VARIOUS

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Содержание

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NEAR OXFORD

On a fine morning in September, we set out on an excursion to Blenheim,—the sculptor and myself being seated on the box of our four-horse carriage, two more of the party in the dicky, and the others less agreeably accommodated inside. We had no coachman, but two postilions in short scarlet jackets and leather breeches with top-boots, each astride of a horse; so that, all the way along, when not otherwise attracted, we had the interesting spectacle of their up-and-down bobbing in the saddle. It was a sunny and beautiful day, a specimen of the perfect English weather, just warm enough for comfort,—indeed, a little too warm, perhaps, in the noontide sun,—yet retaining a mere spice or suspicion of austerity, which made it all the more enjoyable.

The country between Oxford and Blenheim is not particularly

interesting, being almost level, or undulating very slightly; nor is Oxfordshire, agriculturally, a rich part of England. We saw one or two hamlets, and I especially remember a picturesque old gabled house at a turnpike-gate, and, altogether, the wayside scenery had an aspect of old-fashioned English life; but there was nothing very memorable till we reached Woodstock, and stopped to water our horses at the Black Bear. This neighborhood is called New Woodstock, but has by no means the brand-new appearance of an American town, being a large village of stone houses, most of them pretty well time-worn and weather-stained. The Black Bear is an ancient inn, large and respectable, with balustraded staircases, and intricate passages and corridors, and queer old pictures and engravings hanging in the entries and apartments. We ordered a lunch (the most delightful of English institutions, next to dinner) to be ready against our return, and then resumed our drive to Blenheim.

The park-gate of Blenheim stands close to the end of the village-street of Woodstock. Immediately on passing through its portals, we saw the stately palace in the distance, but made a wide circuit of the park before approaching it. This noble park contains three thousand acres of land, and is fourteen miles in circumference. Having been, in part, a royal domain before it was granted to the Marlborough family, it contains many trees of unsurpassed antiquity, and has doubtless been the haunt of game and deer for centuries. We saw pheasants in abundance, feeding in the open lawns and glades; and the stags tossed their antlers

and bounded away, not affrighted, but only shy and gamesome, as we drove by. It is a magnificent pleasure-ground, not too tamely kept, nor rigidly subjected within rule, but vast enough to have lapsed back into Nature again, after all the pains that the landscape-gardeners of Queen Anne's time bestowed on it, when the domain of Blenheim was scientifically laid out. The great, knotted, slanting trunks of the old oaks do not now look as if man had much intermeddled with their growth and postures. The trees of later date, that were set out in the Great Duke's time, are arranged on the plan of the order of battle in which the illustrious commander ranked his troops at Blenheim; but the ground covered is so extensive, and the trees now so luxuriant, that the spectator is not disagreeably conscious of their standing in military array, as if Orpheus had summoned them together by beat of drum. The effect must have been very formal a hundred and fifty years ago, but has ceased to be so,—although the trees, I presume, have kept their ranks with even more fidelity than Marlborough's veterans did.

One of the park-keepers, on horseback, rode beside our carriage, pointing out the choice views, and glimpses at the palace, as we drove through the domain. There is a very large artificial lake, (to say the truth, it seemed to me fully worthy of being compared with the Welsh lakes, at least, if not with those of Westmoreland,) which was created by Capability Brown, and fills the basin that he scooped for it, just as if Nature had poured these broad waters into one of her own valleys. It is a most

beautiful object at a distance, and not less so on its immediate banks; for the water is very pure, being supplied by a small river, of the choicest transparency, which was turned thitherward for the purpose. And Blenheim owes not merely this water-scenery, but almost all its other beauties, to the contrivance of man. Its natural features are not striking; but Art has effected such wonderful things that the uninstructed visitor would never guess that nearly the whole scene was but the embodied thought of a human mind. A skilful painter hardly does more for his blank sheet of canvas than the landscape-gardener, the planter, the arranges of trees, has done for the monotonous surface of Blenheim,—making the most of every undulation,—flinging down a hillock, a big lump of earth out of a giant's hand, wherever it was needed,—putting in beauty as often as there was a niche for it,—opening vistas to every point that deserved to be seen, and throwing a veil of impenetrable foliage around what ought to be hidden;—and then, to be sure, the lapse of a century has softened the harsh outline of man's labors, and has given the place back to Nature again with the addition of what consummate science could achieve.

After driving a good way, we came to a battlemented tower and adjoining house, which used to be the residence of the Ranger of Woodstock Park, who held charge of the property for the King before the Duke of Marlborough possessed it. The keeper opened the door for us, and in the entrance-hall we found various things that had to do with the chase and woodland sports.

We mounted the staircase, through several stories, up to the top of the tower, whence there was a view of the spires of Oxford, and of points much farther off,—very indistinctly seen, however, as is usually the case with the misty distances of England. Returning to the ground-floor, we were ushered into the room in which died Wilmot, the wicked Earl of Rochester, who was Ranger of the Park in Charles II.'s time. It is a low and bare little room, with a window in front, and a smaller one behind; and in the contiguous entrance-room there are the remains of an old bedstead, beneath the canopy of which, perhaps, Rochester may have made the penitent end that Bishop Burnet attributes to him. I hardly know what it is, in this poor fellow's character, which affects us with greater tenderness on his behalf than for all the other profligates of his day, who seem to have been neither better nor worse than himself. I rather suspect that he had a human heart which never quite died out of him, and the warmth of which is still faintly perceptible amid the dissolute trash which he left behind.

Methinks, if such good fortune ever befell a bookish man, I should choose this lodge for my own residence, with the topmost room of the tower for a study, and all the seclusion of cultivated wildness beneath to ramble in. There being no such possibility, we drove on, catching glimpses of the palace in new points of view, and by-and-by came to Rosamond's Well. The particular tradition that connects Fair Rosamond with it is not now in my memory; but if Rosamond ever lived and loved, and ever had

her abode in the maze of Woodstock, it may well be believed that she and Henry sometimes sat beside this spring. It gushes out from a bank, through some old stone-work, and dashes its little cascade (about as abundant as one might turn out of a large pitcher) into a pool, whence it steals away towards the lake, which is not far removed. The water is exceedingly cold, and as pure as the legendary Rosamond was not, and is fancied to possess medicinal virtues, like springs at which saints have quenched their thirst. There were two or three old women and some children in attendance with tumblers, which they present to visitors, full of the consecrated water; but most of us filled the tumblers for ourselves, and drank.

Thence we drove to the Triumphal Pillar which was erected in honor of the Great Duke, and on the summit of which he stands, in a Roman garb, holding a winged figure of Victory in his hand, as an ordinary man might hold a bird. The column is I know not how many feet high, but lofty enough, at any rate, to elevate Marlborough far above the rest of the world, and to be visible a long way off: and it is so placed in reference to other objects, that, wherever the hero wandered about his grounds, and especially as he issued from his mansion, he must inevitably have been reminded of his glory. In truth, until I came to Blenheim, I never had so positive and material an idea of what Fame really is—of what the admiration of his country can do for a successful warrior—as I carry away with me and shall always retain. Unless he had the moral force of a thousand men together,

his egotism (beholding himself everywhere, imbuing the entire soil, growing in the woods, rippling and gleaming in the water, and pervading the very air with his greatness) must have been swollen within him like the liver of a Strasbourg goose. On the huge tablets inlaid into the pedestal of the column, the entire Act of Parliament, bestowing Blenheim on the Duke of Marlborough and his posterity, is engraved in deep letters, painted black on the marble ground. The pillar stands exactly a mile from the principal front of the palace, in a straight line with the precise centre of its entrance-hall; so that, as already said, it was the Duke's principal object of contemplation.

We now proceeded to the palace-gate, which is a great pillared archway, of wonderful loftiness and state, giving admittance into a spacious quadrangle. A stout, elderly, and rather surly footman in livery appeared at the entrance, and took possession of whatever canes, umbrellas, and parasols he could get hold of, in order to claim sixpence on our departure. This had a somewhat ludicrous effect. There is much public outcry against the meanness of the present Duke in his arrangements for the admission of visitors (chiefly, of course, his native countrymen) to view the magnificent palace which their forefathers bestowed upon his own. In many cases, it seems hard that a private abode should be exposed to the intrusion of the public merely because the proprietor has inherited or created a splendor which attracts general curiosity; insomuch that his home loses its sanctity and seclusion for the very reason that it is better than other men's

houses. But in the case of Blenheim, the public have certainly an equitable claim to admission, both because the fame of its first inhabitant is a national possession, and because the mansion was a national gift, one of the purposes of which was to be a token of gratitude and glory to the English people themselves. If a man chooses to be illustrious, he is very likely to incur some little inconveniences himself, and entail them on his posterity. Nevertheless, his present Grace of Marlborough absolutely ignores the public claim above suggested, and (with a thrift of which even the hero of Blenheim himself did not set the example) sells tickets admitting six persons at ten shillings: if only one person enters the gate, he must pay for six; and if there are seven in company, two tickets are required to admit them. The attendants, who meet you everywhere in the park and palace, expect fees on their own private account,—their noble master pocketing the ten shillings. But, to be sure, the visitor gets his money's worth, since it buys him the right to speak just as freely of the Duke of Marlborough as if he were the keeper of the Cremorne Gardens.[1]

Passing through a gateway on the opposite side of the quadrangle, we had before us the noble classic front of the palace, with its two projecting wings. We ascended the lofty steps of the portal, and were admitted into the entrance-hall, the height

[1] The above was written two or three years ago, or more; and the Duke of that day has since transmitted his coronet to his successor, who, we understand, has adopted much more liberal arrangements. There is seldom anything to criticize or complain of, as regards the facility of obtaining admission to interesting private houses in England.

of which, from floor to ceiling, is not much less than seventy feet, being the entire height of the edifice. The hall is lighted by windows in the upper story, and, it being a clear, bright day, was very radiant with lofty sunshine, amid which a swallow was flitting to and fro. The ceiling was painted by Sir James Thornhill in some allegorical design, (doubtless commemorative of Marlborough's victories,) the purport of which I did not take the trouble to make out,—contenting myself with the general effect, which was most splendidly and effectively ornamental.

We were guided through the showrooms by a very civil person, who allowed us to take pretty much our own time in looking at the pictures. The collection is exceedingly valuable,—many of these works of Art having been presented to the Great Duke by the crowned heads of England or the Continent. One room was all aglow with pictures by Rubens; and there were works of Raphael, and many other famous painters, any one of which would be sufficient to illustrate the meanest house that might contain it. I remember none of them, however, (not being in a picture-seeing mood,) so well as Vandyck's large and familiar picture of Charles I on horseback, with a figure and face of melancholy dignity such as never by any other hand was put on canvas. Yet, on considering this face of Charles, (which I find often repeated in half-lengths,) and translating it from the ideal into literalism, I doubt whether the unfortunate king was really a handsome or impressive-looking man: a high, thin-ridged nose, a meagre, hatchet face, and reddish hair and beard,—these are

the literal facts. It is the painter's art that has thrown such pensive and shadowy grace around him.

On our passage through this beautiful suite of apartments, we saw, through the vista of open doorways, a boy of ten or twelve years old coming towards us from the farther rooms. He had on a straw hat, a linen sack that had certainly been washed and re-washed for a summer or two, and gray trousers a good deal worn,—a dress, in short, which an American mother in middle station would have thought too shabby for her darling school-boy's ordinary wear. This urchin's face was rather pale, (as those of English children are apt to be, quite as often as our own,) but he had pleasant eyes, an intelligent look, and an agreeable, boyish manner. It was Lord Sunderland, grandson of the present Duke, and heir— though not, I think, in the direct line—of the blood of the great Marlborough, and of the title and estate.

