere down North.'

He rose, walked with some difficulty to the chair, where he had flung his great-coat, and took the card from one of its pockets. 'Mr John Stanley, Aspinshaw, Firth Vale.'

'By Jove!' he said, sinking into his chair again. 'Firth Vale—Firth Vale. That's in Derbyshire. Ah me!'

He thrust his feet forward again to the warmth, and leaning back gazed long into the fire, but not quite so complacently as he had done before it had occurred to him to make that journey across the room to his great-coat.

CHAPTER III.
THE NEW MASTERS

THE funeral was over, and Thornsett Mill was closed for the day. Fortunately the 'Spotted Cow' was not closed, so that the majority of the hands did not find themselves without resources. Added to the subtle pleasure which so many derive from drinking small beer in a sanded kitchen furnished with oak benches, there was to-day the excitement of discussing a great event, for to the average mind of Thornsett the death and burial of old Richard Ferrier were great events indeed. And then there appears to be something inherent in the nature of a funeral which produces intense and continued thirst in all persons connected, however remotely, with the ceremony. So John Bolt, the landlord, had his hands pretty full, and the state of the till was so satisfactory that it was a really praiseworthy sacrifice to the decencies of society for him to persist in not shortening by one fraction of an inch the respectfully long face which he had put on in the morning as appropriate to the occasion.

'Well, for my part, I'm sorry he's gone,' he said, drawing himself a pot of that tap which seemed best calculated to assist moral reflections. 'That I am! He was always a fair dealer, if he wasn't a giving one.'

'He was more a havin' nor a givin' one,' said old Bill Murdoch.

'Givin' don't build mills, my lad, nor yet muck up two acres o' good pasture wi' bits o' flowers wi' glass windows all over 'em. I never seen sic foolin'.'

'Surely a man's a right to do what he will with his own,' ventured a meek-looking man, who had himself a few pounds laid by, and felt acutely the importance of leaving unchallenged the rights of property.

'I'm none so sure o' that,' remarked Bill, who had a conviction which is shared by a few more of us, that one's superiority shows itself naturally and unmistakably in one's never agreeing with any statement whatever which is advanced by anyone else.

'There'll be more flowers than ever now, if Mr Roland has his way,' said Sigley the meek.

'D'ye think, now, Sigley, he'll be like to get that where Mr Richard is?' asked Bill. 'Mr Roland thinks too much o' flowers and singin', and book learnin', to give much time to getten o' his own way.'

'Mr Roland may be this, or he may be that,' Potters, the village grocer, observed, with the air of one clearly stating a case, 'but he can get his way where he cares to.'

'Tha's fond o' saying words as might mean owt—or nowt, for that matter. Can't tha say what tha does mean?'

'Tha'd know what I mean if tha weren't too blind to see owt. How about Alice Hatfield?'

'Gently, gently,' said Bolt. 'Tha was i' the right, Potters, not to name names, but when it comes to namin' o' names I asks tha

where's tha proof?'

Here there was a general 'movement of adhesion,' and an assenting murmur ran round, while the mild man repeated like an echo, 'Where's your proof?'

'Her father don't think ther's proof,' said Sigley.

'A man doesn't want to prove the bread out of his mouth, and the roof off his children.'

'John Hatfield wouldn't work for a man as had ruined his girl.'

'Hungry dogs eat dirty pudding,' remarked Potters.

'Hatfield does na' deal o' thee, Potters,' observed Murdoch, drily.

'And it would be just one if he did,' answered Potters, his large face growing crimson, 'and Alice was a good lass and a sweet lass till she took up wi' fine notions and told a' the lads as none on 'em was good enough to tie her shoon, and as she'd be a lady, and I don't know what all, and Mr Roland was the only gentleman as ever took any notice of her, except Mr Richard; and Mr Roland, he went away when she went away, and it's all as plain as the nose on your face.'

'Tha says too much,' said Murdoch slowly, 'for't a' to be true.'

'Now, now!' interposed Bolt. 'Enow said on all sides, I'm sure. The poor old master's gone, and the mill's got a holiday, and I think you'll all be better employed i' turning your thoughts on him as is gone than i' picking holes i' them as is to be your masters, and raking up yesterday's fires i' this fashion. And so I say, as I said before, I for one am sorry he's gone.'

'Yes; and so am I,' said Bill; 'for as long as he lived I always expected him to do summat for me, as worked alongside o' him when he were a lad i' Carrington's Mills, and now I know *that* chance is ower.'

'Well, he gave thee work here, and he'd always a kind word for thee.'

'Kind words spread no butties, and when he was rolling in brass, work at the usual wages was a' he ever give me.'

'Did'st thee ever gie him owt, lad?'

'I never had owt to give him, or anyone else for that matter.'

A general laugh arose, and Bill buried his face in his mug of beer.

'The next work-day the mill's closed'll be a wedden-day, I s'pose,' said Sigley, after a pause.

'Ay, and not long fust.'

'Mr Roland's always up at Aspinshaw.'

'So's Mr Richard if you come to that.'

'They can't both marry the girl.'

'No, nor I shouldn't think either of them would yet a bit. Miss Clare's only just come home fro' endin' her schoolin'.'

'And a gradely lass she is.'

'Ay, that's so,' cut in old Murdoch. 'She thinks a sight more o' workin'-folk nor either o' they boys do.'

'Where's your proof o' that, Bill?' asked Bolt, the village logician.

'Proof,' snarled Murdoch; 'don't 'ee call to mind two years

agone when we had a kind o' strike like, and didn't she go about speakin' up for us like a good un?'

A murmur of assent mingled with the gurgling of liquor down half-a-dozen throats.

'There's one I hope she'll never take to,' Potters was beginning, but Bolt interrupted him with—

'Whichever has her will have a fine wife. Let's drink good luck to the new masters, lads.'

'Or, so to say, to oursel', for their's'll be ours,' said Sigley.

'Their bad luck'll be ours; but their good luck's their own,' said Bill Murdoch sententiously.

This startling economic theory meeting with no support, the original toast was drunk with a feeble attempt at honours.

The 'new masters' whose health had thus been unenthusiastically drunk found it hard to realise the peculiar position in which they found themselves.

The will was a great surprise to them both. Neither had thought that the slight breach which had come between them was sufficiently wide to be noticed, and the very fact of its having been noticed made it appear deeper and more serious than they had before considered it to be.

It was a bitter thought to Richard Ferrier that the old man's last moments should have been made unquiet through any conduct of his, and he reproached himself for not having concealed his own feelings better, and for not having watched more keenly over those of his father. The most crushing part of bereavement is

always the consciousness that so little more thought, so little more tact and tenderness, would have sufficed to spare that ended life many an hour of sorrow, that quiet heart many a pang of pain. It is then that we would give our heart's blood for one hour with the beloved in which to tell them all that we might have said so easily while they were here. This universal longing is responsible for that deeply rooted belief in the life beyond the grave which causes two-thirds of human-kind to dispense with evidence and to set reason at nought. So long as the sons and daughters of men

> Weep by silent graves alone,

so long will the priest find his penitent, the professor of modern spiritualism his open-mouthed dupe, and the shrine its devotee. The ages roll on, each year the old earth opens her bosom for our dearest, and still man—slow learner that he is—will not realise that (whatever may be the chances of another life in which to set right what has been here done amiss) in this life, which is the only one he can be sure of having, it rests with him to decide whether there shall be any acts of unkindness that will seem to need atonement.

The consolation which so many find in the idea of a future life was a closed door to Dick. He had belonged to the 'advanced' school of thought at college, and to him the gulf which separated him from his father was one that could never be bridged over.

Roland's grief was more absorbing than his brother's, though

it was not so acute; and by its very nature could not be so lasting. Yet through it all he felt rather—not vexed—but grieved that his father should have not only divined his inmost feelings, but should have published them to the world by means of this will. He had an uneasy consciousness that he was made to appear ridiculous, and for Roland to be possibly absurd was to be certainly wretched. It was very irritating that two brothers could not have an occasional difference without having their 'sparring' made the subject of a solemn legal document; and without being themselves placed in such a situation that the eyes of all their acquaintances must be turned expectantly on them to see what they would do next.

