DISAPPEARED FROM HER HOME.

A Novel,

IN ONE VOLUME.

BY

MRS. FRED. E. PIRKIS.

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Table of Contents

DEDICATED,

WITH ALL LOVE AND ESTEEM,
TO MY BROTHER,
GEORGE IGNATIUS PIRKIS.

DISAPPEARED FROM HER HOME.

CHAPTER I.

"£200 REWARD. Disappeared from her home, Amy, only daughter of Stephen Warden, Esq., of the High Elms, Harleyford. Age, 17; height, 5ft. Dark hair and eyes, oval face, small nose, mouth, and chin; remarkably small hands and feet; dressed in dark blue silk walking costume, broad brimmed felt hat, with light-blue ostrich feather. Jewellery worn—a gold butterfly brooch, and butterfly earrings; on the third finger of left hand, an antique ruby ring—one large stone, surrounded with eight small diamonds, set in a garter with buckle; motto on garter, '*Sans espoir je meurs.*' The young lady was last seen on the morning of the 14th of August, leaving the park lands, and entering the high road leading to Dunwich. Information to be given to Inspector Smythe, Dunwich Police Station, who will pay the above reward on the young lady's restoration to her family, or portions of the amount according to the value of the information received."

The above handbill appeared one bright summer's morning on the walls of Dunwich Police Station, and on all the principal buildings of that busy manufacturing town.

Hard-working men of business found time, in the midst of their buying and selling, to stop and read, and wonder how it was possible that any young lady, well looked after, as Miss Warden undoubtedly was, well-known, too, in the neighbourhood, and surrounded by relations, friends, and servants, could thus disappear from their very midst, at noon-day, and leave no trace of any sort.

Harleyford was situated about five miles from Dunwich, and Mr. Warden's house about three from the local railway station. A well-traversed high road led from his estate to the market town—Dunwich. This the young lady had been seen to enter about ten o'clock on the morning of the 14th of August, by some country people, with whom she exchanged greetings. From that moment nothing more had been seen nor heard of her, and it was, as the country people expressed it in their broad Leicestershire dialect, "as though the earth had opened, and swallowed her up," so completely had all traces of her been lost.

Well-to-do tradesmen and thriving farmers, passing by, read the handbill with a sort of shudder. Here was a young lady taking her usual morning walk on a bright summer's day; she wishes her neighbours a gay good morning with a nod and a smile, goes on her way, and lo! nothing more is seen or heard of her. After this, who was safe? And with a sigh and a shiver, and a thought of their own young daughters at home, they went their way to ponder over the strange occurrence.

The county people by scores left their cards on Mr. and Mrs. Warden; heard how they had waited breakfast for their daughter, then luncheon, then dinner—how they had sent their men far and near to scour the country—how every river had been dragged, every infirmary and hospital searched, every railway official questioned and cross-questioned as to whether the young lady had been seen entering either station—how the parents had racked their brains to discover any possible or impossible pretext which could drive their daughter from her home—how that now, well-nigh broken-hearted, after a fortnight of wearying suspense, they had folded their hands and prayed for any news, even the worst that might come.

“It is beyond mystery,” said old Lady Nugent to her young lady companion, driving along the very same high road which had seen the last of poor Amy, and looking right and left in the hedges, as though she expected to find some traces of her there; “If the girl had had any love troubles, one could understand it better; for the young, foolish things at seventeen are often driven to some desperate folly by a man’s wicked eyes. But every one knows she could have made the best match in the county if she had liked. There’s young Lord Hardcastle, who absolutely worships her—fastidious and fault-finding as he is; and as for Frank Varley, the rector’s son, with his £10,000 a year, he is positively mad after her.”

“Yes, my lady,” responded the companion, “and it is well known that neither Mr. nor Mrs. Warden cared in the least whom she chose. Ah! she was always a coquette, even in the schoolroom. Those young, bright things with so much money, and so many chances generally choose badly after all, and run away with some groom, or footman. Depend upon it, my lady”—

“Don’t be an idiot, Matthews,” interrupts the dowager, “talk about things you understand. It has been ascertained beyond doubt that no one but Miss Warden is missing, far or near. Besides, the young lady, however playful and vivacious she might be with her equals in station, was too well-born and well-bred to permit the slightest familiarity from an inferior. She would not have suffered such a thing any more than I should myself,” with a withering glance at Matthews. “Tell George,” she added, pulling violently at the check-string, “to drive past the police station. I want to see what they have put in the handbills.”

And, as the old lady drives through the crowd of stragglers gathered about the station-house doors, two others, with white, anxious faces, are standing there, reading the printed lines. Tall, fair, muscular Frank Varley, the rector's scapegrace son, the best rider, runner, and rower in the county—the first in all mischief—in all breakneck adventures—and yet more sought after at balls and garden parties, than the richest lord, or the most eligible unmarried baronet—his mother's darling and pride, and a constant source of anxiety and apprehension to his father.

As he reads, his brow darkens. "By heaven!" he mutters through his set teeth, "there has been foul play somewhere. She held my hand for a moment only, at the ball the night before, under the large oleander tree, and called me her own Frank; and then, coquette as she is, the next minute she told me she meant her own *brother* Frank—I had been so good to her. Shall we all sit still with folded hands, and let a girl like that be stolen from our very midst? A thousand times, no!" And then aloud, with a full-drawn breath, "By heaven! no corner of the earth shall hide her from me; by land and by sea, by night and by day, I will search the whole world through, till I find her, living or dead."

"You are right," exclaims a voice at his elbow, and Lord Hardcastle's dark pale face, with thin, clear-cut features, looks over his shoulder. ("Kid-gloved Hardcastle" he was sometimes called by his sporting and boating friends, on account of his super-refinement and dainty fastidiousness.) "You are right; there has been some foul play here—some deed of iniquity which must be brought to light. We, who have been rivals hitherto, may well join hands now." He extends his thin white hand, which Varley grasps in a strong, firm hold. "I repeat your own words; 'no corner of the earth shall hide her from me; by land and by sea, by night and by

day, I will search the whole world through till I find her, living or dead.’”

CHAPTER II.

WHILE the townspeople and country folks read and wondered at the printed handbills, the father and mother of the missing girl wandered about their now desolate home, listless, aimless, well-nigh broken-hearted hearted. The first sharp pang, it is true, was past, and the sorrow had settled down to a dull leaden weight on heart and brain. The servants walked about the house slowly and silently, speaking in subdued voices. Day and night lay old Presto, Amy's favourite deerhound, at the house door, waiting and listening, and never seeming to eat nor sleep. Her maid carefully each day fed her birds and watered her flowers, and every one in the household vied with each other in endeavouring to carry out every known wish or fancy the young lady had ever had (and it must be confessed they were not a few) as they would endeavour to carry out the wishes of some dear one dead. On every side, in every room, were traces of the lost darling. Here, the open piano with a roll of new music; there, the uncovered harp. In the little morning room piece after piece of unfinished needlework, and here in a little "studio," as Amy was pleased to call it, numberless pencil sketches, an oil landscape commenced, a water-colour three-parts done, and a crayon head, "all but" finished. A whole tableful of china-painting accessories, and commenced cups, saucers, and plates; and there, in a corner, a cabinet of fret-work tools, with brackets, card trays, and picture frames enough to stock a small shop.

From all this it may be seen that the young lady's tastes and pursuits were numerous and varied—change, to her, the one great necessity of life. A too great indulgence from her earliest infancy

had developed in her character an impatience of restraint, an impetuosity and wilfulness which, unless it had been counterbalanced, as in her case it was, by an unusually loving, playful, tender disposition, would have rendered her imperious and domineering. As it was, every one in the household, from her father downwards, adored her and bowed to her sway. “I must not be kept waiting an instant” was a remark which might be heard every hour of the day from Miss Amy’s lips. And kept waiting she never was, for the simple reason that it was an impossibility to keep her in any posture of tranquillity for five minutes at a time. Every thought or idea that entered into her brain must be executed there and then and, scarcely completed, must be thrown on one side to make way for another.

“Were you ever thus in your very young days, Stephen?” Mrs. Warden would sometimes enquire of her husband. And the husband would smile and shake his head, and declare he had never been half so fascinating as his wilful, loving, teasing little daughter, “the music and sunshine of his life,” as he was wont to call her.

And now all was changed! The music was hushed, the sunlight had died out. Would the shadows ever be lifted from the home again? Would the quick, light step ever be heard again, and the sweet, young, ringing voice, exclaiming in its old familiar tones, “I must not be kept waiting an instant?”

So the father and mother asked themselves, as, standing side by side in their dining room verandah, they looked across the bright August landscape to where the groom was leading out Amy’s pony for its morning canter.

Mr. Warden, at this time, was about forty-five years of age, looking considerably younger. A well-featured, muscular man, with energy, determination, and many other good qualities plainly written on his face. A more complete contrast to him than his wife could not well be imagined. She was very tiny, very fair, very gentle, with amiability, want of will, and weakness of character marked in every line and feature. Her one god was her husband, her one thought how to please him, and her every opinion and wish was simply an echo of his.

"A doll, my dear, nothing more," was old Lady Nugent's summing up, after her first introduction to Mrs. Warden, some twelve years previously. Mr. Warden had come among them a perfect stranger, buying one of the largest estates in the county which happened to be for sale. He had resided, so he had said, nearly all his life in the south of France, but his family and connections were well known in the Midland Counties as wealthy and nobly connected. Of his wife, however, nothing was known, nor could be discovered, so she was set down, and perhaps justly, as having been an English governess in some French family, and as such, most probably, Mr. Warden had first known her.

"What men can see in dolls to induce them to marry them, I cannot see," pursued the dowager, "they simply need a glass case, some good clothes, and their work in life is done." Nevertheless, in spite of Lady Nugent's comments, Mrs. Warden had been well received in Harleyford for her husband's sake, and now, in the time of her sorrow, nothing could exceed the kindness and sympathy extended to her on all sides. Carriage after carriage sweeps along their drive, letter after letter is brought to the house, some containing wild and improbable suggestions, others opening here and there a door of hope, all full of warm and earnest sympathy, and offers of help.

“What can any of them do that has not already been done?” says Mr. Warden, handing to his wife a joint letter from Frank Varley and Lord Hardcastle, relating their solemn vow, and placing their services at Mr. Warden’s disposal.

“They are noble young fellows, and worthy of a true-hearted girl’s love. But what can they do? God help us all and teach us how to act for the best, for my brains are nearly worn out with thinking and supposing.”

“The gentleman from London, sir, Mr. Hill, wishes to see you,” says the butler at his elbow, having entered the room with a quiet, solemn tread, as though serving at a funeral feast.

“Ah, the detective,” says Mr. Warden, thankful to have the pressure of thought lifted for an instant; “show him into the library; I will see him at once.”

Mr. Hill, a slight, gentleman-like man, with the eye of an eagle, and the nose of a deerhound, seats himself at the library table, and spreads his memoranda before him.

“I bring you my latest report, Mr. Warden, and I grieve to say it amounts to very little. The only additional information I have obtained, and that, I fear, is scarcely reliable, is from the postman, John Martin. He tells me that on the morning of the 14th he met your daughter in the park lands, and, at her request, handed to her her morning’s letters. I questioned him as to how he recollected it was on that day, and he at once admitted he could not be positive, as it was the young lady’s custom, whenever she met him, thus to ask for and receive her letters. I questioned him as to the general appearance of her letters, whether directed in masculine or feminine hand-writing—(I beg your pardon, sir, such questions

must be asked)—and his reply is, he never recollects bringing Miss Warden any but letters in ladies' writing. You must take the evidence for what it is worth; I fear it counts for very little, but, such as it is, I have entered it in my case book."

"I scarcely see whither your questions tend," remarks Mr. Warden, somewhat stiffly. "Miss Warden, I am convinced, had no correspondents with whom I am unacquainted. She has been brought up at home, under careful supervision, and has never visited anywhere without Mrs. Warden or myself. If you are inferring some unknown attachment existed, such a supposition is entirely without foundation. I have every reason to believe that my daughter's affections have been given, and with my approval, to a very dear young friend and neighbour."

"All this I know, sir. Indeed, I think there is very little you or any one else can tell me on this matter. There is not a man or woman in the place whom I have not sounded to their very depths, questioned and cross-questioned in every imaginable way. I have here, in my pocket, a map of my own sketching, containing every field and river, every shady nook and hollow within thirty miles round. I have also a directory with the names, ages, occupation, and household of every human being within the same area. Very little, indeed, remains now to be done."

"Don't tell me that," exclaims Mr. Warden, excitedly, jumping to his feet, and pacing the room; "don't tell me that your work here is over, and no result for your three weeks' labour. Don't, I implore you, crush me down into utter despair. Have you no hope, ever so slight, to hold out to me—no advice of any sort to give?"

“I have both, Mr. Warden,” replies the detective, calmly; “I need not tell you now how I have worked out my theory, nor how, step by step, I have come to the conclusion that your daughter is not dead. This is the hope I hold out to you.”

“Then, if not dead, worse than death has happened to her,” groans the poor father, covering his face with his hands; “better death, than dishonour.”

For a moment both are silent; then, Mr. Warden, slowly recovering himself, enquires, “And what is the advice you have to give, Mr. Hill? let me have that, at any rate.”

“Simply to watch, and to wait, sir; at present, nothing more can be done. We have exhausted every theory, we have followed out every clue, or pretence of one. If there are accomplices in the matter, my presence here puts them on their guard, and as long as I remain nothing will transpire; when I have left, and things have settled down to their usual course, I feel sure some one will betray him or herself unawares. I repeat, wait and watch; and directly your suspicions are aroused in the slightest degree, communicate with me, and I will advise you to the best of my ability.”

“Wait!” groans Mr. Warden, “wait! ‘let things settle down to their usual course;’ how is it possible for a man to live through such a life of torture and suspense? Is there nothing—absolutely nothing—that can be done before you leave us?”

“Only one thing, and that, with your permission, I will do at once. With the men of your household, I have been on tolerably familiar terms, and know pretty well what they could, or could not do; but about the women I am not so sure. If you will allow me, I will have the whole of your female servants in here in succession, from the

scullery maids, upwards—take their names, ages, occupations, &c., from their own lips. I may, possibly, seem to you, sir, to ask a great many irrelevant questions, but while I am questioning, I am watching and noting, and I will under take to say there will be no one with a guilty conscience who will hide it from my eye."

Mr. Warden rings the bell, and gives the order to the footman, who conveys it to the housekeeper, who forthwith summons all the maids of the household to be paraded in succession before their master, and the detective.

Mr. Hill requests that the housekeeper will remain in the room the whole time. "I may have occasion," he explains, "to refer to you from time to time, as to the truth or otherwise of some of the statements made."

First, the kitchen-maids enter, looking very red, and very much ashamed of themselves. Mr. Hill glances at them, looks them through and through, and contents himself with simply noting down their names, ages, and position in Mr. Warden's household. The cooks are almost as quickly dismissed, and between the exit of one staff of servants and entrance of another, Mr. Hill's eyes are occupied in scrutinizing the elderly housekeeper, and in addressing to her various friendly remarks.

The housemaids undergo a much longer examination; one girl turns red, another pale. One answers wide of the mark, and is reprimanded by Mr. Hill; another is detected in a wilful fib by the housekeeper, who forthwith brings her to book. Eventually, however, they are dismissed, and the detective, turning to the housekeeper, enquires where Miss Warden's maid is.

"I have to apologize for her, sir," replies the housekeeper, "will you kindly excuse her? The poor girl was taken with a violent sick-headache about an hour ago, and went to lie down in her own room. I believe, however, I can answer any questions for her you may wish to put."

"About an hour ago," muses Mr. Hill, "just when the order for the servants' parade was given out." Then, aloud to the housekeeper, "Is this young person often troubled with violent headaches, Mrs. Nesbitt?"

"Oh dear no, sir," replies Mrs. Nesbitt, "I never knew her taken in this way before, but you see we have all of us had such an upset, sir, lately. Dear me! such an upset!" and the old lady glances furtively at her master.

"Exactly, Mrs. Nesbitt, exactly," said Mr. Hill, sympathetically. "That is just what I am thinking. Will you kindly take a message from me to this young person? Tell her I have merely one or two unimportant questions to put as a matter of form, as to her duties, &c., as Miss Warden's maid, but I must have the answers from her own lips. If it will suit her better I will go with you to her own room, but in any case I must see her."

Mrs. Nesbitt at once departs on her errand, and after a delay of some ten minutes, returns with the maid, a round-faced, small-featured girl, somewhat fashionably dressed for her position, and with an assumption of refinement and dignity evidently intended as a copy of her young mistress's style.

Mr. Hill preserves his careless suavity of manner, regrets, politely, he should have been compelled to disturb her, hopes she will soon

recover her usual health. Meantime his eye is fixed full on her face, and throughout the short interview his gaze is never once lifted.

“Your name, if you please?” he asks.

“Lucy Williams,” replies the girl, quivering and tremulous under his fixed gaze.

“Are your parents living, Miss Williams?”

“No,” she replies, shortly, “I have no relations of any sort.”

“Not even a brother,” he enquires, “who was once gamekeeper on an estate the other side of Dunwich, and who subsequently sailed for America?”

Here the girl breaks down utterly, and gives way to a flood of tears. “How dare you insult me thus?” she enquires angrily. “What do you know of my brother Tom? He may be dead and buried for anything I care.”

“I know very little about your brother Tom, Miss Williams, beyond the fact of his having caused your parents a great deal of anxiety. In fact it was the disgrace of their son’s dismissal from his situation, charged with conspiring with poachers to rob his master, which, I believe, broke their hearts. However, I have only one more question to ask. Have you seen or heard anything of your brother since his return to this neighbourhood? He was seen, I believe, not very far from this house on the morning of the 15th of August.”

Another passionate burst of sobbing from the girl, and this time an appeal to Mr. Warden.

“Will you allow me, sir, to be insulted in this way in your presence?” she demands. “I vow and declare since I have been in your service, I have always been an honest, faithful servant; I have never wronged any one by word or deed. I have always”—here another flood of tears.

“Gently, gently, Lucy,” expostulates Mr. Warden, “no one is bringing any charge against you.” Then, to the detective, “Is it not possible to waive this question, Mr. Hill? I really think you are going almost too far.”

“I will waive it with a great deal of pleasure, sir, and as far as that goes, I do not see any necessity for prolonging the interview. Miss Williams, I should certainly advise you to get a little quiet sleep in your own room, it will do more for you than anything else. Good morning, Mrs. Nesbitt, I am much obliged to you for the trouble you have taken for me.” He politely opens the door for the housekeeper, who conducts the still sobbing girl out of the room.