After passing through the first suite of rooms, we were conducted through a corresponding suite on the opposite side of the entrance-hall. These latter apartments are most richly adorned with tapestries, wrought and presented to the first Duke by a sisterhood of Flemish nuns; they look like great, glowing pictures, and completely cover the walls of the rooms. The designs purport to represent the Duke's battles and sieges; and everywhere we see the hero himself, as large as life, and as gorgeous in scarlet and gold as the holy sisters could make him, with a three-cornered hat and flowing wig, reining in his horse, and extending his leading-staff in the attitude of command. Next

to Marlborough, Prince Eugene is the most prominent figure. In the way of upholstery, there can never have been anything more magnificent than these tapestries; and, considered as works of Art, they have quite as much merit as nine pictures out of ten.

One whole wing of the palace is occupied by the library, a most noble room, with a vast perspective length from end to end. Its atmosphere is brighter and more cheerful than that of most libraries: a wonderful contrast to the old college-libraries of Oxford, and perhaps less sombre and suggestive of thoughtfulness than any large library ought to be; inasmuch as so many studious brains as have left their deposit on the shelves cannot have conspired without producing a very serious and ponderous result. Both walls and ceiling are white, and there are elaborate doorways and fireplaces of white marble. The floor is of oak, so highly polished that our feet slipped upon it as if it had been New-England ice. At one end of the room stands a statue of Queen Anne in her royal robes, which are so admirably designed and exquisitely wrought that the spectator certainly gets a strong conception of her royal dignity; while the face of the statue, fleshy and feeble, doubtless conveys a suitable idea of her personal character. The marble of this work, long as it has stood there, is as white as snow just fallen, and must have required most faithful and religious care to keep it so. As for the volumes of the library, they are wired within the cases and turn their gilded backs upon the visitor, keeping their treasures of wit and wisdom just as intangible as if still in the unwrought mines of human

thought.

I remember nothing else in the palace, except the chapel, to which we were conducted last, and where we saw a splendid monument to the first Duke and Duchess, sculptured by Rysbrach, at the cost, it is said, of forty thousand pounds. The design includes the statues of the deceased dignitaries, and various allegorical flourishes, fantasies, and confusions; and beneath sleep the great Duke and his proud wife, their veritable bones and dust, and probably all the Marlboroughs that have since died. It is not quite a comfortable idea, that these mouldy ancestors still inhabit, after their fashion, the house where their successors spend the passing day; but the adulation lavished upon the hero of Blenheim could not have been consummated, unless the palace of his lifetime had become likewise a stately mausoleum over his remains, —and such we felt it all to be, after gazing at his tomb.

The next business was to see the private gardens. An old Scotch under-gardener admitted us and led the way, and seemed to have a fair prospect of earning the fee all by himself; but by-and-by another respectable Scotchman made his appearance and took us in charge, proving to be the head-gardener in person. He was extremely intelligent and agreeable, talking both scientifically and lovingly about trees and plants, of which there is every variety capable of English cultivation. Positively, the Garden of Eden cannot have been more beautiful than this private garden of Blenheim. It contains three hundred acres, and

by the artful circumlocution of the paths, and the undulations, and the skilfully interposed clumps of trees, is made to appear limitless. The sylvan delights of a whole country are compressed into this space, as whole fields of Persian roses go to the concoction of an ounce of precious attar. The world within that garden-fence is not the same weary and dusty world with which we outside mortals are conversant; it is a finer, lovelier, more harmonious Nature; and the Great Mother lends herself kindly to the gardener's will, knowing that he will make evident the half-obliterated traits of her pristine and ideal beauty, and allow her to take all the credit and praise to herself. I doubt whether there is ever any winter within that precinct,—any clouds, except the fleecy ones of summer. The sunshine that I saw there rests upon my recollection of it as if it were eternal. The lawns and glades are like the memory of places where one has wandered when first in love.

What a good and happy life might be spent in a paradise like this! And yet, at that very moment, the besotted Duke (ah! I have let out a secret which I meant to keep to myself; but the ten shillings must pay for all) was in that very garden, (for the guide told us so, and cautioned our young people not to be uproarious,) and, if in a condition for arithmetic, was thinking of nothing nobler than how many ten-shilling tickets had that day been sold. Republican as I am, I should still love to think that noblemen lead noble lives, and that all this stately and beautiful environment may serve to elevate them a little way above the rest

of us. If it fail to do so, the disgrace falls equally upon the whole race of mortals as on themselves; because it proves that no more favorable conditions of existence would eradicate our vices and weaknesses. How sad, if this be so! Even a herd of swine, eating the acorns under those magnificent oaks of Blenheim, would be cleanlier and of better habits than ordinary swine.

Well, all that I have written is pitifully meagre, as a description of Blenheim; and I hate to leave it without some more adequate expression of the noble edifice, with its rich domain, all as I saw them in that beautiful sunshine; for, if a day had been chosen out of a hundred years, it could not have been a finer one. But I must give up the attempt; only further remarking that the finest trees here were cedars, of which I saw one—and there may have been many such—immense in girth and not less than three centuries old. I likewise saw a vast heap of laurel, two hundred feet in circumference, all growing from one root; and the gardener offered to show us another growth of twice that stupendous size. If the Great Duke himself had been buried in that spot, his heroic heart could not have been the seed of a more plentiful crop of laurels.

We now went back to the Black Bear, and sat down to a cold collation, of which we ate abundantly, and drank (in the good old English fashion) a due proportion of various delightful liquors. A stranger in England, in his rambles to various quarters of the country, may learn little in regard to wines, (for the ordinary English taste is simple, though sound, in that particular,) but

he makes acquaintance with more varieties of hop and malt liquor than he previously supposed to exist. I remember a sort of foaming stuff, called hop-champagne, which is very vivacious, and appears to be a hybrid between ale and bottled cider. Another excellent tipple for warm weather is concocted by mixing brown-stout or bitter ale with ginger-beer, the foam of which stirs up the heavier liquor from its depths, forming a compound of singular vivacity and sufficient body. But of all things ever brewed from malt, (unless it be the Trinity Ale of Cambridge, which I drank long afterwards, and which Barry Cornwall has celebrated in immortal verse,) commend me to the Archdeacon, as the Oxford scholars call it, in honor of the jovial dignitary who first taught these erudite worthies how to brew their favorite nectar. John Barleycorn has given his very heart to this admirable liquor; it is a superior kind of ale, the Prince of Ales, with a richer flavor and a mightier spirit than you can find elsewhere in this weary world. Much have we been strengthened and encouraged by the potent blood of the Archdeacon!

A few days after our excursion to Blenheim, the same party set forth, in two flies, on a tour to some other places of interest in the neighborhood of Oxford. It was again a delightful day; and, in truth, every day, of late, had been so pleasant that it seemed as if each must be the very last of such perfect weather; and yet the long succession had given us confidence in as many more to come. The climate of England has been shamefully maligned; its sulkinesses and asperities are not nearly so offensive

as Englishmen tell us (their climate being the only attribute of their country which they never overvalue); and the really good summer weather is the very kindest and sweetest that the world knows.

We first drove to the village of Cumnor, about six miles from Oxford, and alighted at the entrance of the church. Here, while waiting for the keys, we looked at an old wall of the churchyard, piled up of loose gray stones which are said to have once formed a portion of Cumnor Hall, celebrated in Mickle's ballad and Scott's romance. The hall must have been in very close vicinity to the church,—not more than twenty yards off; and I waded through the long, dewy grass of the churchyard, and tried to peep over the wall, in hopes to discover some tangible and traceable remains of the edifice. But the wall was just too high to be overlooked, and difficult to clamber over without tumbling down some of the stones; so I took the word of one of our party, who had been here before, that there is nothing interesting on the other side. The churchyard is in rather a neglected state, and seems not to have been mown for the benefit of the parson's cow; it contains a good many gravestones, of which I remember only some upright memorials of slate to individuals of the name of Tabbs.

Soon a woman arrived with the key of the church-door, and we entered the simple old edifice, which has the pavement of lettered tombstones, the sturdy pillars and low arches, and other ordinary characteristics of an English country-church. One or two pews, probably those of the gentlefolk of the neighborhood,

were better furnished than the rest, but all in a modest style. Near the high altar, in the holiest place, there is an oblong, angular, ponderous tomb of blue marble, built against the wall, and surmounted by a carved canopy of the same material; and over the tomb, and beneath the canopy, are two monumental brasses, such as we oftener see inlaid into a church-pavement. On these brasses are engraved the figures of a gentleman in armor and a lady in an antique garb, each about a foot high, devoutly kneeling in prayer; and there is a long Latin inscription likewise cut into the enduring brass, bestowing the highest eulogies on the character of Anthony Forster, who, with his virtuous dame, lies buried beneath this tombstone. His is the knightly figure that kneels above; and if Sir Walter Scott ever saw this tomb, he must have had an even greater than common disbelief in laudatory epitaphs, to venture on depicting Anthony Forster in such hues as blacken him in the romance. For my part, I read the inscription in full faith, and believe the poor deceased gentleman to be a much-wronged individual, with good grounds for bringing an action of slander in the courts above.

But the circumstance, lightly as we treat it, has its serious moral. What nonsense it is, this anxiety, which so worries us, about our good fame, or our bad fame, after death! If it were of the slightest real moment, our reputations would have been placed by Providence more in our own power, and less in other people's, than we now find them to be. If poor Anthony Forster happens to have met Sir Walter in the other world, I doubt

whether he has ever thought it worth while to complain of the latter's misrepresentations.

We did not remain long in the church, as it contains nothing else of interest; and driving through the village, we passed a pretty large and rather antique-looking inn, bearing the sign of the Bear and Ragged Staff. It could not be so old, however, by at least a hundred years, as Giles Gosling's time; nor is there any other object to remind the visitor of the Elizabethan age, unless it be a few ancient cottages, that are perhaps of still earlier date. Cumnor is not nearly so large a village, nor a place of such mark, as one anticipates from its romantic and legendary fame; but, being still inaccessible by railway, it has retained more of a sylvan character than we often find in English country-towns. In this retired neighborhood the road is narrow and bordered with grass, and sometimes interrupted by gates; the hedges grow in unpruned luxuriance; there is not that close-shaven neatness and trimness that characterize the ordinary English landscape. The whole scene conveys the idea of seclusion and remoteness. We met no travellers, whether on foot or otherwise.

I cannot very distinctly trace out this day's peregrinations; but, after leaving Cumnor a few miles behind us, I think we came to a ferry over the Thames, where an old woman served as ferry-man, and pulled a boat across by means of a rope stretching from shore to shore. Our two vehicles being thus placed on the other side, we resumed our drive,—first glancing, however, at the old woman's antique cottage, with its stone floor, and the circular settle round

the kitchen fireplace, which was quite in the mediaeval English style.

We next stopped at Stanton Harcourt, where we were received at the parsonage with a hospitality which we should take delight in describing, if it were allowable to make public acknowledgment of the private and personal kindnesses which we never failed to find ready for our needs. An American in an English house will soon adopt the opinion that the English are the very kindest people on earth, and will retain that idea as long, at least, as he remains on the inner side of the threshold. Their magnetism is of a kind that repels strongly while you keep beyond a certain limit, but attracts as forcibly if you get within the magic line.

It was at this place, if I remember right, that I heard a gentleman ask a friend of mine whether he was the author of "The Red Letter A"; and, after some consideration, (for he did not seem to recognize his own book, at first, under this improved title,) our countryman responded, doubtfully, that he believed so. The gentleman proceeded to inquire whether our friend had spent much time in America,—evidently thinking that he must have been caught young, and have had a tincture of English breeding, at least, if not birth, to speak the language so tolerably, and appear so much like other people. This insular narrowness is exceedingly queer, and of very frequent occurrence, and is quite as much a characteristic of men of education and culture as of clowns.