The differences arose from an only too complete agreement on one particular point. When they had come back from Cambridge a year before, they had found a new and interesting feature in the social aspect of Firth Vale. Clare Stanley had come home from the German boarding-school where she had spent the last three years. The young men had not seen her since she was a child, and now they met her in the full blossom of very pretty and sufficiently-conscious young womanhood.

For about two months they discussed her freely in their more sociable hours, admired her prodigiously, and congratulated each other on their good luck. Then came reticence; then occasional half-hearted sarcasms, directed against her, varied by a criticism of each other, the sincerity of which was beyond a doubt. For some months before the old man's death the rivalry that had

sprung up between them had been too strong to be always kept under, even in his presence, and he had seen the effect, though not guessed the cause.

Strangely enough, another cause of dissension between the brothers had been also touched on by their critics in the tap of the Spotted Cow: Alice Hatfield. When Mrs. Ferrier had died Mrs. Hatfield had been foster-mother to the two boys, and during their childhood they were the constant playfellows of little Alice. Of course as they grew older the distance between them increased, but Richard was still very fond of Alice, and it was a great blow to him when one day, about three months after their return from college, the girl suddenly disappeared, taking leave of no one, and leaving no word of explanation. All that anyone could gather was that during a visit she had recently paid to an aunt in Liverpool she had been seen to talk more than once to a gentleman, and that she had left the Firth Vale Station for Manchester by an early train alone. But the worst of it was that Roland had that very day abruptly announced his intention of taking a holiday, and had gone North without any apparent object; and village gossip busied itself rarely with this portentous coincidence. At the end of a month Roland returned, looking worn and harassed. His brother asked him point blank where he had been, and for what. Roland indignantly denied his right to question, and flatly refused to answer. A quarrel ensued—the first of many, which grew more frequent as they saw more of Miss Stanley.

On the morning on which Mr Ferrier died, she and her father had gone to London to spend a month; and the time of her absence was the most peaceful the young men had known for some time.

Clare herself was glad to go to London, though not so glad to leave the scene of her conquests. One cannot blame her much for knowing that she was charming. The two Ferriers were the most desirable young men the country-side could offer, and no girl could have wished a finer pair of captives to grace her chariot-wheels. And—Aspinshaw was very dull.

CHAPTER IV.
A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

WHEN Miss Stanley opened her hazel eyes the morning after the mischance on the way home from the theatre, her first waking impression was that something pleasant was to happen. She laughed at herself a little when complete wakefulness made her conscious that, after all, it was only Count Litvinoff's acquaintance and promised call which were answerable for that dreamy feeling of anticipated enjoyment.

She let her thoughts stray in his direction several times that day, and at the *table d'hôte* looked out for him with interest. But he was not there. Bearing in mind Mr Stanley's invitation, Count Michael Litvinoff had thought it as well to absent himself from the *table d'hôte*. It would have been rather awkward to meet his new acquaintances at dinner and then to call on them immediately afterwards.

'I don't see our Russian friend, Clare,' remarked Mr Stanley as the fish was removed. 'I think you must have been mistaken about his staying here.'

'Perhaps I was, papa,' said Clare, submissively, but with a sparkle in her eyes that contradicted her words. 'Or perhaps his foot hurt him so much that he couldn't come down.'

'If he doesn't come up after dinner we'd better make inquiries.'

But he did come up after dinner, and when he entered, limping slightly, Mr Stanley received him with as much effusion as could be shown by an old gentleman after a heavy meal.

'My daughter tells me you are staying in this hotel,' he began; and as Litvinoff, taking this as an introduction, bowed low to her, with his eyes on the ground, she hoped he did not notice the sudden flush that swept over her face. But he did; there was, in fact, very little that went on within a dozen yards of him that Count Litvinoff did not notice.

'How strange that you should have been on the spot last night, and how fortunate.'

'It was fortunate for me, since it has procured for me this pleasure. May I hope that you are not any the worse for the shock?'

'No, I'm not; but I'm afraid you are; do sit down.'

As Litvinoff and her father went on talking, Clare, who had not yet spoken a word, could not help thinking that this gentleman with the foreign name was somehow very different from any man she had hitherto met, not even excepting those fine specimens of young English manhood, the Ferriers. There was about him that air of worldliness which is so attractive to young people. 'He looks as if he had a history,' she said to herself, with conviction; a remark which did credit to her powers of observation. She liked his voice and his way of speaking, for though his English was perfect, he spoke it with a precision not usual to Englishmen.

'Will you have tea or coffee?' asked Clare presently, busying

herself with the cups and saucers that had been brought in.

'Mr Litvinoff will have coffee, of course, my dear; young men don't like tea nowadays.'

'I can't claim to be very young,' said the other, smiling, 'but I do like tea.'

'Ah! you would just please my wife; she says that a liking for tea in a young man is a sign of a good moral disposition.'

'I'm afraid in my case it's national instinct, not moral beauty.'

'National!' repeated Mr Stanley, 'national! Why, God bless my soul, you aren't Chinese, are you?'

The guest threw his head back and laughed unaffectedly; and Clare smiled behind the tea-tray.

'Oh, no; I'm only a Russian.'

'Oh, ah,' said Mr Stanley, in a rather disappointed tone. For the moment he had been quite pleased at the thought that here was actually a Chinese who could talk excellent English, and whose garments were not exactly the same, to the uninitiated, as those of his wife and mother.

'You speak English uncommonly well,' he went on.

'Well, I've been in England some years now,' he said, with a rather sad smile, which confirmed Clare in that fancy about his history. 'A turn for languages is like the taste for tea, one of our national characteristics. I suppose the ordinary tongue finds such a difficulty in twisting itself round Russian, that if it can do that it can do anything. Allow me!' springing forward to hand Mr Stanley his cup of coffee.

'My daughter always sings to me while I'm having my coffee,' said Mr Stanley, suppressing the fact that under these circumstances he generally went to sleep, and feeling a mistaken confidence, as slaves of habit always do, that his ordinary custom could be set at nought on the present occasion.

'I hope Miss Stanley will not deny me the privilege of sharing your pleasure,' said Litvinoff, rising and making for the piano. Clare followed him.

'What shall I sing, papa?' she said.

'Whatever you like, my dear. "The Ash Grove."'

Clare sang it. Her voice was not particularly powerful, but she made the most of it, such as it was, and sang with enough expression to make it pleasant to listen to her. After 'The Ash Grove' came one or two plaintive Scotch airs, and before she was well through 'Bonnie Doon,' the accompaniment of her father's heavy breathing made her aware that her audience was reduced by one-half. The most appreciative half remained, and, when the last notes of the regretful melody had died out, preferred a request for Schubert's 'Wanderer.' This happened to be her favourite song, and she sang it *con amore*.

'It always seems to me,' he said when she had finished, 'that that music carries in it all the longing that makes the hearts of exiles heavy.'

Clare looked up at him brightly. 'Oh, but their hearts ought not to be heavy, you know,' she said. 'The Revolution is of no country—I thought banishment from one country ought merely

to mean work in another for an exile for freedom. Surely there is a fight to be fought here in England, for instance, too. I don't know much about it; I've scarcely seen anything, but it seems to me there is much to be put straight here—many wrongs to be redressed, much misery to be swept away.'

The Count's bold eyes fixed themselves on her with a new interest in them.

'Yes, yes,' he returned with a little backward wave of his hand. 'Exiles here do what they can, I think; but the wronged and miserable will not have long to wait, if there are many Miss Stanleys to champion their cause. Still it does make one's heart heavy to know that horrors unspeakable, worse than anything here, take place daily in one's own country, which one is powerless to prevent. One feels helpless, shut out. Ah, heaven! death itself is less hard to bear.'

'You speak as if you had felt it all yourself,' said Clare, a little surprised at the earnestness of his tone.

'I did not mean to speak otherwise than generally. I believe in England it is considered "bad form" to show feeling of any sort—and you English hate sentiment, don't you?'

'I don't think we hate sincere feeling of any kind; but forgive me for asking—are you really an exile?'

