Braddon Mary Elizabeth

John Marchmont's Legacy. Volume 3 of 3

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
CAPTAIN ARUNDEL'S REVENGE

Edward Arundel went back to his lonely home with a settled purpose in his mind. He would leave Lincolnshire, – and immediately. He had no motive for remaining. It may be, indeed, that he had a strong motive for going away from the neighbourhood of Lawford Grange. There was a lurking danger in the close vicinage of that pleasant, old-fashioned country mansion, and the bright band of blue-eyed damsels who inhabited there.

"I will turn my back upon Lincolnshire for ever," Edward Arundel said to himself once more, upon his way homeward through the October twilight; "but before I go, the whole country shall know what I think of Paul Marchmont."

He clenched his fists and ground his teeth involuntarily as he thought this.

It was quite dark when he let himself in at the old-fashioned half-glass door that led into his humble sitting-room at Kemberling Retreat. He looked round the little chamber, which had been furnished forty years before by the proprietor of the cottage, and had served for one tenant after another, until it seemed as if the spindle-legged chairs and tables had grown attenuated and shadowy by much service. He looked at the simple room, lighted by a bright fire and a pair of wax-candles in antique silver candlesticks. The red firelight flickered and trembled upon the painted roses on the walls, on the obsolete engravings in clumsy frames of imitation-ebony and tarnished gilt. A silver tea-service and a Sèvres china cup and saucer, which Mrs. Arundel had sent to the cottage for her son's use, stood upon the small oval table: and a brown setter, a favourite of the young man's, lay upon the hearth-rug, with his chin upon his outstretched paws, blinking at the blaze.

As Mr. Arundel lingered in the doorway, looking at these things, an image rose before him, as vivid and distinct as any apparition of Professor Pepper's manufacture; and he thought of what that commonplace cottage-chamber might have been if his young wife had lived. He could fancy her bending over the low silver teapot, – the sprawling inartistic teapot, that stood upon quaint knobs like gouty feet, and had been long ago banished from the Dangerfield breakfast-table as utterly rococo and ridiculous. He conjured up the dear dead face, with faint blushes flickering amidst its lily pallor, and soft hazel eyes

looking up at him through the misty steam of the tea-table, innocent and virginal as the eyes of that mythic nymph who was wont to appear to the old Roman king. How happy she would have been! How willing to give up fortune and station, and to have lived for ever and ever in that queer old cottage, ministering to him and loving him!

Presently the face changed. The hazel-brown hair was suddenly lit up with a glitter of barbaric gold; the hazel eyes grew blue and bright; and the cheeks blushed rosy red. The young man frowned at this new and brighter vision; but he contemplated it gravely for some moments, and then breathed a long sigh, which was somehow or other expressive of relief.

"No," he said to himself, "I am *not* false to my poor lost girl; I do*not* forget her. Her image is dearer to me than any living creature. The mournful shadow of her face is more precious to me than the brightest reality."

He sat down in one of the spindle-legged arm-chairs, and poured out a cup of tea. He drank it slowly, brooding over the fire as he sipped the innocuous beverage, and did not deign to notice the caresses of the brown setter, who laid his cold wet nose in his master's hand, and performed a species of spirit-rapping upon the carpet with his tail.

After tea the young man rang the bell, which was answered by Mr. Morrison.

"Have I any clothes that I can hunt in, Morrison?" Mr. Arundel asked.

His factotum stared aghast at this question.

"You ain't a-goin' to 'unt, are you, Mr. Edward?" he inquired, anxiously.

"Never mind that. I asked you a question about my clothes, and I want a straightforward answer."

"But, Mr. Edward," remonstrated the old servant, "I don't mean no offence; and the 'orses is very tidy animals in their way; but if you're thinkin' of goin' across country, – and a pretty stiffish country too, as I've heard, in the way of bulfinches and timber, – neither of them 'orses has any more of a 'unter in him than I have."

"I know that as well as you do," Edward Arundel answered coolly; "but I am going to the meet at Marchmont Towers to-morrow morning, and I want you to look me out a decent suit of clothes – that's all. You can have Desperado saddled ready for me a little after eleven o'clock."

Mr. Morrison looked even more astonished than before. He knew his master's savage enmity towards Paul Marchmont; and yet that very master now deliberately talked of joining in an assembly which was to gather together for the special purpose of doing the same Paul Marchmont honour. However, as he afterwards remarked to the two fellow-servants with whom he sometimes condescended to be familiar, it wasn't his place to interfere or to ask any questions, and he had held his tongue accordingly.

Perhaps this respectful reticence was rather the result of

prudence than of inclination; for there was a dangerous light in Edward Arundel's eyes upon this particular evening which Mr. Morrison never had observed before.

The factotum said something about this later in the evening.

"I do really think," he remarked, "that, what with that young 'ooman's death, and the solitood of this most dismal place, and the rainy weather, – which those as says it always rains in Lincolnshire ain't far out, – my poor young master is not the man he were."

He tapped his forehead ominously to give significance to his words, and sighed heavily over his supper-beer.

* * * * *

The sun shone upon Paul Marchmont on the morning of the 18th of October. The autumn sunshine streamed into his bedchamber, and awoke the new master of Marchmont Towers. He opened his eyes and looked about him. He raised himself amongst the down pillows, and contemplated the figures upon the tapestry in a drowsy reverie. He had been dreaming of his poverty, and had been disputing a poor-rate summons with an impertinent tax-collector in the dingy passage of the house in Charlotte Street, Fitzroy Square. Ah! that horrible house had so long been the only scene of his life, that it had grown almost a part of his mind, and haunted him perpetually in his sleep, like a nightmare of brick and mortar, now that he was rich, and had

done with it for ever.

Mr. Marchmont gave a faint shudder, and shook off the influence of the bad dream. Then, propped up by the pillows, he amused himself by admiring his new bedchamber.

It was a handsome room, certainly – the very room for an artist and a sybarite. Mr. Marchmont had not chosen it without due consideration. It was situated in an angle of the house; and though its chief windows looked westward, being immediately above those of the western drawing-room, there was another casement, a great oriel window, facing the east, and admitting all the grandeur of the morning sun through painted glass, on which the Marchmont escutcheon was represented in gorgeous hues of sapphire and ruby, emerald and topaz, amethyst and aqua-marine. Bright splashes of these colours flashed and sparkled on the polished oaken floor, and mixed themselves with the Oriental gaudiness of a Persian carpet, stretched beneath the low Arabian bed, which was hung with ruby-coloured draperies that trailed upon the ground. Paul Marchmont was fond of splendour, and meant to have as much of it as money could buy. There was a voluptuous pleasure in all this finery, which only a parvenu could feel; it was the sharpness of the contrast between the magnificence of the present and the shabby miseries of the past that gave a piquancy to the artist's enjoyment of his new habitation.

All the furniture and draperies of the chamber had been made by Paul Marchmont's direction; but its chief beauty was the

tapestry that covered the walls, which had been worked, two hundred and fifty years before, by a patient chatelaine of the House of Marchmont. This tapestry lined the room on every side. The low door had been cut in it; so that a stranger going into that apartment at night, a little under the influence of the Marchmont cellars, and unable to register the topography of the chamber upon the tablet of his memory, might have been sorely puzzled to find an exit the next morning. Most tapestried chambers have a certain dismal grimness about them, which is more pleasant to the sightseer than to the constant inhabitant; but in this tapestry the colours were almost as bright and glowing to-day as when the fingers that had handled the variegated worsteds were still warm and flexible. The subjects, too, were of a more pleasant order than usual. No mailed ruffians or drapery-clad barbarians menaced the unoffending sleeper with uplifted clubs, or horrible bolts, in the very act of being launched from ponderous crossbows; no wicked-looking Saracens, with ferocious eyes and copper-coloured visages, brandished murderous scimitars above their turbaned heads. No; here all was pastoral gaiety and peaceful delight. Maidens, with flowing kirtles and crisped yellow hair, danced before great wagons loaded with golden wheat. Youths, in red and purple jerkins, frisked as they played the pipe and tabor. The Flemish horses dragging the heavy wain were hung with bells and garlands as for a rustic festival, and tossed their untrimmed manes into the air, and frisked and gamboled with their awkward legs, in

ponderous imitation of the youths and maidens. Afar off, in the distance, wonderful villages, very queer as to perspective, but all a-bloom with gaudy flowers and quaint roofs of bright-red tiles, stood boldly out against a bluer sky than the most enthusiastic pre-Raphaelite of to-day would care to send to the Academy in Trafalgar Square.