Then the man’s manner undergoes an entire change. He turns abruptly to Mr. Warden. “Keep your eye on that girl, sir; I have not passed the greater part of my life among rogues of all sorts not to know a guilty face when I see it. That girl is keeping something back, but what I am at present at a loss to imagine. Take my word for it, within a fortnight she will do one of two things, either request permission to leave on account of the dulness of the house or else run away. I think the latter, from the irresolution and want of nerve she has shown this morning, but I am not sure. I can only reiterate the advice I have already given you, watch and wait, and the moment your suspicions are aroused, communicate with me.”

And the detective takes his leave, and as Mr. Warden's horses convey him swiftly along the high road to Dunwich, he shakes his head gravely and mutters, "This is a bad business, and I fear there is worse to come. I was never before so thoroughly at a loss; I cannot see one inch before me in the matter; however, we can only watch and wait."

CHAPTER III.

IT seemed strange, at first, to the good people of Harleyford to see young Lord Hardcastle and the rector's son daily in close and friendly intercourse, accustomed, as they were, to see each politely ignored by the other, or else spoken of in terms of supercilious contempt. It was certainly a strange sight to see the young men constantly walking side by side in earnest conversation, or else riding to and from each other's houses. Lord Hardcastle's weakness had hitherto been near-sightedness whenever Varley had happened to cross his path. "Who was that you recognized just now?" he would say to a companion, if he happened to have one at the time, and on being informed it was the rector's son, would remark, carelessly—

"Oh, the young giant whose brains have run into muscle; let us talk of something interesting."

Frank Varley, in his turn, would speak in no measured terms of "that kid-gloved dandy—that embodiment of priggishness and polite literature."

But now all was changed. A common sorrow had drawn them to each other, and their intense and true love for, and devotion to poor Amy, had rendered them so far unselfish as to enable them to work together with determination and courage.

Mr. Warden's reply to their letter had been a brief, "Come and see me; we will talk the matter over." And arm in arm the young men had responded to his invitation.

“I am very grateful to you both,” was Mr. Warden’s greeting, “I know not how to express my thanks; but what can any one do that has not been already done?”

“See here, Mr. Warden,” broke in Frank, impetuously, “I don’t care what other people have or have not done, I must do something. I shall go mad if I sit here idle any longer. I have no doubt that detective fellow you had from London did his work superlatively well, but still it is possible he may have left something undone. Let me ride through your plantations once more; let me have men down here, and drag over again that cursed water, yonder.” He pointed through the window to a silvery little stream which flowed at the bottom of Mr. Warden’s lawn and flower garden. Deep water it was here and there, and here and there clogged with long grasses and rushes; but on and on it went, until at length it fell into the noble river upon which the town of Dunwich is built.

“My poor fellow, do it if you will,” is Mr. Warden’s reply, “do it a hundred times over, if it is any gratification to you; I fear the result will be the same to your efforts as to mine. But tell me in your turn, have you nothing to suggest? You, Lord Hardcastle, have the reputation of having more brains than most of us, tell me if you can propose anything to lighten this terrible time of suspense? Have you thought well over the possibilities and impossibilities of this dreadful affair, and do you see any glimmer of hope anywhere for us?”

“Have I thought well over it?” repeats Hardcastle; “you might better ask me, ‘do I ever think of anything else?’ for day and night no other thought ever enters my mind; hour after hour do I sit thinking over, and weighing in turn, each circumstance, however slight, which has occurred in connection with the loss of your

daughter. I have looked at the matter, not only from my own point of view, and worked out my own theories threadbare, but have endeavoured to put myself, as it were, in other people's bodies, to hear the matter with their ears, and see it with their eyes! and then have I exhausted every possible or impossible theory which they might have. Nowhere, alas, can I see any clue to the mystery. Indeed, each day that passes renders it more terrible and difficult. It is impossible she can be dead"—

He pauses abruptly; large drops of perspiration stand out upon his forehead, and his outstretched hand trembles with suppressed emotion. "Had she been lying dead anywhere in the whole land, her body would by this time have been brought to you, or at any rate news of how and where she died."

"Hush, hush!" breaks in Mr. Warden pitifully, as, pale and tottering, he catches hold of Lord Hardcastle's arm; "don't speak to me in this way, Hardcastle, or you will kill me outright; this last month has made an old man of me, and a feather's weight would knock me over now. If you can see more clearly than any of us what lies in the future, for mercy's sake hold back the blow as long as possible."

There is a pause of some minutes; at last, Varley jumps to his feet, impatiently—

"For Heaven's sake, my dear fellow," he exclaims, "don't croak any more than you can help, but help us a little with your wisdom and advice. I have Mr. Warden's permission to travel over the old ground again, and we are to commence this very hour; tell us what you purpose doing?"

“I shall wait and watch,” replies Hardcastle, unconsciously repeating Mr. Hill’s own words, “the clue will discover itself somewhere, somehow, when we least expect it; here, more likely, than anywhere else; and it needs a hearing ear and a seeing eye to seize and follow it up. You may wander hither and thither, if you will, I shall remain here, and wait and watch.”

“Strange,” said Mr. Warden, musingly, “your words are the echo of what was said to me yesterday, by the professional detective I employed.” Then he related to them in detail the examination of the servants by Mr. Hill, and his parting advice.

“Have the girl, Williams, in at once, Mr. Warden,” exclaims Frank, “question her as to what she has, or has not done; let me,” he adds, eagerly, “ask her one or two questions; depend upon it, they will be to the point.”

But to this the two other gentlemen object, Mr. Warden considering it an unjust thing to attach suspicion to the girl on account of the misdeeds of her brother; and Lord Hardcastle alleging that by so doing they would defeat their own object by putting the girl on her guard. “Let us wait and watch,” once more he implores. But Frank shakes his head, “Waiting and watching may suit some men,” he says, “but for me it is an impossibility. I must do something, and at once, or I shall blow my brains out; that is, if I have any,” he adds, with a grim smile, and a shrug of his shoulders.

Forthwith he departs to organize a body of volunteers once more to scour the whole county—to search commons and through woods—to cut fern and furze from shady hollows and dark corners, where, by any chance, a secret might be hidden. Once more to drag rivers

and streams, and search under hedges, and in reed-grown ditches; and finally to question and re-question every man, woman, and child far or near, as to their recollection of the day's occurrences of the 14th of August.

This was the plan of action Frank had sketched out for himself, and bravely indeed, did he carry it out. Volunteers by the score came forward, for the sympathy expressed for Mr. Warden was heartfelt, and Amy's loss had cast a gloom over the whole county. Not a man or woman in the country side but what would have gone to the other end of the world to have lifted from the sorrowing father and mother this dark cloud of suspense. As for the young lady herself, they would have laid down their lives for her; for her kindly, pleasant ways and pretty queenly airs, had won all hearts. And thus, high and low, rich and poor joined hands with Frank Varley, and searched with a will, working early, and working late—earnest men, at earnest work.

CHAPTER IV.

AT this time Lord Hardcastle began to be a daily visitor at the High Elms. “My own house is very dreary to me,” he had said, “may I come to you very often for an hour or so, without feeling I am intruding?” And Mr. Warden had bade him welcome, but had warned him that he would find the High Elms more than “dreary.” “To me the place is silent and gloomy as a vault or grave-yard,” he said, “but I am sure the presence of a real friend like yourself will be a great comfort to Mrs. Warden, now that I am such a poor companion for her.” Thus, it came to pass that daily, about noon, Lord Hardcastle might be seen riding up the steep avenue which led to Mr. Warden’s house, returning generally about dusk to his solitary dinner, for being an orphan, and without any near relative, and naturally of a studious, reserved disposition, his privacy was very seldom broken into by chance visitors, or casual acquaintances.

As time went on, however, he frequently accepted Mr. Warden’s invitation to dine and sleep at his house; and on these occasions he would devote the entire morning to Mrs. Warden and her occupations; generally after lunch walking or riding with Mr. Warden. Thus, a week or ten days slipped away; Frank Varley and his band of volunteers working hard meantime. Then suddenly, an unexpected calamity befel the village of Harleyford—an epidemic of small-pox broke out, and threatened to be of a virulent nature. A groom of Mr. Warden’s, calling on one of the villagers, caught the disease, and returned to the High Elms, only to sicken and die. Mr. Warden, habitually kind and thoughtful to his dependants, had had the best local medical advice that could be procured, and in

addition, nurses, and all approved disinfectants, &c., from the Dunwich Fever Hospital. Yet, in spite of these precautions. Lord Hardcastle, one morning, on entering the house, was met by the housekeeper with a face so long and melancholy he could see at once some fresh calamity had occurred.

“What is it, Mrs. Nesbitt?” he enquired, without waiting for the old lady to speak, “Has your master or mistress taken the infection, or if not, what has happened?”

“Both, I fear, sir, are seized,” replied the housekeeper, sadly; “I have sent for Doctor Mills and Doctor Hayward, and two additional nurses from the hospital; but as yet, no one has come. And oh, sir! something else has happened: Lucy Williams has disappeared in some mysterious manner; not a soul has seen her since last night. It seems, indeed,” added the old lady, clasping her hands, while the tears rained from her eyes, “as though a curse had fallen upon the house. Where will it all end! Heaven knows: I tremble to think who may be taken next.”

This was startling news indeed, although, perhaps, nothing more than might have been expected from the state of affairs at the High Elms. Mr. and Mrs. Warden’s health had been considerably shaken by the days and nights of suspense they had passed through. Consequently it would not be a matter of surprise if they were the next to fall victims to the disease.

Then again with regard to Lucy Williams, were they not watching the girl, and waiting for her to make a move in some direction?

However, there was no time to be lost in speculation, there was work to be done. Lord Hardcastle wrote a brief note to Varley—

"Leave off your searching and dragging at once; there is something else for you to do. Lucy Williams has disappeared. Come over immediately. I will have all necessary information collected, and ready to place in your hands by the time you arrive. This, if you will, you can convey to Inspector Hill, Scotland Yard. It may save time. Start, if possible, by the 2.10 p.m. train.

"HARDCASTLE."

This note he despatched by one of the grooms, mounting the man on his own horse, a high-bred roan, which knew how to go like the wind when need was. Unfortunately there was some uncertainty as to where Varley was to be found. The rectory in those days saw but little of him, and his work had lately taken him to a woodland some four or five miles distant.

Hither the man, by Lord Hardcastle's direction, rode in quest, only, unfortunately, to see the volunteers returning by different routes, after another fruitless search. On enquiry, he found that Varley had ridden still farther on to the nearest post-town, most likely on some false scent.

Hither again the man followed him, and, fortunately, met him slowly riding towards home, thinking, perhaps, of another day of useless search ended, and where it would be best to recommence on the morrow.

He read Hardcastle's note, and then looked at his watch. The hands pointed at two o'clock.

"Here," he exclaimed in a perfect whirl of passion and vexation, "have I been wasting precious time over this confounded woodland, and the real work waiting for me! That girl will have twenty-four

hours start of us. No train till 6.30 to-night! Arrive at London about nine o'clock. The police, I suppose, set to work the first thing in the morning! The girl has a fair chance of escape, I must say, but, thank Heaven, there is something definite to be done at last! Here," he called to the groom, "ride alongside of me, and tell me all that is to be known about the girl Williams and her flight!"

But the man had little, or nothing, to tell beyond the fact that the girl had gone. All his information had been obtained at second-hand, and, like the housekeeper and other servants, the man seemed almost bewildered with the strange events occurring in such rapid succession in the household.

Meantime Lord Hardcastle was carefully collecting all the information that was to be had relative to the girl's disappearance, questioning each of the servants in succession.

It appeared she had taken her supper with the other servants as usual at 10 o'clock on the previous night, or rather had attempted to do so, for she complained of feeling very ill, of pains in her head and back, and declared she was unable to eat. One of the maids had taunted her by enquiring whether it was the same sort of head-ache she had had when Detective Hill was in the house. This was met by an indignant rejoinder, and then the girl angrily left the room, as the others thought, to go to bed. The next morning she did not make her appearance at the servants' breakfast, and the housekeeper, with whom Lucy was somewhat a favourite, determined to allow her a little latitude, thinking possibly the girl might really need rest and quiet.

Time slipped by, and Mrs. Nesbitt, occupied in household matters, did not again think of Lucy Williams until about half-past ten; then

going to her room to enquire for her, found the door locked, and received no reply to her repeated knockings. Without consulting her master, she desired one of the men to break open the door, and entering, found that the bed had not been slept in, and the room in a great state of confusion. They had not had time to inform their master of the fact, before his bell was rung hurriedly, and he gave orders that Dr. Hayward should immediately be sent for, as Mrs. Warden and he were feeling far from well. “Stricken in body, as well as mind, Nesbitt,” he had said sadly. “It doesn’t matter much, there is not a great deal left to live for now.”

Mrs. Nesbitt had not dared to inform him of the fresh calamities. “And I am indeed thankful, sir,” added the poor old lady, “that you have come into the house to lift some of this heavy responsibility off my shoulders.”

“Let me see Lucy’s room, Mrs. Nesbitt,” said Lord Hardcastle.

The housekeeper immediately conducted him to the servants’ quarters.

“Is this exactly the condition in which you found the room?” he enquired, as Nesbitt threw back the door for him to enter.

“Indeed, sir, and I grieve to say that it is,” she replied. “To think that any young girl in this house could leave a room in such a state is more than I can understand,” and she sighed again.

Lord Hardcastle looked attentively round. A box, half open, and the contents partially drawn out, stood at the foot of the bed. A dress, bonnet and walking jacket lay upon a chair, evidently thrown there in a hurry, and a whole pile of burned letters was heaped in the fire-grate. Here and there the charred scraps had been

fluttered on to the floor, most likely by the rapid passing and re-passing of the girl while preparing for her flight.

“And to think that we might all of us have been burned in our beds last night,” moaned the housekeeper, “for aught she cared, the wicked girl!”

“Tell me, Mrs. Nesbitt,” interrupts Lord Hardcastle, “do you know the extent of Lucy Williams’s wardrobe? how many bonnets or hats had she do you think?”

“It’s that which puzzles me, sir. I know for certain, she had but two, for she told me only yesterday, she would not buy another just now, in case we might have to go into mourning for our dear young lady, and she complained that both were so shabby she was ashamed to be seen in them. And there they both are; she must have left the house with nothing on her head.”

“Or else in some one else’s!” remarks Lord Hardcastle. “It was yesterday you say she spoke of her hats; from her remarks I should imagine her flight was not thought of until suggested by the taunts of the other maid. Consequently her plans would not be properly matured nor well laid. So much the better for our chance of finding her. Tell me, Mrs. Nesbitt, could you or any one else speak as to the contents of Miss Warden’s wardrobe, and had Lucy Williams any means of access to it.”

“She had sole charge of it, sir, after our dear young lady left. You see Mrs. Warden and every one else so liked and trusted Lucy that everything was left in her hands, except the jewel case, which was removed to Mrs. Warden’s room. I don’t believe any one but Lucy could speak for a certainty as to what Miss Warden had or had not.”

“We will go now, if you please, to Miss Warden’s room,” says Lord Hardcastle, giving one more glance at the untidy chamber. “This door must be secured and sealed till the police have seen the room. I will see if by any chance she has left any letters behind her.”

But on looking through the drawers and boxes no papers of any sort are to be found, and it seems to the housekeeper, that few if any of the girl’s clothes have been removed.

In an hour’s time, Lord Hardcastle has a small packet of carefully written notes ready for Varley’s assistance and guidance.

“I have not time,” he wrote, “to give you in detail the bases upon which my suppositions rest, I have simply dotted down one or two facts which I have ascertained beyond doubt, and one or two ideas which may perhaps be useful to you.

“In the first place, the girl’s flight if intended at some future period, was certainly not thought of for to-day, until late last night. This I am sure of from the hurried and scanty nature of her preparations.

“Secondly, she has not gone away in her own clothes, but most likely in Miss Warden’s; at any rate in one of Miss Warden’s bonnets and walking jackets.

“Thirdly, she has most probably appropriated other properties of Miss Warden’s, as the young lady’s room and its contents have been left in her sole charge.

“Hence it follows (fourthly), that she has probably taken the train to London, travelling by the first this morning, as she would be anxious to dispose of her spoil and would only dare to do so in the metropolis.

“Fifthly, the girl has gone away very ill. My own impression is, that the small-pox is in her system, and that she will not hold up as far as to London.

“Sixthly, her only friend in London, as far as can be ascertained, is a Miss or Mrs. Kempe, who resides at 15, Gresham Street North, High Street, Hackney.”

CHAPTER V.

DR. HAYWARD'S report of Mr. and Mrs. Warden's health was far from satisfactory. "The lady," he said, in reply to Lord Hardcastle's enquiries, was undoubtedly suffering from small-pox, which in her weak state of health, had taken strong hold of her. As to Mr. Warden, he could not be sure; he feared some disease was latent in his system; he was altogether below par, and the anxiety and grief he had gone through had completely undermined his constitution—

"Do what you can for them, while you can, my dear, young friend," he added (he had known Hardcastle from his boyhood), "and spare them, as far as possible, the details of this sad business."

So Lord Hardcastle had sent for his portmanteau, and a few favourite books, and begged of Mrs. Nesbitt a room in some quiet corner of the house, "A room, if you please, with cool, quiet colouring, no reds, or blues, or yellows, to flash out from the walls, and some soft thick carpet on the floor," he had said, his wonted fastidiousness once more asserting itself. But he was more than repaid for any temporary inconvenience he might suffer, by the look of grateful thanks which crossed Mr. Warden's careworn face, and his warm pressure of the hand, as he thanked his young friend for his kind unselfishness in thus voluntarily sharing the dreariness and desolation of their home. Dreary it was, indeed, to one who had known it in the old days. No light footsteps on the stairs, or sudden opening of doors, and a bright young voice pouring forth a flood of question, answer, and exclamation in a breath; no croquet,

nor tennis balls here and there on the lawn, nor galloping of pony's feet up the long steep avenue. A silence as of death appeared to have fallen upon the house, and the father and mother, stricken and weary, looked in each other's pale faces and wondered "could this be the home of a month ago?"

And as Lord Hardcastle began to grow accustomed to the routine and family life of the household, two thoughts gradually forced themselves into his mind, which he felt would lead him somewhere, although utterly at a loss to imagine where.

Thrown as he was daily into close and intimate relations with Mr. and Mrs. Warden, he could not help reflecting on the strangeness of the fact, that neither in appearance, disposition, nor manner, did Amy in the slightest degree resemble either parent. The more closely he observed them, the more the dissimilarity became apparent.