Count Litvinoff bowed. 'I have that misfortune—or that honour, as, in spite of all, I suppose it is. But won't you sing something else?' he added, with a complete change of manner, which made any return on her part to the subject of his exile

impossible.

'I really think I've done my duty to-night,' she answered, rising. 'Don't you sing?'

'Yes, sometimes. Music is a consolation. And one is driven to make music for oneself when one lives a very lonely life.'

'Won't you make music for us?' she asked, ignoring the fact that her father was still snoring with vigour.

'Yes, if you wish it.'

He took her place at the piano, and, in a low voice, sang a Hungarian air, wild and melancholy, with a despairing minor refrain.

While her thanks were being spoken his fingers strayed over the keys, and, almost insensibly as it seemed, fell into a few chords that suggested the air of the Marseillaise.

'Oh, do sing that! I've never heard anyone but a schoolgirl attempt it, and I long so to hear it really sung. I think it's glorious.'

Without a word he obeyed her, and launched into the famous battle song of Liberty. His singing of the other song had been a whisper, but in this he gave his voice full play, and sang it with a fire, a fervour, a splendid earnestness and enthusiasm, that made the air vibrate, and thrilled Clare through and through with an utterly new emotion.

She understood now how this song had been able to stir men to such deeds as she had read of—had nerved ragged, half-starved, untrained battalions to scatter like chaff the veteran armies of Europe. She understood it all as she listened to the

mingled pathos, defiance, confidence of victory, vengeance and passionate patriotism, which Rouget de Lisle alone of all men has been able to concentrate and to embody in one immortal song, in every note of which breathes the very soul of Liberty.

As the last note was struck and Litvinoff turned round from the piano, he almost smiled at the contrasts in the picture before him—a girl leaning forward, her face lighted up with sympathetic fire, and her eyes glowing with sympathetic enthusiasm, and an old gentleman standing on the hearthrug, very red in the face, very wide awake, and unutterably astonished. The girl was certainly very lovely, and if the exile thought so, as he glanced somewhat deprecatingly at the old gentleman, who shall blame him?

'How splendid!' said Clare.

'Very fine, very fine,' said her father; 'but—er—for the moment I didn't know where I was.'

This reduced the situation to the absurd—and they all laughed.

'I hope I haven't brought down the suspicions of the waiters upon you, Mr Stanley, by my boisterous singing; but it's almost impossible to sing that song as one would sing a ballad. I evidently have alarmed someone,' he added, as a tap at the door punctuated his remark.

But the waiter, whatever his feelings may have been, gave them no expression. He merely announced—

'Mr Roland Ferrier,' and disappeared.

'I'm very glad to see you, my dear boy,' said Mr Stanley, as

Roland came forward; 'though it's about the last thing I expected. Mr Litvinoff—Mr Ferrier.'

Both bowed. Roland did not look particularly delighted.

'We've come to London on business,' said he.

'We? Then where is your brother?' questioned Clare.

'Well,' said Roland, 'it is rather absurd, but I can't tell you where he is; he's lost, stolen, or strayed. We came up together, dined together, and started to come here together. We were walking through a not particularly choice neighbourhood between here and St Pancras, when I suddenly missed him. I waited and looked about for something like a quarter of an hour, but as it wasn't the sort of street where men are garrotted, and as he's about able to take care of himself, I thought I'd better come on. I expect he'll be here presently.'

But the evening wore on, and no Richard Ferrier appeared. Clare felt a little annoyed—and Roland more than a little surprised. Perhaps, in spite of his *sang froid*, he was a trifle anxious when at eleven o'clock Litvinoff and he rose to go, and still his brother had not come.

CHAPTER V.
AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE

AS a rule, it was not an easy matter to turn Richard Ferrier from any purpose of his, and when his purpose was that of visiting Miss Stanley and at the same time of putting a stop to any chance of a *tête-à-tête* between his divinity and his brother, no ordinary red herring would have drawn him off the track.

As he walked through the streets with Roland all his thoughts were with the girl he was going to see—all his longing was to hasten as much as might be the moment of their meeting. In his mind just then she was the only woman in the world; and yet it was a woman's face in the crowd that made him start so suddenly—a woman's figure that he turned to follow with so immediate a decision as to give his brother no time to notice his going until he had gone.

The street was one of those long, straight, melancholy streets, the deadly monotony and general seediness of which no amount of traffic can relieve—which bear the same relation to Regent Street and Oxford Street as the seamy side of a stage court suit does to the glitter and gaudiness that charm the pit, and stir the æsthetic emotions of the gallery. There are always plenty of people moving about in these streets whom one never sees anywhere else—and you may pass up and down them a dozen

times a day without meeting anyone whose dress does not bear tokens, more or less pronounced, of a hand-to-hand struggle with hard-upness. It is a peculiarity of this struggle that in it those who struggle hardest appear to get least, or at any rate those who get least have to struggle hardest. This Society recognises with unconscious candour—and when it sees a man or woman shabbily dressed and with dirty hands, it at once decides that he or she must belong to the 'working' classes; thus naïvely accepting the fact that those whose work produces the wealth are not usually those who secure it.

The face which had attracted Dick's notice was as careworn as any other in that crowd—the figure as shabbily clad as the majority. But the young man turned and followed with an interest independent of fair features or becoming raiment—an interest which had its rise in a determination to solve a problem, or at any rate to silence a doubt.

Yet it was a young woman he was following—more than that, a pretty young women; and the very evident fact that this handsome, well-dressed young man was openly following this shabby girl with a parcel inspired some of the loafers whom they passed to the utterance of comments, the simple directness of which would perhaps not have pleased the young man had he heard them. He heard nothing. He was too intent on keeping her in sight. Presently she passed into a quieter street, and Dick at once ranged alongside of her, and, raising his hat said, 'Why, Alice, have you forgotten old friends already?'

The girl turned a very white face towards him.

'Oh, Mr Richard! I never thought I should see you again, of all people.'

'Why, everybody is sure to meet everyone else sooner or later. How far are you going? Let me carry your parcel.'

'Oh, no, it's not heavy,' she said; but she let him take the brown-paper burden all the same.

'Not heavy!' he returned. 'It's too heavy for you.'

'I'm used to it,' she answered, with a little sigh.

'So much the worse. I'm awfully glad I've met you, my dear girl. Why did you leave us like that? What have you been doing with yourself?'

'Oh, Mr Richard, what does it matter now? And don't stand there holding that parcel, but say good-bye, and let me go home.'

'And where is home?'

'Not a long way off.'

'Well, I'll walk with you. Come along.'

They walked side by side silently for some yards. Then he said, —

'Alice, I want you to tell me truly how it was you left home.'

A burning blush swept over her face, from forehead to throat, and that was the only answer she gave him.

'Come, tell me,' he persisted.

'Can't you guess?' she asked in a low voice, looking straight before her.

'Perhaps I can.'

'Perhaps? Of course you can. Why do girls ever leave good homes, and come to such a home as mine is now?'

'Then he has left you?'

'No,' she said, hurriedly; 'no, no, I've left him. But I can't talk about it to you.'

'Why not to me, if you can to anyone?' he asked.

'Because—because— Don't ask me anything else;' and she burst into tears.

'There, there,' he said, 'don't cry, for heaven's sake. I didn't mean to worry you; but you will tell me all about it by-and-by, won't you? What are you doing now?'

'Working.'

'What sort of work? Come, don't cry, Alice. I hate to think I have been adding to your distress.'

She dried her eyes obediently, and answered:

'I do tailoring work. It seems to be the only thing I'm good for.'

'That's paid very badly, isn't it?' he asked, some vague reminiscences of "Alton Locke" prompting the question.

'Oh, I manage to get along pretty well,' she replied, with an effort at a smile, which was more pathetic in Dick's eyes than her tears had been. He thought gloomily of the time, not so very long ago either, when her face had been the brightest as well as the fairest in Thornsett village, and his heart was sore with indignant protest against him who had so changed her face, her life, her surroundings. He looked at her tired thin face, still so pretty, in spite of the grief that had aged and the want that had pinched

it, and found it hard to believe that this was indeed the Alice with whom he had raced through the pastures at Firth Vale—the Alice who had taken the place in his boyish heart of a very dear little sister. Ah, if she had only been his sister really, then their friendship would not have grown less and less during his school and college days, and his protection would have saved her, perhaps, from this. These foster-relationships are uncomfortable things. They inflict the sufferings of a real blood tie, and give none of the rights which might mitigate or avert such suffering.