Paul Marchmont smiled at the youths and maidens, the laden wagons, the revellers, and the impossible village. He was in a humour to be pleased with everything to-day. He looked at his dressing-table, which stood opposite to him, in the deep oriel window. His valet – he had a valet now – had opened the great inlaid dressing-case, and the silver-gilt fittings reflected the crimson hues of the velvet lining, as if the gold had been flecked with blood. Glittering bottles of diamond-cut glass, that presented a thousand facets to the morning light, stood like crystal obelisks amid the litter of carved-ivory brushes and Sèvres boxes of pomatum; and one rare hothouse flower, white and fragile, peeped out of a slender crystal vase, against a background of dark shining leaves.

"It's better than Charlotte Street, Fitzroy Square," said Mr. Marchmont, throwing himself back amongst the pillows until such time as his valet should bring him a cup of strong tea to refresh and invigorate his nerves withal. "I remember the paper in my room: drab hexagons and yellow spots upon a brown ground. *So* pretty! And then the dressing-table: deal, gracefully designed; with a shallow drawer, in which my razors used to rattle like

castanets when I tried to pull it open; a most delicious table, exquisitely painted in stripes, olive-green upon stone colour, picked out with the favourite brown. Oh, it was a most delightful life; but it's over, thank Providence; it's over!"

Mr. Paul Marchmont thanked Providence as devoutly as if he had been the most patient attendant upon the Divine pleasure, and had never for one moment dreamed of intruding his own impious handiwork amid the mysterious designs of Omnipotence.

The sun shone upon the new master of Marchmont Towers. This bright October morning was not the very best for hunting purposes; for there was a fresh breeze blowing from the north, and a blue unclouded sky. But it was most delightful weather for the breakfast, and the assembling on the lawn, and all the pleasant preliminaries of the day's sport. Mr. Paul Marchmont, who was a thorough-bred Cockney, troubled himself very little about the hunt as he basked in that morning light. He only thought that the sun was shining upon him, and that he had come at last – no matter by what crooked ways – to the realisation of his great day-dream, and that he was to be happy and prosperous for the rest of his life.

He drank his tea, and then got up and dressed himself. He wore the conventional "pink," the whitest buckskins, the most approved boots and tops; and he admired himself very much in the cheval glass when this toilet was complete. He had put on the dress for the gratification of his vanity, rather than from

any serious intention of doing what he was about as incapable of doing, as he was of becoming a modern Rubens or a new Raphael. He would receive his friends in this costume, and ride to cover, and follow the hounds, perhaps, – a little way. At any rate, it was very delightful to him to play the country gentleman; and he had never felt so much a country gentleman as at this moment, when he contemplated himself from head to heel in his hunting costume.

At ten o'clock the guests began to assemble; the meet was not to take place until twelve, so that there might be plenty of time for the breakfast.

I don't think Paul Marchmont ever really knew what took place at that long table, at which he sat for the first time in the place of host and master. He was intoxicated from the first with the sense of triumph and delight in his new position; and he drank a great deal, for he drank unconsciously, emptying his glass every time it was filled, and never knowing who filled it, or what was put into it. By this means he took a very considerable quantity of various sparkling and effervescing wines; sometimes hock, sometimes Moselle, very often champagne, to say nothing of a steady undercurrent of unpronounceable German hocks and crusted Burgundies. But he was not drunk after the common fashion of mortals; he could not be upon this particular day. He was not stupid, or drowsy, or unsteady upon his legs; he was only preternaturally excited, looking at everything through a haze of dazzling light, as if all the gold of his newly-acquired fortune had

been melted into the atmosphere.

He knew that the breakfast was a great success; that the long table was spread with every delicious comestible that the science of a first-rate cook, to say nothing of Fortnum and Mason, could devise; that the profusion of splendid silver, the costly china, the hothouse flowers, and the sunshine, made a confused mass of restless glitter and glowing colour that dazzled his eyes as he looked at it. He knew that everybody courted and flattered him, and that he was almost stifled by the overpowering sense of his own grandeur. Perhaps he felt this most when a certain county magnate, a baronet, member of Parliament, and great landowner, rose, – primed with champagne, and rather thicker of utterance than a man should be who means to be in at the death, by-and-by, – and took the opportunity of – hum – expressing, in a few words, – haw – the very great pleasure which he – aw, yes – and he thought he might venture to remark, – aw – everybody about him – ha – felt on this most – arrah, arrah – interesting – er – occasion; and said a great deal more, which took a very long time to say, but the gist of which was, that all these country gentlemen were so enraptured by the new addition to their circle, and so altogether delighted with Mr. Paul Marchmont, that they really were at a loss to understand how it was they had ever managed to endure existence without him.

And then there was a good deal of rather unnecessary but very enthusiastic thumping of the table, whereat the costly glass shivered, and the hothouse blossoms trembled, amidst the

musical chinking of silver forks; while the foxhunters declared in chorus that the new owner of Marchmont Towers was a jolly good fellow, which —*i. e.*, the fact of his jollity – nobody could deny.

It was not a very fine demonstration, but it was a very hearty one. Moreover, these noisy foxhunters were all men of some standing in the county; and it is a proof of the artist's inherent snobbery that to him the husky voices of these half-drunken men were more delicious than the sweet soprano tones of an equal number of Pattis – penniless and obscure Pattis, that is to say – sounding his praises. He was lifted at last out of that poor artist-life, in which he had always been a groveller, – not so much for lack of talent as by reason of the smallness of his own soul, – into a new sphere, where everybody was rich and grand and prosperous, and where the pleasant pathways were upon the necks of prostrate slaves, in the shape of grooms and hirelings, respectful servants, and reverential tradespeople.

Yes, Paul Marchmont was more drunken than any of his guests; but his drunkenness was of a different kind to theirs. It was not the wine, but his own grandeur that intoxicated and besotted him.

These foxhunters might get the better of their drunkenness in half an hour or so; but his intoxication was likely to last for a very long time, unless he should receive some sudden shock, powerful enough to sober him.

Meanwhile the hounds were yelping and baying upon

the lawn, and the huntsmen and whippers-in were running backwards and forwards from the lawn to the servants' hall, devouring snacks of beef and ham, – a pound and a quarter or so at one sitting; or crunching the bones of a frivolous young chicken, – there were not half a dozen mouthfuls on such insignificant half-grown fowls; or excavating under the roof of a great game-pie; or drinking a quart or so of strong ale, or half a tumbler of raw brandy, *en passant*; and doing a great deal more in the same way, merely to beguile the time until the gentlefolks should appear upon the broad stone terrace.

It was half-past twelve o'clock, and Mr. Marchmont's guests were still drinking and speechifying. They had been on the point of making a move ever so many times; but it had happened every time that some gentleman, who had been very quiet until that moment, suddenly got upon his legs, and began to make swallowing and gasping noises, and to wipe his lips with a napkin; whereby it was understood that he was going to propose somebody's health. This had considerably lengthened the entertainment, and it seemed rather likely that the ostensible business of the day would be forgotten altogether. But at half-past twelve, the county magnate, who had bidden Paul Marchmont a stately welcome to Lincolnshire, remembered that there were twenty couple of impatient hounds scratching up the turf in front of the long windows of the banquet-chamber, while as many eager young tenant-farmers, stalwart yeomen, well-to-do butchers, and a herd of tag-rag and bobtail, were pining for

the sport to begin; – at last, I say, Sir Lionel Boport remembered this, and led the way to the terrace, leaving the renegades to repose on the comfortable sofas lurking here and there in the spacious rooms. Then the grim stone front of the house was suddenly lighted up into splendour. The long terrace was one blaze of "pink," relieved here and there by patches of sober black and forester's green. Amongst all these stalwart, florid-visaged country gentlemen, Paul Marchmont, very elegant, very picturesque, but extremely unsportsmanlike, the hero of the hour, walked slowly down the broad stone steps amidst the vociferous cheering of the crowd, the snapping and yelping of impatient hounds, and the distant braying of a horn.

It was the crowning moment of his life; the moment he had dreamed of again and again in the wretched days of poverty and obscurity. The scene was scarcely new to him, – he had acted it so often in his imagination; he had heard the shouts and seen the respectful crowd. There was a little difference in detail; that was all. There was no disappointment, no shortcoming in the realisation; as there so often is when our brightest dreams are fulfilled, and the one great good, the all-desired, is granted to us. No; the prize was his, and it was worth all that he had sacrificed to win it.

He looked up, and saw his mother and his sisters in the great window over the porch. He could see the exultant pride in his mother's pale face; and the one redeeming sentiment of his nature, his love for the womankind who depended upon him,

stirred faintly in his breast, amid the tumult of gratified ambition and selfish joy.

This one drop of unselfish pleasure filled the cup to the brim. He took off his hat and waved it high up above his head in answer to the shouting of the crowd. He had stopped halfway down the flight of steps to bow his acknowledgment of the cheering. He waved his hat, and the huzzas grew still louder; and a band upon the other side of the lawn played that familiar and triumphant march which is supposed to apply to every living hero, from a Wellington just come home from Waterloo, to the winner of a boat-race, or a patent-starch proprietor newly elected by an admiring constituency.