The second fact which forced itself upon his notice, related solely to Mrs. Warden. Sincere as her grief for her daughter's loss undoubtedly was, it soon became apparent to Lord Hardcastle, that it was nevertheless simply a reflected sorrow, that is to say, it struck her through her husband; she grieved for his loss, more than for her own, and was broken-hearted because she saw that grief was slowly killing him day by day. No one but a very close observer would have noted these things, and Lord Hardcastle was a very close observer, and more than that, a logical one. He did not believe in the possibility of sudden and disconnected facts occurring in the human world any more than in the world of nature. "There is a reason for these things, although at present it eludes me," he would say to himself time after time. Long after midnight might the shaded lamp be seen burning from his bedroom window,

and could any one have lifted the curtain, they would have seen Hardcastle, with head resting on his hands, and elbows on the table, no books before him, nor any pretence of writing materials, but a whole world of thought evidently passing and repassing through his brain.

Meantime enquiries were set on foot on all sides as to the girl Williams. Frank Varley had ascertained from the station master at Dunwich, that a young girl, veiled and exceedingly well dressed, had left by the first train on that morning—

"I should not have noticed any number of ladies at any other time, sir," said the man, "but it is quite the exception for any but work people or business men to travel up by the 5.9 a.m. train."

Varley had farther ascertained from the guard, that the lady had travelled first class, and had seemed very faint and tired. Arriving at the Midland Station, his work suddenly and unexpectedly became very easy to him. The officials there at once informed him of a lady having been taken alarmingly ill on alighting from the early morning train. The porter who told him, said that he himself had fetched a cab for her, and, scarcely conscious, she had given some address at Hackney, where she wished to be driven, but the name of the street had entirely slipped his memory.

Frank did not waste time in further enquiries. He at once telegraphed to Detective Hill fullest particulars of Lucy's flight, and where he expected to find her, requesting him to follow him there as soon as possible. Then he sprang into a cab, and gave the man orders to drive to Gresham Street, Hackney.

An hour's drive brought him to the farther side of that northern suburb—a *terra incognita* to Frank, whose knowledge of London

was limited to the club quarters, and west-end-squares and parks. Two or three busy roads were crossed, with flaring gas jets and goods very freely distributed on the pavement in front of the comparatively empty shops. Then a sudden turn brought him into a quiet street of some twenty or thirty two-storied houses, inhabited mostly by dressmakers, machinists, and journeymen of all kinds. Although poor, there was an air of quiet industry about the place, which gave Frank the hope that Lucy Williams's friends might prove respectable, honest people. Dismissing his cab, he knocked at the door of No. 15; a few minutes elapsed, and it was opened by a tall, thin, pale woman of about thirty years of age, very neatly dressed, and with a look of settled anxiety and grief upon a face plain, but still frank and honest.

"Ah! I expected you, sir," she said, quietly, "or at least some one in pursuit to-night. If you have come in search of Lucy Williams, I beseech you take these, and let the girl die in peace."

She opened her hand, and held out something glittering; there was no light in the narrow doorway, but the glimmer of a gas-lamp lower down the street fell upon a small heap of splendidly cut diamonds, and was flashed back in a thousand brilliant hues. These Frank readily identified as the brooch and earrings Miss Warden had worn at the county ball the last night he had seen her. He took them from the woman's hand—

"Yes, I want these," he said, "but I also want your friend, and must and will see her. Don't attempt to hinder me, but take me at once to where she is."

"Have mercy, sir," pleaded the woman, "the poor girl cannot live very long, she is standing on the verge of the dark river. Do not! oh

do not, I implore you, turn her thoughts from the only One who can carry her over! I have read to her, I have prayed—”

“Be quiet!” interrupted Frank, for he began to fear there might be some trickery behind all this; lest she might be delaying his entrance in this way, in order to give the girl time to escape. “Be quiet,” he repeated, “and take me at once to the girl, or I shall find my way by myself.” Then the woman yielded, and once more pleading for mercy for her friend, opened a door on her left hand, and Frank found himself in a small, hot room, only lighted by a low fire flickering in the grate.

A faint moaning from the bed denoted it was occupied. “Can you not bring me a light?” said Frank, “I can’t see which way to turn.” At the sound of a man’s voice, a figure started up in the square old-fashioned bed, exclaiming in a high-pitched, feverish voice—

“Have they come for me? Let me die in peace, I entreat you! Oh, sir, I will tell you everything, everything; only let me stay here.” Then, clasping her hands, and swaying herself to and fro she exclaimed—

“Tom knows all about it; I did it for him, only for him!” Then she fell back exhausted, evidently in a high state of delirium, muttering again and again, “Tom, only for Tom.”

Frank readily recognised Lucy’s voice, but it was too dark to see her face. The woman came forward and endeavoured to soothe her; “Hush, Lucy,” she said, “don’t think about Tom now, although God knows I would lay down my life for him. Turn your thoughts to One able to save both you and Tom if you will repent and believe. Hear what He said to the dying thief on the cross.” Then

she commenced reciting the Scripture story from memory. But again Frank interrupted her—

“See here,” he said, “I am not a heathen, nor an infidel, but I want to know what you have done towards bringing the girl round. Have you had a doctor in?”

“A doctor, sir,” replied the woman, “since Lucy came into the house I have not ceased reading and praying with her for one five minutes; if it is the Lord’s will she will recover, and live to repent of her sins; but if she must die, why should I waste precious time trying to cure her poor body, while Satan is striving to steal her soul.”

“Hush! my good woman,” said Frank, “I will stay here with your friend, and do my best to fight the devil for you; you must go at once and get a doctor in. Here, take my card, get the best and nearest doctor; tell him I will be answerable for all charges.”

“I go, sir,” replied the woman; then, once more bending over the bed, she murmured, “Lucy, Lucy, while there is yet time, turn to the Lord; do not forget what He has said to all who go to Him in tears and penitence.” Then Frank took her by the arm, and led her out of the room, reminding her that there still might be a chance of saving her friend’s life.

Left thus unexpectedly alone with the girl, Frank determined to make one more effort to get at the truth. How ill she was, he scarcely knew, but getting more accustomed to the dim light of the room, he could see that her face was crimson with fever, and her eyes wild and staring. He approached the bed quietly, and bending over her, said in a low tone—

“Lucy Williams, do you know me? I have come a long way to ask you a question, will you try to answer it?”

The girl started up in bed with a loud cry, “Tom, Tom!” she exclaimed, evidently mistaking Varley for her brother; “Why do you stay here? I thought you were at Liverpool; you will never, never get off!” Then she sank back on her pillows, and recommenced breathing heavily.

Frank waited a few minutes and thought he would try once more. This time he began differently. “Lucy,” he said, in a kind, soothing tone, “I have no doubt your brother is safe somewhere by this time, it is about your young mistress I wish to speak, your dear Miss Amy. Can you tell me where she is or do you know what led her to leave her home?” But now the girl’s terror redoubled; she clasped her hands and hid her face in the pillows. “Do not take me away, sir,” she implored, “let me die here in peace! I did it for Tom—he knows, he will tell you—only leave me here till the morning?” Then her mutterings became incoherent, and she tossed wildly from side to side.

It was evidently useless; nothing more could then be attempted, and Varley drew away from the bed and leant against the window ledge. Had he been of an imaginative temperament, the scene in which he was playing a part would have excited his nerves horribly. Not a sound in the house save the tick, tick, of a large Dutch clock fixed in a corner near the window. Now and then a feeble flame would spring up in the half-filled grate and cast a gaunt shadow across the ceiling. A badly silvered oval mirror hung over the mantle-piece and seemed to reflect all sorts of weird shapes; and every now and then, from the poor worn out bed in the darkest

corner of the room, came a sob or moan, or the girl's half-muttered delirous fancies.

"I shall be glad when this is over," said Frank to himself. "How long that woman is. The girl may be dead before morning and we none the wiser for what she knows!" He tried to catch a sentence here and there of her wanderings, but it told him nothing beyond the fact that her brother was somehow mixed up in the affair, and her one anxiety was for his safety.

At length, after what seemed to Frank an hour's waiting, but which in reality was but half the time, footsteps stopped outside in the silent street. In a few moments two figures entered the room and a brisk sharp voice exclaimed, "A light, Miss Kempe, and quickly; do you suppose I can attend a patient in the dark?" Then Miss Kempe groped in the depths of a corner cupboard, and presently produced a small end of a small candle ensconced in a large flat candlestick; this Frank quickly lighted with one of his cigar matches, and exchanging greetings with the doctor, turned with him towards the bed.

The doctor held the candle low, throwing the light on the girl's face, then he shook his head. "Are you afraid of infection?" he said, turning to Frank, "if so you had better go home at once."

"Afraid!" repeated Varley, "No, I am not afraid of anything under heaven when I have an object in view. But what is it? What is she suffering from?"

"Suppressed small-pox. A very bad case; something on her mind, too, I should say," this with a keen glance at Frank, "Twenty-four hours will see the end of it." Then he turned to Miss Kempe and proceeded to give her some necessary directions.

And twenty-four hours did see the end of it. About an hour before midnight, Frank was joined in his watch by Detective Hill, who at once offered to take sole charge of the case. “No,” said Frank decisively, “as long as there is the shadow of a chance of the shadow of a clue being given I shall remain. Your ears are sharpened by your practice and profession, but mine, Mr. Hill, by something with which your profession has nothing to do.”

“Gentlemen,” said the doctor, as the grey dawn began to struggle through the narrow panes, and light up the poorly furnished room. “It is perfectly useless for either of you to remain. The delirium has ceased, and the girl has fallen into a state of stupor from which she will never waken. She will never speak again.”

Still they stayed on. The Detective, as the day wore away, went in and out for his meals or a breath of fresh air, for the small room had become stifling. But Frank never stirred. “She may die at any moment,” he thought, “and it’s just possible that at the very last her energies may re-kindle, and she may make some sign that will need interpretation.”

So he waited and waited. The doctor came in and out, attending neighbouring patients and returning at intervals. The old clock went tick, tick, in the corner, and Miss Kempe, on her knees at the bedside, prayed audibly for the poor dying one. “Will you not join me, sir,” she had said to Frank, “in wrestling for this poor sinner’s soul?”

“I won’t say I won’t join you, Miss Kempe,” Frank had replied, “but you must let me stay here by the window.”

And thus towards evening the girl passed away in her sleep; she made no sign, she did not even lift her hand, and Frank, with a sigh

and a pitiful look at the once bright-faced Lucy Williams, thankfully made his escape into the fresh air.

He was soon joined by Detective Hill. “So sir,” he said, “it is all over, and there is little more we can do beyond setting a watch on the house and the woman there.”

“How so,” exclaimed Frank, “do you suspect she is mixed up in the affair? To me she seemed an honest sort of person, although somewhat of a fanatic.”

“So she is, sir, a really good woman I believe, a sort of a mission woman, I think they call her, connected with the Plymouth Brethren. I have, however, made a few enquiries about her, and I find that she was at one time engaged to be married to Tom Williams, but gave him up on account of the dissolute life he was leading. For his sake I suspect she has shown all this kindness to Lucy, and I think it more than probable that the fellow not hearing from his sister will endeavour to communicate with her through this woman.”

“Then it has not been altogether time wasted in following the girl here? I was beginning to lose heart again, and to imagine that once more the clue had slipped through our fingers. You mean to have this woman watched, Mr. Hill. Very good. May I ask you to allot this task to me? I cannot rest, I must be doing something, you know.”

“Pardon me, sir, the man has already been chosen for the work. Your presence in this neighbourhood is unwise, and arouses suspicion, and instead of being the watcher, you would be the one watched. A man of their own class must do the work. The man I have chosen is the postman on this beat. He is an old ally and

friend of mine, and has taken a room opposite No. 15 for the purpose. We must pay him well, sir, that's all, and we may count on a minute report of Miss Kempe's daily doings; including, as a matter of course, the first foreign or country letter she receives."

"Very well, you must do things your own way, I suppose. But what about the Liverpool police, are they on the watch for the man? Is there nothing I can do there? I dare say," added Frank, apologetically, "you think me a confounded fool, but I must be doing something. I think I must start off for Chicago, Australia, or somewhere! If you can't find work for me, I must find it for myself."

"But why go so far, sir? You may be of more use nearer home. Only one thing I must beg of you, leave this neighbourhood at once. If these people get it into their heads that they are watched, our difficulties will be increased tenfold. I can't say for certain," the Detective added, reflectively, "but it's just possible you might be of use at Liverpool. I can give you the names of one or two chums of Tom Williams, and if you can contrive to get it known among them that Lucy has died, and left her brother her clothes and savings, it will, no doubt, reach the fellow's ears, and the bait may draw. You see, these people are sharp enough to know the difference between a detective and a gentleman, and would be more likely to attach faith to a report coming through you, than from Scotland Yard."

"Very well, then, I start for Liverpool at once. I have given orders for the girl's funeral, and arranged that Miss Warden's walking dress and diamonds shall be sent back to her parents. I have only kept this, Hill," and Frank took from his pocket-book a small bow of lace and ribbon. "You see, I remember her wearing it, and if it's

missed, you'll know I have it," and he replaced it reverently in his breast-pocket.

"And now, before we part, Mr. Hill," continued Frank, "I want you honestly and candidly to give me your own private opinion on this matter. How, and in what way, do you consider Lucy Williams to be concerned in Miss Warden's disappearance?"

"Well, sir, it's a difficult question to answer," replied Mr. Hill, looking sideways at Frank. "I only feel sure of one thing in this affair, and that is that Miss Warden is alive and well somewhere. All else must be conjecture. My own impression is that she left her home voluntarily, and that she is staying away voluntarily. In such cases the maid generally possesses, to some extent, the confidence of her mistress, and acts according to some pre-arranged plan. Even the diamonds for instance—"

"Stop," shouted Frank, in a voice that made the detective start, "I can't stand this. Say another word, and I shall knock you down! No power in Heaven or earth shall make me believe such a story as that. No, no, it implies too much! Could a girl with her mouth and eyes have deliberately set herself to deceive her parents and friends? Could she—no, no, I will not hear it. Tell me anything but such a black story as that, Hill."

"Well, sir, I have no wish to give offence. You asked for my opinion, but it is extremely difficult in such a case as this to have one." This with a respectful glance at Frank's Herculean arm and well-developed muscles.

Two hours after this Frank was well on his way to Liverpool. Anxious, worried, disappointed as he was at the unforeseen ending to his journey, he could not help feeling at heart more hopeful than

he had hitherto been. “Alive and well somewhere,” he kept repeating to himself over and over again, not as an incentive to his work, for he needed none, but for the ring of comfort the words brought.

“Nothing can ever shake my faith in that girl, nothing can ever make me doubt her truth and purity,” he said, as he entered one or two facts in his note-book for future experience and guidance. “But how the mystery deepens and thickens, supposing her to be alive and well somewhere!”

CHAPTER VI.

SHORTLY after his arrival at Liverpool, Frank received two letters from Harleyford. The first from his mother, ran thus—

"MY DEAREST BOY,—

"We received your telegram, with your address, yesterday, and I need not say how thankful your father and I were to hear that you were safe and well, and that you had some settled place of abode, where a letter could be sent. We had begun to fear that with your usual impetuosity, you would be starting off on some long journey, and it would be weeks or months before there would be any means of communicating with you.

"I know, where a young lady is concerned, it is almost always lost labour to attempt to reason with a young man, so it is with little hope of success that I make one more appeal to your common sense.

"My dearest Frank, can you possibly imagine that you, unversed and inexperienced in such matters, can hope to meet with success where well-trained professional men have failed? Have not the science and ingenuity of first-class London detectives been exhausted in this search, and what can you hope to do? To my mind one of two things is certain; either Miss Warden met with some accident (to us unaccountable) and is long since dead; or else she has contracted some *mésalliance*, and is remaining voluntarily hidden from her friends. In either case, search for her, as far as you are concerned, is equally fruitless; for dead or living she could never be your wife.

“My son, be reasonable, give up a task for which you are utterly unsuited, and which renders your father and myself equally miserable. We are ‘wearying’ for you, as your old Scotch tutor used to say, and the rectory seems very cheerless with my Frank’s chair so long unoccupied.

“The sculling match will be coming off soon, and I hear that Benson is likely to be the favourite. What do you wish done about Sultana? I know you objected to Robert riding her, but she has grown far too frisky for your father to mount. Let us have a long letter as soon as you possibly can, and thankful, indeed, shall I be if it contains the welcome news that you will soon be amongst us again.

“Ever, with much love,
“Your affectionate mother,
“GRACE VARLEY.”

Then there followed a long postscript.

“Do you remember your old playfellow, Mary Burton? I have her staying with me now (she came over from the Denver’s) and she has grown into one of the sweetest, handsomest girls, I have ever seen. She is just twenty-one, and has come into her mother’s large property at North-over-Fells. She is very anxious to know if you are at all like the Frank of old times, but I tell her a mother’s description of her only son cannot be a trustworthy one, so she must wait till she sees you, and judge for herself. Adieu.”

“Dear mother!” said Frank, when he read her letter, “God bless her, she means kindly, and may say things to me no one else would dare to!”

Then he wrote a short reply.

"DEAREST MOTHER,—

"Please not to expect me at the rectory until you see me. I have serious work on hand, which nothing but death or success will induce me to give up. Thanks for all your news.

"Robert may ride Sultana, but tell him, I'll thrash him if he spoils her mouth. I am delighted to hear such good accounts of Mary Burton, but I have other thoughts in my head than old playfellows and sweethearts just now.

"With a great deal of love,
"Your affectionate son,
"FRANK VARLEY."

Mrs. Varley read his letter, and sighed and cried over it. Then she showed it to Mary Burton, who sighed and smiled over it.

"Why are such coquettes as Amy Warden sent into the world to turn men's brains, Mary, will you tell me that?" said Mrs. Varley. "If she had lived, she would have been a most unsuitable wife for Frank, with her self-willed, impatient temper. Will you wait for him, Mary? Do you think he is worth waiting for?"

And Mary had confessed that she thought he was worth waiting for, and had sighed and smiled again. Why should she not smile, indeed? There was no rival beauty in her way now!

Frank's second letter was from Lord Hardcastle, and contained a brief summary of events at Harleyford—

"I grieve to say," he wrote, "that Mrs. Warden is in a very weak state of health. Indeed I think far more seriously of her than

Hayward does, and have suggested that further medical advice should be called in. Mr. Warden has pulled himself together wonderfully, for his wife's sake, and seems, to a certain extent, to have recovered some of his old strength and energy.