'How's mother and father?' she said, breaking in among his sad thoughts.

'They were well when I saw them, but I've not seen them lately. We've been in great trouble.'

'Yes. I saw in the papers. I was so sorry.'

'Then you read the papers?'

'I always try to see a weekly paper,' she said a little confusedly. 'Then you don't know how they are at home?'

'I only know they're grieving after you still.'

'They know I'm not dead. I let them know that, and I should think that's all they care to know.'

'You know better than that. My dear child, why not go home to them? I believe the misery you have cost them—forgive me for saying it—will shorten their lives unless you do go back.'

'Go back? No! I've sowed and I must reap. I must go through with it. I live just down here. Good-night.'

It did not look a very inviting residence—a narrow street,

leading into a court which was too dark and too distant to be seen into from the corner where she had stopped.

'I sha'n't say good-night till you say when I shall see you again.'

'What's the use? It only makes me more miserable to see you, though I can't help being glad I have seen you this once.'

'But I must try to do something for you. I think I've some sort of right to help you, Alice.'

'But I've no right to be helped by you. Besides, I really don't need help. I have all I want. I'd much better not see you again.'

'Well, *I* mean to see *you* again, anyway. I shall be in London for some time. When shall I see you?'

'Not at all.'

'Nonsense!' he said, authoritatively. 'You must promise to write, at any rate, or I shall come down here and wait from eight to eleven every evening till I see you.'

'Very well. I'll write, then. Good-bye!'

'But how can you write? You don't know my address. Here's my card;' and he scribbled the address in pencil. 'It's a promise, Alice. You'll write and you'll see me again?'

'Yes, yes; good-bye;' and she turned to leave him.

'Why, you're forgetting your parcel.'

'So I am. Thank you!' As she took it from him, he said suddenly, watching her keenly the while,—

'Roland is in town now. Shall I bring him to see you?'

'No, no; for God's sake, don't tell *him* you've seen me!'

And she left him so quickly as to give no time for another

word. As she sped down the street a loitering policeman turned to look sharply at her, and two tidy-looking women who were standing at the opposite corner exchanged significant glances.

'I never thought she was one of that sort!' said one.

'Ah!' said the other, 'bad times drives some that way as 'ud keep straight enough with fair-paid work.'

CHAPTER VI.
BETWEEN TWO OPINIONS

DICK did not feel inclined to go to Morley's after this *rencontre*, so he turned back towards his hotel. The problem was not actually solved, certainly; but he was disposed to take all that had passed as a confirmation of his worst suspicions—so much so, that he felt he could not meet his brother just then, as if nothing had happened. He took two or three turns up and down that festive promenade, the Euston Road, thinking indignantly that his position ought to have been Roland's, and Roland's his—that he was suffering for his brother's misdeeds, while his brother was enjoying bright glances from eyes that would hardly look so kindly on him could their owner have known how Dick was spending the evening. For the first time, too, he saw, though only dimly, a few of the difficulties that would lie in his way. It would be harder than ever to keep on any sort of terms with his brother now that he could no longer respect him, and to respect a man who had brought misery into a family which he was bound by every law of honour to protect was not possible to Dick. As his rival he had almost hated Roland; as the man who had ruined Alice Hatfield he both hated and despised him, and he knew well enough that between partners in business these sort of feelings do not lead to commercial success. He did not care to follow out

all the train of thought that this suggested; but the remembrance of his father's strange will was very present with him as he went to bed.

In the morning things looked different. It is a way things have.

> Colours seen by candle light
> Will not look the same by day.

After all, was it proved? When he came to think over what the girl had said there seemed to be nothing positively conclusive in it all. It was a strange contradiction—he had been very eager to trace the matter out—to prove to himself that Roland was utterly unworthy to win Clare Stanley; and yet now he felt that he would give a good deal to believe that Roland had not done this thing. And this was not only because of the grave pecuniary dilemma in which he must involve himself by any quarrel with Roland. Perhaps it was partly because blood is, after all, thicker than water.

It did not seem to Dick that his knowledge was much increased by his conversation with Alice. The blackest point was still that mysterious holiday trip, taken at such an unusual time, and about which his brother had been so strangely reticent. And that might be accounted for in plenty of other ways. Alice's disappearance at that particular time was very likely only a rather queer coincidence.

Dick had thought all this, and more, before he had finished

dressing, and he was ready to meet his brother at breakfast with a manner a shade more cordial than usual—the reaction perhaps from his recent suspicions. Roland was in particularly high spirits.

'Wherever did you get to last night?' he asked. 'I was quite uneasy till I heard you were safe in your bed.'

'What time did you get home?'

It seemed that Roland's uneasiness had been shown by his not turning in till about two.

'Good heavens!—you didn't stay there till that time?' asked Dick, with an air of outraged propriety that would have amused him very much in anyone else. 'How old Stanley must have cursed you!'

'Oh, no; we left there at eleven.'

'We? You didn't take Miss Stanley for a walk on the Embankment, I presume?'

'No such luck. Didn't I tell you? I met an awfully jolly fellow there—a Russian beggar—a real Nihilist and a count, and we went and had a smoke together.'

'My dear fellow, all exiled Russians are Nihilists, and most of them are counts.'

'Oh, no; he really is. I only found out he was a count quite by chance.'

'What's made old Stanley take up with him? Not community of political sentiments, I guess?'

'Oh, no; he saved the old boy from being smashed by

some runaway horses, and of course he's earned his everlasting gratitude. I didn't like him much at first, but when you come to talk to him you find he's got a lot in him. I'm sure you'll like him when you see him.'

'Am I sure to have that honour?' asked Dick, helping himself to another kidney. 'Is he tame cat about the Stanleys already.'

'Why, he'd never been there before; what a fellow you are! I've asked him to come and have dinner with us to-night. I want you to see him. I'm sure you'll get on together. He seems to have met with all sorts of adventures.'

'A veritable Baron Munchausen, in fact?'

'I never met such a suspicious fellow as you are, Dick,' said Roland, a little huffily; 'you never seem to believe in any body.'

This smote Dick with some compunction, and he resolved not to dislike this *soi-disant* count until he had cause to do so, which cause he did not doubt that their first meeting would furnish forth abundantly. But he was wrong.

Litvinoff came, and Dick found his prejudices melting away. The count seemed a standing proof of the correctness of the parallels which have been drawn between Russian and English character. He was English in his frankness, his modesty, his off-hand way of telling his own adventures without making himself the hero of his stories. Before the evening was over Dick began to realise that Nihilists were not quite so black as they are sometimes painted, and that there are other countries besides England where progressive measures are desirable. The brothers

were both interested, and tried very hard to get more particulars of Nihilist doctrines, but as they grew more curious Litvinoff became more reticent. As he rose to go he said,—

'Well, if you want to hear a more explicit statement of our wrongs, our principles, and our hopes, and you don't mind rubbing shoulders with English workmen for an hour or two—and if you're not too strict Sabbatarians, by-the-way—you might come down to a Radical club in Soho. I am going to speak there at eight on Sunday evening. I shall be very glad if you'll come; but don't come if you think it will bore you.'

'I shall like it awfully,' said Dick. 'You'll go, won't you, Roland?'

'Of course I will.'

'We might have dinner together,' said Litvinoff. 'Come down to Morley's; we'll dine at six.'

This offer was too tempting to be refused. It presented an admirable opportunity for making an afternoon call on the Stanleys, and the brothers closed with it with avidity, and their new acquaintance took his leave.

When Dick was alone he opened a letter which had been brought to him during the evening. He read:—

'15 Spray's Buildings,
Porson Street, W.C.