Stanton Harcourt is a very curious old place. It was formerly the seat of the ancient family of Harcourt, which now has its principal abode at Nuneham Courtney, a few miles off. The parsonage is a relic of the family-mansion, or castle, other portions of which are close at hand; for, across the garden, rise two gray towers, both of them picturesquely venerable, and interesting for more than their antiquity. One of these towers, in its entire capacity, from height to depth, constituted the kitchen of the ancient castle, and is still used for domestic purposes, although it has not, nor ever had, a chimney; or we might rather say, it is itself one vast chimney, with a hearth of thirty feet square, and a flue and aperture of the same size. There are two huge fireplaces within, and the interior walls of the tower are blackened with the smoke that for centuries used to gush forth from them, and climb upward, seeking an exit through some wide air-holes in the conical roof, full seventy feet above. These lofty openings were capable of being so arranged, with reference to the wind, that the cooks are said to have been seldom troubled by the smoke; and here, no doubt, they were accustomed to roast oxen whole, with as little fuss and ado as a modern cook would roast a fowl. The inside of the tower is very dim and sombre, (being nothing but rough stone walls, lighted only from the apertures above mentioned,) and has still a pungent odor of smoke and soot, the reminiscence of the fires and feasts of generations that have passed away. Methinks the extremest range of domestic economy lies between an American cooking-stove

and the ancient kitchen, seventy dizzy feet in height, of Stanton Harcourt.

Now—the place being without a parallel in England, and therefore necessarily beyond the experience of an American—it is somewhat remarkable, that, while we stood gazing at this kitchen, I was haunted and perplexed by an idea that somewhere or other I had seen just this strange spectacle before. The height, the blackness, the dismal void, before my eyes, seemed as familiar as the decorous neatness of my grandmother's kitchen; only my unaccountable memory of the scene was lighted up with an image of lurid fires blazing all round the dim interior circuit of the tower. I had never before had so pertinacious an attack, as I could not but suppose it, of that odd state of mind wherein we fitfully and teasingly remember some previous scene or incident, of which the one now passing appears to be but the echo and reduplication. Though the explanation of the mystery did not for some time occur to me, I may as well conclude the matter here. In a letter of Pope's, addressed to the Duke of Buckingham, there is an account of Stanton Harcourt, (as I now find, although the name is not mentioned,) where he resided while translating a part of the "Iliad." It is one of the most admirable pieces of description in the language,—playful and picturesque, with fine touches of humorous pathos,—and conveys as perfect a picture as ever was drawn of a decayed English country-house; and among other rooms, most of which have since crumbled down and disappeared, he dashes off the grim aspect of this

kitchen,—which, moreover, he peoples with witches, engaging Satan himself as head-cook, who stirs the infernal caldrons that seethe and bubble over the fires. This letter, and others relative to his abode here, were very familiar to my earlier reading, and, remaining still fresh at the bottom of my memory, caused the weird and ghostly sensation that came over me on beholding the real spectacle that had formerly been made so vivid to my imagination.

Our next visit was to the church, which stands close by, and is quite as ancient as the remnants of the castle. In a chapel or side-aisle, dedicated to the Harcourts, are found some very interesting family-monuments,—and among them, recumbent on a tombstone, the figure of an armed knight of the Lancastrian party, who was slain in the Wars of the Roses. His features, dress, and armor are painted in colors, still wonderfully fresh, and there still blushes the symbol of the Red Rose, denoting the faction for which he fought and died. His head rests on a marble or alabaster helmet; and on the tomb lies the veritable helmet, it is to be presumed, which he wore in battle,—a ponderous iron case, with the visor complete, and remnants of the gilding that once covered it. The crest is a large peacock, not of metal, but of wood. Very possibly, this helmet was but an heraldic adornment of his tomb; and, indeed, it seems strange that it has not been stolen before now, especially in Cromwell's time, when knightly tombs were little respected, and when armor was in request. However, it is needless to dispute with the dead knight about the identity of his

iron pot, and we may as well allow it to be the very same that so often gave him the headache in his lifetime. Leaning against the wall, at the foot of the tomb, is the shaft of a spear, with a wofully tattered and utterly faded banner appended to it,—the knightly banner beneath which he marshalled his followers in the field. As it was absolutely falling to pieces, I tore off one little bit, no bigger than a finger-nail, and put it into my waistcoat-pocket; but seeking it subsequently, it was not to be found.

On the opposite side of the little chapel, two or three yards from this tomb, is another, on which lie, side by side, one of the same knightly race of Harcourts, and his lady. The tradition of the family is, that this knight was the standard-bearer of Henry of Richmond in the Battle of Bosworth Field; and a banner, supposed to be the same that he earned, now droops over his effigy. It is just such a colorless silk rag as the one already described. The knight has the order of the Garter on his knee, and the lady wears it on her left arm,—an odd place enough for a garter; but, if worn in its proper locality, it could not be decorously visible. The complete preservation and good condition of these statues, even to the minutest adornment of the sculpture, and their very noses,—the most vulnerable part of a marble man, as of a living one, are miraculous. Except in Westminster Abbey, among the chapels of the kings, I have seen none so well preserved. Perhaps they owe it to the loyalty of Oxfordshire, diffused throughout its neighborhood by the influence of the University, during the great Civil War and the

rule of the Parliament. It speaks well, too, for the upright and kindly character of this old family, that the peasantry, among whom they had lived for ages, did not desecrate their tombs, when it might have been done with impunity.

There are other and more recent memorials of the Harcourts, one of which is the tomb of the last lord, who died about a hundred years ago. His figure, like those of his ancestors, lies on the top of his tomb, clad, not in armor, but in his robes as a peer. The title is now extinct, but the family survives in a younger branch, and still holds this patrimonial estate, though they have long since quitted it as a residence.

We next went to see the ancient fish-ponds appertaining to the mansion, and which used to be of vast dietary importance to the family in Catholic times, and when fish was not otherwise attainable. There are two or three, or more, of these reservoirs, one of which is of very respectable size,—large enough, indeed, to be really a picturesque object, with its grass-green borders, and the trees drooping over it, and the towers of the castle and the church reflected within the weed-grown depths of its smooth mirror. A sweet fragrance, as it were, of ancient time and present quiet and seclusion was breathing all around; the sunshine of to-day had a mellow charm of antiquity in its brightness. These ponds are said still to breed abundance of such fish as love deep and quiet waters: but I saw only some minnows, and one or two snakes, which were lying among the weeds on the top of the water, sunning and bathing themselves at once.

I mentioned that there were two towers remaining of the old castle: the one containing the kitchen we have already visited; the other, still more interesting, is next to be described. It is some seventy feet high, gray and reverend, but in excellent repair, though I could not perceive that anything had been done to renovate it. The basement story was once the family-chapel, and is, of course, still a consecrated spot. At one corner of the tower is a circular turret, within which a narrow staircase, with worn steps of stone, winds round and round as it climbs upward, giving access to a chamber on each floor, and finally emerging on the battlemented roof. Ascending this turret-stair, and arriving at the third story, we entered a chamber, not large, though occupying the whole area of the tower, and lighted by a window on each side. It was wainscoted from floor to ceiling with dark oak, and had a little fireplace in one of the corners. The window-panes were small, and set in lead. The curiosity of this room is, that it was once the residence of Pope, and that he here wrote a considerable part of the translation of Homer, and likewise, no doubt, the admirable letters to which I have referred above. The room once contained a record by himself, scratched with a diamond on one of the window-panes, (since removed for safe-keeping to Nuneham Courtney, where it was shown me,) purporting that he had here finished the fifth book of the "Iliad" on such a day.

A poet has a fragrance about him, such as no other human being is gifted withal; it is indestructible, and clings forevermore

to everything that he has touched. I was not impressed, at Blenheim, with any sense that the mighty Duke still haunted the palace that was created for him; but here, after a century and a half, we are still conscious of the presence of that decrepit little figure of Queen Anne's time, although he was merely a casual guest in the old tower, during one or two summer months. However brief the time and slight the connection, his spirit cannot be exorcised so long as the tower stands. In my mind, moreover, Pope, or any other person with an available claim, is right in adhering to the spot, dead or alive; for I never saw a chamber that I should like better to inhabit,—so comfortably small, in such a safe and inaccessible seclusion, and with a varied landscape from each window. One of them looks upon the church, close at hand, and down into the green churchyard, extending almost to the foot of the tower; the others have views wide and far, over a gently undulating tract of country. If desirous of a loftier elevation, about a dozen more steps of the turret-stair will bring the occupant to the summit of the tower,—where Pope used to come, no doubt, in the summer evenings, and peep—poor little shrimp that he was!—through the embrasures of the battlement.

From Stanton Harcourt we drove—I forget how far—to a point where a boat was waiting for us upon the Thames, or some other stream; for I am ashamed to confess my ignorance of the precise geographical whereabout. We were, at any rate, some miles above Oxford, and, I should imagine, pretty near

one of the sources of England's mighty river. It was little more than wide enough for the boat, with extended oars, to pass,—shallow, too, and bordered with bulrushes and water-weeds, which, in some places, quite overgrew the surface of the river from bank to bank. The shores were flat and meadow-like, and sometimes, the boatman told us, are overflowed by the rise of the stream. The water looked clean and pure, but not particularly transparent, though enough so to show us that the bottom is very much weed-grown; and I was told that the weed is an American production, brought to England with importations of timber, and now threatening to choke up the Thames and other English rivers. I wonder it does not try its obstructive powers upon the Merrimack, the Connecticut, or the Hudson,—not to speak of the St. Lawrence or the Mississippi!

It was an open boat, with cushioned seats astern, comfortably accommodating our party; the day continued sunny and warm, and perfectly still; the boatman, well trained to his business, managed the oars skilfully and vigorously; and we went down the stream quite as swiftly as it was desirable to go, the scene being so pleasant, and the passing hour so thoroughly agreeable. The river grew a little wider and deeper, perhaps, as we glided on, but was still an inconsiderable stream; for it had a good deal more than a hundred miles to meander through before it should bear fleets on its bosom, and reflect palaces and towers and Parliament-houses and dingy and sordid piles of various structure, as it rolled to and fro with the tide, dividing London asunder. Not, in truth, that I

ever saw any edifice whatever reflected in its turbid breast, when the sylvan stream, as we beheld it now, is swollen into the Thames at London.

Once, on our voyage, we had to land, while the boatman and some other persons drew our skiff round some rapids, which we could not otherwise have passed; another time, the boat went through a lock. We, meanwhile, stepped ashore to examine the ruins of the old nunnery of Godstowe, where Fair Rosamond secluded herself, after being separated from her royal lover. There is a long line of ruinous wall, and a shattered tower at one of the angles; the whole much ivy-grown,—brimming over, indeed, with clustering ivy, which is rooted inside of the walls. The nunnery is now, I believe, held in lease by the city of Oxford, which has converted its precincts into a barnyard. The gate was under lock and key, so that we could merely look at the outside, and soon resumed our places in the boat.