"With regard to Lucy Williams, my own opinion is very strong and decided. I fail to see matters in the light in which Hill, in his report to us, has placed them. He seeks to imply that she has been acting in concert with Miss Warden, or upon some pre-arranged plan, and was probably commissioned by her mistress to sell the diamonds to supply her with money. To my mind he is shooting beyond the mark in such a supposition. I can only look upon the girl as a common thief of a very ordinary type, who took advantage of the state of confusion into which the 'High Elms' was thrown, to take possession of her mistress's jewellery and clothes. She has probably stolen far more than we know, and when Mrs. Warden becomes stronger (if she ever does) and able to go into the matter, no doubt many things will be missed.

"I think in following this track, you are most probably wasting time and energy. Still, as you say one must do something, and it is just possible that in following up one clue you may come upon another, so I will say no more, but wish you 'God speed' with all my heart."

Frank growled tremendously over this letter—

"It's all very well," he muttered, "for Hardcastle to sit quietly at home and throw cold water on all my attempts; how on earth does he think the clue is to be found if one does not look after it? He says so little, it is difficult to get at the man's real thoughts on the

matter. It is easy to say it is perfectly useless doing this or doing that, but what in Heaven's name does he think ought to be done?"

What indeed! Not once or twice, but every hour in the day did Lord Hardcastle ask himself the same question. He felt like a man walking in a circle, for ever on the verge of a mystery, but never approaching any nearer than a circle permitted. Become now one of the family at the High Elms, not a look, not a word, not a tone of any one of the household ever escaped his observation. Mrs. Warden's severe illness had thoroughly incapacitated her for the exertion of receiving visitors, and the family had gradually become all but isolated from their neighbours. An occasional morning caller, leaving cards only, the daily visit of the doctor, and the arrival of the London post, was all that occurred to break the day's monotony.

Thus the summer wore slowly away, the short autumn days began to grow chill and stormy, the sad old house looked drear and gray among the tall, dark elms. Very drear and very gray Lord Hardcastle thought it, as he rode slowly along the steep avenue leading through the park. He had been transacting some business in Dunwich for Mr. Warden, and, somewhat weary and dispirited, was returning in the afternoon twilight. He looked right and left on a damp misty landscape. The equinoctial gales had set in early, and the trees were already brown and leafless. Heavy rains, too, had flooded the country round, and the stream running through the Park was swollen and turbid, threatening to overflow its banks. Dark clouds were gathering overhead, and a flight of rooks whirling low and flapping their black wings, with their mournful cawing, completed the desolateness of the scene.

“It is like entering a graveyard,” he thought, as he rode along. Then his memory went back to one bright sunny morning, when riding up this same avenue he had met Amy and her father, well-mounted, coming from the house. Very lovely had she looked in the summer sunshine, with her fresh, girlish beauty, and almost royal dignity of manner.

“*A bien-tôt*, Lord Hardcastle,” had been her salutation as she cantered past, and the sweet, ringing voice echoed in his ears still—aye, and would until he died. Was it the many-sidedness of Amy’s character (if the expression be allowed) which made her so dangerously fascinating? With Varley, generally speaking, her manner had been that of a finished coquette, alternately commanding or persuading, wilful or gentle, as the fancy seized her. With Hardcastle, on the contrary, her bearing was that of a stately, high-bred lady; her impatience and impetuosity of temper only shown in the vivacity and variety of her conversation. Was it, could it be all over now for ever? Was all this bright beauty and loveliness but a memory—a thing of the past? All this and much more passed through Lord Hardcastle’s mind as he drew near to the house, standing out grim and gray against the dark, threatening sky.

“Bad news again, sir,” said the man who came forward to take his horse, “Mrs. Warden is much worse, but would insist on getting up this afternoon. Doctor Hayward has been sent for, and master would like to see you at once in the morning room.”

Thither Lord Hardcastle immediately went. The morning room was one of the prettiest sitting rooms in the house—Amy’s favourite in the old days, on account of its long French windows opening on to the lawn, and from which might be seen a charming miniature

landscape of woodland and park, and the silvery rippling stream now so dark and swollen.

Mr. Warden came forward to meet him. “She would come down and sit here,” he whispered; “a sudden change has set in, and I have sent for Hayward; I fear he will be caught in this storm, for a storm we shall certainly have.” As he spoke, a crash of thunder shook the house from basement to roof, and flash after flash of brilliant lightning followed in quick succession.

“Let me move your chair, dear,” he said, tenderly, “a little way from the window; it is a grand sight, but almost too much for your nerves.” She yielded at once to his wishes, as she had yielded all through their married life; and still further to shield her from the bright flashes he stood between her and the window, bending over her in an almost lover-like attitude, so as not to lose any of her words, for her voice had grown alarmingly faint and weak.

“This reminds me of old times, Stephen,” she said, looking up in his face. At this moment a pitiful howl from old “Presto,” the hound, rang through the room. The dog himself trembled violently and began to sniff first under the windows, then at the door. Mr. Warden rang the bell. “Don’t turn him out, Stephen,” said his wife, “I like him here at my feet. Don’t you remember he was often like this in a storm. Poor old doggie,” she added, stooping down to smooth his large head, “stay with me as long as you can.”

Mr. Warden made no reply. Something in his throat seemed to choke him. Lord Hardcastle looked from one to the other. Then he wrote on a slip of paper, “The man must have missed Hayward somehow; I will go myself after him,” and placing it where Mr. Warden would see it, hurriedly departed on his mission.

And now the storm seemed to have reached its height. Flash after flash lighted up the otherwise dark room, peal after peal crashed over the roof, and the rain dashed in torrents against the window panes. “We will have lights,” Mr. Warden had said, but his wife had objected, urging that she wished to see the storm in all its grandeur and beauty. “We have had dark days together lately, dear,” she said plaintively, looking up in his face, “but I feel they are ending now. Something tells me that your Amy will come home again”—Another mournful howl from “Presto” interrupted her, and again the bright pink and purple of the lightning played about the room.

“I never saw ‘Presto’ so frightened before,” she exclaimed. “How strange it is! I used to be so nervous and terrified in a thunderstorm, and to-night I feel so happy, as if I were beginning my girl’s life over again.” She broke off suddenly, looking towards the window. “What was that?” she exclaimed, “surely I heard something more than the rain!”

“Yes,” said her husband, trying to steady his nerves, which were almost beyond his control, “it is the bough of the oleander against the glass. How the wind is rising! It is indeed an awful tempest!”

And now Lord Hardcastle and Dr. Hayward came in, drenched to the skin and out of breath with their hurried ride, then the dog, with one prolonged howl, flew past them as they entered. “Something is wrong,” said Hardcastle. “Hey, ‘Presto!’ go, find!” and opening a side door he let the dog out into the stormy night.

The doctor went softly into the middle of the room and looked at his patient. The hectic flush was fading from her face, and she seemed to be sinking into a sweet sound sleep.

“I am so thankful to see her thus,” said Mr. Warden, “she has been so feverish and excitable all day, I think the storm must have upset her nerves.”

“Hush!” said the doctor, solemnly, holding up his hand, “this is not sleep; this is death, Mr. Warden; she will soon be beyond the sound of storm and tempest.” He yielded his place to the husband, who, kneeling by her side, took her thin white hand in his. Hardcastle and the doctor withdrawing to a further corner of the room, waited and watched for the end to come.

Gradually the storm subsided, and the rain settled down into a slow steady fall. The breathing of the patient became slower and fainter, and the doctor whispered to Hardcastle that the end was at hand. At that moment a long low wail sounded on the outside of the window, and Hardcastle, peering through the dark panes, could see “Presto’s” brown head and glittering eyes pressed close against the glass.

He crept softly out of the room to call the dog in, fearful lest he might disturb the solemn watch in the chamber of death. “Quiet, old doggie,” he said, stooping down to pat the hound, all wet and mud-covered as he was. But what is this! What is it makes the young man start and tremble, and his lips and cheeks turn pale? What is it brings that look of horror into his face, and makes his eyes distend and his nostrils quiver? What is this hanging in shreds between the dog’s firmly-set teeth? What is it? Only a few tattered remnants of dark-blue silk!

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. WARDEN passed away before midnight; only the doctor and her husband were with her at the last moment, for Hardcastle, bare-headed and trembling with excitement, had followed the hound out into the dark night.

"Find, 'Presto,' find," he exclaimed, urging the dog forward. But "Presto" needed no urging, he bounded rather than ran over the sodden grass and under the dripping trees; no stars, no moon, no light anywhere, and Hardcastle, breathless and stumbling, with difficulty kept up with the eager hound, who turns neither to the right nor to the left, but makes straight for the deep rushing stream, straight on to the low, sloping bank; and there the dog stops and trembles.

"Which way, 'Presto?' Forward, forward!" shouts Hardcastle. But the dog will not stir a step now, and stands quivering on the brink of the stream; Hardcastle mounts the bank after him, and, bending forward, looks up and down the river. Not a sound save the rush and whirl of the waters, the moaning of the wind in the dark trees, and the pitiless splash, splash of the rain. Not a sign of life nor death in the flood, but as he turns to descend the slippery bank, something lying in the roots of an overhanging willow tree catches his eye. One arm clinging to a low bough, one arm in the cold, dark waters, and in another instant he holds in his hand a girl's low-crowned felt hat, with pale-blue ostrich feather. "My God! and is this the end?" He cries out in the bitterness of his heart, then, feeling how utterly useless and helpless he is alone and single-handed in the dark, he rushes back to the house.

“I want men, I want lights,” he calls in a hoarse voice; “quickly, in Heaven’s name, down to the stream!” Down to the stream they follow him, with lights, and ropes, and drags. No time is lost in setting to work; lanterns are swung on ropes across the river, the men, with Hardcastle at their head, are wading through the swollen waters—hand in hand, throwing ropes, dragging, shouting, lest some poor soul might still be struggling in the dark flood.

What does it matter? There she lies, face downwards, among the reeds and tall rushes in the river’s mud. What does it matter! The men may shout—the waters rush—aye, and her warm, true-hearted lover kneel by her side, and call her by her sweet name, never more will those dark eyes open to the light of day, nor those red lips be unsealed to tell their story of sorrow and wrong! Clasp her tight, and clasp her long, Lord Hardcastle, then yield her up for ever to the shadows, the doubt, the darkness of the grave.

They brought her in, and laid her on her own dainty little bed. The storm had ceased now; day dawned, the birds carolled and twittered at the casement, and the bright sunshine streamed in through Amy’s rose-coloured curtains, and fell sideways on her pale, grey face. Silent, hopeless, and awe-stricken the father and lover gazed upon their darling; the search is ended now—there she lies in her blue silk dress, all torn and mud-stained; her dark hair unwound and lying round her in long, damp coils; her tiny hands still clasped as though in prayer, and a look of agony and terror in her half-closed eyes. Alas! how changed. What terrible ordeal can she have passed through since she last lay sleeping here. There are lines on her brow, and dark circles beneath her eyes which tell of tears and sorrow; a pained look about the chiselled mouth which the Amy of old days never wore. Lord Hardcastle bends over her reverently—he will not even kiss her forehead, dead as she lies, for

he dared not have done so living. Kneeling as he would to his sovereign, he takes her damp, cold hand in his to press to his lips; as he does so, something glittering on the third finger of her left hand catches his eye. What is it! Not the antique ruby ring with its quaint motto, "*sans espoir je meurs*," only a plain gold band encircles the tiny finger—a simple wedding-ring!

They buried Mrs. Warden and Amy on one day—on one day, but not in one grave. People in Harleyford wondered much at this; and they wondered still more, when, shortly afterwards a splendid granite monument was placed over the mother's grave, with name, age, date, birth, and death engraved in clear-cut letters; while Amy's resting-place was shadowed only by a simple marble cross with but one word inscribed, "*Aimée*."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE news of Amy's death was telegraphed to Frank at Dublin. Thither, following some imaginary clue, he had gone, and eager and hopeful at heart, the sudden tidings nearly proved his death-blow. Before the day closed which brought the news, Frank was lying helpless and unconscious on a bed of fever.

Mrs. Varley trembled for her son's life; fortunately her address was known to the proprietor of the hotel where Frank was staying, and he had immediately telegraphed to her her son's danger.

"Mary," she said, addressing Miss Burton, "have you courage to cross the Channel with me to try to save my poor boy? The rector will follow next week if there's any need, but he cannot leave his parish at an hour's notice."

And Mary had expressed her willingness to start there and then for Dublin. What would she not do for one who had always been as a brother to her? So the two ladies took passage in a packet crossing the next day, and arrived at Dublin to find Frank raving and tossing in the delirium of brain fever.

Then followed days and nights of weary watching and nursing.

"He may pull through yet, madam," said the good old doctor, addressing Mrs. Varley, but peering wonderingly at Mary through his spectacles. He had been told that the sudden death of a young lady was the cause of the illness. Who, then, was this other young lady so devoted in her attentions to the sufferer? "He may pull through yet, madam; he has a constitution of iron and the frame of

a giant, not to speak of the two angels who watch over him day and night!" This in a rich Irish brogue, with a gallant bow right and left to the two ladies.

And Frank did pull through. Gradually the fever in his brain subsided, and though weak and helpless as a child, the doctor pronounced him out of danger.

But with returning consciousness came back the sense of sorrow and loss, and Mrs. Varley's heart ached for her son as she saw the look of utter blank misery and despair settle down upon his once bright, happy face. "Get him to talk of his sorrow" had been the doctor's advice, and gently and gradually his mother had led him on to speak freely of poor Amy and her terrible ending.

"We all suffer with and for you, my son," said Mrs. Varley, sitting by Frank's easy chair in the early twilight, the glow from the fire alone lighting the room, "but my feeling for you does not prevent me feeling for someone else very near and very dear to me, and who is just now suffering as much as, or, perhaps, more than you."

Frank's eyes expressed his wonder. Of whom could his mother be speaking? Wrapped up in his own misery, he had had no thought for the sorrows of others.

"Don't try to talk to me, Frank, dear," continued his mother. "You must forgive me if I say that sorrow is apt to make one selfish and unobservant. Otherwise you would have noticed not only the grief and anxiety in my face, which has made an old woman of me the last few weeks, but also the grief in a sweet young face which has been watching yours very sadly for many a day and night."

“Mother, mother,” exclaimed Frank, passionately, for now his mother’s meaning was unmistakable. “Why did you bring the girl here? You knew it was useless. Why didn’t you leave me here to die? God knows I have nothing left to live for now!”

“Miss Burton did not come for you alone, Frank, she came for my sake also. She has been to me as a daughter in my trouble, and as a daughter she came with me here. Your father could not leave his parish, and was it right that I should travel all these miles alone to face such an illness as yours? The difficulty, however, will soon be ended, as Mary tells me she must leave us to-morrow; she has friends here in Dublin. Your danger is past, she says, and she is no longer needed. Believe me, Frank, it is not your return to health which is driving her away, but your coldness and indifference, and (forgive me, dear) your ingratitude.”

“What is it you want me to do, mother?” asks poor Frank, piteously. “Not marry her! I have no love to offer any woman now. My heart is crushed and broken, and a dozen Mary Burtons couldn’t mend it.”

“I know that, Frank, dear,” replied his mother, very sweetly, “but if you have a broken heart to carry about with you, it should teach you to be very tender to the broken hearts of others, especially to so good and true a heart as Mary’s. A few kind words to her just now would make her, if not happy, at any rate a little less miserable than she is now.”

“Tell me what to say, then,” said Frank, wearily, “and let me say it at once. You don’t want me to ask her to marry me? The words would choke me, I think.”

“No, my son, not that. I only want you to thank her for her kindness and care through your illness (for, indeed, she has nearly worn herself out in saving your life), and I want you just to say four little words to her. ‘Don’t leave us, Mary.’ This for your mother’s sake, for what could I do without her? May I send her to you, Frank?” she added, after a pause.

Then Frank, wearied with the discussion, gave a feeble assent, and Mrs. Varley left the room immediately, thankful for her partial success, and hoping much from the coming interview between her son and Mary.

Very softly Mary entered the room, and went straight up to Frank. Then, for the first time, he noticed how pale and sad the girl had grown.

“How white you are looking, Mary,” he said, kindly. “Are you feeling ill? Will you take my chair a moment?” at the same time attempting to rise.

“No, no,” said Mary in an instant, flushing scarlet, “you are still an invalid, and must not think of politeness. Mrs. Varley said you wanted to see me. What is it, Frank?”

“Mary,” he said, taking both her hands in his, “I want to ask you to forgive my abominable rudeness and ingratitude to you. I want to thank you for all you have done for me. I am so ashamed I have not done this before, but I have been so miserable, so broken-hearted.” Then the poor fellow broke down utterly, and weakened by his long illness and unable to control himself, covered his face with his hands, and wept and sobbed like a child.

“Frank, Frank,” pleaded Mary. “For all our sakes restrain yourself; you will kill me if you give way like this. What can I do for you? I would lay down my life to give you an hour’s happiness.”

Still Frank sobbed on, and Mary, bending over him as a mother would over a sick child, drew his head on to her shoulder, and soothed and comforted him.

Gradually the passion of his grief subsided, and he lay back, with his head on her shoulder, worn out and exhausted.

Then Mrs. Varley gently turned the handle of the door, and entered the room.

“Thank God for this,” she exclaimed. “Mary, don’t move. Frank, dear, she is the one wife out of all the world you should have chosen, and you may well be thankful to have won such an one. God bless you both. I will write to your father to-night.”

Frank was on the point of asking his mother what he had said or done that she should congratulate and bless him in this way, but Mary’s white face and trembling hands checked the words on his lips, so he merely said, with a weary sigh, “Mother, I must go to bed at once, I am utterly worn out,” and tottered rather than walked to the door. Mrs. Varley followed him. “I may tell your father it is all settled, may I not?” she said, in a low voice, as she held open the door for him. Frank glanced back at Mary leaning still over the back of the armchair, and her drooping figure and tearful face pleaded her own cause. “Tell him what you like, mother,” he replied, wearily, “only let me rest to-night.” Besides, after all, what did it matter? The best of his life was gone, any one who would might have the broken remnants.

Very angry indeed was the rector when he received his wife's letter containing the news of his son's engagement. "It is absolutely indecent," he wrote back, "it is gross disrespect to the living and the dead. Every one knows the hopes my son cherished with regard to Miss Warden, and now, within a fortnight after her death, he is engaged to some one else. I will have nothing whatever to do with such an arrangement. Mr. Warden is an old and valued friend of mine, and how could I look him in the face if I countenanced such conduct on the part of my son? Is he a child or a lunatic that he cannot learn to control his own feelings and bear up against a bereavement? Let him make up his mind to bear his sorrows as a man should and as other people have had to before him."