'Dear Mr Richard,—I promised to write to you but I did not mean to see you again. But it was a great comfort to meet a face I knew, and I feel I must see you again, if it's

only to ask you so many questions about them all at home. I do not seem to have said half I ought to have said the other night. If you really care to see me again, I shall be in on Monday afternoon. Go straight up the stairs until you get to the very top—it's the right-hand door. I beg you not to say you have seen me—to Mr Roland or to anyone else.—Yours respectfully,

'Alice Hatfield.'

This letter revived his doubts, but he was very glad of the chance of seeing her again, and he determined not to be deterred from pressing the question which he had at heart by any pain which it might cause her or himself. Jealousy, curiosity, regard for the girl—all these urged him to learn the truth, and besides them all a certain sense of duty. If her sorrow had come to her through his brother it surely was all the more incumbent on him to see that her material sufferings, at any rate, were speedily ended. If not....

Men almost always move from very mixed motives, and of these motives they only acknowledge one to be their spring of action. This sense of duty was the one motive which Dick now admitted to himself. At any rate he did not mean to think any more about it till Monday came, so he thrust the letter into his pocket, and let his fancy busy itself with Clare Stanley after its wonted fashion. It found plenty of occupation in the anticipation of that Sunday afternoon call.

When the call was made Mr Stanley was asleep, and though he roused himself to welcome them he soon relapsed into the

condition which is peculiar to the respectable Briton on Sunday afternoons.

Miss Stanley was particularly cheerful, but as soon as she heard where they intended to spend the evening, the conversation took a turn so distinctly Russian, as to be almost a forestalment of the coming evening's entertainment. Nihilism in general and Nihilist counts in particular seemed to be the only theme on which she would converse for two minutes at a time. Roland made a vigorous effort to lead the conversation to things English, but it was a dead failure. Dick sought to elicit Miss Stanley's opinion of the reigning actress, but this, as he might have foreseen, only led to a detailed account of that adventure in which the principal part of hero had been played by a Russian, a Nihilist, or a count, and there were all the favoured subjects at once over again.

The young men felt that the visit had not been a distinct success, and when Clare woke her father up to beg him to take her to that Radical club in Soho, even his explosive refusal and anathematising of Radicals as pests of society failed to reconcile the Ferriers to their lady's new enthusiasm.

The conversation at dinner, however, was a complete change. Count Litvinoff appeared to feel no interest in life, save in the question of athletics at the English universities; but on this topic he managed to be so entertaining that his guests quite forgot, in his charm as talker, the irritation he had caused them to feel when he was merely the subject of someone else's talk. When dinner

was over, and the three started to walk to Soho, they were all on the very best of terms with themselves and each other.

Would one of them have been quite so much at ease if he had known that the announcement of the coming lecture had been seen in the paper by Alice Hatfield, and that she—not being much by way of going to church—had made up her mind to be there?

CHAPTER VII.
SUNDAY EVENING IN SOHO

THE average English citizen and his wife have a certain method of spending Sunday which admits of no variation, and is as essential to their religion as any doctrine which that religion inculcates. Indeed, it is very often the only tribute which they pay to those supernatural powers who are supposed to smile upon virtue and to frown upon vice.

When church and chapel—St Waltheof's and Little Bethel—unite in teaching that ceremonial observance is at least as important as moral practice, is it to be wondered at that their congregations, feeling that it would be more than human to combine the two, choose to move along the line of least resistance? It is comparatively easy, though perhaps somewhat tiresome, especially in hot weather, to get up only a *little* late on Sunday mornings, instead of a good deal late, as the 'natural man' would prefer to do; to assume a more or less solemn aspect at the breakfast-table; to wear garments of unusual splendour, which do not see daylight during the week, and in assuming them to feel tremors of uneasiness lest they should be outshone by Mr Jones' wife, Mr Smith's daughter, Mr Brown's sister, or Mr Robinson's maiden aunt. It is not quite so easy, but still possible, to sit for two hours on a narrow seat, evidently made by someone who

knew he would never have to sit on it, and to keep awake (in the old pews this was not imperative), while a preacher, whom one does not care for, talks, in language one does not understand, on subjects in which one takes not the slightest interest. And then, as a compensation, one has the heavy early dinner and the afternoon sleep, in itself almost a religious exercise. Perhaps one's ungodly neighbours curse the day they were born as they hear one, after tea, playing long-drawn hymn tunes on a harmonium, till the bells begin to go for evening 'worship'; then one's wife goes to put on her bonnet (which has been lying in state all day on the best bed, covered with a white handkerchief), and one goes to one's 'sitting' again with a delicious sense that the worse of it is over. All this is not so difficult, and an eternity of bliss is cheap at the price—distinctly.

But to refrain from sanding the sugar or watering the milk —especially for a 'family man,' who has 'others to think of besides himself'—to keep one's hand from this, and one's tongue from evil-speaking, lying and slandering, to keep one's body in temperance and soberness, to be true and just in all one's dealings —this would be not only difficult but absurd, nowadays.

There are a good many who try to carry out the moral teachings and let the ceremonial observances alone, and there are far more who disregard the one and the other; and for both these classes there are ways of spending Sunday evening of which the strict Sabbatarian has no conception. Among others are the entertainments provided by working men's clubs. These are not

the wildest form of dissipation; but, as a rule, they have some practical bearing on this world and its affairs and, though rather solid pudding, are appreciated by the audiences, mostly working men, who have a strong and increasing taste for solids, and no small discernment in the matter of flavours.

To-night the dish provided for the Agora Club was a Russian one, and was likely to be highly spiced.

'Do you expect a large audience?' Richard Ferrier asked Litvinoff, as they walked along.

'I hope so,' he said. 'I can always speak better to a full room. Perhaps the physical heat does something to grease one's tongue; and then, again, in a large audience, you're sure to have some people who agree with you, and you and they reflect enthusiasm backwards and forwards between you. We're close there now,' he added, as they turned down a narrow street of high, unhappy-looking houses.

'How in the world do you come to be lecturing at a place like this? How do you know anything about it?' asked Roland.

'There is a freemasonry among the soldiers of Liberty which holds good all over the world, and we who serve her are pledged to carry her light into the darkest corners.'

If this seemed somewhat rhetorical to the young Englishmen, they were ready enough to excuse it in a foreigner, and especially in a foreigner who was about to make a speech. It did occur to Dick that the locality in which they were at the moment was a dark corner which stood as much in need of the services of

the Metropolitan Gas Company as of those of the torch-bearers of Freedom; but there was light enough in the room into which Count Litvinoff soon led them.

It was long and rather low, not unlike a certain type of dissenting meeting-room. At one end was a platform, on which stood two wooden chairs, and a deal table which had upon it a tumbler, a bottle of water, and a small wooden hammer, similar to those used by auctioneers. The room was well filled—so well filled that all the wooden forms and chairs were occupied, and even the standing room was so much taken up that the three young men found a little difficulty in working their way to the upper end of the room. Roland noticed, with some surprise, that among the audience were several women, who seemed quite as much at home there as the husbands and brothers with whom they had come.

The two Ferriers were placed on a seat facing the platform, which Litvinoff at once ascended, in company with the chairman. The two were received with cheers and applause, which redoubled when the chairman in his opening remarks referred to the count as 'one who had suffered and worked for years for the cause he was about to advocate.'

Much as the Ferriers had already wondered at Litvinoff's mastery of English, they wondered still more after the first ten minutes on his speech. It is one thing to carry on a social conversation in a tongue not one's own; it is another and a widely different thing to be able to hold a foreign audience, and to sway

and move it, to rouse its enthusiasm and to thrill it with horror, at one's will and pleasure. Yet such was the power of this young Russian rebel. He spoke without notes, and without the slightest hesitation. His voice in the opening sentences was very low, but so clear as to be heard distinctly all over the room.

The first part of his address was simply a narrative. In a calm, unimpassioned way he told his hearers the story, from its beginning, of a struggle for freedom; he told them how a movement which had begun in a spirit of love, enthusiasm, and self-sacrifice, had been turned by blind tyranny and brutal oppression into one of wild vengeance and bitter relentless hatred. He told them how, for a chance expression of sympathy with the down-trodden peasants; for the possession of a suppressed book; sometimes even for less than these offences, for having incurred the personal spite of some members of the police, aged men and tender girls had been, and were, at that moment while he spoke to them, being delivered over to the torture chambers of the Russian monarch, to be scourged and starved, to be devoured by disease and riven by madness. He told them how tyranny always had treated—how while it exists, tyranny always will treat the sons of men.