At three o'clock, or thereabouts, (or sooner or later,—for I took little heed of time, and only wished that these delightful wanderings might last forever,) we reached Folly Bridge, at Oxford. Here we took possession of a spacious barge, with a house in it, and a comfortable dining-room or drawing-room within the house, and a level roof, on which we could sit at ease, or dance, if so inclined. These barges are common at Oxford, —some very splendid ones being owned by the students of the different colleges, or by clubs. They are drawn by horses, like canal-boats; and a horse being attached to our own barge, he

trotted off at a reasonable pace, and we slipped through the water behind him, with a gentle and pleasant motion, which, save for the constant vicissitude of cultivated scenery, was like no motion at all. It was life without the trouble of living; nothing was ever more quietly agreeable. In this happy state of mind and body we gazed at Christ-Church meadows, as we passed, and at the receding spires and towers of Oxford, and on a good deal of pleasant variety along the banks: young men rowing or fishing; troops of naked boys bathing, as if this were Arcadia, in the simplicity of the Golden Age; country-houses, cottages, water-side inns, all with something fresh about them, as not being sprinkled with the dust of the highway. We were a large party now; for a number of additional guests had joined us at Folly Bridge, and we comprised poets, novelists, scholars, sculptors, painters, architects, men and women of renown, dear friends, genial, outspoken, open-hearted Englishmen,—all voyaging onward together, like the wise ones of Gotham in a bowl. I remember not a single annoyance, except, indeed, that a swarm of wasps came aboard of us and alighted on the head of one of our young gentlemen, attracted by the scent of the pomatum which he had been rubbing into his hair. He was the only victim, and his small trouble the one little flaw in our day's felicity, to put us in mind that we were mortal.

Meanwhile a table had been laid in the interior of our barge, and spread with cold ham, cold fowl, cold pigeon-pie, cold beef, and other substantial cheer, such as the English love, and

Yankees too,—besides tarts, and cakes, and pears, and plums, —not forgetting, of course, a goodly provision of port, sherry, and champagne, and bitter ale, which is like mother's milk to an Englishman, and soon grows equally acceptable to his American cousin. By the time these matters had been properly attended to, we had arrived at that part of the Thames which passes by Nuneham Courtney, a fine estate belonging to the Harcourts, and the present residence of the family. Here we landed, and, climbing a steep slope from the river-side, paused a moment or two to look at an architectural object, called the Carfax, the purport of which I do not well understand. Thence we proceeded onward, through the loveliest park and woodland scenery I ever saw, and under as beautiful a declining sunshine as heaven ever shed over earth, to the stately mansion-house.

As we here cross a private threshold, it is not allowable to pursue my feeble narrative of this delightful day with the same freedom as heretofore; so, perhaps, I may as well bring it to a close. I may mention, however, that I saw the library, a fine, large apartment, hung round with portraits of eminent literary men, principally of the last century, most of whom were familiar guests of the Harcourts. The house itself is about eighty years old, and is built in the classic style, as if the family had been anxious to diverge as far as possible from the Gothic picturesqueness of their old abode at Stanton Harcourt. The grounds were laid out in part by Capability Brown, and seemed to me even more beautiful than those of Blenheim. Mason the poet, a friend of the house,

gave the design of a portion of the garden. Of the whole place I will not be niggardly of my rude Transatlantic praise, but be bold to say that it appeared to me as perfect as anything earthly can be,—utterly and entirely finished, as if the years and generations had done all that the hearts and minds of the successive owners could contrive for a spot they dearly loved. Such homes as Nuneham Courtney are among the splendid results of long hereditary possession; and we Republicans, whose households melt away like new-fallen snow in a spring morning, must content ourselves with our many counterbalancing advantages,—for this one, so apparently desirable to the far-projecting selfishness of our nature, we are certain never to attain.

It must not be supposed, nevertheless, that Nuneham Courtney is one of the great show-places of England. It is merely a fair specimen of the better class of country-seats, and has a hundred rivals, and many superiors, in the features of beauty, and expansive, manifold, redundant comfort, which most impressed me. A moderate man might be content with such a home,—that is all.

And now I take leave of Oxford without even an attempt to describe it,—there being no literary faculty, attainable or conceivable by me, which can avail to put it adequately, or even tolerably, upon paper. It must remain its own sole expression; and those whose sad fortune it may be never to behold it have no better resource than to dream about gray, weather-stained, ivy-grown edifices, wrought with quaint Gothic ornament, and

standing around grassy quadrangles, where cloistered walks have echoed to the quiet footsteps of twenty generations,—lawns and gardens of luxurious repose, shadowed with canopies of foliage, and lit up with sunny glimpses through archways of great boughs, —spires, towers, and turrets, each with its history and legend,— dimly magnificent chapels, with painted windows of rare beauty and brilliantly diversified hues, creating an atmosphere of richest gloom,—vast college-halls, high-windowed, oaken-panelled, and hung round with portraits of the men, in every age, whom the University has nurtured to be illustrious,—long vistas of alcoved libraries, where the wisdom and learned folly of all time is shelved,—kitchens, (we throw in this feature by way of ballast, and because it would not be English Oxford without its beef and beer,) with huge fireplaces, capable of roasting a hundred joints at once,—and cavernous cellars, where rows of piled-up hogsheads seethe and fume with that mighty malt-liquor which is the true milk of Alma Mater: make all these things vivid in your dream, and you will never know nor believe how inadequate is the result to represent even the merest outside of Oxford.

We feel a genuine reluctance to conclude this article without making our grateful acknowledgements, by name, to a gentleman whose overflowing kindness was the main condition of all our sight-seeings and enjoyments. Delightful as will always be our recollection of Oxford and its neighborhood, we partly suspect that it owes much of its happy coloring to the genial medium through which the objects were presented to us,—to the kindly

magic of a hospitality unsurpassed, within our experience, in the quality of making the guest contented with his host, with himself, and everything about him. He has inseparably mingled his image with our remembrance of the Spires of Oxford.

CYRIL WILDE

For some reason which it does not concern us now to investigate, Kentucky, under the dominion of the white man, has continued to justify its native name of "Dark and Bloody Ground," in being the scene of a remarkable number of tragedies in real life.

One of these, less known to the public in later times, we think transcends all the others in boldness of conception, regularity of plot, variety of passion and character displayed, and horror and pathos of catastrophe. It might have furnished a worthy subject to the pen of Sophocles or Shakespeare, one that they would have found already cast into a highly dramatic form, requiring only fitting words to convey the passions of the actors. Little invention of situation or incident would have been needed, for neither could be imagined more intensely interesting; nor could the most finished artist have constructed a plot more coherent in all its details, or more strictly in accordance with the rules of composition,—even to the preservation of the Aristotelian unities of time and place. So perfect, indeed, does it seem, that, were it not substantiated in every point by the records of a judicial tribunal, it might well be taken for the invention of some master of human nature and the dramatic art.

Captain Cyril Wilde, the hero, or rather the victim, of the events we are about to narrate, was one of those perfectly happy

men whom every one has learned to regard as favorites of Fortune, and on whom no one ever expects disaster to fall, simply because it never has done so. Well descended, at a period when good birth was a positive honor in itself, and connected, either by affinity or friendship, with the best society of Kentucky, he held, by hereditary right, a high position among that old aristocracy which then and for a long time afterward stoutly maintained its own against the encroaching spirit of democratic equality, and whose members still kept in mind many of the traditions, honored in their own persons the dignity, and strove to preserve in their households somewhat of the manners, of the Cavaliers of the Old Dominion. Nor was wealth wanting to complete his happiness,—at least, such wealth as was needed by one of his simple tastes and unostentatious habits. He was rich beyond his disposition to spend, but not beyond his capacity to enjoy,—a capacity multiplied by as many times as he had friends to stimulate it;—summer friends, alas! too many of them proved to be. His character was without reproach; his disposition easy and genial; his mind of that happy middle order which always commands respect, while it feels none of the restless ambition and impotent longing for public recognition that usually attend the possession of superior abilities.

Such was the position of Captain Wilde, and such the character he bore during the first thirty-eight years of his life. Not many have known a more lengthened prosperity,—and few, very few, a more sudden and terrible reverse. Fortune, like a

fond mistress, had lavished her gifts on him without stint,—but, like a jealous one, seemed resolved that he should owe everything to her gratuitous bounty, and the moment he sought to win an object of desire by his own exertions turned her face away forever, persecuting her former favorite thenceforth with vindictive malice. Continuing to yield, for a time, with apparent complacency, every boon he sought, she treacherously concealed therein the germs of all his woes.

In the year 17—Captain Wilde was persuaded to better his already happy condition by marriage. The lady he chose, or suffered to be chosen for him, was a Miss M–, a scion of one of those extensive families, not now so common as formerly, which by repeated intermarriage and always settling together develop a spirit of clanship, so exclusive as to make them almost incapable of any feeling of interest outside of their own name and connection, and render them liable to regard any person of different blood, who may happen to intermarry among them, as an intruder. In some parts of the Union these clans may still be found flourishing in considerable purity and vigor,—the same name sometimes prevailing over a district of many miles,—a fact which an observant traveller would surmise from a certain prevailing cast of form and feature.

It was with a family of this kind that Captain Wilde was, in an evil hour, induced to ally himself,—a step which soon proved to be the first in a long career of misfortune. The lady possessed that worst of all tempers, a quick and irritable, but at the same

time hard and unforgiving one. And she soon showed, that, in her estimation, the feelings and interests of her husband were as nothing in comparison with those of her family, and that, in any variance, she would leave the former and cleave to the latter. Such variances were, unfortunately, almost inevitable; for the family of Mrs. Wilde differed both in politics and religion from her husband,—a fact, it may here be remarked, which had no small influence on his subsequent fate,—and the narrow, bigoted exclusiveness of the wife was utterly incompatible with the free and open-hearted fellowship with which the husband received his acquaintances, of whatever sect or party. In a very few months, therefore, it began to be whispered abroad that the hitherto happy and joyous bachelor's-hall had become a scene of constant bickerings and heartburnings.

But mere incongruity of tempers and habits was not, as was supposed by their neighbors, the only source of domestic discord. This might in time have entirely disappeared; had conjugal confidence only been allowed its natural growth, all might have been passably well in the end, in spite of such serious drawbacks; for, from the necessity of his nature, the husband would in time have become completely subservient to the sterner spirit of his wife, which, in turn, might have been mollified in some degree amid the peaceful duties of home;—a state of things that has existed in many families, which have, nevertheless, enjoyed a fair share of domestic happiness in spite of this inversion of the natural relations of their heads. But Mrs. Wilde had brought into

her husband's house that deadliest foe of domestic peace, an elderly, ill-tempered, suspicious female relative, serving in the capacity of *confidante*. This curse was embodied in the person of a much older sister, who happened to be neither maid, wife, nor widow, and, having once effected an entrance under the pretence of assisting to arrange the disordered household-affairs, easily contrived to render her position a permanent one. So soon as this was achieved, she appears to have begun her hateful work of sowing discord between the new-married pair. Having long since blighted her own hopes of happiness, she seemed to find no consolation so sweet as wrecking that of others;—not that she had no love for her sister; on the contrary, her love, such as it was, was really strong and lasting; and in her fierce grief for that sister's death she met a punishment almost equal to her deserts. Nor was it long before she provided herself with a most effectual means of accomplishing her malicious object, of inflaming the troubles of the household into which she had intruded herself. This was the discovery, real or pretended, of a former illicit connection between her brother-in-law and a pretty and intelligent mulatto girl, about eighteen or nineteen years of age, who was still retained in the family in the capacity of housemaid. Having once struck this jarring chord, she continued to play upon it with diabolical skill. To those who watched the course of her unholy labors, the energy and ingenuity with which this wretched woman wrought at her task, and the completeness of her success, would have seemed a subject of admiration, if the

result had not been so deplorable as to merge all other emotions in indignant detestation.

So thoroughly had her design been accomplished in the course of a single year, that the birth of as sweet a child as ever smiled upon fond parents, instead of serving as a point of union between Captain Wilde and his wife, only increased their estrangement by furnishing another subject of contention. Alas! the peace of Eden was not more utterly destroyed by the treacherous wiles of the serpent than that of this ill-starred household by the whispers of this serpent in woman's shape. Under her continual exasperations, Mrs. Wilde's temper, naturally harsh, became at last so outrageous and unbridled as to render her unfortunate husband's life one long course of humiliation and misery. Far from taking any pains to hide their discords from the world, she seemed to court observation by seizing every opportunity of inflicting mortification upon him in public, reckless of the reflections such improprieties might bring upon herself.