In reply to this, Mrs. Varley wrote a long letter pleading, not so much the wisdom of her own conduct, as the necessity of the case.

"Frank is neither a child nor a lunatic," so ran the letter, "but he has strong passions and an impetuous temper which would very rapidly carry him down hill if once he turned that way. Add to this his broken health and spirits, and you will see I have had no light task to perform in endeavouring to restore him to what he once was. The physician here tells me his only chance of recovering health and strength is to start at once on a long foreign tour—under any circumstances he must not think of returning to Harleyford for another year. What then, do you advise? Can you leave your parish for so long a time to travel with your son through Europe (she knew the rector hated travelling, or indeed any kind of bodily exertion) or do you consider that I should be a suitable companion for him under the circumstances? Is there any one of his own friends fit for such a task, or who could do for him all that a tender loving wife will do? What would it matter to Mr. Warden, or to

any one else likely to criticise his conduct, if Frank fell into a course of reckless dissipation, or ended his life by his own hand—and this, let me tell you, is another terror I have had always before me. No, no, my dear husband, see things in their right light I beseech you; you must give way in this matter, and believe me it is as much for your own happiness as your son's that you should do so."

And the rector did give way as might have been expected, and not only consented to his son's wedding, but went over to Dublin and performed the ceremony himself, and also sketched out the wedding tour for the young people—a trip through the American continent first, and a final run through the chief cities of Europe.

"Hardcastle has the best of it now," said poor Frank, sadly, to himself, as he stood waiting for his bride in the vestry of the little Irish church where the ceremony was to take place. "He has no mother to talk him into a marriage he has no heart for. Not but that I shall do my best to make her happy, for she is sweet and good, but I cannot tear the other memory out of my heart."

Thus it was that Frank and Mary became man and wife within a month of poor Amy's death, and the rector and Mrs. Varley returned to Harleyford to sustain, as best they might, the inquisitiveness and criticism of their neighbours.

CHAPTER IX.

VERY slowly and wearily the days went on at the High Elms. Lord Hardcastle, now become an acknowledged inmate of the house, scarcely recognised himself in the life he was leading, so completely were his occupations and surroundings reversed. Habituated to the quiet monotony of a life of study, broken only by a yearly visit to London to attend the meetings of the various scientific societies of which he was a member, it was not the solitude of the house which jarred upon his nerves and feelings. He had from his earliest youth been accustomed to keep his impulses and passions well under control, and his highly nervous temperament had ever been perfectly balanced by his well cultivated reasoning powers. Under the trying circumstances through which he had passed, his health had not suffered in the slightest degree, and yet here was he, reasonable and self-contained as ever, in a state of nervous irritability for which he could not account. "It is an atmosphere of mystery that I am breathing," he would say to himself, "at every turn something confronts me for which I am totally unprepared. Why, for instance, the inscription on Amy's grave? and why is it that I, who loved her so truly and who held her cold and lifeless in my arms, have as yet no feeling of utter blank despair in my heart, but only some strong undefinable impulse which is for ever urging me on, on, on, in the search for the truth?" And the more he thought the more he wondered, until his brain became as it were sick and giddy with revolving so constantly round one centre.

Mr. Warden, on his part, seemed to have settled down into the absolute quietude of a hopeless, aimless life. He had become

altogether an old man in his ways and habits, and was leading the life of one who knows the future will have no good thing in store for him, and who therefore lives entirely in the memory of the past. About Mrs. Warden, and her illness and death, he would talk freely, but when once or twice Lord Hardcastle had purposely mentioned Amy's name to him, he had either abruptly quitted the room or else so pointedly turned the conversation that another remark on the subject would have been impossible.

"It cuts him to the heart even to hear me speak of her, and he must know she is never out of my mind," thought Lord Hardcastle, as he looked across the library to where Mr. Warden was sitting with an open volume before him, but his eyes dreamily fixed on the window pane—his thoughts evidently far away.

"See here, Mr. Warden," he said suddenly, crossing the room to him, "I may seem impertinent to you in what I am about to ask, but I have a real reason for asking the question. I loved your daughter living (God knows how truly) and I love her dead. If she had lived she might never have been my wife—who can tell—but her good name, dead as she is, is as dear to me as though she had been. Will you tell me—I ask it as a great favour—why you had inscribed on her tomb a name so different to the one we were accustomed to know her by?"

"It was her right name, the one she was christened," said Mr. Warden dreamily, his thoughts still far away and his eyes looking beyond his book.

Then Lord Hardcastle summoned together all his courage, and making a great effort asked the one question which had occupied

his mind through so many sorrowful days, and to which, indeed, his former question was but intended to lead the way.

“Mr. Warden, tell me one thing else, I beg of you; indeed it is not from idle curiosity I ask it, was Aimée the name of Miss Warden’s mother?”

At these words Mr. Warden visibly started, and his face grew ashy pale; then controlling himself with an effort, he replied “Mrs. Warden’s name was Helen, I thought you knew.”

“Yes, I knew that; forgive me, Mr. Warden, if my conduct seem grossly impertinent to you. I know I have not the slightest right to ask these questions, but if you think I have in any way been to you as a son through these long sorrowful days, as a son I beg for the confidence of my father.”

“A son! ah, you have indeed been to me as a son in my affliction! But you are probing old wounds now, my young friend, and asking for a story sadder than the one you know already, because there is sin and crime mixed up in it.”

There was a pause, neither spoke for some minutes. Mr. Warden shaded his face with both hands, and his thoughts wandered back to his bright young days when sorrow seemed a far-away thing and death a hideous impossibility. The long sorrowful years that had since come and gone, faded from his memory; he no longer saw the room where he sat, nor even his companion, and rushing back upon him in full force came the recollection of young, strong passions, early hopes and fears, bright sunshiny hours when life was better worth having than it now was.

At length he uncovered his face and began speaking slowly as one in a dream. “I can see her now, see her as she stood the first day I saw her, in the lonely mountain country. Her feet on the black-red lava, the glowing sunset behind her head, her rich dark beauty flashing back every gold and crimson ray. I can see yet, her long white dress with its bright coloured ribbons and the dark-faced nurse by her side who scowled and frowned at me as my eyes expressed the wonder and admiration I felt. There and then I could have knelt at her feet and worshipped her as a goddess. Young and passionate, I poured out my all of love and devotion at her shrine; she vowed she loved me as I loved her; she took my heart into her keeping—played with it—broke it—and threw it on one side for ever.”

He paused, overcome by his recollections. Lord Hardcastle leaned forward breathlessly. Here was Mr. Warden voluntarily according the confidence he was so eager to obtain.

Presently Mr. Warden recommenced. “I married her according to the rites of her own Church. I can see her now in her royal beauty (she had the blood of Spanish kings in her veins) as she swept down the aisle, the small head thrown back, the dark eyes sometimes flashing, sometimes drooping, the full-parted lips and the delicate nostril. Lord Hardcastle,” he said suddenly turning to the young man, “You thought my daughter lovely, I suppose, but compared with her mother, my first Aimée, she was but as the wild white daisy to the queenly lily.”

Again he paused, then once more recommenced—

“For four short years we lived together, in perfect love but not in peace, for her wilful, passionate temper raised many storms

between us. At last I felt it my duty to endeavour to curb, if I could not conquer, her waywardness; but I found the task altogether beyond me—I had so indulged her every whim and fancy that she would not brook the slightest control at my hands. Her nurse, Isola, added not a little to our difficulties; she worshipped her young mistress as a being of a superior order, and was continually representing to her that I had become harsh and tyrannical of late, whereas I was simply endeavouring to teach my wife how to acquire a little self-control. Seeing this, I contrived one morning to have a long quiet talk with Isola on the matter. I assured her my one object was to secure the peace and happiness of her young mistress, and begged her to aid me in my efforts as far as possible.

"But it was useless. Isola was loud and stubborn in her *Cevenol patois*. Mademoiselle (so she still called my wife) was perfect. What would I? Did I wish to freeze the warm southern blood in her veins, and teach her the cunning and caution of the cold-hearted northerners? Had not Aimée's father and mother, each in dying, committed their darling to her care, and no power in heaven or earth would induce her to betray the trust. 'I love those who love her,' the poor ignorant faithful creature concluded, 'and those who hate her, I hate also with an undying hatred.' These last words she almost hissed in my face, then abruptly turned and left me, taking my little girl by the hand, telling her to come and gather lilies to make a crown for her dear mamma.

"Then I went to Aimée herself, and asked if she were ready to give me some real proof of her love, for I had come to ask her a great favour—

"'What is it?' said Aimée, petulantly, 'I have not loved you so well lately, for you have been cross and cruel to me.'

“How lovely she looked that morning, angry and scornful though she was. I remember she was threading some bright Andalusian beads, one of our little girl’s lily crowns, half-faded, drooped over her forehead, and an Indian scarf, draped round her waist, fell in folds over her white dress. Poor, poor Aimée! My girl-wife! then scarcely nineteen years of age—till I die, your image will remain in my mind fresh and glowing, as on that last morning I looked on your sweet face!

“The favour I had to ask was a very simple one. I merely wished to take my wife and daughter to England, and introduce both to my friends and relations, from whom I had been, to a certain extent, alienated during my long residence in France. But the one thing which I begged with great earnestness was, that Isola should be left behind with her own people. I explained to her that my motive in asking this was a kind one. Isola should be well cared for during our absence, and, as I loved my wife well, I wished to have her all to myself, for a short time at any rate.

“Then the storm burst. It was terrible to see my wife’s anger—

“‘Did I wish to kill her in some secret place,’ she asked, ‘that I should thus take her away from her own bright land, and the one, the only one who loved her truly?’

“The scene was indescribable; in vain I attempted to reason with, or calm her. In a perfect whirlwind of fury, she swept out of the room.

“I would not trust myself to follow her, so much had my temper been aroused. So calling to my little girl, who was playing in the garden, we went together for a long ramble among the mountains; I thought that perhaps alone with my little one in the sweet air I

might somewhat recover my calmness, and would better arrange my plan of action for the future. We did not return until nearly evening, Amy singing and scattering flowers as we went. At the door of my house I was met by one of the servants, who handed to me a letter from my wife, and in answer to my enquiry, informed me that she and Isola had gone out immediately after I had, and not since returned.

"With a foreboding of calamity, I opened the letter and read these words, they are burnt into my memory, 'You no longer love me. Your every look and action prove it. For many months I have seen your love slipping away from me, and I have not cared to stretch out my hand to keep it. I go to one who has worshipped me from my earliest childhood, to my cousin in Arragon. In his house, and in his presence, I will see you if you wish, but never seek to win me back to your home again, for I have torn your image out of my heart.

"'AIMÉE.'

"I staggered like a man who had received a heavy blow; the room swam round and round before my eyes; then all was darkness, and I fell heavily to the ground. Lord Hardcastle, do I weary you? When you asked for my confidence just now, did you expect to hear such a story as this of Amy's mother?"

"No, I did not, Mr. Warden; and may I ask you, did Amy ever know of her mother's guilt, or did she imagine that your second wife was her real mother?"

"No, to both your questions. Amy was told her mother was dead, as far as she could be made to understand what that was; but her fascinating image was so deeply rooted in the child's mind, that I

do not believe she ever forgot her. Later on—but no, I will not anticipate, but will tell you in proper order each successive event.

“When I came to my senses, I fully realized the depth of my misery, and at once took measures to ascertain if my wife had really done as she threatened. Alas! it was only too easily ascertained—the shamelessness of her conduct was absolutely appalling. Stricken to the heart, though I was, I made no effort to win her back; ‘she has ceased to love me, let her go,’ was the one thought in my mind, and henceforth my little Amy would have all my love and care.

“I hastened to take her to a place where her mother’s name and sin would be unknown. So I left the Haute Loire province, and settled at St. Sauveur, near Bordeaux. There I engaged an excellent English governess for her (the lady who afterwards became my wife) and by study and incessant occupation endeavoured to divert my thoughts.

“About a year after we had been at St. Sauveur, I was startled one morning by the appearance of Isola standing at the gate. My first thought was that she had come to me with a message of penitence from my wife. Then, however, noticing she was clad in deep mourning, I guessed she had far different tidings to bring.

“‘Your mistress is dead,’ I asked, at once anticipating the worst. She bowed her head.

“‘Tell me everything, Isola,’ I gasped, hoping still there might be some message of love or repentance for me.

“‘There is nothing to tell,’ she replied coldly, ‘she is dead, that is all.’

“‘But where, when, how?’ I insisted, my soul thirsting and hungering after my wife.

“‘She took cold, she would not take care, and so she died, that is all,’ was the reply.

“‘And not a word or message for me, or for her daughter?’

“Then the woman laughed a harsh scornful laugh.

“‘What would Monsieur have? Don Josef took care of her, and gave her all she wanted. He was by her side when she died, and held her in his arms.’

“I had no heart to ask more; and when Isola turned her back on me without another word or salutation of any sort, I did not seek to detain her. The least sign of penitence would have brought back my old love for my wife, but to die thus, as she had lived, in sin, was the bitterest blow of all.

“My great fear at this time was lest Amy should know, by some means, any part of this terrible story. I endeavoured, and successfully, to confuse her infant mind, by constantly speaking of her mother as her governess, and the thought soon suggested itself to me, that if she had another mother given to her, the recollection of the first would be completely obliterated. Accordingly, some short time after Aimée’s death, I married my second wife. The result you know, a life of peace and comparative happiness until now.”

Again Mr. Warden paused, his calmness was evidently failing him, and it was with increased effort and difficulty that he finished his narration.

“Soon after my second marriage,” he continued, “I left St. Sauveur, hoping still farther to blot the recollection of her early days from Amy’s young mind. To a certain extent I believe I succeeded; I imagined I had quite done so, when one day, some two years ago, to my great surprise, she suddenly asked me—

“‘Papa, dear, tell me about that beautiful lady who used to play with me when I was a child; wasn’t she my very own mamma?’

“Then it was I told my little daughter the first and only lie I ever uttered, and assured her that that beautiful lady was her governess, and that Mrs. Warden was her very own mamma.

“‘Is that the truth, papa?’ asked Amy, looking up into my face; and again I assured her that was the truth. ‘Then,’ said the child, persistently, ‘I love the governess better than my own mamma, for she used to kiss and play with me, and hold me in her arms, but this mamma only does embroidery, and receives visitors all day.’ The words cut me to the heart; there never was much affection between Amy and her step-mother, their characters were so opposite, and every year the want of sympathy between them became more and more apparent. Not one of my friends and relatives knew of my second marriage; they imagined Mrs. Warden to be my first and only wife, and Mrs. Warden, without any near relatives, found no difficulty in concealing the fact that she had married a widower. We had lived such a completely isolated life among the French peasantry, that there was no fear of Amy ever hearing her mother spoken of in England; and yet, after all these precautions, here was nature asserting herself in this extraordinary manner.” Then Mr. Warden broke off abruptly. “Lord Hardcastle, I can tell you no more of this sad story. What it has cost me to talk

to you thus, you will never know; let us not speak on the subject again."

"How can I thank you, Mr. Warden?" exclaimed Hardcastle earnestly, springing forward, and clasping Mr. Warden's hand, "how can I ever thank you for this proof of your confidence in me? For weeks past as I have thought and thought over this matter, like a man in a dream almost, my thoughts have ever led me back to you, as holding in your hands the solution of the mystery. I feel nearer the truth to-night than I have ever felt before. One ray of light breaks through the darkness, and we will follow where it leads. Mr. Warden, will you leave your home here for a time—it is dreary enough, Heaven knows—and with me visit the scenes of your first love and sorrow? Do you feel equal to it? Who knows but what the truth may lie hidden somewhere there. I cannot explain to you the workings of my own mind just now; I must try to think the matter out. At present I can only see Isola's hatred of you, and Amy's strong resemblance to her dead mother in impetuosity and vehemence of character. But there are other lights and shadows in the picture which must fall into their own place before it can be complete."

"Yes," said Mr. Warden, sadly, "Amy was a pale likeness (if I may use the expression) of her mother in mind and body. She resembled her in form and outline, so to speak, but lacked the full, brilliant colouring which made her mother so dangerously fascinating. Strange to say, the likeness was never so apparent to me as when she was lying cold and lifeless in her coffin; then I felt tempted to ask myself, is this Amy, or is it her mother?"

"And I, too," said Lord Hardcastle, quietly, "saw a look in Amy's face then I had never seen before. Mr. Warden, I have now but one

object in life, to rescue Amy dead, as I would have rescued her living, from scorn or dishonour. I want to write the name she has a right to bear, on her now nameless tomb. I want to be able to hold up the picture of the girl I love so truly, in all her innocence, and purity, and beauty, and to say to all the world, ‘this is the one I have loved in life, whom I love in death, and whom I shall love after death, through eternity!’”

Mr. Warden looked up at the flushed, earnest face of the speaker, then he said very quietly—

“Lord Hardcastle, I thought I knew you intimately; I find I have never really known you until to-day. Yes, I will go with you to Le Puy or anywhere else you may choose. I feel equal to it, and after all, for an old man like me it doesn’t much matter in what corner of the world he may lay his bones!”

CHAPTER X.

BEFORE starting for France, Lord Hardcastle received two letters. The first, from Detective Hill, ran thus:—

"SIR,—

"It is now so long since I have received any orders from Mr. Warden, that I venture to write to you, fearing he may be ill, and knowing you have his entire confidence in the matter on which I am engaged.

"Since I sent in my last report relative to Miss Kempe's movements, nothing of importance has occurred, until yesterday, when she received a letter enclosing another, evidently foreign. The outside envelope was too thick to enable my man (the postman if you will remember, sir) to discover what stamp was on the letter, but the crackle of the thin, foreign paper was unmistakable. As I write (at the window opposite her house) there are evident signs of packing up and departure going on in her room. I shall feel much obliged if you will transmit to me further instructions on Mr. Warden's behalf. The woman may possibly be leaving England, and I am anxious to know whether the investigation is to be continued, and the woman still watched, as I must necessarily appoint very different men for foreign work.

"Awaiting your orders,
"I remain,
"Your lordship's obedient servant,
"JERVIS HILL."

To this, Lord Hardcastle sent a brief reply—

"SIR,—

"Mr. Warden and myself think you are attaching too much importance to Miss Kempe and her movements, and that it really is not worth while to pursue this matter further. We are hoping for better results from another quarter.