There was nothing wanting. I think that in that supreme moment Paul Marchmont quite forgot the tortuous and perilous ways by which he had reached this all-glorious goal. I don't suppose the young princes smothered in the Tower were ever more palpably present in Tyrant Richard's memory than when the murderous usurper grovelled in Bosworth's miry clay, and knew that the great game of life was lost. It was only when Henry the Eighth took away the Great Seal that Wolsey was able to see the foolishness of man's ambition. In that moment memory and conscience, never very wakeful in the breast of Paul Marchmont, were dead asleep, and only triumph and delight reigned in their stead. No; there was nothing wanting. This glory and grandeur paid him a thousandfold for his patience and self-abnegation during the past year.

He turned half round to look up at those eager watchers at the window.

Good God! It was his sister Lavinia's face he saw; no longer full of triumph and pleasure, but ghastly pale, and staring at someone or something horrible in the crowd. Paul Marchmont turned to look for this horrible something the sight of which had power to change his sister's face; and found himself confronted by a young man, – a young man whose eyes flamed like coals of fire, whose cheeks were as white as a sheet of paper, and whose firm lips were locked as tightly as if they had been chiseled out of a block of granite.

This man was Edward Arundel, – the young widower, the handsome soldier, – whom everybody remembered as the husband of poor lost Mary Marchmont.

He had sprung out from amidst the crowd only one moment before, and had dashed up the steps of the terrace before any one had time to think of hindering him or interfering with him. It seemed to Paul Marchmont as if his foe must have leaped out of the solid earth, so sudden and so unlooked-for was his coming. He stood upon the step immediately below the artist; but as the terrace-steps were shallow, and as he was taller by half a foot than Paul, the faces of the two men were level, and they confronted each other.

The soldier held a heavy hunting-whip in his hand – no foppish toy, with a golden trinket for its head, but a stout handle of stag-horn, and a formidable leathern thong. He held this whip in his

strong right hand, with the thong twisted round the handle; and throwing out his left arm, nervous and muscular as the limb of a young gladiator, he seized Paul Marchmont by the collar of that fashionably-cut scarlet coat which the artist had so much admired in the cheval-glass that morning.

There was a shout of surprise and consternation from the gentlemen on the terrace and the crowd upon the lawn, a shrill scream from the women; and in the next moment Paul Marchmont was writhing under a shower of blows from the hunting-whip in Edward Arundel's hand. The artist was not physically brave, yet he was not such a cur as to submit unresistingly to this hideous disgrace; but the attack was so sudden and unexpected as to paralyse him – so rapid in its execution as to leave him no time for resistance. Before he had recovered his presence of mind; before he knew the meaning of Edward Arundel's appearance in that place; even before he could fully realise the mere fact of his being there, – the thing was done; he was disgraced for ever. He had sunk in that one moment from the very height of his new grandeur to the lowest depth of social degradation.

"Gentlemen!" Edward Arundel cried, in a loud voice, which was distinctly heard by every member of the gaping crowd, "when the law of the land suffers a scoundrel to prosper, honest men must take the law into their own hands. I wished you to know my opinion of the new master of Marchmont Towers; and I think I've expressed it pretty clearly. I know him to be a most

consummate villain; and I give you fair warning that he is no fit associate for honourable men. Good morning."

Edward Arundel lifted his hat, bowed to the assembly, and then ran down the steps. Paul Marchmont, livid, and foaming at the mouth, rushed after him, brandishing his clenched fists, and gesticulating in impotent rage; but the young man's horse was waiting for him at a few paces from the terrace, in the care of a butcher's apprentice, and he was in the saddle before the artist could overtake him.

"I shall not leave Kemberling for a week, Mr. Marchmont," he called out; and then he walked his horse away, holding himself erect as a dart, and staring defiance at the crowd.

I am sorry to have to testify to the fickle nature of the British populace; but I am bound to own that a great many of the stalwart yeomen who had eaten game-pies and drunk strong liquors at Paul Marchmont's expense not half an hour before, were base enough to feel an involuntary admiration for Edward Arundel, as he rode slowly away, with his head up and his eyes flaming. There is seldom very much genuine sympathy for a man who has been horsewhipped; and there is a pretty universal inclination to believe that the man who inflicts chastisement upon him must be right in the main. It is true that the tenant-farmers, especially those whose leases were nearly run out, were very loud in their indignation against Mr. Arundel, and one adventurous spirit made a dash at the young man's bridle as he went by; but the general feeling was in favour of the conqueror, and there was

a lack of heartiness even in the loudest expressions of sympathy.

The crowd made a lane for Paul Marchmont as he went back to the house, white and helpless, and sick with shame.

Several of the gentlemen upon the terrace came forward to shake hands with him, and to express their indignation, and to offer any friendly service that he might require of them by-and-by, – such as standing by to see him shot, if he should choose an old-fashioned mode of retaliation; or bearing witness against Edward Arundel in a law-court, if Mr. Marchmont preferred to take legal measures. But even these men recoiled when they felt the cold dampness of the artist's hands, and saw that *he had been frightened*. These sturdy, uproarious foxhunters, who braved the peril of sudden death every time they took a day's sport, entertained a sovereign contempt for a man who *could* be frightened of anybody or anything. They made no allowance for Paul Marchmont's Cockney education; they were not in the dark secrets of his life, and knew nothing of his guilty conscience; and it was *that*which had made him more helpless than a child in the fierce grasp of Edward Arundel.

So one by one, after this polite show of sympathy, the rich man's guests fell away from him; and the yelping hounds and the cantering horses left the lawn before Marchmont Towers; the sound of the brass band and the voices of the people died away in the distance; and the glory of the day was done.

Paul Marchmont crawled slowly back to that luxurious bedchamber which he had left only a few hours before, and,

throwing himself at full length upon the bed, sobbed like a frightened child.

He was panic-stricken; not because of the horsewhipping, but because of a sentence that Edward Arundel had whispered close to his ear in the midst of the struggle.

"I know *everything*," the young man had said; "I know the secrets you hide in the pavilion by the river!"

CHAPTER II
THE DESERTED CHAMBERS

Edward Arundel kept his word. He waited for a week and upwards, but

Paul Marchmont made no sign; and after having given him three days'

grace over and above the promised time, the young man abandoned

Kemberling Retreat, for ever, as he thought, and went away from

Lincolnshire.

He had waited; hoping that Paul Marchmont would try to retaliate, and that some desperate struggle, physical or legal, – he scarcely cared which, – would occur between them. He would have courted any hazard which might have given him some chance of revenge. But nothing happened. He sent out Mr. Morrison to beat up information about the master of Marchmont Towers; and the factotum came back with the intelligence that Mr. Marchmont was ill, and would see no one – "leastways" excepting his mother and Mr. George Weston.

Edward Arundel shrugged his shoulders when he heard these tidings.

"What a contemptible cur the man is!" he thought. "There was

a time when I could have suspected him of any foul play against my lost girl. I know him better now, and know that he is not even capable of a great crime. He was only strong enough to stab his victim in the dark, with lying paragraphs in newspapers, and dastardly hints and inuendoes."

It would have been only perhaps an act of ordinary politeness had Edward Arundel paid a farewell visit to his friends at the Grange. But he did not go near the hospitable old house. He contented himself with writing a cordial letter to Major Lawford, thanking him for his hospitality and kindness, and referring, vaguely enough, to the hope of a future meeting.

He despatched this letter by Mr. Morrison, who was in very high spirits at the prospect of leaving Kemberling, and who went about his work with almost boyish activity in the exuberance of his delight. The valet worked so briskly as to complete all necessary arrangements in a couple of days; and on the 29th of October, late in the afternoon, all was ready, and he had nothing to do but to superintend the departure of the two horses from the Kemberling railway-station, under the guardianship of the lad who had served as Edward's groom.

Throughout that last day Mr. Arundel wandered here and there about the house and garden that so soon were to be deserted. He was dreadfully at a loss what to do with himself, and, alas! it was not to-day only that he felt the burden of his hopeless idleness. He felt it always; a horrible load, not to be cast away from him. His life had been broken off short,

as it were, by the catastrophe which had left him a widower before his honeymoon was well over. The story of his existence was abruptly broken asunder; all the better part of his life was taken away from him, and he did not know what to do with the blank and useless remnant. The ravelled threads of a once-harmonious web, suddenly wrenched in twain, presented a mass of inextricable confusion; and the young man's brain grew dizzy when he tried to draw them out, or to consider them separately.