But why, it may be asked, did not both parties seek a separation, when affairs had reached such a state as this? First, because Captain Wilde, though advised thereto, naturally shrank from the scandal such a step always occasions; and, on the other side, because his wife was gifted with one of those intolerable tempers that make some women cling to a partner they hate with a jealous tenacity which love could scarcely inspire, simply for the reason that a separation would put an end to their power, so dearly prized, of inflicting pain;—for hatred has its jealousy, as

well as love.

Of the perverse ingenuity of these two women in causing the deepest mortification to the unfortunate gentleman, whenever Fate and his own weakness gave them the power, we will notice one instance, on account of the important influence it had in bringing about the denouement of this domestic tragedy.

According to the kindly custom of that time, Captain Wilde had on one occasion requested the assistance of some of his neighbors in treading out his grain; and the party had set to work at dawn, in order to avail themselves of the cooler portion of the day. After waiting with longing ears for the sound of the breakfast-horn, they finally, at a late hour, repaired to the house, uncalled. Here the host, supposing all to be ready, led his friends unceremoniously into the dining-room, where he was astonished, and not a little angered, to find his wife and sister seated composedly at their meal, which they had already nearly finished, with only the three customary plates on the table, and no apparent preparation for a larger number. On his beginning to remonstrate in a rather heated tone, his wife arose, and, remarking that she had not been used to eat in company with common laborers, swept disdainfully from the room, followed by her sister. No more unpardonable insult could have been offered to Kentucky farmers, at the very foundation of whose social creed lay the principle of equality, and of whose character an intense and jealous feeling of personal dignity was the most salient feature: for these were men of independent means, who

had come rather to superintend the labors of their negroes than to labor themselves,—such occasions being regarded only as pleasant opportunities for free and unrestrained sociability, far more agreeable than formal and ceremonious visits. On these occasions, the host would conduct his friends over his farm to survey the condition of his crops, or point out to their admiration his fine cattle, or obtain their opinion concerning some contemplated improvement;—a most admirable means of drawing closer the bonds of neighborly feeling and interest. A more bitter mortification, therefore, could hardly have been devised for one who always prided himself on his open-hearted Kentucky hospitality even to strangers. Justly enraged by such foolish and ill-timed rudeness, he flung a knife, which he had idly taken up, violently upon the table, swearing that his friends should, in his house, be treated as gentlemen; at the same time calling to the mulatto, Fanny, he bade her prepare breakfast, and added, in a tone but half-suppressed, "You are the only woman on the place who behaves like a lady." This imprudent remark was overheard by the ever-present sister-in-law, and the use she made of it may be imagined.

In this unpleasant state of his domestic relations, the character of Captain Wilde Seemed to undergo an entire transformation. From being remarkable for his love of quiet retirement, he became restless and dissatisfied; and instead of laughing, as formerly, at public employment as only vanity and vexation, he, now that a greater vexation assailed him in his once peaceful

home, eagerly sought relief, not, as a younger or less virtuous man might have done, in dissipation, but in the distractions of public business. But here again his evil fortune granted the desired boon in a shape pregnant with future disaster. The hostility of Mrs. Wilde's family, which had now become deeply excited,—combined with his own political heterodoxy,—forbade any hope of attaining a place by popular choice; and in an evil hour his friends succeeded in procuring him the office of exciseman.

Now there is no peculiarity more marked in all the branches of the Anglo-Saxon race than the extreme impatience with which they submit to any direct interference of the government in the private affairs of the citizens; and no form of such interference has ever been so generally odious as the excise, and, by consequence, no officer so generally detested as the exciseman. This feeling, on account of the very large number of persons engaged in distilling, was then formidably strong in Kentucky,—all the more so that this form of taxation was a favorite measure of the existing Federal Administration. Those who ventured to accept so hateful an office at the hands of so hated a government were sure to make themselves highly unpopular. In time, when the people began to learn their own strength and the weakness of the authorities, the enforcement of the law became dangerous, and at last altogether impossible. The writer has been told, by a gentleman holding a responsible position under our judicial system, that the name of his grandfather—the last Kentucky

exciseman—to this day stands charged on the government-books with thousands of dollars arrears, although he was a man of great courage and not at all likely to be deterred from the discharge of his duty by any ordinary obstacle.

Such was the place sought and obtained by the unfortunate Wilde as a refuge from domestic wretchedness. The consequence it was easy to foresee. In a few months, he who had been accustomed to universal good-will became an object of almost as general dislike; and as people are apt to attribute all sorts of evil to one who has by any means incurred their hostility, and are never satisfied until they have blackened the whole character in which they have found one offensive quality, the family difficulties of the unpopular official soon became a theme of common scandal, all the blame, of course, being laid upon him. This state of things, disagreeable in itself, proved most unfortunate in its influence on his subsequent fate; for, had he retained his previous popularity in the county, the last deplorable catastrophe would certainly never have happened: since every lawyer knows full well, that, in capital cases especially, juries are merely the exponents of public sentiment, and that the power of any judge to cause the excited sympathies of a whole community to sink into calm indifference at the railing of a jury-box is about as effective as was the command of the Dane in arresting the in-rolling waters of the ocean. This is peculiarly true in this country, where the people, both in theory and in fact, are so completely sovereign that the institutions of government are

only instruments, having little capability of independent, and none at all of antagonistic action. The skilful advocate, therefore, always watches the crowd of eager faces without the bar, with eye as anxious and far more prophetic than that with which he studies the formal countenances of the panel whom he directly addresses.

There was one circumstance, arising indirectly from his public employment, that exercised no trivial influence upon Captain Wilde's fate. On one occasion, while engaged with a brother-official in arranging their books preparatory to the annual settlement, his wife, becoming enraged because he failed to attend instantly to her orders concerning some trifling domestic matter, rushed into his study and caught up an armful of papers, which she attempted to throw into the fire. The documents were of great importance; and to prevent her carrying her childish purpose into execution, her husband was obliged to seize her quickly and violently, and drag her from the hearth. The reader will hardly recognize this incident in the form in which it was afterward detailed from the witness-stand; and it is only on account of the effect which this and other occurrences of like nature had in bringing about the final event of our history, that we take the trouble to narrate matters so trifling and uninteresting; for it appeared that every incident of the kind was carefully registered in the memory of the Erinnys of this devoted household, whence it came out magnified and distorted into a brutal and unprovoked outrage.

Wretched indeed must have been the state of that family in which such scenes were allowed to meet the eyes of strangers; and again it may be asked, Why did not Captain Wilde take measures to dissolve a union that had resulted in so much unhappiness, and in which all hope of improvement must now have disappeared? Such a step would certainly have been wise; nor could the strictest moralist have found aught to censure therein. But it was now too late. No observer of human affairs has failed to notice how surely a stronger character gains ascendency over a weaker with which it is brought into familiar contact. No law of man can abrogate this great law of Nature. Talk as we may about the power of knowledge or intellect or virtue, the whole ordering of society shows that it is strength of character which fixes the relative status of individuals. In whatever community we may live, we need only look around to discover that its real leaders are not the merely intelligent, educated, and good, but the energetic, the self-asserting, the aggressive. Nor will mere passive strength of will prevent subjection; for how often do we see a spirit, whose only prominent characteristic is a restless and tireless pugnacity, hold in complete subserviency those who are far superior in actual strength of mind, purely through the apathy of the latter, and their indisposition to live in a state of constant effort! It is because this petty domineering temper is found much oftener in women than in men, that we see a score of henpecked husbands to one ill-used wife. Woe to the man who falls into this kind of slavery to a wicked woman! for through him she

will commit acts she would never dare in her own person; and a double woe to him, if he be not as wicked and hardened as his mistress! The bargain of the old Devil-bought magicians was profitable, compared with his; since he gets nothing whatever for the soul he surrenders up.

In the present case, a couple of years sufficed for the energetic and ever-belligerent temper of the wife to subdue completely the mild and peaceable nature of the husband. At her bidding most of his former acquaintances were discarded; and even his warmest friends and nearest relations, no longer meeting the old hearty welcome, gradually ceased to visit his house. But the bitterest effect of this weak and culpable abdication of his rights was experienced by his slaves. Sad indeed for them was the change from the ease and abundance of the bachelor's-hall, where slavery meant little more than a happy exemption from care, to their present condition, in which it meant hopeless submission to the power of a capricious and cruel mistress. The worst form of female tyranny is that exhibited on a Southern plantation, under the sway of a termagant. Her power to afflict is so complete and all-pervading, that not an hour, nay, hardly a minute of the victim's life is exempt, if the disposition exist to exercise it. Besides, this species of domestic oppression has this in common with all the worst tyrannies which have been most feared and hated by men: the severities are ordered by those who neither execute them nor witness their execution,—that being left to agents, usually hardened to their office, and who dare not be

merciful, even if so inclined. It adds two-fold to the bitterness of such tyranny, that the tyrant is able to acquire a sort of exemption from the weakness of pity. It is wisely ordered that few human beings shall feel aught but pain in looking upon the extreme bodily anguish of their fellow-men; and when a monster appears who seems to contradict this benign law, he is embalmed as a monster, and transmitted to future times along with such *rara aves* as Caligula, Domitian, and Nana Sahib. And here—as a Southern man, brought up in the midst of a household of slaves—let me remark, that the worst feature of our system of slavery is the possibility of the negroes falling into the hands of a brutal owner capable of exercising all the power of inflicting misery which the law gives him.

But the natural law of compensation is universal; and if the most wretched object in existence be a slave subject to the sway of a brutal owner, certainly the next is the humane master who has to do with a sullen, malicious, or dishonest negro,—while for one instance of the former, there are a hundred of the latter who would willingly give up the whole value of their human chattels in order to get rid of the vexations they occasion. And where master and man were equally bad, we have known cases in which it was really hard to say which contrived to inflict most misery: the one might get used to blows and curses so as not much to mind them, but the other could never escape the agonies of rage into which his contumacious chattel was able to throw him at any time.

Captain Wilde's temper was more than usually mild and

lenient; and he was probably the most wretched being on his own plantation during the last two years of his life,—a day seldom passing that he was not compelled to inflict some sort of punishment upon his negroes. These, however, never ceased to feel for him the respectful attachment inspired by his kindness during the happy years of his bachelor-life; but, strange as it may seem, that feeling was now mingled with a sort of pity; for they well knew the painful reluctance with which he obeyed the harsh commands of his wife. And of all who mourned the hapless fate of this unfortunate gentleman, none mourned more bitterly, and few cherished his memory so long or so tenderly, as these humble dependants, who best knew his real character.

But it was upon the mulatto girl Fanny, particularly, that the tyrannical cruelty of Mrs. Wilde was poured out in all its severity. From some cause,—whether because her duties rendered her more liable to commit irritating faults, or whether, being always in sight, she was simply the most convenient object of abuse, or whether on account of the alleged former intimacy between this girl and her master,—certain it is that the hatred with which the mistress pursued her had something in it almost diabolical. And she seemed to take a peculiar satisfaction in making her husband the instrument of her persecutions: an ingenious method of punishing both her victims, if the motive were the last of those above suggested. And truly bitter it must have been to both, when the hand that had been only too kind was now forced to the infliction even of stripes; so that one hardly knows which to

pity most: though, if the essence of punishment be degradation, certainly the legal slave suffered less of it than the moral one who had fallen so low beneath the dominion of a termagant wife. But let it be ever remembered to the honor of this wretched daughter of bondage, that, in spite of all, she never lost that devoted attachment for her master which in one of a more favored race might be called by a softer name. For, whatever may have been his feelings toward her, there can remain no doubt of the nature of hers for him,—so touchingly displayed at a subsequent period, when she cast away the terror of violent death, so strong in all her race, and sought, by a voluntary confession of guilt never imputed to her, to save him by taking his place upon the scaffold. Surely, such heroic self-sacrifice suffices to

"sublime
Her dark despair and plead for its one crime."