"I remain,
"Your obedient servant,
"HARDCASTLE."

The second letter was from Frank Varley, written on the eve of his wedding-day, and ran as follows:—

"DEAR HARDCASTLE,—

"I dare say you have but one feeling in your heart for a poor, weak-minded wretch like me, that of utter unmitigated contempt. I don't attempt to justify myself, for under present circumstances it would be impossible. I am only, writing to enclose a small packet—a blue bow of ribbon. You will know, old fellow, to whom it belonged, and why I am sending it to you. I couldn't find it in my heart to put it behind the fire.

"Ever yours,
"FRANK VARLEY."

"Poor Varley," said Lord Hardcastle, when he read this. "He spent his strength for nought, and gave in before the race was half run! And yet who am I that I should pity or blame him? The end alone will show whose life has been best worth living!"

And now the preparations for the journey to France were completed, and one dull misty November afternoon, Mr. Warden and Lord Hardcastle said a long good-bye to the High Elms. Very damp, very cold and dreary the old house looked as they turned the corner of the steep avenue.

"Not in this world," said Mr. Warden, mournfully, "shall I call any place home again."

What could Lord Hardcastle say in reply? He clasped his old friend's hand with a firmer, tighter clasp, while the thought ran through his own mind—

"What will our coming back here be like?"

Early in the evening they arrived in London. The preparations for their journey had been very simple. No servants, very little luggage, and their destination even kept secret. Mr. Warden had informed his agents he would be travelling through Europe for some months for his health, and had given various *postes restantes* in France to which his letters were to be sent. He would advise them, he said, of any change in his plans should his inclination lead him in any other direction.

It was not without serious thought and anxiety that Lord Hardcastle had undertaken this journey. There could be no doubt that Mr. Warden's strength had given way very much lately, and it was incurring a heavy responsibility to induce a man at his age, and with his broken health, to go so far on what might prove to be a fool's errand after all. "But," reasoned Hardcastle, "he will certainly die if he remain in his own desolate home, brooding over his sorrows. Action and movement will do more for him than

anything else, and if we can but lift the cloud from the dead girl's grave, we shall both feel our life has not been spent for nought."

The roar of London at first sounded strangely in their ears, accustomed as they were to the saddest and quietest of households. Lord Hardcastle took upon himself the various small duties which travelling involves, and at once gave orders to be driven to Charing Cross Station. Leaving Mr. Warden at the hotel, he directed a porter to place their luggage in the booking-office to be in readiness for the morning tidal train, while he exchanged some English money for present use. There appeared to be a crowd of some sort round the booking-office, and the porter placed the baggage a little on one side, waiting his turn.

At this moment Lord Hardcastle's attention was attracted by a tall figure clad in a long, grey travelling cloak, the hood of which was drawn low over her face. She brushed past him, but he could not see her features, for her head was bent low, as though wishing to hide her face. Something peculiar in the swing of her walk arrested his attention; it was not ungraceful, but seemed as it were to keep time to some song or tune sounding in her ear, so even and regular were her steps. She was evidently in a hurry to save some train, and was crossing towards the third class ticket window, when Lord Hardcastle's luggage caught her eye. She stood still, looked round her on every side, then bending down, read attentively the labels on each box. At this moment the porter advanced to take charge of his baggage, and the woman, evidently altering her plans, walked slowly out of the station.

Lord Hardcastle returned to the hotel, and the woman in grey passed completely out of his mind. Finding Mr. Warden very much tired with the journey to London, he proposed that they should rest

quietly the next day, and pass over to Boulogne during the night. To this Mr. Warden agreed readily.

“I must husband my strength,” he said, “for it is slipping away rapidly. I feel now as if I were embarked upon my last mission, which must be well executed, or not at all.”

Lord Hardcastle looked up at him anxiously. How sad, and old, and worn the dear, kind face had grown lately! How white the hair, and sunken the cheeks, and the eyes with a far-away, mournful look, which said as plainly as words could speak, “it will soon be over now, and I shall be at rest.”

“Don’t speak like that, Mr. Warden,” he said, “or you will take away my last remnants of courage. Who can tell what may yet lie before us.”

“Who can tell, indeed,” echoed Mr. Warden, “who can tell.” He shivered as he spoke, and looked so really ill that Lord Hardcastle began to feel seriously uneasy about him, and begged him to see a doctor before he left England.

“No,” said Mr. Warden, firmly, “the night soon will come when no man can work. Let us not anticipate it by an hour. Not until we have played the last card we hold will we give up the game.” Then he said good-night, and went to his own room.

The next day rose dark and stormy, and Hardcastle trembled to think of the effect a rough passage might have on Mr. Warden in his weak state of health. He did not, however, offer any farther opposition to their journey, knowing it would be useless, and besides this, an undefinable feeling in his own mind kept urging him on to the native land of the two Aimées.

“I cannot explain why,” he said to himself, as they landed at Boulogne in the chill early dawn of the following day, “but I somehow feel as if we had only now struck upon the right track, and that all we have hitherto done has been so much lost time. I know there must be a reason for this feeling; some finer sense in my being must have seized upon some fact in this strange history which my coarser and more logical faculties have failed to perceive.”

So occupied was he with his own thoughts, that he had not noticed that he had become separated from his companion in the narrow landing-place, and had drifted into a crowd of porters, with their various loads, making for the custom-house.

Where was Mr. Warden? He looked right and left along the Quai, and there, standing half hidden behind some bales, stood the same tall grey figure he had noticed at Charing Cross Station. It was unmistakable now; the woman, for some reason, was evidently watching and following them; and, doubtful whether their separation was accidental or intentional, was at a loss whom she should keep in sight. Following the turn of her head, Lord Hardcastle could see Mr. Warden some little way in advance, and, hastening towards him, the woman suddenly passed in front, and disappeared down some narrow passage.

“Let her go,” thought Hardcastle; “somewhere, somehow, we may meet again. I shall know her long stooping figure and swinging gait anywhere.” Then, hastening forward, he soon overtook Mr. Warden, and calling a carriage, desired to be driven to the Hotel de la Cloche, situated somewhere in the heart of the town.

Lord Hardcastle had foreseen before starting that their journey must necessarily be performed by easy stages; they had, therefore, booked only as far as to Boulogne, intending to rest there a day or two to decide upon their route to Le Puy.

The Hotel de la Cloche stands in one of the quietest parts of the town, a little back from the broad, brick-built street, in a grassy, moss-grown quadrangle. An arched corridor runs round this quadrangle, and above this are built the various outbuildings of the hotel. A small fountain, with an insufficient supply of water, plays in the courtyard, and very miserable and dreary it looked under the dull November sky from the windows of the room which Mr. Warden had selected for a sitting-room.

More than ever sad and weary he seemed as he seated himself in front of a large wood fire he had ordered to be made. A pretence of lunch or dinner had been gone through, and the short November day was already closing in, the heavy stonework above the windows adding not a little to the gloom of the room. Lord Hardcastle had tried unsuccessfully various topics of conversation, feeling the necessity of arousing Mr. Warden from the sadness of his own thoughts.

“Tell me, Mr. Warden,” at length he said, almost despairing of success, “something about Le Puy; it is an unknown land to me. I have never visited that part of France.”

“Le Puy!” exclaimed Mr. Warden, suddenly arousing himself, “Ah, that is a country worth living in! It is a land of variety and beauty, of sunshine and solitude; less terrible than Switzerland, it is, at the same time, more interesting, because more varied. It is a land of extinct volcanoes; at every turn one is brought face to face with

nature under a new aspect. Here some mighty convulsion has upheaved gigantic rocks; there in the valley lie fertile plains watered by gushing mountain torrents; above all tower and frown the fantastic Cevennes, cut and fashioned into all sorts of wonderful shapes, and everywhere reigns a silence and solitude only to be found in the lonely mountain regions. Ah! it is a land of glory and beauty! But, my young friend, you will scarcely see it with my eyes; to me it is the saddest and sweetest of all lands, for there I first loved and first suffered, and there my two Aimées were born and grew to beauty." Then he paused, and presently added, in a mournful, passionate tone, "My poor little Amy! I fancy I see her now, creeping along the narrow mountain path, or looking over the verge of some deep ravine, both hands filled with wild flowers and grasses. She would never own to feeling frightened or nervous at the giddy height, but if she felt her little feet slipping, she would call out impatiently, 'Papa, papa! take my flowers, quickly please, I must not be kept waiting an instant.' It is almost too much for me to recall those days, Lord Hardcastle," he sighed, wearily, "I think I will see if I can get a little sleep; perhaps in the morning I shall feel brighter and stronger."

Then he left the room, saying good-night, and that he did not wish to be disturbed until the morning.

Lord Hardcastle looked after him sadly. "He will reach Le Puy," he thought; "his spirit will keep him up as far as that, but he will never come back again. Have I done wisely in inducing him to leave his home? But what home has he left? Only a mere skeleton or husk of one. This is our last and only chance; we are bound, at any cost to try it."

The wood fire crackled and burned, the window panes grew dark and darker, and long, fantastic shadows began to flicker across the oak-panelled wall, to the low, arched ceiling.

Hardcastle's thoughts wandered far away to the lonely house at Harleyford—vividly came back to him the stormy, windy night, the piteous howling of the dog, and poor Amy lying cold and wet and lifeless in his arms. Picture after picture of the past passed before his eyes—the dear dead face as it looked in the grey of the early morning, the strange, pained old look that had spread itself over the features until they almost seemed strange and unknown to him.

The fire crackled, the weird shadows leapt from floor to ceiling, and Hardcastle, drowsy with the overnight's journey, began to see strange shapes in the room, and fantastic visions began to mix with his waking thoughts. He fancied he was standing amidst the rocky, silent scenery Mr. Warden had just described to him. The mountain mists were rolling away from peak and crag, the summer sun was mounting the horizon, and there, on the verge of some terrible precipice, stood Amy—bright, beautiful, girlish as ever, both hands filled with flowers, which she playfully held out to him.

Tremblingly he advanced towards her, hoping to save her from what appeared instant death without alarming her; but the mountain mist swooped down upon them, enveloping Amy and himself in its damp folds. Then it lifted again, but no Amy was to be seen, and there, advancing slowly towards him, was the tall, stooping figure in grey, whom he had seen that morning on the Quai. She, too, stretched out her hands to him, but what she held he could not at first see. Nearer and nearer she drew, the mountain mists still clinging to her long, trailing skirt, and hiding her face as

with a veil. In another instant her cold, thin hands held his, and a deep, sad woman's voice said, slowly and distinctly, "Take it, keep it, and let the poor sinner go." Then he felt a ring placed upon his little finger, and there, flashing out in the mist and darkness was Amy's antique ruby ring.

What was it woke him at this moment? What was that noise sounding in his ears still? Could it be a door or a window shutting? He started to his feet and looked round the room. Nothing appeared to have been disturbed, the books and papers on the table were just as he had left them. Then he pushed aside the curtains, and looked out into the dreary quadrangle. The fountain sent up a feeble spray towards the leaden sky. The corridor looked damp and dismal as ever. Were his eyes deceiving him? Was he thoroughly awake, or could it be that there, slipping in and out between the pillars like a shadow almost in the dimness of the light, was the grey, stooping figure of his dream?

He sprang to the door, and flinging it back, let in a flood of light from the staircase and landing. Then he paused in amazement, for there, on the little finger of his left hand, sparkled and glittered an antique ruby ring with garter and buckle, and the motto, in old French letters, "*Sans espoir je meurs!*"

CHAPTER XI.

"TAKE it, keep it, and let the poor sinner go!" Through long days and sleepless nights the words echoed and re-echoed in Lord Hardcastle's ears. That they were spoken by an actual human voice he was positively certain, but all enquiries respecting the grey veiled figure proved fruitless, and from that time he saw her no more.

Very carefully and gently he broke the news of the restoration of Amy's ring to Mr. Warden, feeling the necessity that every circumstance connected with their search should be known to him as it occurred, for who could tell what might happen next?

Mr. Warden listened very calmly to the strange story—

"It is the beginning of the end," he said. "Heaven only knows what the end will be! Stranger things than this are, no doubt, in store for us. Keep the ring, Hardcastle, who can have a greater right than you to wear it?"

And Hardcastle kept the ring, and registered yet another vow in his own heart in much the same words he had vowed hand-in-hand with Frank Varley, that "by night and by day, by land and by sea, he would search the whole world through" to clear the name of the girl he loved.

Mr. Warden daily grew weaker and weaker. They rested a week at Boulogne, and then travelled by easy stages to Le Puy. After eight days' quiet travelling they reached the picturesque old city, and though tired and worn out to the last degree, Mr. Warden insisted

on being at once driven to a small quiet inn (it could scarcely be called hotel) situated half way between the town and his old mountain home.

"*A l'Aigle des Montagnes*" was the sign which hung over this quiet little hostelry, and its dedication could not possibly have been better chosen. Perched high in the second belt of rocks which surrounds Le Puy, it seemed incredible, when looked at from the plateau beneath, that aught but eagle's wings could mount so far. A narrow, winding path, made to admit the "little cars" of the country, with not an inch to spare on either side, led to the inn. To an inexperienced traveller the road seemed terrible and dangerous, but the hardy, sure-footed mountaineer made but light of it. What to him was a precipice, first on this side, then on that, and occasionally on both? Once arrived at the summit the view was simply magnificent, bounded only by the distant Cevennes, and showing, in all its sparkling beauty, the windings of the Loire and its many tributaries.

Hither some twenty years previously Mr. Warden had first come, and with an artist's appreciation of the grand and the beautiful, had returned again and again to paint the wild mountain scenery and ruined chateaux which were hung here and there like eagle's nests among the rocks.

Since those old days the place had twice changed hands, and the present proprietor was totally unknown to him. Nevertheless the place and its surroundings could not fail to revive many bitter memories and days both sad and sweet to him, and on the second day after their arrival, Lord Hardcastle saw in him such a rapid change for the worse, that he at once gave orders that a doctor should be sent for from Le Puy.

“It is useless, Hardcastle,” said Mr. Warden, when he heard the order given. “No doctor can do anything for me now. Let them get me a few tonics, which I can prescribe for myself, so that I may rally for a few days, and pay a visit to my old home here. Open the window,” he added impetuously, “this soft, sweet air brings life back to me.”

Then Hardcastle placed for him a low easy chair close to the casement, whence he could look right and left upon the mountain panorama, and even catch a glimpse of a turret of his old chateau standing high among the distant rocks.

Mr. Warden gazed long and earnestly upon the magnificent landscape, drinking in every sight and sound, as a dying man might gaze upon some loved scene whose memory he wished to carry with him into eternity. Lord Hardcastle dared not disturb him, he leaned over the back of his chair without a word, and endeavoured, as far as possible, to follow the train of his thoughts.

Suddenly Mr. Warden turned his head and looked Hardcastle full in the face. He spoke excitedly, and his voice appeared almost to have regained its old strength and firmness.

“Hardcastle,” he said “you have done a great deal for me, I know you will do one thing more. It may be the last favour I shall ask of you. Come here, stand at my right. You see, just between those sugarloaf crags, the west turrets of my old home—the Chateau D’Albiac it was called in those days. It stands on the highest ground in Cassagnac. A little to the right there is a low well-cultivated valley, with about five or six peasants’ houses dotted here and there. In one of these Isola’s people lived, and there my darling Aimée was reared as her foster-child. Will you go there for

me, and if you can find her, bring her here to me. I have one or two questions to ask, which she only can answer."

"Gladly," replied Hardcastle. "It has been my intention from the first to seek this woman out and question her. As soon as the doctor arrives, I will leave you in his charge, and set off without further delay."

"No," said Mr. Warden decisively, "you must set off at once; you do not know these mountain paths as I do, and to a stranger they are full of difficulties and dangers. Cassagnac is nearly six miles from here. You laugh at the distance. Five miles of these mountain paths is no light thing, I can assure you. If you start at once on one of the little mountain ponies, you will not arrive at Cassagnac till nearly sunset. Then you will have at least three miles further to go before you can get a night's lodging, for you cannot possibly by any means return here until to-morrow."

"Until to-morrow," echoed Hardcastle sadly, and the thought flashed through his brain "what if he be not here to-morrow?"

Mr. Warden read his thoughts, "It is not so near as that Hardcastle," he said quietly; "but it is not far away. Go at once, I implore you, for days and hours are getting precious to me now. Your doctor will be here before long; the people of the house are good and kind, and I feel at home with them. Go at once, I beg of you; let me not feel I have had my journey here for nothing. Ah! if my young strength would come back to me for one day, how gladly would I set off with you!" Then he leaned back in his easy chair wearied out, and once more begging Hardcastle to start immediately, closed his eyes as though he wished to sleep.

Hardcastle had no choice but to obey. He went at once to the innkeeper and his wife, and gave them strict orders to be constantly in and out of Mr. Warden's room during his absence, and one to remain with him throughout the night. Then he wrote a few lines to the doctor, requesting him to remain until his return on the morrow. Even with these precautions his heart misgave him, and he could scarcely summon courage to start on his journey.

However, he felt further contention with Mr. Warden would be worse than useless—it would be positively injurious to him, so with another farewell glance at his friend, apparently sleeping quietly in the window seat, he set off on his little mountain pony.

Then it was that the Cevenol scenery burst upon him in all its wild grandeur. It was not one magnificent picture which met his eye, but a hundred or more, for every turn of the steep mountain path brought to view some fresh tableau of startling beauty. But the one thing which struck him most was the solitude, the intense silence which reigned everywhere. The rush and roar of the falling torrent, the scream of a distant wild bird, and once only the lowing of some oxen, evidently yoked to one of the rude cars of the country, these were the only sounds which broke the perfect stillness of the scene.

"Cassagnac," he thought, "must be a very tiny village, for its highway to be so little frequented." It had slipped his memory, so full it was of other thoughts, that none but the hardiest or poorest of the villagers would remain to face the terrible winter of these parts, when roads and valleys alike are choked with snow. In fact he was journeying on to a deserted village, for, by the end of November at latest, most of the peasants have taken refuge in more accessible localities.

Quietly and steadily the little pony kept on his way, never swerving an inch right or left; the gritty lava crunched under his feet, and now and then a huge boulder would fall from the path into the deep ravine below, with an echoing crash. Hardcastle had provided himself with a plan of the country,—a rudely sketched one, drawn out by the landlord of the "*Aigle des Montagnes*," for the use of his guests—but he scarcely needed it, so well did the little pony know his road.