Then, when many among his audience had broken out into groans of indignation and cries of 'Shame!' the usual note of an indignant English audience, the speaker dropped the narrative tone and became argumentative. Here, when he justified the Nihilists' 'deeds of death' as the lawful punishment of criminals

—punishment inflicted by the only power that has the right to execute vengeance, the outraged spirit of man—he seemed to lose for a moment the sympathy of some of his hearers, and certainly of the Ferriers, who like most Englishmen, believed in the efficacy of Parliamentary reforms, and also forgot, like most Englishmen, that these patent remedies for all the ills of life are hardly applicable to nations that have no parliament.

With the ready apprehension of a true orator, Litvinoff saw the slight shade of coldness as it passed over some of the upturned faces before him, and, with a consummate skill that was the result either of long practice or oratorical genius, he changed, without seeming to change, the argumentative and defensive attitude for one of stern and glowing denunciation. His voice rang through the room now like a trumpet-call. A very little of this sort of thing was sufficient to rouse the men before him to stormy approbation, and Richard whispered to his brother that if any Russian dignitary were to come in just then, while the speaker was in the full tide of his invective, he would have very much the sort of reception that was given to the Austrian woman-flogging general some years ago by the stalwart draymen of Messrs Barclay & Perkins.

Apparently satisfied with the applause of his audience, in which he seemed to delight and revel, Litvinoff turned from the present and the past, and invited his hearers to look with him into the future, 'not only of Russia, but of mankind,' he said; 'what the world might be—what it would be.' Then were done into

rhetorical English the concluding pages of that famous Russian pamphlet, 'A Prophetic Vision'—the pamphlet for whose sake Russian peasants had braved the spydom of the police, and to hear which read aloud by some of their fellows who *could* read, they had crowded together at nights in outhouses and sheds, by the dim light of tallow candles—the pamphlet for whose possession St Petersburg and Moscow students had quarrelled and almost fought, knowing all the time that the mere fact of its being found upon their persons or among their belongings meant certain imprisonment, and possible death—the pamphlet, in short, the discovery of whose authorship three years back had sent Count Litvinoff and his luckless secretary flying for the Austrian frontier.

It was certainly a pleasant vision this of the Russian noble, whether it was prophetic or no, a dream of a time when men would no longer sow for other men to reap, when the fruits of the earth would be the inheritance of all the earth's children, and not only of her priests and her rulers; when, in fact, rulers would be no more, for all would rule and each would obey; when every man would do as he liked, and every man would like to do well.

All this seemed very high-flown and remote to the young university critics on the front seats, though even they were moved for a moment or two, by the vibrating tones of the speaker, out of the attitude of English stolidity which they had carefully kept up during the evening. But those behind them were less reserved, and perhaps more credulous—more given to believing

in visions; and when Litvinoff sat down, the walls of the Agora rang again and again with the cheers of a sympathetic and delighted audience.

When the chairman had announced that 'Mr' Litvinoff would be happy to answer any questions that might be suggested by the lecture, there was a moment or two of that awkward silence which always occurs on these occasions, when everyone feels that there are at least half-a-dozen questions he would like to ask, but experiences the greatest possible difficulty in putting even one into an intelligible shape.

At length a man in one of the far corners of the room rose to put a question. His accent showed him to be a foreigner, but that was not a very remarkable thing in Soho. He had a scrubby chin and dirty linen, two other characteristics not uncommon in that region. After a preliminary cough he explained that his question was rather personal than general, and he quite allowed that the lecturer was not bound to answer it; but he said that, having been in Russia, he could bear testimony to the truth of all that had been said that evening, and that while in the south of Russia he had come across a small pamphlet, called 'A Prophetic Vision,' which he had been told had been written by a Count Michael Litvinoff. Some parts of the address to-night had reminded him of that excellent pamphlet, and he thought it would be interesting to the audience to know whether the author of that pamphlet was the speaker of the evening.

Litvinoff rose at once.

'I had no idea,' he said, 'that the little *brochure* would ever be heard of outside the country for whose children it was written; but since the question is asked me so frankly to-night, I will answer as frankly—Yes, I wrote it.'

An approving murmur ran through the room, and the foreigner rose again. He was sorry again to trouble Citizen Litvinoff, but was he right in supposing (it had been so reported) that the discovery of this pamphlet by the Russian Government had occasioned Count Litvinoff's exile?

Litvinoff was very pale as he answered,—

'Yes; it was that unhappy pamphlet which deprived me of the chance of serving my country on the scene of action, and which lost me a life I valued above my own—that of a fellow-countryman of the audience which I have the pleasure of addressing to-night—my secretary and friend, whom I loved more than a brother.' His voice trembled as he ended.

There was another round of applause, and, no more questions being forthcoming, the meeting broke up, and people stood talking together in little groups. Richard was discussing a knotty economic point with a sturdy carpenter and trades unionist, and Roland, close by, was earnestly questioning a French Communist to whom Litvinoff had introduced him, and was receiving an account of the so-called murder of the hostages very different from any which had appeared in the daily papers of the period, when the Count came up to them.

'Excuse me,' he said, 'I am *désolé*; but I shall be unable to stay

longer. You will be able, doubtless, to pilot yourselves back to civilisation, and will pardon my abrupt departure. I have just seen someone going out of the door whom I've been trying to catch for the last three months, and I'm off in pursuit.'

And he was off. As he passed a small knot of youths outside the door they looked after him, and one of them said with a laugh, 'Blest if I don't believe he's after that handsome gal. What chaps these foreigners are for the ladies.'

The discerning youth was right. He was after that girl—but though he followed her and watched her into the house where she lived, he did not speak to her.

'Think twice before you speak once is a good rule,' he said to himself, as he turned westwards, 'and I know where she lives, at any rate.'

Even discussions on political economy, and historical revelations by those who helped to make the history, must come to an end at last, and the Ferriers came away, after Dick had received a pressing invitation from the chairman to address the club, and to choose his own subject, and Roland, who had suddenly conceived a passion for foreigners of a revolutionary character, had made an appointment with his Communist acquaintance for an evening in the week.

As they passed down the street, two men standing under a lamp looked at them with interest. One was the man who had put the questions regarding the pamphlet. The other was a foreigner too, though he was clean in his attire and had not a

scrubby chin, but a long, light silky beard. He wore the slouch hat so much affected by the High Church Clergy, and which is popularly supposed to mark any non-clerical wearer as a man of revolutionary views. He was tall, and pale, and thin, and had very deeply-set hollow eyes, which he kept fixed on the retreating millowners till they turned the corner and went out of sight. Then he said, in a Hungarian dialect,—

'Our pamphlet-writing friend doesn't seem to choose his friends solely among the poor and needy; and that is politic to say the least of it.'

'Money seeks money,' growled the other, 'and he has plenty.'

'Not so much as you'd suppose. The greater part of the Litvinoff property is quite out of his reach. Our "little father" takes good care of that.'

'That which he has he takes care to keep,' said the other.

'I'm not so sure; at anyrate, he uses his tongue, which is a good one, in our cause. Speeches like that are good. A man who can speak so is not to be sneered at, and I'm certain he could not speak like that unless he felt some of it at least. He has done us good service before, and he will again. The Mantle of the Prophet fits him uncommonly well.'

CHAPTER VIII.
'YOU LIE!'

'Morley's Hotel, Sunday Evening.

EAR MR FERRIER,—You were so full of Russia yesterday afternoon that you made me forget to say to you what might have saved you the trouble of answering this by post. Will you and your brother dine with us (papa says) to-morrow evening at seven? I hope you enjoyed yourselves last night. I am sure I should have done if I had been there. With papa's and my kind regards to you and Mr Roland,—I am, dear Mr Ferrier, yours very truly,
'Clare Stanley.