It was probably on a discovery of this feeling in the girl that the intermeddling sister-in-law founded her charge against the master.

But there is a point beyond which human endurance cannot go,—at which milder natures turn to voluntary death as a refuge from further suffering, and fiercer ones begin to contemplate crime with savage complacency. Towards this point the ruthless and persevering cruelty of these two women was now rapidly driving their wretched victim, and soon, very soon, they were

to learn that they had been hunting, not a lamb, but a tigress, whose single spring, when brought to bay, would be as quick, as sure, and as deadly as was ever made from an Indian jungle. For now, near the end of the third year of Captain Wilde's married life, its wretched scenes of discord and tyranny were about to be closed in a catastrophe that was to overwhelm a great community with consternation and horror, and blot an entire family out of existence almost in a single night,—a catastrophe in which Providence, true to that ideal of perfect justice called poetical, working out the punishment of two of the actors by means of their own inhumanity, at the same time mysteriously involved two others,—one clothed in all the innocence of infancy, and the other guilty only through weakness and as the instrument of another. Seldom has destruction been more sudden or more complete, and never, perhaps, was so annihilating a blow dealt by so weak a hand.

Those who remember the early times of Kentucky know that the place of the agricultural and mechanics' fairs of the present day was supplied by "big meetings," which, under the various names of associations, camp-meetings, and basket-meetings, continued in full popularity to a quite recent period, and were at last partially suppressed on account of the immorality which they occasioned and encouraged. It was to these holy fairs—as now to secular ones—that the wealth and fashion of early Kentucky crowded for the purpose of displaying themselves most conspicuously before the eyes of assembled counties. Mrs.

Wilde, like most women of her temper, was passionately fond of such public triumphs, and had determined, at a camp-meeting soon to be held in the vicinity, to outshine all her rural neighbors in splendor. For the full realization of this ambition, a new carriage was, in her opinion, absolutely necessary. This fact she communicated to her husband, and upon some demur on his part, a thing now very rare, her temper, as usual, broke forth in a storm of reproach and abuse, so that the poor man, completely subdued, was glad to purchase peace by acquiescence in what his judgment regarded as a foolish expense; and he prepared immediately to set off for L– to procure the coveted vehicle. But before he had mounted, his wife, yet hot from their recent altercation, discovered or affected to discover some negligence on the part of the mulatto girl, who was engaged in nursing the child, which was at this time suffering from a dangerous illness. Now the one tender trait of this violent woman was intense love for her offspring; but it was a love that, far from softening her manner toward others, partook, on the contrary, of the fierceness of her general character, and became, like that of a wild animal for its young, a source of constant apprehension to those whose duty compelled them to approach its object. So now, seizing the weeping culprit by the hair, she dragged her to the door, and, after exhausting her own powers of maltreatment, called to her husband and ordered him to bring, on his return, a new cowhide,—"For you shall," cried she, in uncontrollable rage, "give this wretch, in the morning, two hundred lashes!" It was

a brutal threat, falling from the lips of one who was called a lady: for, of all tortures, that of the cowhide is for the moment the most intolerable, in its sharp, penetrating agony, as is well known by those who remember even a moderate application of it to their own person in school-boy days. The victim knew that the execution of the barbarous menace would be strict to the letter, and that it would be but little preferable to death itself. Yet, in spite of this, she now, for the first time, failed to cower and tremble, but arose and faced her oppressor, erect and defiant. The last drop had now been dashed into the cup of endurance,—the final blow had been struck, under which the human spirit either falls crushed and prostrated forever, or from which it springs up tempered to adamantine hardness, and incapable thenceforth of feeling either fear for itself or pity for its smiter. That one moment had entirely reversed the relations of the two, making the slave mistress of her mistress's fate, while the latter thenceforward held her very existence at the will of her slave. The cruel woman had raised up for herself that enemy more terrible even to throned tyrants than an army with banners: for there is something truly terrific in the almost omnipotent power of harm possessed by any intelligent being, whom hatred, or fanaticism, or suffering has wound up to that point of desperation where it is willing to throw away its own life in order to reach that of an adversary, —such desperation as inspired the gladiator Maternus, in his romantic expedition from the woods of Transylvania through the marshes of Pannonia and

the Alpine passes, to strike the lord of the Roman world in the recesses of his own palace, and in the presence of his thousand guards. He who has provoked such hostility can know no safety, but in the destruction of his enemy,—a fact well understood by the elder Napoleon, who, however he might admire, never pardoned those whose attempts on his person showed them utterly reckless of the safety of their own.

And now, for a few hours, the whole interest of our narrative centres in her whom that moment had so completely transformed and made already a murderess in heart and in purpose. And how thoroughly must that heart have been steeled, and how entire must have been the banishment of all counteracting feelings, when she could for a whole day, in the midst of a household of fellow-servants, and under the watchful eyes of an angry mistress, continue to discharge her usual tasks, bearing this deadly purpose in her breast, yet never, by word, look, or gesture, betray the slightest indication of its dreadful secret,—no, not even so much as to draw suspicion toward herself after the discovery of the crime! There was no time or opportunity for preparation, of which little was indeed necessary; for human life is a frail thing, and a determined hand is always strong. She had already undergone the most effectual preparation for such a task,—that of the soul; and when that is once thoroughly accomplished, not much more is needed: a fact which seems not to be understood by those patriotic assassins—French and Italian —whose elaborately contrived infernal-machines do but betray

the anxious precautions taken to insure lives which, according to their own professions, have been rendered valueless by tyranny, and ought therefore to be the more freely risked. Felton and Charlotte Corday understood their business better; but even their preparations may be called elaborate, compared with those of this poor slave-girl.

Captain Wilde returned late in the evening with the coveted coach; and the whole family, white and black, of course, turned out to admire that crowning addition to the family splendor. But among the noisy group of the latter there stood one who gazed upon the object of admiration with thoughts far different from those of her companions; and soon the careless mirth of all was checked and chilled into silent fear, when they saw their master take from beneath one of the seats a new specimen of the well-known green cow-skin, and hand it, with a troubled, deprecating look, to his wife. Ah! they all knew that appealing look well, and the hard, relentless frown by which it was answered, as well as they knew the use of the dreaded instrument itself. But there was only one among them who comprehended its immediate purpose. The glance of cruel meaning which the tyranness, after having examined the lithe, twisted rod critically for an instant, cast upon the object of her malice, probably banished the last lingering hesitation from the breast of the latter,—who turned away ostensibly to the performance of her accustomed duties, but in reality to settle the details of a crime unsurpassed in coolness and resolution by aught recorded of pirate or highwayman. It

was probably during the hours immediately succeeding Captain Wilde's return that her deadly purpose shaped itself forth in the plan finally executed; because it was not till then that she became cognizant of all the circumstances which entered into its formation. Seldom have more nicely calculated combinations entered into the plots of criminals, and never was a plot depending on so many chances more completely successful. Yet the pivot of the whole, as often in more extensive schemes of homicide, is to be found in the reckless daring and utter disregard of personal safety manifested throughout. For this alone she seems to have made no calculations and taken no precautions; her whole mind being bent apparently on the solution of one single difficulty,—how to approach her enemy undetected.

As to the details of this affair, let us mention one or two facts, and then the conduct of the murderess will itself explain them. We have already stated that the only child of Captain and Mrs. Wilde, an infant about eighteen months old, was at this time dangerously ill. For a fortnight it had been the custom of the parents to sit up with it on alternate nights, this night it being the father's regular turn to perform that duty; but his trip of twenty-five or thirty miles had fatigued him so much that it was judged best for his wife to relieve him,—his slumbers being usually so profound as to be almost lethargic, so that, when once fairly asleep, the loudest noises even in the same room would fail to arouse him, and it being feared, therefore, that the little patient might suffer, if left to his care in his present state of weariness. In

the same room slept a young negro girl, whose duty it was to carry the child into the open air when occasion required,—an office which Fanny herself had more than once performed. The reader will note how ingeniously every one of these circumstances was woven into the girl's scheme of death, and how each was made subservient to the end in view.

* * * * *

At ten o'clock on the night of the 18th of July, 17—, everything had become quiet about that lonely farm-house, so completely isolated in the midst of its wide plantation that the barking of the dogs at the nearest dwellings was barely heard in the profound stillness. A dim light, as if from a deeply shaded candle, shone from one of the casements to the right of the hall-door, showing where the parents watched by the bed of their suffering infant. Along the high-road, which, a few rods in front, stretched white and silent in the moonlight between its long lines of worm-fences, a solitary traveller on horseback was journeying at this hour. This gentleman afterward remembered being more than usually impressed by the air of peace and repose that reigned about the place, as he rode under the tall locust-trees which skirted the yard and cast their dark shadows over into the highway. But he did not see a female form flitting furtively from the negro-quarters in the rear, toward the house; and a shade of suspicion might have crossed his mind, had he glanced back a

moment later and beheld that form approach the lighted window with stealthy, cautious steps, and peer long and intently through the partially drawn curtains upon the scene within, then, stooping low, glide along the moonlit wall and disappear beneath the short flight of wooden steps that led up to the front-door.

Here ensconced, safe from observation, the murderess lay listening to every sound in the sick-room above. Ten,—eleven,—twelve,—one,—sounded from the clock in the dining-room on the other side of the hall. For three hours has she crouched there, but the opportunity she expected has not yet come. The moon was setting and deep darkness beginning to envelop the earth, when, just as she was about to steal forth and regain her cabin unobserved, the door above her head opened, and the young negro nurse, still half-asleep, came forth, stood for a moment upon the topmost step to recover her senses, and then, with the wailing infant in her arms, descended and passed round the corner of the house. She had barely disappeared when the murderess crept from her lair, and, swift and noiseless as a serpent or a cat, glided up the steps through the open door, and in another moment had again concealed herself beneath the leaves of a large table that stood in the hall close to the door of the sick-room, which, standing ajar, gave her an opportunity of studying once more the situation of things within. In the corner farthest from her lurking-place stood the bed on which her master was slumbering, concealing with its curtains the front-window against which it was placed. At the foot of this, under the other front-

window, was the pallet of the nurse, and midway between it and the door through which she peered was the low trundle-bed of the sick child, on which at this moment lay the mother,—soon to become a mother again; while at the farther end of the room a candle was burning dimly upon the hearth. Thus, for half an hour, the murderess crouched within a few feet of her victim and watched, noting every circumstance with the eye of a beast of prey about to spring. At the end of that time the nurse returned, placed the quieted child beside its mother, and, closing the door, retired to her own pallet, whence her loud breathing almost immediately told that she was asleep. Still with bated breath the mulatto waited, stooping with her ear at the keyhole till the regular respirations of the mother and the softened panting of the little invalid assured her that all was safe. Then, at last, turning the handle of the latch silently and gradually, she glided into the room and stood by the side of her victim.