His life was most miserable, most hopeless, by reason of its emptiness. He had no duty to perform, no task to achieve. That nature must be utterly selfish, entirely given over to sybarite rest and self-indulgence, which does not feel a lack of something wanting these, – a duty or a purpose. Better to be Sisyphus toiling up the mountain-side, than Sisyphus with the stone taken away from him, and no hope of ever reaching the top. I heard a man once – a bill-sticker, and not by any means a sentimental or philosophical person – declare that he had never known real prosperity until he had thirteen orphan grandchildren to support; and surely there was a universal moral in that bill-sticker's confession. He had been a drunkard before, perhaps, – he didn't say anything about that, – and a reprobate, it may be; but those thirteen small mouths clamoring for food made him sober and earnest, brave and true. He had a duty to do, and was happy in its performance. He was wanted in the world, and he was somebody. From Napoleon III., holding the destinies of civilised Europe in his hands, and debating whether he shall re-create Poland or

build a new boulevard, to Paterfamilias in a Government office, working for the little ones at home, – and from Paterfamilias to the crossing-sweeper, who craves his diurnal halfpenny from busy citizens, tramping to their daily toil, – every man has his separate labour and his different responsibility. For ever and for ever the busy wheel of life turns round; but duty and ambition are the motive powers that keep it going.

Edward Arundel felt the barrenness of his life, now that he had taken the only revenge which was possible for him upon the man who had persecuted his wife. *That* had been a rapturous but brief enjoyment. It was over. He could do no more to the man; since there was no lower depth of humiliation – in these later days, when pillories and whipping-posts and stocks are exploded from our market-places – to which a degraded creature could descend. No; there was no more to be done. It was useless to stop in Lincolnshire. The sad suggestion of the little slipper found by the water-side was but too true. Paul Marchmont had not murdered his helpless cousin; he had only tortured her to death. He was quite safe from the law of the land, which, being of a positive and arbitrary nature, takes no cognisance of indefinable offences. This most infamous man was safe; and was free to enjoy his ill-gotten grandeur – if he could take much pleasure in it, after the scene upon the stone terrace.

The only joy that had been left for Edward Arundel after his retirement from the East India Company's service was this fierce delight of vengeance. He had drained the intoxicating cup to the

dregs, and had been drunken at first in the sense of his triumph. But he was sober now; and he paced up and down the neglected garden beneath a chill October sky, crunching the fallen leaves under his feet, with his arms folded and his head bent, thinking of the barren future. It was all bare, – a blank stretch of desert land, with no city in the distance; no purple domes or airy minarets on the horizon. It was in the very nature of this young man to be a soldier; and he was nothing if not a soldier. He could never remember having had any other aspiration than that eager thirst for military glory. Before he knew the meaning of the word "war," in his very infancy, the sound of a trumpet or the sight of a waving banner, a glittering weapon, a sentinel's scarlet coat, had moved him to a kind of rapture. The unvarnished schoolroom records of Greek and Roman warfare had been as delightful to him as the finest passages of a Macaulay or a Froude, a Thiers or Lamartine. He was a soldier by the inspiration of Heaven, as all great soldiers are. He had never known any other ambition, or dreamed any other dream. Other lads had talked of the bar, and the senate, and *their* glories. Bah! how cold and tame they seemed! What was the glory of a parliamentary triumph, in which words were the only weapons wielded by the combatants, compared with a hand-to-hand struggle, ankle deep in the bloody mire of a crowded trench, or a cavalry charge, before which a phalanx of fierce Affghans fled like frightened sheep upon a moor! Edward Arundel was a soldier, like the Duke of Wellington or Sir Colin Campbell, – one writes the

old romantic name involuntarily, because one loves it best, – or Othello. The Moor's first lamentation when he believes that Desdemona is false, and his life is broken, is that sublime farewell to all the glories of the battle-field. It was almost the same with Edward Arundel. The loss of his wife and of his captaincy were blent and mingled in his mind and he could only bewail the one great loss which left life most desolate.

He had never felt the full extent of his desolation until now; for heretofore he had been buoyed up by the hope of vengeance upon Paul Marchmont; and now that his solitary hope had been realised to the fullest possible extent, there was nothing left, – nothing but to revoke the sacrifice he had made, and to regain his place in the Indian army at any cost.

He tried not to think of the possibility of this. It seemed to him almost an infidelity towards his dead wife to dream of winning honours and distinction, now that she, who would have been so proud of any triumph won by him, was for ever lost.

So, under the grey October sky he paced up and down upon the grass-grown pathways, amidst the weeds and briars, the brambles and broken branches that crackled as he trod upon them; and late in the afternoon, when the day, which had been sunless and cold, was melting into dusky twilight, he opened the low wooden gateway and went out into the road. An impulse which he could not resist took him towards the river-bank and the wood behind Marchmont Towers. Once more, for the last time in his life perhaps, he went down to that lonely shore. He went

to look at the bleak unlovely place which had been the scene of his betrothal.

It was not that he had any thought of meeting Olivia Marchmont; he had dismissed her from his mind ever since his last visit to the lonely boat-house. Whatever the mystery of her life might be, her secret lay at the bottom of a black depth which the impetuous soldier did not care to fathom. He did not want to discover that hideous secret. Tarnished honour, shame, falsehood, disgrace, lurked in the obscurity in which John Marchmont's widow had chosen to enshroud her life. Let them rest. It was not for him to drag away the curtain that sheltered his kinswoman from the world.

He had no thought, therefore, of prying into any secrets that might be hidden in the pavilion by the water. The fascination that lured him to the spot was the memory of the past. He could not go to Mary's grave; but he went, in as reverent a spirit as he would have gone thither, to the scene of his betrothal, to pay his farewell visit to the spot which had been for ever hallowed by the confession of her innocent love.

It was nearly dark when he got to the river-side. He went by a path which quite avoided the grounds about Marchmont Towers, – a narrow footpath, which served as a towing-path sometimes, when some black barge crawled by on its way out to the open sea. To-night the river was hidden by a mist, – a white fog, – that obscured land and water; and it was only by the sound of the horses' hoofs that Edward Arundel had warning to step

aside, as a string of them went by, dragging a chain that grated on the pebbles by the river-side.

"Why should they say my darling committed suicide?" thought Edward Arundel, as he groped his way along the narrow pathway. "It was on such an evening as this that she ran away from home. What more likely than that she lost the track, and wandered into the river? Oh, my own poor lost one, God grant it was so! God grant it was by His will, and not your own desperate act, that you were lost to me!"

Sorrowful as the thought of his wife's death was to him, it soothed him to believe that death might have been accidental. There was all the difference betwixt sorrow and despair in the alternative.

Wandering ignorantly and helplessly through this autumnal fog, Edward Arundel found himself at the boat-house before he was aware of its vicinity.

There was a light gleaming from the broad north window of the painting-room, and a slanting line of light streamed out of the half-open door. In this lighted doorway Edward saw the figure of a girl, – an unkempt, red-headed girl, with a flat freckled face; a girl who wore a lavender-cotton pinafore and hob-nailed boots, with a good deal of brass about the leathern fronts, and a redundancy of rusty leathern boot-lace twisted round the ankles.

The young man remembered having seen this girl once in the village of Kemberling. She had been in Mrs. Weston's service as a drudge, and was supposed to have received her education in

the Swampington union.

This young lady was supporting herself against the half-open door, with her arms a-kimbo, and her hands planted upon her hips, in humble imitation of the matrons whom she had been wont to see lounging at their cottage-doors in the high street of Kemberling, when the labours of the day were done.

Edward Arundel started at the sudden apparition of this damsel.

"Who are you, girl?" he asked; "and what brings you to this place?"

He trembled as he spoke. A sudden agitation had seized upon him, which he had no power to account for. It seemed as if Providence had brought him to this spot to-night, and had placed this ignorant country-girl in his way, for some special purpose. Whatever the secrets of this place might be, he was to know them, it appeared, since he had been led here, not by the promptings of curiosity, but only by a reverent love for a scene that was associated with his dead wife.

"Who are you, girl?" he asked again.

"Oi be Betsy Murrel, sir," the damsel answered; "some on 'em calls me

'Wuk-us Bet;' and I be coom here to cle-an oop a bit."

"To clean up what?"

"The paa-intin' room. There's a de-al o' moock aboot, and aw'm to fettle oop, and make all toidy agen t' squire gets well."

"Are you all alone here?"

"All alo-an? Oh, yes, sir."

"Have you been here long?"

The girl looked at Mr. Arundel with a cunning leer, which was one of her "wuk-us" acquirements.

"Aw've bin here off an' on ever since t' squire ke-ame," she said.

"There's a deal o' cleanin' down 'ere."

Edward Arundel looked at her sternly; but there was nothing to be gathered from her stolid countenance after its agreeable leer had melted away. The young man might have scrutinised the figure-head of the black barge creeping slowly past upon the hidden river with quite as much chance of getting any information out of its play of feature.