'*P.S.*—Count Litvinoff, your interesting Russian friend, will be here.'

Miss Stanley smiled to herself rather wickedly as she folded this note. She had noticed that her interest in the Russian acquaintance did not seem to enhance theirs, and she thought to herself that whatever the dinner might be at which those three assisted, it certainly would not be dull for her.

In Derbyshire, where her amusements were very limited, she would have thought twice before permitting herself to risk offending the masters of Thornsett, but here that risk only seemed to offer a new form of amusement. But experimenting

on the feelings of these gentlemen was an entertainment which was somehow not quite so enthralling as it had been, and she now longed, not for a fresh world to conquer—here was one ready to her hand—but for the power to conquer it. She would have given something to be able to believe that she had anything like the same power over this hero of romance, whom fate had thrown in her way, as she had over the excellent but commonplace admirers with whom she had amused herself for the last year.

Litvinoff had distinctly told her that the goddess of his idolatry, the one mistress of his heart, was Liberty, and though this statement was modified in her mind by her recollection of certain glances cast at herself, she yet believed in it enough to feel a not unnatural desire to enter into competition with that goddess. Her classical studies taught her that women had competed successfully with such rivals, and she was not morbidly self-distrustful, especially when a looking-glass was near her.

With the letter in her hand she glanced at the mirror over the mantelpiece, and the fair vision of dark-brown lashes, gold-brown waving hair, delicate oval face, and well-shaped if rather large mouth, might have reassured her had she felt any doubts of her own attractions. But the glance she cast at herself over her shoulder was one of saucy triumph, and the smile with which she sealed her letter one of conscious power.

Would she have been gratified if she could have seen the effect of her note? It was not at all with the sort of expression you would expect to see on the face of a man who had just received

a dinner invitation transmitted through the lady of his heart from that lady's papa, that Richard Ferrier passed the note over to his brother next morning.

'Here you are,' he said. '*Bouquet de Nihilist*, trebly distilled.'

'Well, don't let's go, then.'

'Why, I thought you were so fond of the Count. I wonder you don't jump at it. I thought it would please you.'

'So I do like him—he's a splendid speaker; but I didn't come to London to spend all my days and nights with him, any more than you did. Besides, I'm engaged for to-night.'

'Oh, are you? Well, I think I shall go.'

'You'd better leave it alone. You won't stand much chance beside a man with such a moustache as that. Besides, he sings, don't you know? and with all your solid and admirable qualities, Richard, you're not a nightingale.'

'Nor yet a runaway rebel.'

'I say, you'd better look a little bit after your epithets. Litvinoff doesn't look much of the running-away sort. According to what I heard last night, he can use a revolver with effect on occasion. By the way, Richard,' he went on, more seriously, 'I believe I saw a face at that club I knew, but it was only for a minute, and I lost sight of it, and I couldn't be sure.'

'Who did you think it was?'

'Little Alice.'

'Think—you think!' said his brother, turning fiercely on him. 'Do you mean to say you didn't *know*?'

'Know? Of course not, or I should say so. What the deuce do you mean?'

'I should like to ask you what the deuce you mean by even debating whether or no to accept that invitation when you know you've no earthly right to go near Miss Stanley—'

'You'd better mention your ideas to Mr Stanley. I don't in the least know what you're driving at—and I don't care; but since you choose to bring *her* name in, I shall throw over my other engagement and go to Morley's to-night.'

'You can go to the devil if you choose!' said Dick, who seemed to have entirely lost his self-control, and he flung out, slamming the door behind him.

Clare's note was bearing more fruit than she desired or anticipated in setting the brothers not so much against Litvinoff as against each other, for what but her letter could have stirred Dick's temper to this sudden and unpremeditated outbreak? What but her note and Dick's comments thereon could have ruffled Roland's ordinarily even nature in this way? It is always a mistake to play with fire; but people, girls especially, will not believe this until they have burned their own fingers, and, *en passant*, more of other people's valuables than they can ever estimate.

'I wish I had spoken to that girl yesterday,' said Count Litvinoff to himself; 'it would have saved my turning out this vile afternoon. If fate has given England freedom, she has taken care to accompany the gift with a fair share of fog. I wish I could help

worrying about other people's troubles. It is very absurd, but I can't get on with my work for thinking of that poor tired little face. Hard up, she looked, too. Ah, well! so shall I be very soon, unless something very unexpected turns up. I'll go now, and earn an easy conscience for this evening.'

He threw down his pen and rose. The article on the Ethics of Revolution on which he was engaged had made but small progress that afternoon. He had felt ever since lunch that go out he must sooner or later, and the prospect was dispiriting. He glanced out of his window as he put on his fur-lined coat. From the windows of Morley's Hotel the view on a fine day is about as cheerful as any that London can present—though one may have one's private sentiments respecting the pepper-boxes which emphasise the bald ugliness of the National Gallery, and though one may sometimes wish that the slave of the lamp would bring St George's Hall from Liverpool and drop it on that splendid site. But this was not a fine day. It was a gloomy, damp, foggy, depressing, suicidal day. The fog had, with its usual adroitness, managed to hide the beauties of everything, and to magnify the uglinesses. Nelson was absolutely invisible, and the lions looked like half-drowned cats. Litvinoff shuddered as he lighted a large cigar and pulled his gloves on.

'This is a detestable climate,' he said, as he drew the first whiffs; 'but London is about the only place I know where good cigars can be had at a price to fit the pocket of an exile. I suppose I shall soon have to leave this palatial residence, and become

one of the out-at-elbows gentlemen who make life hideous in Leicester Square and Soho.'

Like many men who have lived lonely lives, Michael Litvinoff had an inveterate habit of soliloquy. It had been strengthened by his life at the ancestral mansion on the Litvinoff estate, and had not grown less in his years of solitary wanderings.

His walk to-day was not a pleasant one, and more than once he felt inclined to turn back. But he persevered, and when he reached the house which he had seen her enter he asked a woman on the ground floor if Miss Hatfield lived there.

'There's a young person named Hatfield in the front attic,' was the reply, as the informant stared with all her eyes at the Count, who was certainly an unusual sort of apparition in Spray's Buildings.

As he strode up the dirty, rotten stairs, stumbling more than once, he thought to himself, as Dick had done, that Alice did not make her new life profitable, whatever it was.

'Poor girl!' he thought; 'if she's of the same mind now as she was when I saw her last, I suppose I must find an opportunity of doing good by stealth.'

The house, though poor enough, did not seem to be one of those overcrowded dens of which we have heard so much lately, and which a Royal Commission is to set right, as a Royal Commission always does set everything right. Or perhaps the lodgers were birds of prey, who only came home to roost at uncertain hours; or beasts of burden, who were only stabled at

midnight to be harnessed again at sunrise. At anyrate, the Count saw no one on the stairs, and he saw no one in the front attic either. Not only no one, but no thing. The door and window were both open. The room appeared to have been swept and garnished, but was absolutely empty of everything but fog. There was another door opposite, but it was closed and locked.

'She's evidently not here. We'll try lower down.' But before he had time to turn he heard a foot on the stairs, coming up with the light and springy tread which is the result of good and well-fitting boots, and which does not mark those who walk through life, from the cradle to the grave, shod in boots several sizes too large and several pounds too heavy.

He glanced over the broken banisters, and recoiled hastily.

'The gentle Roland, by all that's mysterious!' he said, 'Now, what on earth can *he* want here? At anyrate, he'd better not see *me*.'

The landing on which he stood was very dark, and there was a heap of lumber, old boxes, a hopelessly broken chair, a tub, and some boards. Litvinoff crept behind them, and in his black coat and the obscurity of the dusky landing and the dark afternoon he felt himself secure. He had hardly taken up this position when Roland Ferrier's head appeared above the top stair, to be followed cautiously by the rest of him. He cast a puzzled look round the empty attic, tried the closed door, and, turning, went downstairs again.

Litvinoff was just coming out of his not over savoury lurking-

place when he heard a voice on the landing below, which was not Roland's.

'Parbleu!' he said to himself; 'it rains Ferriers here this afternoon. Here's the engaging Richard, and evidently not in the best of tempers.'