As the afternoon went on the Chateau D'Albiac stood out plainly in front of him. But although apparently so near it was yet some little distance off, for the pathway, ever mounting, took many curves and bends, and Lord Hardcastle found he could not possibly arrive there before twilight set in. The sun sank lower and lower, the shadows lengthened and deepened, and although the air for the time of year was remarkably balmy and mild, Hardcastle could not repress a shudder as he took the last curve which brought him face to face with the old chateau. Was it the silence and loneliness of the place which so oppressed him, or was it that his nerves had been shaken by the strange events through which he had lately passed? A feeling he could not understand took possession of his mind. He felt almost like a man walking in a dream, seeing strange sights and hearing strange sounds, so unreal, so unlike anything he had ever seen was the mountain picture around him. There, straight in front of him, stood the old chateau, the highest point in the rocky landscape. Every door barred, every window shut, not to be opened till the following spring. The sun sank lower and lower, the shadows lengthened and deepened, the rocks began to take fantastic shapes against the evening sky, lighted in the west by the long golden and purple streaks of the dying day. Not a sound broke the intense silence of the place, and Hardcastle, throwing the reins

on his pony's neck, in perfect stillness drank in the beauty and glory of the scene. The sun, with a farewell scarlet light, fired the windows of the old chateau, danced upon peaks and crags of fantastic shape, and sent a flood of glory upon two solitary female figures standing on one of the highest points of the worn-out volcanoes.

"I must be dreaming! It is a land of visions here; I have lost control over my own senses;" said Hardcastle, aloud, as he pressed forward to get a nearer view of what seemed to him an illusion. Two figures at such a time, in such a scene of loneliness and solitude! Nearer and nearer he drew. What did he see? Breathless and nerveless he leaned forward deprived alike of speech and power. Mountains, crags and sunlight swam before his eyes and faded away into mist, while the words of Mr. Warden, in the study of Harleyford, rang and echoed in his ears. "I can see her now—see her as she stood the first day I saw her in the lonely mountain country. Her feet on the black-red lava, the glowing sunset behind her head, her rich dark beauty flashing back every gold and crimson ray. The long white robe she wore, and the dark-faced nurse by her side." There, straight in front of him, was the literal realization of the picture in all its details, for there, awe-struck and silent as himself, stood Amy Warden and Isola the nurse!

CHAPTER XII.

THE time passed slowly and heavily to Mr. Warden during Lord Hardcastle's absence. The Docteur Lemoine arrived in due course, the ribbon of the Legion of Honour fastened in his button-hole, and a general air of got-up-for-the-occasion about him. It was not often, indeed, that he had a patient of Mr. Warden's standing to attend. His experiences, as a rule, were limited to the dying beds of the simple peasantry about him, for it is not often that a Cevenol mountaineer calls in the aid of a doctor—rarely, indeed, until the patient is beyond the hope of recovery.

He looked inquiringly at Mr. Warden, and was proceeding to ask him a multitude of questions, when the latter stopped him. "My friend," he said, "I shall be your patient for such a very short time that it is really not worth while for you to take a great deal of trouble about me. My disease is mental, not bodily, and what I most require is rest and quiet. What you want to know you must find out from your own observation, and I will promise to take any remedy you may prescribe."

"But," expostulated the doctor, "I have been called in to attend M'sieur, who I am told is suffering. What will you? There are questions I must ask. My profession"—

"Doctor Lemoine," again interrupted Mr. Warden, "what I wish is that you should stay in the house in case of need till my friend returns. The people here will make you very comfortable, and you can come into my room and look at me as often as you like; only, I beg, do not trouble me with any questions."

Then the doctor bowed and withdrew, and was compelled to content himself with questioning the landlord and his wife of their strange guest, and in his broad mountain *patois* declared again and again that such treatment was unheard of, incredible; that if he had not seen death itself written on the stranger's features he could not have supported such an insult.

So the time wore slowly away; the afternoon faded into evening, and Mr. Warden retired early to rest, carefully attended by the kind-hearted innkeeper.

The next morning rose grey and misty, and Mr. Warden could not repress a feeling of anxiety for his young friend traversing the (to him) unfamiliar mountain paths. What if he had missed his way and had been benighted in some lonely, unfrequented road. What if Isola's people had proved treacherous, and looking upon him as his (Mr. Warden's) emissary, had maltreated or perhaps murdered him! A hundred such suppositions rushed through his brain, as weak and feverish he lay on his couch in his sitting-room.

The Docteur Lemoine came in from time to time, entreating him to calm himself, and prescribing tonics or light stimulants.

Towards noon the mist began to lift, but still no sign of Lord Hardcastle. Two, three, four, five o'clock passed, and Mr. Warden started to his feet in a state of feverish excitement. "I can bear this no longer," he said, ringing the bell violently. "We must at once organize a searching party. Doctor, don't stand there gazing at me; we may want your help now; we have delayed too long as it is!"

As he spoke the door opened, and Lord Hardcastle slowly and quietly entered the room. His face was very pale, but a look had come into his eyes, a quiet triumphant sort of look, which seemed

to say plainly “we have fought a good fight and have conquered at last.”

“Thank Heaven, Hardcastle, you are safe! What has happened? Tell me quickly, for I can see you have something to tell me,” said Mr. Warden, sinking back once more on to his couch.

“Yes, much has happened, Mr. Warden, and I have a great deal to tell you. But you must nerve yourself to bear the news, and prepare to receive a great surprise. Doctor, where are your tonics? we shall want them just now, and then, I hope and trust, get rid of them all for ever!”

“Hardcastle, Hardcastle! speak out I implore you; this is simply torture; you speak as if you had some good news to tell. Great Heavens, what good news can there be for me, with wife and daughter both dead and buried in darkness and disgrace!”

“Yes, Mr. Warden, I will speak out plainly,” replied Lord Hardcastle calmly. “Are you sure both wife and daughter are dead and buried? Listen to me. When Isola came to you and told you your wife was dead, she told you a lie. This she was ordered to do by your wife, who had soon wearied of her life of sin and returned with her to these mountains. Thoroughly repentant, and anxious to repair the wrong she had done you, she framed this lie in order that you might forget her, and in a second marriage lose the recollection of the misery of the first. Isola, only too glad once more to have her young charge in her own care, faithfully fulfilled her mission. This I have heard from Isola’s own lips, and I must say truer or more passionate devotion than her’s to her mistress, I have never seen.”

“My wife not dead,” repeated Mr. Warden slowly, as though scarcely able to grasp the fact. “Where is she Hardcastle? Take me to her or bring her to me! my poor, poor Aimée! Is she waiting for my forgiveness before she will come?”

“I did not say that your wife was living now, Mr. Warden; she died about two months since. It is a sad, sad story,” he spoke very slowly now, pausing long between each sentence. “In England, one stormy night in September, we will pray that she lost her footing in the dark, and fell into the swollen stream; she lies buried in Harleyford churchyard.”

Then Mr. Warden sprang to his feet and threw up his arms with an exceeding bitter cry.

“My Aimée, my poor Aimée! I see it all now, it was she who stood outside the window in the rain and tempest. No, no, Hardcastle, you cannot blind my eyes. There was no accidental slipping into the dark river, she could not bear the sight of my love and devotion to another woman, and in her madness and jealousy threw away her life.”

“Let us rather hope, Mr. Warden,” said Lord Hardcastle gravely, “that the same feeling of penitence and self-sacrifice which induced her long years since to send you a fictitious message of her death, led her to render the fiction a reality in order to save you from the disgrace of an exposure of your sorrows, and that you might live in peace with the one whom you had chosen.”

Mr. Warden made no reply, he sunk back in a chair and covered his face with both hands.

Then the doctor interposed; he had been gazing in amazement from one to the other, totally unable to understand their English, yet thoroughly comprehending that something startling and wonderful, and of great importance to Mr. Warden, had occurred.

“See how M’sieur suffers,” he said angrily, addressing Lord Hardcastle, “he cannot sustain any more such news. Cannot Milord wait until to-morrow for the rest which must be said?” Then he handed to Mr. Warden a glass of wine.

“There is no reason why I should wait until to-morrow,” replied Hardcastle, speaking loudly to attract Mr. Warden’s attention, “he has heard the worst now, all that remains to be told is good news.”

“Good news!” exclaimed Mr. Warden, “what good news can there be for me? My wife, my daughter!—Ah! my other Amy, have you heard of her, Hardcastle? Tell me quickly what you know, where is she, living or dead?”

“I have heard of her, I have seen her, I have even spoken with her. Mr. Warden! can you bear good news, the best of news? Your daughter Amy is in this house now, and waiting only for a word from you—” He paused, for Mr. Warden once more risen to his feet, had suddenly staggered and fallen back senseless in his chair.

Now the little doctor took the lead—

“I have obeyed Milord too long, in resting here so tranquilly. You must follow my orders now,” he said, severely and dictatorially.

“Willingly,” replied Lord Hardcastle, as he assisted to remove Mr. Warden to a couch. “I only stipulate one thing, and that is, that when my friend opens his eyes they shall rest first on the being he loves best in the world, his only daughter.”

And they did so rest. Amy crept noiselessly into the room, paler, thinner, graver than in the old days, and kneeling by her father's side, took his hand in hers.

The movement aroused him. He opened his eyes, and they rested full on her face. Amy controlled herself admirably.

"Papa, dear," she said, "you must not speak till I give you permission; I am going to turn both doctor and nurse (with a smile at Hardcastle) out of office, and endeavour to cure you myself."

"I am cured already," replied Mr. Warden, as he held his daughter tightly clasped in his arms, "you are only just in time, Amy; a few more days' delay, and you would have been indeed an orphan," then he checked himself. How much did his daughter know? How should he tell her what she must be told?

"Miss Warden knows all she need know," said Lord Hardcastle, rightly interpreting his thoughts. "She has also, on her part, very much to tell you, but I do implore you wait at least for a day before you talk over the sad events of the past few months."

He spoke earnestly, and as he did so laid his hand entreatingly on Mr. Warden's arm, which still encircled Amy's waist. Then, for the first time, Amy saw glittering on his little finger her own ruby ring.

"Papa, dear," she exclaimed in her old, quick, imperious manner, "will you ask Lord Hardcastle what right he has to wear a ring of mine?"

"I have no right whatever to do so, Miss Warden," said Hardcastle gravely. Then he drew the ring from his finger, and handing it to her with a low bow, left the room.

CHAPTER XIII.

AT this time Mr. Warden received his first packet of English letters from the *poste restante* at Le Puy.

Among others there was one from Inspector Hill, which ran as follows:—

"Scotland Yard,
"Nov. 20th.

"SIR,—

"I think it right you should be informed of certain facts which have come to my knowledge respecting some jewellery belonging to Miss Warden, viz., a diamond necklace, earrings, and brooch, which have already been restored to you through Mr. Varley, and an antique ruby ring which Miss Warden was supposed to have worn the day she left home, but which in reality was left by her on her toilette table with the diamonds which she had worn on the previous night at the Leicestershire county ball.

"My informant is a Miss Marian Kempe, whom you may possibly remember I have mentioned once or twice in my reports to you as a relative of the girl Lucy Williams, at one time Miss Warden's maid.

"This girl Williams, if you will remember, I stated had a most disreputable brother who had been convicted of connivance with poachers to rob his master's estate. On his release from prison he returned to his native place, and once more fell into his old dissolute habits. He appears, on several occasions, to have had

interviews with his sister at your house, and to have threatened her in various ways if she could not find sufficient money to enable him to reach New York, or some other large city, where he hoped, by false written characters, to find some means of support.

“Then occurred Miss Warden’s mysterious disappearance, and the jewellery lying loose upon the table proved too strong a temptation for the girl, who at once secreted the diamonds and ring, and when asked by you for the dress in which to describe Miss Warden in the advertisements, cleverly included the ring in the description. This ring she at once handed over to her brother, who immediately started for Liverpool, intending to wait there for farther supplies which his sister had promised, if possible, to procure for him.

“The diamonds she appears to have kept back for a time in case they should be asked for, but in the state of confusion into which your house was thrown, and Mrs. Warden being too ill to interest herself much in the matter, they were not missed; in fact, I believe, the jewel case was not even opened when handed over to Mrs. Warden’s care.

“The girl most probably intended to dispose of the diamonds in London, and afterwards to have escaped with her brother to New York, when, as you know, she was seized with small-pox, and died at the house of her relative, the Miss Marian Kempe whom I have already mentioned.

“This Miss Kempe is, undoubtedly, a woman of good character, holding extreme religious views, and willing to sacrifice everything in the discharge of her duty. She was at one time engaged to be married to Tom Williams, and although the match was broken off, is evidently still very much attached to the man.

About a week since she came to me in travelling dress, and appeared very much fatigued with a long journey she said she had just taken across the channel. She also seemed much agitated, and asked me in an excited tone if I ever read the Gospel, and if I knew who it was Christ came to seek and to save? ‘See here, Miss Kempe,’ I said in reply, ‘if you are alluding to publicans and sinners, I conclude you have something to say to me about that rascal, Tom Williams. If so, say it at once, please, for I have no time for sermonizing, I assure you.’ ‘He is no rascal,’ she said, indignantly, ‘he is a repentant sinner, and will yet, please God, be numbered among the elect.’ Then she proceeded to tell me a very extraordinary story. How that Tom Williams arrived at Liverpool, intending to wait there for Lucy; how he waited and waited, and at length received, through some secret channel, the news of her death, and that the diamonds had been restored to you. In his haste to escape, he took passage in the first steamer he came across, which chanced to be a trader bound for Boulogne. It is also possible he imagined himself to be safer across the channel than across the Atlantic. Landing at Boulogne, he appears to have had some drunken quarrel with an Italian seaman, who wounded him severely in the thigh with a large clasp knife. Tom was eventually carried by some passers-by to a quiet lodging-house on the Quai, and the woman of the house showed him a great deal of kind attention. A fever set in after this stabbing affair, and Tom was reduced to a very low ebb. Utterly friendless, in a foreign country, and at death’s door, his thoughts turned to Miss Kempe as the one most likely to help him out of his troubles. He consequently made an appeal to her, couched in very penitent language, and implored her, by her past affection for him, to help him out of his sin and misery. This letter he sent under cover to some comrade in London, who posted it to Miss Kempe’s address. The bait succeeded

admirably. The woman at once locked up her room, disposed of a few valuables she had, and started for Boulogne. At Charing Cross Station, when about to take her ticket for the night train, she caught sight of your luggage on the platform, addressed to Boulogne. She at once concluded you were in pursuit of Tom, and determined to wait and watch your proceedings. She, however, crossed the next morning, and hurrying to Tom, informed him of your approach, and asked what he thought it best to do. 'This is what they want, Marian,' he said, drawing the ring from under his pillow, 'take it to them, and beg me off.' This she seemed afraid to do, and waited about the hotel all day before she could make up her mind to enter. When at length she summoned courage to do so, she wandered by chance into your sitting-room, and finding Lord Hardcastle asleep by the fire, the idea occurred to her of placing the ring on his finger as he slept, thus avoiding embarrassing questions, and thinking, poor, foolish woman, that if your property were restored to you, you would no longer wish to prosecute the rascal. Her object in coming to me was twofold. First, to assure me of the genuineness of the man's repentance, and secondly to find out, if possible, your intention on the matter.

"Of course nothing would be easier than to bring the man to justice. I have not the slightest belief in his penitence, and I farther think, if he should recover, he will induce this infatuated woman to marry him for the sake of her small savings.

"I must ask your pardon, sir, for this long letter I have unwillingly troubled you with, and awaiting your orders, beg to remain,

"Your obedient servant,
"JERVIS HILL."

“Postscript.—Since writing the above I have received a special communication from Dunwich Police Station, in which, perhaps, sir, you may feel interested. It relates to the conviction of a gipsy woman and tramp, for stealing. In her possession was found a long travelling cloak and thick veil. This she states she found in a plantation in your grounds about two months ago, when she had there taken refuge from a thunderstorm which had set in with violence. This thunderstorm, sir, we must all remember as occurring on the night Miss Warden’s body was found. This cloak and veil most probably belonged to her and enabled her to pass unnoticed and unknown through Dunwich streets, and were most likely thrown on one side by her when wearied and heated by her long walk she found them heavy and cumbersome. They remain at Dunwich Station to be claimed and identified, if possible, and may chance to be of great importance should you wish at any time to recommence the investigation I had the honour to conduct for you.

“J. HILL.”

To this Lord Hardcastle wrote in reply, at Mr. Warden’s request—

“SIR,—

“Mr. Warden wishes me to thank you for your letter, and to inform you that he cannot ask you to recommence your former investigation for the simple reason that Miss Warden has returned to her family and friends, and will in due time communicate all that is wished to be known.

“As for Tom Williams, Mr. Warden has not the least intention of prosecuting him provided he gives up his malpractices and leads a sober, honest life. Please to have him informed of this, and also

strongly counsel Miss Kempe to return to her home and keep her money in her own hands.

"Your obedient servant,
"HARDCASTLE."

CHAPTER XIV.

AMY'S story took long to tell. Not in one continuous narrative, but at long intervals, and in answer to many questions did she give her father the history of the days she had spent away from home.

And this is the substance of her narrative.

On that bright August morning, the day after her first ball, she went out of the house with a light step and a gay young heart. No thought of care or sorrow in her mind, on the verge of womanhood, with a life full of promise and brightness stretching out before her, the world, as it were, at her feet, and the crown of her youth and beauty on her head, suddenly a dark cloud fell over it all, shutting out the brilliant landscape and sunlight, and enveloping youth, beauty, hope and promise, the whole of the glory of the summer's day, in the mist and darkness of the valley of the shadow of death.

Amy Warden, thinking only of her last night's scene of triumph (for such it had been to her) walked gaily through her father's grounds till she came almost to the verge of the park lands. Here she met the postman, "My letters, if you please," she said, exchanging a kind "good morning" with the man. He handed two to her in feminine handwriting, and passed on. The first she quickly disposed of, it was from a young girl friend, declining an invitation of Amy's for the following day. The second, in a strange foreign hand, although bearing the London post mark, she opened as she quitted the park for the Dunwich high road. It was (as has already been stated) market day at Dunwich, and two or three villagers from Harleyford passed at this moment with whom she

exchanged greetings, and who, for the time, drew her attention from the letter.

Once more turning her eye upon the page, she read words which made park, woodland and road alike swim before her eyes, and which sent her young blood rushing to her face and back again with a chill to her heart. Recovering herself partially, she turned back into the park lands, and there, under the shadow of the great trees, read through her letter.