He walked past the girl into Paul Marchmont's painting-room. Miss Betsy Murrel made no attempt to hinder him. She had spoken the truth as to the cleaning of the place, for the room smelt of soapsuds, and a pail and scrubbing-brush stood in the middle of the floor. The young man looked at the door behind which he had heard the crying of the child. It was ajar, and the stone-steps leading up to it were wet, bearing testimony to Betsy Murrel's industry.

Edward Arundel took the flaming tallow-candle from the table in the painting-room, and went up the steps into the pavilion. The girl followed, but she did not try to restrain him, or to interfere with him. She followed him with her mouth open, staring at him after the manner of her kind, and she looked the

very image of rustic stupidity.

With the flaring candle shaded by his left hand, Edward Arundel examined the two chambers in the pavilion. There was very little to reward his scrutiny. The two small rooms were bare and cheerless. The repairs that had been executed had only gone so far as to make them tolerably inhabitable, and secure from wind and weather. The furniture was the same that Edward remembered having seen on his last visit to the Towers; for Mary had been fond of sitting in one of the little rooms, looking out at the slow river and the trembling rushes on the shore. There was no trace of recent occupation in the empty rooms, no ashes in the grates. The girl grinned maliciously as Mr. Arundel raised the light above his head, and looked about him. He walked in and out of the two rooms. He stared at the obsolete chairs, the rickety tables, the dilapidated damask curtains, flapping every now and then in the wind that rushed in through the crannies of the doors and windows. He looked here and there, like a man bewildered; much to the amusement of Miss Betsy Murrel, who, with her arms crossed, and her elbows in the palms of her moist hands, followed him backwards and forwards between the two small chambers.

"There was some one living here a week ago," he said; "some one who had the care of a – "

He stopped suddenly. If he had guessed rightly at the dark secret, it was better that it should remain for ever hidden. This girl was perhaps more ignorant than himself. It was not for him

to enlighten her.

"Do you know if anybody has lived here lately?" he asked.

Betsy Murrel shook her head.

"Nobody has lived here – not that *oi* knows of," she replied; "not to take their victuals, and such loike. Missus brings her work down sometimes, and sits in one of these here rooms, while Muster Poll does his pictur' paa-intin'; that's all *oi* knows of."

Edward went back to the painting-room, and set down his candle. The mystery of those empty chambers was no business of his. He began to think that his cousin Olivia was mad, and that her outbursts of terror and agitation had been only the raving of a mad woman, after all. There had been a great deal in her manner during the last year that had seemed like insanity. The presence of the child might have been purely accidental; and his cousin's wild vehemence only a paroxysm of insanity. He sighed as he left Miss Murrel to her scouring. The world seemed out of joint; and he, whose energetic nature fitted him for the straightening of crooked things, had no knowledge of the means by which it might be set right.

"Good-bye, lonely place," he said; "good-bye to the spot where my young wife first told me of her love."

He walked back to the cottage, where the bustle of packing and preparation was all over, and where Mr. Morrison was entertaining a select party of friends in the kitchen. Early the next morning Mr. Arundel and his servant left Lincolnshire; the key of Kemberling Retreat was given up to the landlord; and a

wooden board, flapping above the dilapidated trellis-work of the porch, gave notice that the habitation was to be let.

CHAPTER III
TAKING IT QUIETLY

All the county, or at least all that part of the county within a certain radius of Marchmont Towers, waited very anxiously for Mr. Paul Marchmont to make some move. The horsewhipping business had given quite a pleasant zest, a flavour of excitement, a dash of what it is the fashion nowadays to call "sensation," to the wind-up of the hunting breakfast. Poor Paul's thrashing had been more racy and appetising than the finest olives that ever grew, and his late guests looked forward to a great deal more excitement and "sensation" before the business was done with. Of course Paul Marchmont would do something. He *must* make a stir; and the sooner he made it the better. Matters would have to be explained. People expected to know the *cause* of Edward Arundel's enmity; and of course the new master of the Towers would see the propriety of setting himself right in the eyes of his influential acquaintance, his tenantry, and retainers; especially if he contemplated standing for Swampington at the next general election.

This was what people said to each other. The scene at the hunting-breakfast was a most fertile topic of conversation. It was almost as good as a popular murder, and furnished scandalous paragraphs*ad infinitum* for the provincial papers, most of them

beginning, "It is understood – ," or "It has been whispered in our hearing that – ," or "Rochefoucault has observed that – ." Everybody expected that Paul Marchmont would write to the papers, and that Edward Arundel would answer him in the papers; and that a brisk and stirring warfare would be carried on in printer's-ink – at least. But no line written by either of the gentlemen appeared in any one of the county journals; and by slow degrees it dawned upon people that there was no further amusement to be got out of Paul's chastisement, and that the master of the Towers meant to take the thing quietly, and to swallow the horrible outrage, taking care to hide any wry faces he made during that operation.

Yes; Paul Marchmont let the matter drop. The report was circulated that he was very ill, and had suffered from a touch of brain-fever, which kept him a victim to incessant delirium until after Mr. Arundel had left the county. This rumour was set afloat by Mr. Weston the surgeon; and as he was the only person admitted to his brother-in-law's apartment, it was impossible for any one to contradict his assertion.

The fox-hunting squires shrugged their shoulders; and I am sorry to say that the epithets, "hound," "cur," "sneak," and "mongrel," were more often applied to Mr. Marchmont than was consistent with Christian feeling on the part of the gentlemen who uttered them. But a man who can swallow a sound thrashing, administered upon his own door-step, has to contend with the prejudices of society, and must take the consequences of being

in advance of his age.

So, while his new neighbours talked about him, Paul Marchmont lay in his splendid chamber, with the frisking youths and maidens staring at him all day long, and simpering at him with their unchanging faces, until he grew sick at heart, and began to loathe all this new grandeur, which had so delighted him a little time ago. He no longer laughed at the recollection of shabby Charlotte Street. He dreamt one night that he was back again in the old bedroom, with the painted deal furniture, and the hideous paper on the walls, and that the Marchmont-Towers magnificence had been only a feverish vision; and he was glad to be back in that familiar place, and was sorry on awaking to find that Marchmont Towers was a splendid reality.

There was only one faint red streak upon his shoulders, for the thrashing had not been a brutal one. It was *disgrace* Edward Arundel had wanted to inflict, not physical pain, the commonplace punishment with which a man corrects his refractory horse. The lash of the hunting-whip had done very little damage to the artist's flesh; but it had slashed away his manhood, as the sickle sweeps the flowers amidst the corn.

He could never look up again. The thought of going out of this house for the first time, and the horror of confronting the altered faces of his neighbours, was as dreadful to him as the anticipation of that awful exit from the Debtor's Door, which is the last step but one into eternity, must be to the condemned criminal.

"I shall go abroad," he said to his mother, when he made his

appearance in the western drawing-room, a week after Edward's departure. "I shall go on the Continent, mother; I have taken a dislike to this place, since that savage attacked me the other day."

Mrs. Marchmont sighed.

"It will seem hard to lose you, Paul, now that you are rich. You were so constant to us through all our poverty; and we might be so happy together now."

The artist was walking up and down the room, with his hands in the pockets of his braided velvet coat. He knew that in the conventional costume of a well-bred gentleman he showed to a disadvantage amongst other men; and he affected a picturesque and artistic style of dress, whose brighter hues and looser outlines lighted up his pale face, and gave a grace to his spare figure.

"You think it worth something, then, mother?" he said presently, half kneeling, half lounging in a deep-cushioned easy chair near the table at which his mother sat. "You think our money is worth something to us? All these chairs and tables, this great rambling house, the servants who wait upon us, and the carriages we ride in, are worth something, are they not? they make us happier, I suppose. I know I always thought such things made up the sum of happiness when I was poor. I have seen a hearse going away from a rich man's door, carrying his cherished wife, or his only son, perhaps; and I've thought, 'Ah, but he has forty thousand a year!' You are happier here than you were in Charlotte Street, eh, mother?"

Mrs. Marchmont was a Frenchwoman by birth, though she

had lived so long in London as to become Anglicised. She only retained a slight accent of her native tongue, and a good deal more vivacity of look and gesture than is common to Englishwomen. Her elder daughter was sitting on the other side of the broad fireplace. She was only a quieter and older likeness of Lavinia Weston.

"*Am* I happier?" exclaimed Mrs. Marchmont. "Need you ask me the question, Paul? But it is not so much for myself as for your sake that I value all this grandeur."

She held out her long thin hand, which was covered with rings, some old-fashioned and comparatively valueless, others lately purchased by her devoted son, and very precious. The artist took the shrunken fingers in his own, and raised them to his lips.