He evidently was not—if one might judge by his voice, which was icy with contempt as he said sneeringly, 'So this was the engagement you were going to put off, was it?'

'Yes, it was. At least I am here to put off an engagement; but I don't know what you know about it,' said Roland, 'and I don't know what you mean by following me about like this. What business have *you* here? This isn't Aspinshaw, that you need dog my footsteps.'

'I came here to try and find out whether my father's son was a scoundrel or not, and you've answered the question for me by being here.'

'Upon my word,' said Roland's voice, 'I think you must be out of your mind.'

It isn't often that the thought which would restrain comes into one's mind at the moment when restraint is most needed; but just then Dick *did* think of his father and his dying wishes, and the remembrance helped him to speak more calmly than he would otherwise have done.

'Once for all, then, will you tell me why you are here, Roland?'

'Yes, I will, though I don't acknowledge your right to question me. I had an appointment, with that Frenchman we met last night,

for this evening, but I've lost his address. I knew it was in this court, and I was walking about on the chance of finding him, when I'm almost sure I saw Litvinoff come in here. I made after him, feeling sure he was going to the same place as I was.'

'And where *is* Litvinoff?'

'He seems to have disappeared, or else I was mistaken. Now, what have you got to say?'

'This. You lie!'

It sounded hardly like Richard's voice, so hoarse and choked with passion was it; and so full of insult and scorn that Roland at last lost control of himself.

'Stand back, you raving maniac,' he said, 'and let me pass! The same roof mustn't cover us two any longer, and don't speak again to me this side of the grave.'

The listener, leaning forward eagerly to catch every word, heard Roland's foot dash down the staircase. There was a moment of perfect silence, and then came a long-drawn sigh from Richard Ferrier.

'Now then, young man, what's all this to-do about? I should like to know what you mean by quarrelling in places that don't belong to you, and terrifying respectable married women out of their seven senses.' It was a shrill woman's voice that spoke, and a door opened on the landing where young Ferrier stood.

'I'm very sorry, madam,' said Richard, in tones calm enough now. 'I didn't intend to disturb anyone. Will you kindly tell me if anyone lives here named Hatfield?'

'There was a young woman of that name in the front attic, but she left sudden this morning.'

'Do you know where she's gone?'

'No, I don't.'

'Does anyone in the house know?'

'No. I'm the landlady, and she'd have told me if she told anyone.'

'Thank you,' he said, and turned to pass down the staircase.

'Stay, though,' he said; 'have you any Frenchmen lodging here?'

'I don't want no dratted furriners here, and I haven't got none, thank God!'

'Of course not,' said Ferrier to himself, and strode downstairs.

'No foreigners here? Don't be too sure, my good woman,' Litvinoff muttered to himself, as he heard the landlady's door close to a continued accompaniment of reiterated objections in that lady's shrill treble. 'I'd better get out of this house of mystery at once. I trust that the outraged female proprietor of this staircase will not demand my blood. Well, whatever happens, I suppose we shall not see the amiable brothers to-night, and that will mean a *tête-à-tête*,' he added, as he came out from his dusty retirement, and carefully removed all traces of the same from his clothes. When he found himself once more in the chill, foggy, outside air, he looked up and down the court, and smiled.

'The situation becomes interesting,' he said to himself, 'and demands another of these very excellent cigars.'

CHAPTER IX.
AT SPRAY'S BUILDINGS

IT seemed a very long walk home to Alice Hatfield, after that Sunday evening lecture. She felt almost as though she could never reach her lodging. It was such weary work to keep putting one tired foot before the other. And somehow she was so much more easily tired now than she used to be in her Derbyshire home, where she had been used to breast the steepest hills without even a quickened breath. She wished she had not gone; she had derived no pleasure from the evening, and had only gained a sharper heartache from the sight of a certain face, which had been, and was still for that matter, the dearest face in the world to her. She felt re-awakened too in her a liking for a different life among different surroundings; the life she had given up of her own free will three months ago. She had been much alone in that other life, it is true, and her thoughts had not made solitude sweet; but she had seen *him* sometimes, and now she was quite alone—always—save for the few slight acquaintances she had made in the house where she lived. In that other life, which now looked brighter than it had ever done when it was hers, she had been racked and tortured by her conscience, which had at last forced her to try and silence it by renouncing what she had sacrificed everything to gain, and by voluntarily adopting this strange, hard

way of living. But now that that gloomy monitor was on her side, it failed to give that comfort and support which one is taught to expect from it.

'Be virtuous and you will be happy,' say the copy-books. A somewhat higher authority (Professor Huxley) thinks otherwise. 'Virtue is undoubtedly beneficent,' he says, 'but the man is to be envied to whom her ways seem in any wise playful; and though she may not talk much about suffering and self-denial, her silence on that topic may be accounted for on the principle *ça va sans dire*. She is an awful goddess, whose ministers are the furies, and whose highest reward is peace.'

Alice Hatfield hadn't read Huxley, but if she had she would have agreed with him in this; and now it seemed as though the furies were driving her along the streets towards that miserable home of hers, where, so far, no dove of peace had folded its wings.

It is given to all of us, at one time or another, to repent—more or less—of the evil; but many of us also know what it is to look back, with something like remorse, on what we believe to have been the good. And good and evil, get so mixed up sometimes, when we have often heard the world's 'right' skilfully controverted and made to seem wrong, by the tongue whose eloquence once made wrong seem to us right.

Alice had to collect all her energies to enable her to climb the steep dark stairs which led to her room, and when she had gained it at last, and had lighted her little benzoline lamp, she sank down

on her chair bedstead, exhausted and breathless. What a hateful room it was; how cold, and cheerless, and wretched. The few poor articles of furniture did not relieve its bareness in the least. There was no fire, of course, and her little lamp quite failed to light up the dark corners. There must be something wrong with that lamp—it was going out surely—the room was growing so dark; or was it her eyes from which the power of seeing was going? The room seemed to swim before her sight, and a feeling of deadly faintness came over her, a horrible sensation of going through the floor. She staggered to her feet and drank some water, which gave her strength to go unsteadily down to the floor below, and to knock at the landlady's door.

'Oh, I am so ill—so ill! I think I'm dying,' she said, holding out both hands as the woman appeared; 'help me.'

Then she knew no more. Her troubles, her tiredness, her regrets, her very self, all were swallowed up in the horror of great darkness that overwhelmed her.

'Here's a nice set out,' grumbled Mrs Fludger, as her lodger fell at her feet; 'as if one hadn't enough troubles o' one's own—what with Jenny being out o' work, and the master on the booze since Friday. Jenny!'

'Here I am.'

Miss Jenny Fludger, a muscular young woman, with her hair in a long beaded net, responded to the call, and lent her help in carrying Alice back to her room. Then the unsympathetic hands of the two women undressed the girl and laid her in her bed.

Then they looked meaningly at each other.

'If she don't soon come round I'll send Joe for the doctor,' said the mother. 'You never knows what may happen.'

Then Mrs Fludger dashed cold water in the patient's face, slapped her hands with a vigour that would have brought tears to her eyes had she been conscious, and made a horrible smell with the benzoline lamp and a pigeon's feather hastily begged from a lodger who had leanings ornithological. Alice showing no signs of being affected by the application of these generally efficacious remedies, Mrs Fludger decided that this was a case of 'going off' quite beyond her experience, and feeling the responsibility too much to be borne alone, she despatched her third son in quest of a doctor, regardless of Miss Jenny's opinion that the lodger was 'shamming.' Joe Fludger was not particularly pleased at being sent. He was busy just then shaking up a mangy kitten and a recently-acquired guinea-pig in a box, with a view of getting them to fight, which they showed no signs of doing, and he did not care to relinquish this enthralling pastime until he had compassed his end. He put his two 'pets' into one pocket, hoping that that position would urge them to fulfil their destiny and have it out, and as he met several friends, and felt it incumbent on him to exhibit his treasures to each of them, it was some time before he carried out his instructions, and brought medical science, as represented by Dr Moore, to 15 Spray's Buildings. But even when the doctor did at last stand by her bedside, Alice was still insensible.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.