The whole range of imaginative literature cannot furnish an incident of more absorbing interest; nor can the whole history of the theatre exhibit a situation of more tremendous scenical power than was presented at this moment in that chamber of doom. The four unconscious sleepers with the murderess in the midst of them, bending with hard, glittering eyes over her prey, while around them all the huge shadows cast by the dim, untrimmed light, like uncouth monsters, rose, flitted, and fell, as if in a goblin-dance of joy over the scene of approaching guilt. Sleep, solemn at any time, becomes almost awful when we gaze upon it

amid the stillness of night, so mysterious is it, and so near akin to the deeper mystery of death,—so peaceful, with a peace so much like that of the grave: men could scarcely comprehend the idea of the one, if they were not acquainted with the reality of the other. There lay the mother, with her arms around her sleeping child, whose painful breathing showed that it suffered even while it slept. Such a spectacle might have moved the hardest heart to pity; but it possessed no such power over that of the desperate slave, whose vindictive purpose never wavered for an instant. Passing round the bed, she stooped and softly encircled the emaciated little neck with her fingers. One quick, strong gripe, —the poor, weak hands were thrown up, a soft gasp and a slight spasm, and it was done. The frail young life, which had known little except suffering, and which disease would probably have extinguished in a few hours or days, was thus at once and almost painlessly cut short by the hand of violence.

And now at last the way was clear. "I knew," said she afterwards, "the situation of my mistress; and I thought that by jumping upon her with my knees I should kill her at once." Disturbed by the slight struggle of the dying child, Mrs. Wilde moved uneasily for a moment, and again sunk into quietude, lying with her face—that hard, cold face—upward. This was the opportunity for the destroyer. Bounding with all her might from the floor, she came down with bended knees upon the body of her victim. But the shock, though severe, was not fatal; and with a loud cry of "Oh, Captain Wilde, help me!" she,

by a convulsive effort, threw her assailant to the floor. Though stunned and bewildered by the suddenness and violence of the attack, the wretched woman in that terrible moment recognized her enemy, and felt the desperate purpose with which she was animated, and so recognizing and so feeling, must have known in that momentary interval all that the human soul can know of despair and terror. But it was only for a moment; for, before she could utter a second cry for help, the baffled assailant was again upon her with the bound of a tigress. A blind and breathless struggle ensued between the desperate ferocity of the slave and the equally desperate terror of the mistress; while faster and wilder went the huge, dim shadows in their goblin-dance, as the yellow flame flared and flickered in the agitated air. For a few moments, indeed, the result of the struggle seemed doubtful, and Mrs. Wilde at length, by a violent effort, raised herself almost upright, with the infuriated slave still hanging to her throat; but the latter converted this into an advantage, by suddenly throwing her whole weight upon the breast of her mistress, thus casting her violently backward across the head-board of the bed, and dislocating the spine. Another half-uttered cry, a convulsive struggle, and the deed was accomplished. One slight shiver crept over the limbs, and then the body hung limp and lifeless where it had fallen,—the head resting upon the floor, on which the long raven hair was spread abroad in a disordered mass. The victor gazed coolly on her work while recovering breath; and then, to make assurance doubly sure, took up, as she thought, a stocking

from the bed and deliberately tied it tight round the neck of the corpse. Then, gliding to the door, she quitted the scene of her fearful labors as noiselessly as she had entered, leaving behind her not one trace of her presence,—but leaving, unintentionally, a most fatal false trace, which suspicion continued to follow until it had run an entirely innocent man to his grave. The last act of the drama of woman's passion and woman's revenge was over; the tragedy of man's suffering and endurance still went on.

How or by whom the terrible spectacle in that chamber of death was first discovered we are not told. All we know, from the reports of the negroes, is, that Captain Wilde, who seemed stupefied at first, suddenly passed into a state of excitement little short of distraction,—now raving, as if to an imaginary listener, and then questioning and threatening those about him with incoherent violence. To these simple observers such conduct was entirely incomprehensible; but we may easily suppose that at this moment the unfortunate man first realized the fearful nature of the circumstances which surrounded him, and perceived the abyss which had yawned so suddenly at his feet. And no wonder that he shrank back from the prospect, overwhelmed for the moment with consternation and despair,—not the prospect of death, but of a degradation far worse to the proud spirit of the Kentucky gentleman, on whose good name even political hatred had never been able to fix a stain.

The terrified negroes carried the alarm to the nearest neighbors, and soon the report of this appalling occurrence was

flying like lightning toward the utmost bounds of the county. The first stranger who reached the scene of death was Mr. Summers, formerly an intimate friend of Captain Wilde. When he entered the room, he found the poor gentleman on his knees beside the body of his child, with his face buried in the bed-clothes. At the sound of footsteps he raised his wild, tearless eyes, exclaiming, "My God! my God! Mr. Summers, my wife has been murdered here, in my own room, and it will be laid on me!" Shocked by the almost insane excitement of his old friend, and sensible of the imprudence of his words, Summers begged him to compose himself, pointing out the danger of such language. But the terrible thought had mastered his mind with a monomaniacal power, and to every effort at consolation from those who successively came in the only reply was, "Oh, my God, it will all be laid upon me!" Fortunately, those who heard these expressions were old friends, who, although they had been long unfamiliar, knew the native uprightness of the man, and still felt kindly toward one whose estrangement they knew was the effect of weak submission to the dictation of his wife, not the result of any change in his own feelings. They regarded his wild words as only the incoherent utterances of a mind bewildered by horror, and were anxious to put an end to the harrowing scene, and remove the stricken man as soon as possible from the observation of a mixed crowd that was now rapidly assembling from all directions, many of whom knew Captain Wilde only in his unpopular capacity of exciseman, and would therefore be apt

to suspect a darker explanation of his strange behavior.

So shocking had been the sight presented to their eyes, on entering the room, that hitherto no one had had sufficient presence of mind to examine the bodies closely; but at last Mr. Summers, cooler than the rest, approached to raise that of Mrs. Wilde, and then, for the first time, perceived the bandage about her neck. It proved to be *a white silk neckerchief*, which Summers removed and began to examine. As he did so, his face was seen to grow suddenly pale as death. All pressed anxiously forward to see, and a silent, but fearfully significant look passed round the circle; for in one corner, embroidered in large letters, was the name of *Cyril Wilde*. As silently every eye sought the devoted man, and on many countenances the look of doubt settled at once into one of conviction, when they saw that he wore no cravat; and to many ears the heart-broken moan of the wretched husband and father, which a moment before seemed only the foreboding of over-sensitive innocence, now sounded like the voice of self-accusing guilt. So great is the power of imagination in modifying our beliefs!

After such a discovery an arrest followed as a matter of course; and a popular feeling adverse to the accused quickly manifested itself in the community. But it is pleasant to know, that, in spite of all appearances, many of Captain Wilde's old friends never lost faith in his innocence, or hesitated to renew in his hour of adversity the kindly relations that had existed before his marriage; while his own kindred stood by him and bravely fought

his hopeless battle to the last,—employing as his advocate the celebrated John Breckenridge, who was then almost without a rival at the Kentucky bar. But, on the other hand, his wife's family pursued their unfortunate relative with a savageness of hatred hardly to be paralleled. Having hunted him to the very foot of the scaffold, their persevering malice seemed unsated even by the sight of their victim suspended as a felon before their very eyes; for it was reported, at the time, that two of the murdered woman's brothers were seen upon the ground during the execution.

And now it was that the unpopularity resulting from Captain Wilde's official employment manifested its most baleful effects. Had he possessed at this crisis the same general good-will he had enjoyed four years before, he might have bid defiance to the rage of his enemies, and have escaped, in spite of all the suspicious circumstances by which he stood environed. For the general drift of sentiment in the West has always been against capital penalties, and it is next to impossible to carry such penalties into effect against a popular favorite. In a country like this we might as soon expect to see the hands of a clock move in a direction contrary to the machinery by which it is governed, as a jury to run counter to plainly declared popular feelings. There may now and then be instances of their acquitting contrary to the general sentiment, where that sentiment is unimpassioned; but we much doubt whether there has ever occurred a single example of a jury convicting a person in whose favor the sympathy of a whole community was warmly and earnestly expressed. Of such

sympathy Captain Wilde had none; for to the great majority he was known only as the exciseman, and as such was an object of hostility. Not that this hostility at any time took the form of insult and abuse,—for we are proud to say that outside of the large towns such disgraceful exhibitions of feeling are unknown,—but it left the minds of the general mass liable to be operated on by all the suspicious circumstances of the case, and by the slanders of the personal enemies of the accused.

On the 23d of November, an immense crowd of people, both men and women, were assembled in the court-house at – to witness a trial which was to fix a dark stain on the judicial annals of Kentucky, and in which, for the thousandth time, a court of justice was to be led fatally astray by the accursed thing called Circumstantial Evidence, and made the instrument of that most deplorable of all human tragedies, a formal, legalized murder. It is one of the most glaring inconsistencies of our law, that it admits, in a trial where the life of a citizen is at stake, a species of testimony which it regards as too inconclusive and too liable to misconstruction to be allowed in a civil suit involving, it may be, less than the value of a single dollar. True, it is a favorite maxim of prosecutors, that "circumstances will not lie"; but it requires little acquaintance with the history of criminal trials to prove that circumstantial evidence has murdered more innocent men than all the false witnesses and informers who ever disgraced courts of justice by their presence; and the slightest reflection will convince us that this shallow sophism contains even less practical

truth than the general mass of proverbs and maxims, proverbially false though they be. For not only is the chance of falsehood, on the part of the witness who details the circumstances, greater, —since a false impression can be conveyed with far less risk of detection by distortion and exaggeration of a fact than by the invention of a direct lie,—but there is the additional danger of an honest misconception on his part; and every lawyer knows how hard it is for a dull witness to distinguish between the facts and his impressions of them, and how impossible it often is to make a witness detail the former without interpolating the latter. But the greatest risk of all is that the jury themselves may misconstrue the circumstances, and draw unwarranted conclusions therefrom. It is an awful assumption of responsibility to leap to conclusions in such cases, and the leap too often proves to have been made in the dark. God help the wretch who is arraigned on suspicious appearances before a jury who believe that "circumstances won't lie"! for the Justice that presides at such a trial is apt to prove as blind and capricious as Chance herself. In reviewing the present trial in particular, one may well feel puzzled to decide which of these deities presided over its conduct. A Greek or Roman would have said, Neither,—but a greater than either, —Fate; and we might almost adopt the old heathen notion, as we watch the downward course of the doomed gentleman from this point, and note how invariably every attempt to ward off destruction is defeated, as if by the persevering malice of some superior power. We shall soon see the most popular

and influential attorney of the State driven from the case by an awkward misunderstanding; another, hardly inferior, expire almost in the very act of pleading it; and, finally, when the real criminal comes forward, at the last moment, to avert the ruin which she has involuntarily drawn down upon the head of her beloved master, and take his place upon the scaffold, we shall behold her heroic offer of self-sacrifice frustrated by influences the most unexpected,—political influences which—with shame be it told—were sufficient to induce a governor of Kentucky to withhold the exercise of executive clemency, the most glorious prerogative intrusted to our chief magistrates, and which it ought to have been a most pleasing privilege to grant: for, incredible as it may seem, Governor – knew, when he signed the death-warrant, that the man he was consigning to an ignominious grave was innocent of the crime for which he was to suffer.

The trial was opened in the presence of a crowded assembly, among whom it was easy to discern that general conviction of the prisoner's guilt so chilling to the spirits of a defendant and his counsel, and so much deprecated by the latter, because he knows too well how far it goes toward a prejudgment of his cause. Several of the most prominent members of the bar had been retained by the family of Mrs. Wilde to assist the State's attorney in the prosecution. In the defence John Breckenridge stood alone, needing no help; for all knew that whatever man could do in behalf of his client would be done by him. The prisoner himself, upon whom all eyes were turned, appeared dejected, but calm,

like one who had resigned all hope. The ominous foreboding, which had so overcome him on the fatal morning of the murder, had never left him for a single moment. From that hour he had looked upon himself as doomed, and had yielded only a passive acquiescence in the measures of defence proposed by his friends, awaiting the fate which he regarded as inevitable with a patience almost apathetic. Adversity brought out in bold relief qualities that might have sustained a cause whose victories are martyrdoms, but how useless to one requiring active heroism!