"I'm very glad that I've made you happy, mother," he said; "that's something gained, at any rate."

He left the fireplace, and walked slowly up and down the room, stopping now and then to look out at the wintry sky, or the flat expanse of turf below it; but he was quite a different creature to that which he had been before his encounter with Edward Arundel. The chairs and tables palled upon him. The mossy velvet pile of the new carpets seemed to him like the swampy ground of a morass. The dark-green draperies of Genoa velvet deepened into black with the growing twilight, and seemed as if they had been fashioned out of palls.

What was it worth, this fine house, with the broad flat before it? Nothing, if he had lost the respect and consideration of his

neighbours. He wanted to be a great man as well as a rich one. He wanted admiration and flattery, reverence and esteem; not from poor people, whose esteem and admiration were scarcely worth having, but from wealthy squires, his equals or his superiors by birth and fortune. He ground his teeth at the thought of his disgrace. He had drunk of the cup of triumph, and had tasted the very wine of life; and at the moment when that cup was fullest, it had been snatched away from him by the ruthless hand of his enemy.

Christmas came, and gave Paul Marchmont a good opportunity of playing the country gentleman of the olden time. What was the cost of a couple of bullocks, a few hogsheads of ale, and a waggon-load of coals, if by such a sacrifice the master of the Towers could secure for himself the admiration due to a public benefactor? Paul gave *carte blanche* to the old servants; and tents were erected on the lawn, and monstrous bonfires blazed briskly in the frosty air; while the populace, who would have accepted the bounties of a new Nero fresh from the burning of a modern Rome, drank to the health of their benefactor, and warmed themselves by the unlimited consumption of strong beer.

Mrs. Marchmont and her invalid daughter assisted Paul in his attempt to regain the popularity he had lost upon the steps of the western terrace. The two women distributed square miles of flannel and blanketing amongst greedy claimants; they gave scarlet cloaks and poke-bonnets to old women; they gave an insipid feast, upon temperance principles, to the children of the

National Schools. And they had their reward; for people began to say that this Paul Marchmont was a very noble fellow, after all, by Jove, sir and that fellow Arundel must have been in the wrong, sir; and no doubt Marchmont had his own reasons for not resenting the outrage, sir; and a great deal more to the like effect.

After this roasting of the two bullocks the wind changed altogether. Mr. Marchmont gave a great dinner-party upon New-Year's Day. He sent out thirty invitations, and had only two refusals. So the long dining-room was filled with all the notabilities of the district, and Paul held his head up once more, and rejoiced in his own grandeur. After all, one horsewhipping cannot annihilate a man with a fine estate and eleven thousand a year, if he knows how to make a splash with his money.

Olivia Marchmont shared in none of the festivals that were held. Her father was very ill this winter; and she spent a good deal of her time at Swampington Rectory, sitting in Hubert Arundel's room, and reading to him. But her presence brought very little comfort to the sick man; for there was something in his daughter's manner that filled him with inexpressible terror; and he would lie for hours together watching her blank face, and wondering at its horrible rigidity. What was it? What was the dreadful secret which had transformed this woman? He tormented himself perpetually with this question, but he could imagine no answer to it. He did not know the power which a master-passion has upon these strong-minded women, whose minds are strong because of their narrowness, and who are the

bonden slaves of one idea. He did not know that in a breast which holds no pure affection the master-fiend Passion rages like an all-devouring flame, perpetually consuming its victim. He did not know that in these violent and concentrative natures the line that separates reason from madness is so feeble a demarcation, that very few can perceive the hour in which it is passed.

Olivia Marchmont had never been the most lively or delightful of companions. The tenderness which is the common attribute of a woman's nature had not been given to her. She ought to have been a great man. Nature makes these mistakes now and then, and the victim expiates the error. Hence comes such imperfect histories as that of English Elizabeth and Swedish Christina. The fetters that had bound Olivia's narrow life had eaten into her very soul, and cankered there. If she could have been Edward Arundel's wife, she would have been the noblest and truest wife that ever merged her identity into that of another, and lived upon the refracted glory of her husband's triumphs. She would have been a Rachel Russell, a Mrs. Hutchinson, a Lady Nithisdale, a Madame de Lavalette. She would have been great by reason of her power of self-abnegation; and there would have been a strange charm in the aspect of this fierce nature attuned to harmonise with its master's soul, all the barbaric discords melting into melody, all the harsh combinations softening into perfect music; just as in Mr. Buckstone's most poetic drama we are bewitched by the wild huntress sitting at the feet of her lord, and admire her chiefly because we know that only that

one man upon all the earth could have had power to tame her. To any one who had known Olivia's secret, there could have been no sadder spectacle than this of her decay. The mind and body decayed together, bound by a mysterious sympathy. All womanly roundness disappeared from the spare figure, and Mrs. Marchmont's black dresses hung about her in loose folds. Her long, dead, black hair was pushed away from her thin face, and twisted into a heavy knot at the back of her head. Every charm that she had ever possessed was gone. The oldest women generally retain some traits of their lost beauty, some faint reflection of the sun that has gone down, to light up the soft twilight of age, and even glimmer through the gloom of death. But this woman's face retained no token of the past. No empty hull, with shattered bulwarks crumbled by the fury of fierce seas, cast on a desert shore to rot and perish there, was ever more complete a wreck than she was. Upon her face and figure, in every look and gesture, in the tone of every word she spoke, there was an awful something, worse than the seal of death. Little by little the miserable truth dawned upon Hubert Arundel. His daughter was mad! He knew this; but he kept the dreadful knowledge hidden in his own breast, – a hideous secret, whose weight oppressed him like an actual burden. He kept the secret; for it would have seemed to him the most cruel treason against his daughter to have confessed his discovery to any living creature, unless it should be absolutely necessary to do so. Meanwhile he set himself to watch Olivia, detaining her at the Rectory for a

week together, in order that he might see her in all moods, under all phases.

He found that there were no violent or outrageous evidences of this mental decay. The mind had given way under the perpetual pressure of one set of thoughts. Hubert Arundel, in his ignorance of his daughter's secrets, could not discover the cause of her decadence; but that cause was very simple. If the body is a wonderful and complex machine which must not be tampered with, surely that still more complex machine the mind must need careful treatment. If such and such a course of diet is fatal to the body's health, may not some thoughts be equally fatal to the health of the brain? may not a monotonous recurrence of the same ideas be above all injurious? If by reason of the peculiar nature of a man's labour, he uses one limb or one muscle more than the rest, strange bosses rise up to testify to that ill usage, the idle limbs wither, and the harmonious perfection of Nature gives place to deformity. So the brain, perpetually pressed upon, for ever strained to its utmost tension by the wearisome succession of thoughts, becomes crooked and one-sided, always leaning one way, continually tripping up the wretched thinker.

John Marchmont's widow had only one set of ideas. On every subject but that one which involved Edward Arundel and his fortunes her memory had decayed. She asked her father the same questions – commonplace questions relating to his own comfort, or to simple household matters, twenty times a day, always forgetting that he had answered her. She had that impatience as

to the passage of time which is one of the most painful signs of madness. She looked at her watch ten times an hour, and would wander out into the cheerless garden, indifferent to the bitter weather, in order to look at the clock in the church-steeple, under the impression that her own watch, and her father's, and all the time-keepers in the house, were slow.

She was sometimes restless, taking up one occupation after another, to throw all aside with equal impatience, and sometimes immobile for hours together. But as she was never violent, never in any way unreasonable, Hubert Arundel had not the heart to call science to his aid, and to betray her secret. The thought that his daughter's malady might be cured never entered his mind as within the range of possibility. There was nothing to cure; no delusions to be exorcised by medical treatment; no violent vagaries to be held in check by drugs and nostrums. The powerful intellect had decayed; its force and clearness were gone. No drugs that ever grew upon this earth could restore that which was lost.

This was the conviction which kept the Rector silent. It would have given him unutterable anguish to have told his daughter's secret to any living being; but he would have endured that misery if she could have been benefitted thereby. He most firmly believed that she could not, and that her state was irremediable.

"My poor girl!" he thought to himself; "how proud I was of her ten years ago! I can do nothing for her; nothing except to love and cherish her, and hide her humiliation from the world."

But Hubert Arundel was not allowed to do even this much

for the daughter he loved; for when Olivia had been with him a little more than a week, Paul Marchmont and his mother drove over to Swampington Rectory one morning and carried her away with them. The Rector then saw for the first time that his once strong-minded daughter was completely under the dominion of these two people, and that they knew the nature of her malady quite as well as he did. He resisted her return to the Towers; but his resistance was useless. She submitted herself willingly to her new friends, declaring that she was better in their house than anywhere else. So she went back to her old suite of apartments, and her old servant Barbara waited upon her; and she sat alone in dead John Marchmont's study, listening to the January winds shrieking in the quadrangle, the distant rooks calling to each other amongst the bare branches of the poplars, the banging of the doors in the corridor, and occasional gusts of laughter from the open door of the dining-room, – while Paul Marchmont and his guests gave a jovial welcome to the new year.

While the master of the Towers re-asserted his grandeur, and made stupendous efforts to regain the ground he had lost, Edward Arundel wandered far away in the depths of Brittany, travelling on foot, and making himself familiar with the simple peasants, who were ignorant of his troubles. He had sent Mr. Morrison down to Dangerfield with the greater part of his luggage; but he had not the heart to go back himself – yet awhile. He was afraid of his mother's sympathy, and he went away into the lonely Breton villages, to try and cure himself of his great grief, before

he began life again as a soldier. It was useless for him to strive against his vocation. Nature had made him a soldier, and nothing else; and wherever there was a good cause to be fought for, his place was on the battle-field.

CHAPTER IV
MISS LAWFORD SPEAKS HER MIND

Major Lawford and his blue-eyed daughters were not amongst those guests who accepted Paul Marchmont's princely hospitalities. Belinda Lawford had never heard the story of Edward's lost bride as he himself could have told it; but she had heard an imperfect version of the sorrowful history from Letitia, and that young lady had informed her friend of Edward's animus against the new master of the Towers.

"The poor dear foolish boy will insist upon thinking that Mr. Marchmont was at the bottom of it all," she had said in a confidential chat with Belinda, "somehow or other; but whether he was, or whether he wasn't, I'm sure I can't say. But if one attempts to take Mr. Marchmont's part with Edward, he does get so violent and go on so, that one's obliged to say all sorts of dreadful things about Mary's cousin for the sake of peace. But really, when I saw him one day in Kemberling, with a black velvet shooting-coat, and his beautiful smooth white hair and auburn moustache, I thought him most interesting. And so would you, Belinda, if you weren't so wrapped up in that doleful brother of mine."

Whereupon, of course, Miss Lawford had been compelled

to declare that she was not "wrapped up" in Edward, whatever state of feeling that obscure phrase might signify; and to express, by the vehemence of her denial, that, if anything, she rather detested Miss Arundel's brother. By-the-by, did you ever know a young lady who could understand the admiration aroused in the breast of other young ladies for that most uninteresting object, a *brother*? Or a gentleman who could enter with any warmth of sympathy into his friend's feelings respecting the auburn tresses or the Grecian nose of "a sister"? Belinda Lawford, I say, knew something of the story of Mary Arundel's death, and she implored her father to reject all hospitalities offered by Paul Marchmont.

"You won't go to the Towers, papa dear?" she said, with her hands clasped upon her father's arm, her cheeks kindling, and her eyes filling with tears as she spoke to him; "you won't go and sit at Paul Marchmont's table, and drink his wine, and shake hands with him? I know that he had something to do with Mary Arundel's death. He had indeed, papa. I don't mean anything that the world calls crime; I don't mean any act of open violence. But he was cruel to her, papa; he was cruel to her. He tortured her and tormented her until she – " The girl paused for a moment, and her voice faltered a little. "Oh, how I wish that I had known her, papa," she cried presently, "that I might have stood by her, and comforted her, all through that sad time!"

The Major looked down at his daughter with a tender smile, – a smile that was a little significant, perhaps, but full of love and

admiration.

"You would have stood by Arundel's poor little wife, my dear?" he said. "You would stand by her *now*, if she were alive, and needed your friendship?"

"I would indeed, papa," Miss Lawford answered resolutely.

"I believe it, my dear; I believe it with all my heart. You are a good girl, my Linda; you are a noble girl. You are as good as a son to me, my dear."

Major Lawford was silent for a few moments, holding his daughter in his arms and pressing his lips upon her broad forehead.

"You are fit to be a soldier's daughter, my darling," he said, "or – or a soldier's wife."

He kissed her once more, and then left her, sighing thoughtfully as he went away.

This is how it was that neither Major Lawford nor any of his family were present at those splendid entertainments which Paul Marchmont gave to his new friends. Mr. Marchmont knew almost as well as the Lawfords themselves why they did not come, and the absence of them at his glittering board made his bread bitter to him and his wine tasteless. He wanted these people as much as the others, – more than the others, perhaps, for they had been Edward Arundel's friends; and he wanted them to turn their backs upon the young man, and join in the general outcry against his violence and brutality. The absence of Major Lawford at the lighted banquet-table tormented this modern rich man as

the presence of Mordecai at the gate tormented Haman. It was not enough that all the others should come if these stayed away, and by their absence tacitly testified to their contempt for the master of the Towers.

He met Belinda sometimes on horseback with the old grey-headed groom behind her, a fearless young amazon, breasting the January winds, with her blue eyes sparkling, and her auburn hair blowing away from her candid face: he met her, and looked out at her from the luxurious barouche in which it was his pleasure to loll by his mother's side, half-buried amongst soft furry rugs and sleek leopard-skins, making the chilly atmosphere through which he rode odorous with the scent of perfumed hair, and smiling over cruelly delicious criticisms in newly-cut reviews. He looked out at this fearless girl whose friends so obstinately stood by Edward Arundel; and the cold contempt upon Miss Lawford's face cut him more keenly than the sharpest wind of that bitter January.

Then he took counsel with his womankind; not telling them his thoughts, fears, doubts, or wishes – it was not his habit to do that – but taking*their* ideas, and only telling them so much as it was necessary for them to know in order that they might be useful to him. Paul Marchmont's life was regulated by a few rules, so simple that a child might have learned them; indeed I regret to say that some children are very apt pupils in that school of philosophy to which the master of Marchmont Towers belonged, and cause astonishment to their elders by the precocity of their intelligence.

Mr. Marchmont might have inscribed upon a very small scrap of parchment the moral maxims by which he regulated his dealings with mankind.

"Always conciliate," said this philosopher. "Never tell an unnecessary lie. Be agreeable and generous to those who serve you. N.B. No good carpenter would allow his tools to get rusty. Make yourself master of the opinions of others, but hold your own tongue. Seek to obtain the maximum of enjoyment with the minimum of risk."

Such golden saws as these did Mr. Marchmont make for his own especial guidance; and he hoped to pass smoothly onwards upon the railway of life, riding in a first-class carriage, on the greased wheels of a very easy conscience. As for any unfortunate fellow-travellers pitched out of the carriage-window in the course of the journey, or left lonely and helpless at desolate stations on the way, Providence, and not Mr. Marchmont, was responsible for *their* welfare. Paul had a high appreciation of Providence, and was fond of talking – very piously, as some people said; very impiously, as others secretly thought – about the inestimable Wisdom which governed all the affairs of this lower world. Nowhere, according to the artist, had the hand of Providence been more clearly visible than in this matter about Paul's poor little cousin Mary. If Providence had intended John Marchmont's daughter to be a happy bride, a happy wife, the prosperous mistress of that stately habitation, why all that sad business of old Mr. Arundel's sudden illness, Edward's hurried journey, the

railway accident, and all the complications that had thereupon arisen? Nothing would have been easier than for Providence to have prevented all this; and then he, Paul, would have been still in Charlotte Street, Fitzroy Square, patiently waiting for a friendly lift upon the high-road of life. Nobody could say that he had ever been otherwise than patient. Nobody could say that he had ever intruded himself upon his rich cousins at the Towers, or had been heard to speculate upon his possible inheritance of the estate; or that he had, in short, done any thing but that which the best, truest, most conscientious and disinterested of mankind should do.

In the course of that bleak, frosty January, Mr. Marchmont sent his mother and his sister Lavinia to make a call at the Grange. The Grange people had never called upon Mrs. Marchmont; but Paul did not allow any flimsy ceremonial law to stand in his way when he had a purpose to achieve. So the ladies went to the Grange, and were politely received; for Miss Lawford and her mother were a great deal too innocent and noble-minded to imagine that these pale-faced, delicate-looking women could have had any part, either directly or indirectly, in that cruel treatment which had driven Edward's young wife from her home. Mrs. Marchmont and Mrs. Weston were kindly received, therefore; and in a little conversation with Belinda about birds, and dahlias, and worsted work, and the most innocent subjects imaginable, the wily Lavinia contrived to lead up to Miss Letitia Arundel, and thence, by the easiest conversational short-cut, to

Edward and his lost wife. Mrs. Weston was obliged to bring her cambric handkerchief out of her muff when she talked about her cousin Mary; but she was a clever woman, and she had taken to heart Paul's pet maxim about the folly of*unnecessary* lies; and she was so candid as to entirely disarm Miss Lawford, who had a schoolgirlish notion that every kind of hypocrisy and falsehood was outwardly visible in a servile and slavish manner. She was not upon her guard against those practised adepts in the art of deception, who have learnt to make that subtle admixture of truth and falsehood which defies detection; like some fabrics in whose woof silk and cotton are so cunningly blended that only a practised eye can discover the inferior material.