All the damaging facts attending the discovery of the murder —the failure of any signs of a stranger's presence in the apartment, the peculiar behavior of the accused, the finding of his cravat on the neck of the corpse, his acknowledgment of having worn it on the previous day—were fully, but impartially, detailed by the witnesses for the Commonwealth. No one could deny that the circumstances were strongly against the prisoner: and these shadows, at best, and too often mere delusive mirages of truth, the law allows to be weighed against the life of a man. Against these shadows all the powers of Breckenridge were taxed to the uttermost; and he might have succeeded, for his eloquence was most persuasive, and his influence over the minds of the people nearly unlimited, had not a false witness appeared to add strength by deliberate perjuries to a case already strong. It was the ungrateful sister-in-law of the accused, who had owed to him a home and an asylum from the merited scorn of her family and the world, who now came forward to complete the

picture of her own detestable character, and put the finishing hand to her unhallowed work, by swearing away that life which her arts had rendered scarcely worth defending, could death have come unaccompanied by disgrace. With a manner betraying suppressed, but ill-concealed eagerness, and in language prompt and fluent, as if reciting by rote a carefully kept journal, she went on to detail every fault or neglect or impatient act of her relative, not sparing exposure of the most delicate domestic events, at the same time carefully suppressing all mention of his provocations. In reply to the question, whether she had ever witnessed any violence that led her to fear personal danger to her sister, she replied, that, on one occasion, Captain Wilde, being displeased at something in relation to the preparation of a meal, seized a large carving-knife and flung it at his wife, who only escaped further outrage by flying from the house. On another occasion, she remembered, he became furiously angry because her sister wished him to see some guests, and, seizing her by the hair, dragged her to the door of his study, and cast her into the hall so violently that she lay senseless upon the floor until accidentally discovered,—her husband not even calling assistance. It is easy to imagine what an effect such exposures of the habitual brutality of the man, narrated by a near relation of the sufferer, and interrupted at proper intervals by sobs and tears, would have upon an impulsive jury, obliged to derive their knowledge of the case wholly from such a source, and already strongly impressed by the circumstantial details with a presumption unfavorable

to the defendant. Now, since there were other persons in the court-house who had witnessed these two scenes of alleged maltreatment, it may seem strange that they were not brought forward to contradict this woman on those two points, which would at once have destroyed the effect of her entire testimony, —the maxim, *Falsum in uno, falsum in omnibus*, being always readily applied in such cases. Had this been done, a reaction of popular feeling would almost certainly have followed in favor of the accused, which might have borne him safely through, in spite of all the presumptive proof against him. For nothing is truer than Lord Clarendon's observation, that, "when a man is shown to be less guilty than he is charged, people are very apt to consider him more innocent than he may actually be." But in this case the falsehood was secured from exposure by its very magnitude, until it was too late for such exposure to be of any benefit to the prisoner. The persons who had beheld the scenes as they really occurred never thought of identifying them with brutal outrages, now narrated under oath, at which their hearts grew hard toward the unmanly perpetrator as they listened.

Against the strong array of facts and fictions presented by the prosecution the only circumstance that could be urged by the counsel for the prisoner was, that the child was murdered along with the mother; and this could only avail to strengthen a presumption of innocence, had innocence been otherwise rendered probable; but when a conviction of his guilt had been arrived at already, it merely served to increase the atrocity of his

crime, and to insure the enforcement of its penalty.

After a two days' struggle, in which every resource of reason and eloquence was exhausted by the defendant's counsel, the judge proceeded to a summing up which left the jury scarcely an option, even had they been inclined to acquit. The latter withdrew in the midst of a deep and solemn silence, while the respectful demeanor of the spectators showed that at last a feeling of pity was beginning to steal into their hearts for the unhappy gentleman, who still sat, as he had done during those two long days of suspense, with his face buried in his hands, as motionless as a statue. A profound stillness reigned in the hall during the absence of the jury, broken only occasionally by a stifled sob from some of the ladies present. After an absence of less than an hour the jury returned and handed in a written verdict; and as the fatal word "Guilty" fell from the white lips of the agitated clerk, the calmest face in that whole vast assembly was that of him whom it doomed to the ignominious death of a felon. And calm he had been ever since the dreadful morning of his arrest; for the vial of wrath had then been broken upon his head, and he had tasted the whole bitterness of an agony which can be endured but a short while, and can never be felt a second time. For, as intense heat quickly destroys the vitality of the nerves on which it acts, and as flesh once deeply cauterized by fire is thenceforth insensible to impressions of pain, so the soul over which one of the fiery agonies of life has passed can never experience a repetition thereof. Besides, it is well known that the anticipation

of an unjust accusation is far more agitating to a virtuous man than the reality, which is sure to arouse that strange martyr-spirit wherewith injustice always arms its victim, and supported by which alone even the most timid men have often suffered with fortitude, and the most unworthy died with dignity.

At that time the judicial arrangements of Kentucky allowed an appeal, in criminal cases, from the Circuit to the District Court; and it was determined to carry this cause before the latter tribunal, Mr. Breckenridge declaring that he believed he should be able to reverse the verdict. On what ground he founded this opinion we do not know: whether he felt convinced that the local prejudice against his client and the influence of his enemies in the County of – had mainly contributed to bring about the unfavorable result of the present hearing, and he hoped to escape these adverse agencies by a change of venue,—or whether he counted on a change of public feeling after the first burst of excitement had subsided, to bear him through,—or whether he had discovered the falsehood of the testimony of the sister-in-law,—or, finally, whether it was that he had obtained a clearer and more favorable insight into the case, and recognized grounds of hope therein,—it is impossible now to say. But it is certain, that to the defendant and his friends he declared his confidence of a final acquittal, if the cause were transferred to the appellate court; and John Breckenridge was not a man to boast emptily, or to hold out hopes which he knew could never be realized. But at this crisis occurred a strange

misunderstanding, which drove from the support of the wretched victim of Fate the only man who thoroughly understood the case in all its minutest details, and would have been most likely to conduct it to a happy termination. When the preparations for the last struggle were almost completed, and the time set for the final trial drew near, Mr. McC–, who, as Captain Wilde's brother-in-law, had been most active and zealous in his behalf, was informed by some officious intermeddler that Breckenridge had said in confidential conversation among his friends, "that the case was entirely desperate, that he had no hope whatever of altering the verdict by an appeal, and the family would save money by letting the law take its course, there being no doubt of the justice of the sentence." Mr. McC–, believing that he might rely on the word of his informant, unfortunately, without making any inquiry as to the truth of the tale, and without assigning any reason, wrote to Mr. Breckenridge a curt letter of dismissal, and immediately employed George – to conduct the further defence. This gentleman, surpassed by no man in Kentucky as a logician, lawyer, and orator, was inferior to the discarded attorney in that great requisite of a jury-lawyer, personal popularity, besides laboring under the disadvantage of being new to the case, and having but a short time to make himself acquainted with its details. Personal pique and professional punctilio, of course, withheld his predecessor from affording any further assistance or advice in a business from which he had been so summarily dismissed. We cannot now measure accurately the effect of

this change of counsel; we only know, that, at the time, it was considered most disastrous by those having the best opportunities of judging.

But if Mr. – went into the cause under this disadvantage, he was spurred on by the consideration that in his client he was defending a friend: for they had been friends in youth, and, though long separated, the tie had never been interrupted. Hence he threw himself into the case with an ardor which money could never have inspired, and in the course of the few remaining days had succeeded in mastering all its essential points.

The interest excited by this second trial was as deep and far more widely spread than by the first. Few proceedings of the kind in Kentucky ever called together a crowd at once so large and intelligent, a great proportion being lawyers, who had been induced to attend by the desire to witness what it was expected would be one of the most brilliant efforts of an eminent member of their fraternity.

The principal difference between the two trials was, that, on this occasion, the testimony of the sister-in-law was much damaged by the exposure both of her exaggerations and suppressions of important facts touching the incident at the breakfast-table. Having incautiously allowed herself to be drawn into particularizing so minutely as to fix the exact date, and so positively as to render retraction impossible, she was, to her own evident discomfiture, flatly contradicted by more than one of those present on that occasion, who described the scene

as it actually occurred. Of course, after such a revelation of untruthfulness, her whole testimony became liable to suspicion, the more violent that the falsehood was plainly intentional. Moreover, the defendant was now provided with evidence of the constant and intolerable provocations to which he had been subjected during the whole of his married life. Of this, however, the most moderate and guarded use was to be made; because, while it was necessary, by exposing the true character and habitual violence of his wife, to relieve the prisoner of that load of public indignation which had been excited against him on account of his alleged brutality, it was even more important that no strong resentment should be supposed to have grown up on his part against his tormentor. This delicate task was managed by the attorney with such consummate skill, that, when the evidence on both sides was closed, public sympathy, if not public conviction, had undergone a very perceptible change. The prosecutors, aware of this, felt the success of their case endangered, and exerted themselves to the utmost to prevent the tide, now almost in equilibrium, from ebbing back with a violence proportionate to that of its flow. But the argument even of their ablest champion, John –, seemed almost puerile, in comparison with this, the last effort of George –,—an effort which was long remembered, even less on account of its melancholy termination than for its extraordinary eloquence. The Kentuckians of that day were accustomed to hear Breckenridge, Clay, Talbot, Allen, and Grundy, all men of singular oratorical fame,—but never, we have

heard it affirmed, was a more moving appeal poured into the ears of a Kentucky jury. Availing himself of every resource of professional skill, he now demonstrated, to the full satisfaction of many, the utter inadequacy of the circumstantial evidence upon which so much stress had been laid to justify a conviction,—sifting and weighing carefully every fact and detail, and trying the conclusions that had been drawn therefrom by the most rigorous and searching logic,—and then, assailing the credibility of the testimony brought forward to prove the habitual cruelty of his client, he gave utterance to a withering torrent of invective and sarcasm, in which the character of the main hostile witness shrivelled and blackened like paper in a flame. Then—having been eight hours on his feet—he began to avail himself of that last dangerous resource which genius only may use,—the final arrow in the lawyer's quiver, which is so hard to handle rightly, and, failing, may prove worse than useless, but, sped by a strong hand and true aim, often tells decisively on a hesitating jury,—we mean a direct appeal to their feelings. Like a skilful leader who gathers all his exhausted squadrons when he sees the crisis of battle approaching, the great advocate seemed now to summon every overtaxed power of body and spirit to his aid, as he felt that the moment was come when he must wring an acquittal from the hearts of his hearers. Nor did either soul or intellect fail at the call. Higher and stronger surged the tide of passionate eloquence, until every one felt that the icy barrier was beginning to yield,—for tears were already seen on more than one of the faces now

leaning breathlessly forward from the jury-box to listen,—when all at once a dead silence fell throughout the hall: the voice whose organ-tones had been filling its remotest nook suddenly died away in a strange gurgle. Several physicians present immediately divined what had happened; nor were the multitude near kept long in doubt; for all saw, at the next moment, a crimson stream welling forth from those lips just now so eloquent,—checking their eloquence, alas, forever! It was quickly reported through the assembly that the speaker had ruptured one of the larger blood-vessels in the lungs. The accident was too dangerous for delay, and George – was borne almost insensible from the scene of his struggles and his triumphs, to reënter, as it proved, no more. He lived but three days longer,—long enough, however, to learn that he had sacrificed his life in vain, the jury having, after a lengthened consideration, affirmed the former verdict against his friend and client.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.