So when Lavinia dried her eyes and put her handkerchief back in her muff, and said, betwixt laughing and crying, —

"Now you know, my dear Miss Lawford, you mustn't think that I would for a moment pretend to be sorry that my brother has come into this fortune. Of course any such pretence as that would be ridiculous, and quite useless into the bargain, as it isn't likely anybody would believe me. Paul is a dear, kind creature, the best of brothers, the most affectionate of sons, and deserves any good fortune that could fall to his lot; but I am truly sorry for that poor little girl. I am truly sorry, believe me, Miss Lawford; and I only regret that Mr. Weston and I did not come to Kemberling sooner, so that I might have been a friend to the poor little thing; for then, you know, I might have prevented that foolish runaway match, out of which almost all the poor child's troubles arose. Yes, Miss

Lawford; I wish I had been able to befriend that unhappy child, although by my so doing Paul would have been kept out of the fortune he now enjoys – for some time, at any rate. I say for some time, because I do not believe that Mary Marchmont would have lived to be old, under the happiest circumstances. Her mother died very young; and her father, and her father's father, were consumptive."

Then Mrs. Weston took occasion, incidentally of course, to allude to her brother's goodness; but even then she was on her guard, and took care not to say too much.

"The worst actors are those who over-act their parts." That was another of Paul Marchmont's golden maxims.

"I don't know what my brother may be to the rest of the world," Lavinia said; "but I know how good he is to those who belong to him. I should be ashamed to tell you all he has done for Mr. Weston and me. He gave me this cashmere shawl at the beginning of the winter, and a set of sables fit for a duchess; though I told him they were not at all the thing for a village surgeon's wife, who keeps only one servant, and dusts her own best parlour."

And Mrs. Marchmont talked of her son; with no loud enthusiasm, but with a tone of quiet conviction that was worth any money to Paul. To have an innocent person, some one not in the secret, to play a small part in the comedy of his life, was a desideratum with the artist. His mother had always been this person, this unconscious performer, instinctively falling into the

action of the play, and shedding real tears, and smiling actual smiles, – the most useful assistant to a great schemer.

But during the whole of the visit nothing was said as to Paul's conduct towards his unhappy cousin; nothing was said either to praise or to exculpate; and when Mrs. Marchmont and her daughter drove away, in one of the new equipages which Paul had selected for his mother, they left only a vague impression in Belinda's breast. She didn't quite know what to think. These people were so frank and candid, they had spoken of Paul with such real affection, that it was almost impossible to doubt them. Paul Marchmont might be a bad man, but his mother and sister loved him, and surely they were ignorant of his wickedness.

Mrs. Lawford troubled herself very little about this unexpected morning call. She was an excellent, warm-hearted, domestic creature, and thought a great deal more about the grand question as to whether she should have new damask curtains for the drawing-room, or send the old ones to be dyed; or whether she should withdraw her custom from the Kemberling grocer, whose "best black" at four-and-sixpence was really now so very inferior; or whether Belinda's summer silk dress could be cut down into a frock for Isabella to wear in the winter evenings, – than about the rights or wrongs of that story of the horsewhipping which had been administered to Mr. Marchmont.

"I'm sure those Marchmont-Towers people seem very nice, my dear," the lady said to Belinda; "and I really wish your papa would go and dine there. You know I like him to dine out a good

deal in the winter, Linda; not that I want to save the housekeeping money, – only it is so difficult to vary the side-dishes for a man who has been accustomed to mess-dinners, and a French cook."

But Belinda stuck fast to her colours. She was a soldier's daughter, as her father said, and she was almost as good as a son. The Major meant this latter remark for very high praise; for the great grief of his life had been the want of a boy's brave face at his fireside. She was as good as a son; that is to say, she was braver and more outspoken than most women; although she was feminine and gentle withal, and by no means strong-minded. She would have fainted, perhaps, at the first sight of blood upon a battle-field; but she would have bled to death with the calm heroism of a martyr, rather than have been false to a noble cause.

"I think papa is quite right not to go to Marchmont Towers, mamma," she said; the artful minx omitted to state that it was by reason of her entreaties her father had stayed away. "I think he is quite right. Mrs. Marchmont and Mrs. Weston may be very nice, and of course it isn't likely *they* would be cruel to poor young Mrs. Arundel; but I *know*that Mr. Marchmont must have been unkind to that poor girl, or Mr. Arundel would never have done what he did."

It is in the nature of good and brave men to lay down their masculine rights when they leave their hats in the hall, and to submit themselves meekly to feminine government. It is only the whippersnapper, the sneak, the coward out of doors who is a tyrant at home. See how meekly the Conqueror of Italy

went home to his charming Creole wife! See how pleasantly the Liberator of Italy lolls in the carriage of his golden-haired Empress, when the young trees in that fair wood beyond the triumphal arch are green in the bright spring weather, and all the hired vehicles in Paris are making towards the cascade! Major Lawford's wife was too gentle, and too busy with her store-room and her domestic cares, to tyrannise over her lord and master; but the Major was duly henpecked by his blue-eyed daughters, and went here and there as they dictated.

So he stayed away from Marchmont Towers to please Belinda; and only said, "Haw," "Yes," "'Pon my honour, now!" "Bless my soul!" when his friends told him of the magnificence of Paul's dinners.

But although the Major and his eldest daughter did not encounter Mr. Marchmont in his own house, they met him sometimes on the neutral ground of other people's dining-rooms, and upon one especial evening at a pleasant little dinner-party given by the rector of the parish in which the Grange was situated.

Paul made himself particularly agreeable upon this occasion; but in the brief interval before dinner he was absorbed in a conversation with Mr. Davenant, the rector, upon the subject of ecclesiastical architecture, – he knew everything, and could talk about everything, this dear Paul, – and made no attempt to approach Miss Lawford. He only looked at her now and then, with a furtive, oblique glance out of his almond-shaped, pale-

grey eyes; a glance that was wisely hidden by the light auburn lashes, for it had an unpleasant resemblance to the leer of an evil-natured sprite. Mr. Marchmont contented himself with keeping this furtive watch upon Belinda, while she talked gaily with the Rector's two daughters in a pleasant corner near the piano. And as the artist took Mrs. Davenant down to the dining-room, and sat next her at dinner, he had no opportunity of fraternising with Belinda during that meal; for the young lady was divided from him by the whole length of the table and, moreover, very much occupied by the exclusive attentions of two callow-looking officers from the nearest garrison-town, who were afflicted with extreme youth, and were painfully conscious of their degraded state, but tried notwithstanding to carry it off with a high hand, and affected the opinions of used-up fifty.

Mr. Marchmont had none of his womankind with him at this dinner; for his mother and invalid sister had neither of them felt strong enough to come, and Mr. and Mrs. Weston had not been invited. The artist's special object in coming to this dinner was the conquest of Miss Belinda Lawford: she sided with Edward Arundel against him: she must be made to believe Edward wrong, and himself right; or she might go about spreading her opinions, and doing him mischief. Beyond that, he had another idea about Belinda; and he looked to this dinner as likely to afford him an opportunity of laying the foundation of a very diplomatic scheme, in which Miss Lawford should unconsciously become his tool. He was vexed at being placed

apart from her at the dinner-table, but he concealed his vexation; and he was aggravated by the Rector's old-fashioned hospitality, which detained the gentlemen over their wine for some time after the ladies left the dining-room. But the opportunity that he wanted came nevertheless, and in a manner that he had not anticipated.

The two callow defenders of their country had sneaked out of the dining-room, and rejoined the ladies in the cosy countrified drawing-rooms. They had stolen away, these two young men; for they were oppressed by the weight of a fearful secret. *They couldn't drink claret!* No; they had tried to like it; they had smacked their lips and winked their eyes – both at once, for even winking with *one* eye is an accomplishment scarcely compatible with extreme youth – over vintages that had seemed to them like a happy admixture of red ink and green-gooseberry juice. They had perjured their boyish souls with hideous falsehoods as to their appreciation of pale tawny port, light dry wines, '42-ports, '45-ports, Kopke Roriz, Thompson and Croft's, and Sandemann's; when, in the secret recesses of their minds, they affected sweet and "slab" compounds, sold by publicans, and facetiously called "Our prime old port, at four-and-sixpence." They were very young, these beardless soldiers. They liked strawberry ices, and were on the verge of insolvency from a predilection for clammy bath-buns, jam-tarts, and cherry-brandy. They liked gorgeous waistcoats; and varnished boots in a state of virgin brilliancy; and little bouquets in their button-holes; and a deluge of *millefleurs*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.