It was written partly in Cevenol *patois*, partly in good French, and thus it ran:—

"MA MIGNONNE,—

"Hast thou forgotten Isola, thy nurse? Hast thou forgotten the one who rocked thee in her arms to sleep, and led thee over the mountain to gather wild campions to weave garlands and crowns for thy beautiful mother? Dost thou know thou hast a mother living now among those mountains? Has he who shadowed and cursed her young life told thee the story of her suffering and wrong? For twelve long years, ma cherie, has she lived a life of loneliness and sorrow, and now she lies on a bed of sickness and pain with the hand of death upon her. She is wearying for thee, my Aimée, wilt thou not go to her? I am in London, and I wait all day long at your great Midland Station, for I know thou wilt come. I shall know your sweet face among a thousand, for have I not seen it night after night in my dreams? And thou! thou wilt know Isola, thy old nurse, by her brown hood and cloak of the mountains."

In utter bewilderment and amazement, with every nerve in her body jarring and trembling, Amy read and re-read her letter, and as she did so the conviction of its genuineness and truth forced itself

upon her. Two thoughts only remained on her mind, the first, “my father told me a bitter cruel lie when he denied my mother to my face, and placed another in her stead;” the second, “my mother still lives! If I hasten I may yet see her before she dies. My darling, beautiful mother, whom unknowingly I have loved all through my life.”

Her anger against her father was only exceeded by one feeling, her intense, fervent love for her mother, whose image now stood out distinctly in her young memory. Isola’s words had brought back a whole world of recollections, the crowns of flowers, the mountain paths, the things which to her had seemed before but floating fancies or childish dreams, now took their right form as distinct vivid realities.

Not knowing anything of the circumstances which had brought about Mr. Warden’s separation from his first wife, to her excited imagination he appeared a perfect monster of wickedness, a cruel, fickle tyrant, who had cast off one who loved him truly, for the sake of another woman—

“He told me a lie,” she kept repeating to herself again and again, “to make me love that other woman, and to steel my heart against my own mother.”

Then the picture of that mother, lying sick unto death, rose before her mind, and one thought swept away every other.

“I will go to her at once,” she said with a wild cry, “at any risk, at any cost. Who knows, I may yet perhaps save her life.”

With Amy, to think was to act; not a moment’s hesitation now. There was another way to Dunwich station, besides the high

road—a quiet way, which led through fields and lanes, a little circuitously, perhaps, and for that reason not likely to be traversed on the busy market day by any but gipsies or tramps. This road Amy at once took; she knew there was a train leaving for London about noon, and this she determined if possible to save. What was a five miles walk to a girl at her age, young, active and strong; besides had she not one all-absorbing thought to shorten her road, and lend wings to her feet—

"I am going to the mother I have dreamed of and loved all through my young life."

Once arrived at Dunwich, she was pretty sure to escape recognition. The station (a junction, with a large amount of traffic) was on market days positively crowded, and Amy, passing rapidly through the throng, took her ticket, and seated herself in the London train without more than a casual glance from the guard, to whom she was personally unknown.

Then she had time for thought. But the more she thought, the more the difficulties of her position grew upon her. How could she act for the best? It was simply an impossibility for her to consult her father on the matter, for would not all his efforts be directed to keep her mother out of her rightful position, and would he who had lived so long in sin (so she thought) with another, be likely to have any sympathy for her in her present undertaking.

"I will wait and consult with Isola," was the young girl's thought as the train whirled her on towards London, "she will most likely know what my mother's wishes are," and as she thought of that mother, and the years of suffering her father's cruelty had condemned her to endure, every feeling was absorbed in one

indignant resolve to leave no means untried to have that mother righted and restored, if not to happiness, at least to peace and honour.

As the train entered the London Station, she noticed a woman clad in a long brown cloak, with a peasant's hood drawn over her head, whom she quickly identified as Isola; not from her recollection of her nurse's face, for here memory failed her, nor yet alone from her dress, which, though strange, seemed familiar to her, but the woman was evidently waiting and watching, and her long earnest gaze into each carriage as the train drew up at the platform, could not fail to strike the most casual observer—

"Ma bonne, ma bonne," said Amy in a low voice, as she jumped from the train, stretching out both hands towards her nurse—

"Holy mother!" exclaimed the woman, seizing Amy's hand, and passionately kissing it—

"Which of my two children is it that I see? The eyes, the voice, the hands, the hair are her mother's own. My child, bless the Saints and Holy Mary whenever you look at your sweet face in the glass, for thou wilt never be without thy mother's portrait all thy life long."

Then followed question and answer in rapid succession. Amy ascertained from Isola that her mother had entered the convent of St. Geneviève, some few miles distant from their old home. Isola breathed not a word of her mother's transgression, nor how she had abandoned husband and child for the caprice of a moment. Isola's intense love for, and devotion to her mistress, blinded her to all her faults; she could see her in but one light, that of a wronged, suffering woman, and as such she spoke of her. She dwelt long

upon Mr. Warden's harshness and cruelty to his young wife, and told Amy how at length his treatment became insupportable, and they were compelled to seek another home; how that her mother had eventually taken vows in the Convent of St. Geneviève, seeking in religion the happiness she could not find in the world. Isola made no mention of the lie passed off on Mr. Warden respecting his wife's death. To her mind the one weak point in Aimée's character was her love for her husband and her real penitence for her fault. This to Isola was simply incomprehensible—

"The man hates you, why should you love him?" was her argument. "He treated you badly, you did well to leave him."

Nevertheless, whatever order Aimée gave must be carried out to the very letter, and with the blind unreasoning fidelity of a dog, she obeyed her mistress's slightest wish.

Thus it was, that intentionally or unintentionally, Isola's narrative conveyed a very wrong impression to Amy's mind. The young girl scarcely realized her own feelings towards her father, so completely had they been reversed—

"I could not have believed all this Isola, even from your lips," she said passionately, "if he had not himself told me a lie, and denied my own mother to my face."

So they journeyed on. Miss Warden had only a few sovereigns in her purse, but Isola seemed to be well supplied with money—

"Where does all your money come from?" asked Amy wonderingly, as she noticed Isola's well-filled purse. Isola pointed to her ears, despoiled of ornaments—

“You sold them!” exclaimed Amy, “why, they must have represented the savings of at least twenty years,” she added, recollecting the practice of the French peasantry to invest their earnings in jewellery, and especially in earrings, which they exchange for others more valuable as they rise and prosper in the world. Isola bowed her head—

“Could they be yielded to one more worthy, or to one who had a greater right?” she enquired earnestly.

Tears filled Amy’s eyes at the proof of such devotion, and she said no more.

By the time they arrived at Folkestone, Amy had become more calm and collected. She endeavoured to mark out for herself some plan of action—

“I think Isola,” she suggested, “we will telegraph to my father from here that I am safe and well, and that he will hear from me again.”

“*Mon Dieu!*” exclaimed Isola, “and be stopped by the police on landing at Boulogne! No, no, my child, wait till thou hast safely reached thy mother, then telegraph, write, or do what thou wilt.”

Amy saw the force of the argument, and contended no more, but it was difficult, nay impossible for a girl who had loved her father so passionately as she had, to shut out altogether from her imagination the agony of mind he must be suffering at her unaccountable absence. But what could she do? The difficulties of her position seemed insuperable, and her mind had become so bewildered, she felt she could scarcely now distinguish between right and wrong. Besides, the one all-absorbing intense desire to

see her mother had taken such possession of her, that every other feeling was comparatively deadened.

They crossed by the night mail to Boulogne, and thence without delay continued the route to Le Puy. A wearisome journey, and which, to Amy, seemed endless, so long and dreary seemed the hours which kept her apart from her idolised mother. At length it was accomplished, and at the time that the whole country round Harleyford had risen to join in the fruitless search, and Frank Varley and Lord Hardcastle had clasped hands in a solemn vow to rest not day nor night till the wanderer was brought home, Amy was lying in her mother's arms at the Convent of St. Geneviève, or kneeling by her side kissing her hands, feet, or dress, in a perfect ecstasy and bewilderment of joy that her wildest imaginings were at last realized, and that she had found a mother indeed.

"Ah," said Amy, here breaking off her narrative and drawing a long breath. "No one could have painted my mother to me as she really was and as I found her. It would have needed a special inspiration to have done so. To describe material beauty, the beauty of form, colour, and outline—yes, it can be done; but to paint the many transparent tints of a sunbeam, or the light and shadow of a handful of the sparkling, rippling stream! It is impossible. When one can be found to do this then may he begin to paint my mother in all her changeful, wondrous beauty. As a very empress, as a star in a dark sky she shone out among the little brown nuns at St. Geneviève. They were all so little, so brown, so old, not a young face among them. Not one of them had been the other side of the mountains for more than thirty years. They were all most kind and courteous, and so indulgent to my mother in all her caprices, treating her almost as a wayward, spoilt child, and only insisting on such matters as were absolutely necessary to keep

up the discipline of the convent. In her tiny bare little room, in her coarse brown-grey dress, my mother had passed ten of the best years of her life. It is marvellous to me, knowing her as I now do, that the routine and confinement of a convent life had not broken her spirit and quite worn her out. Oh, papa, I hate routine, I hate discipline, I detest a quiet, orderly life, and yet I feel as if, should I live to be withered, and brown, and old, I should like to come here to these kind little nuns and end my days in peace with them."

Amy sighed wearily; she often sighed now. The strange events through which she had lately passed had tried her beyond measure, but the bitterest trial of all had been the choice she had been compelled to make between her father and her mother. To believe in the truth of the one was to acknowledge the falsehood of the other, and it was hard indeed for her young, loving heart to choose between the two.

Mr. Warden looked at his daughter anxiously. She was greatly changed, and he could not but feel that his bright, light-hearted Amy would never come back again. Now and then flashes of her old self would shine out, and she would look up in his face with her own laughing eyes, but it was only now and then, and the Amy of to-day was a sadder, paler, more thoughtful being than the Amy of six months ago.

"Amy, dear," said Mr. Warden, tenderly, "tell me one thing and I will ask no more questions to-night. Did your mother ever allude in any way to the wrong she once did me, or did you learn this story from some one else?"

"From Lord Hardcastle," replied Amy. "When I first saw my mother, as she clasped me in her arms, she said, 'my darling, do

you know the whole truth, and can you love me still?' I, imagining she referred to your neglect and cruelty, and her impatience and flight as described by Isola, replied that I did know the whole truth, and I loved her better than ever. After this nothing more was said by either of us on the matter. It was not until Lord Hardcastle stood before me on the rocks and insisted, with his thin pale face and solemn manner, that I should hear the whole truth and then judge between my parents, that I knew what had really occurred. Papa, papa, I felt then I should hate him for ever and ever for having cast down my idol from its pedestal. Yet," she added, tearfully, "I ought to be grateful to him, too, for has he not given back to me my own dear father, and cleared away the cloud that had risen up between us?"

"Thank God for that, indeed, my child, and had it not been for him, Amy, your father would not be here talking to you now. A few more such days of grief and anxiety would have worn out the last remains of my strength. I owe Lord Hardcastle a debt I can never repay, and it pained me beyond measure the other day to hear your abrupt question as to his right to wear your ring. You must have wounded him deeply."

"But, papa, dear, that was because he was not equal to the occasion. Some gentlemen I know, such as Mr. Varley for instance, would have said 'if I had but the right to wear it,' or some such polite speech. Of course I should have thought it very impertinent and great nonsense. But no one will ever accuse Lord Hardcastle of talking nonsense! He mounts his high horse immediately, gives me back my ring with scarcely a word, and with the air of an emperor walks out of the room!"

“Amy,” said Mr. Warden, after a moment’s pause, “you spoke of Frank Varley just now; do you care to know what has become of him?”

“Yes,” said Amy, looking up eagerly, “where is he, papa? What did he do when he heard I was lost? Tell me, don’t keep me waiting an instant,” she added in her old tone and manner.

“For one whole month, my child,” said Mr. Warden, carefully watching his daughter’s face, “he was broken-hearted, inconsolable, in fact all but a madman. The next,” he said this very slowly, for he was loth to strike the blow, “he was engaged to Mary Burton, and married ten days afterwards.”

A start, a shiver, a very flushed and then a very pale face, that was all, and then Amy repeated in a strangely quiet tone, “Married to Mary Burton! I remember her well, that large, fair, good-looking girl, who didn’t know how to make men look at her! We won’t talk any more to-day, papa. The little doctor will scold me if I keep you up late and tire you. Ah!” she said with a sigh and a look towards the mountains, “I think those little brown nuns at St. Geneviève have a far better time of it than we who stand out here in the cold and storm to fight our life’s battle!”

CHAPTER XV.

"SHE was like a wild bird beating its wings against its prison bars," said Amy, continuing her narrative a few days before they started for England. "The excitement and pleasure of seeing me had acted magically on her, so much so that I found it difficult to realize the truth of Isola's description of her before my coming. In a day or two, however, the excitement subsided, and I became seriously alarmed. She seemed possessed by a spirit of unrest, and I began to fear for her reason. No sleep at night, no rest for one five minutes in the day. She fulfilled all her religious duties faithfully (they were not heavy ones, and the Abbess was indulgent) but every spare moment she spent with me was passed in one ceaseless moan. 'I must see him; there will be no peace for me till I have looked at the dear face again. Help me, my child, help me!' I knew not what to do for the best. I felt it would be useless to consult the Abbess, or even the Convent Confessor, on the matter, as their experience in the world's ways was even less than mine, and they looked upon everything in the light of their religion. Besides, I knew there was no possibility of their allowing my mother outside the walls, even in charge of a sister, for their rules on this point were strict. What could be done? I felt, too, that you ought to be written to by some one, but by whom? Mercy to Mrs. Warden, whom I was convinced was ignorant of my mother's existence, withheld my hand, and whom could I trust in such a matter, or to whom, indeed, could I expose my father's guilt? I felt confident in my own mind that you would naturally guess whither I had gone, and would possibly frame some excuse for me to Mrs. Warden and others. But, O, my father, I have no words to express the agony, the absolute torture of

mind I suffered at the thought of your unworthiness, of your cruelty to one whom I believed to be so noble and good as my mother.

“The difficulties, too, of my position were very great. The Abbess was kindness itself to me, and bade me stay with my mother as long as I pleased, but she was constantly asking me questions as to my family and connections, and I, not knowing how much of my mother’s story had been confided to her, was fearful of betraying my mother every hour of the day. Latterly, however, all these anxieties gave way to one more terrible than all. Little as I knew of such cases, I felt sure that my mother was in a state bordering on madness, and every day that passed increased her danger. Isola, who came daily to see us, had but one thought in her mind, how to save my mother, and was for ever suggesting to me some wild plan, which I felt to be either wrong or impracticable. At one time she would propose I should receive a letter, informing me of your death; at another she suggested I should frame some story that would prove you to be utterly base, and unworthy of any woman’s love. But that I could not do, for deep down in my heart there was a feeling I could not explain, nor put into words, but which made me angry or indignant whenever Isola began to anathematize you.

“At length, one evening after I had gone to my own room, utterly worn out with my mother’s excitement and misery, a sudden thought came into my head. ‘Why not gratify her, why not enable her to see the man she so blindly worships?’ Then it flashed across my mind how easily the thing could be done! I had but to assume my mother’s nun’s dress and hood, and no ordinary observer could have told it was not my mother herself. She in my dress would easily be permitted to pass the portress’s lodge, and once outside

the convent walls Isola would be at hand with further disguises, if necessary, and means of facilitating the journey to England.

“I felt, as you may imagine, I was incurring heavy responsibility in acting thus. But what was to be done? I had no one to advise me. I knew that you ought to be communicated with, and it was simply an impossibility for me to leave my mother in the state she was in. Once I had hinted at the advisability of my going back to consult with you as to what ought to be done, but she became perfectly frantic at the bare thought of such a thing, and throwing herself at my feet, had implored me ‘not to quench the last ray of light in her life.’

“Isola entered heart and soul into my plan. ‘I will go with her,’ she exclaimed. ‘She is too much of a child to be trusted by herself in the world. Where she wanders thither will I go, where she dies there will I die, and there will I be buried.’ I gladly consented to this, as Isola had already once made the journey to England, and would know all the details of the route. My mother, too, was so bright and quick, and her remembrance of the English you taught her so perfect, that I had scarcely any fear of difficulties arising on the road. My one and only anxiety was how would she conduct herself in her interview with you. Would she act quietly and with discretion, or would she cause some open scandal and disgrace to you and to your family? I did my best to prevent this by exacting from her a solemn promise that she would not go down to Harleyford, but remain in London at the hotel where Isola stayed, write to you from there, and there wait your reply. My heart misgave me when she made me this promise. Yet, I thought to myself, after all it doesn’t much matter what she says or does in England. The truth will have to be made known to the world, and the rightful wife acknowledged. ‘Ah! it was a weary, bitter time,’”

and here Amy broke down utterly. “My brain aches now when I think of it, and a pain comes into my heart which, I think, will be there till my dying day.”

“Poor child!” said Mr. Warden, tenderly smoothing the masses of dark hair which clustered upon Amy’s white forehead, as she laid her head wearily on his shoulder. “My poor little girl, you have been too much tried. You were too young to bear so heavy a load of responsibility and sorrow. For an old worn-out heart like mine a little suffering, more or less, cannot make much difference, but for you, in your bright, fresh girlhood, it was hard indeed to bear up against such a complication of mistakes and wrong-doing.”

“Yes,” said Amy, wearily, going on with her story, “it was very hard and very miserable, and after my mother had started, I nearly broke down altogether.

“Our plan succeeded beyond our hopes even. In the evening twilight, in the dress in which I left my home, my mother passed out of the Convent gates, with Isola, on the pretext of visiting some old friends on the other side of Le Puy. You, my father, had you seen her then, might have mistaken her for your own daughter, so complete was the resemblance in face, form, and figure. Perhaps she looked a little paler, a little thinner, and a few years older (certainly not more) than I did six months ago, but it would have needed younger and keener eyes than those of the old nuns to have discovered this. And I, in my mother’s dress and hood, had not the slightest fear of detection. I had become so accustomed to the daily routine of the convent, that I knew to the least iota every one of my mother’s religious duties. Latterly, too, she had been so weak and ill she had been allowed to remain very much in her own room. I had acquired, or rather reacquired, the singing intonation peculiar

to the Cevenol peasant, and knowing our voices were so nearly one pitch and tone, had no fear of discovery on this point. I drew the hood a little more closely over my face; I was perhaps a little less sociable and friendly with the sisters, and thus for three days I escaped detection.

"But on the fourth day I knew that Pére Ambroise, the Confessor, was expected, and I determined that with him I would attempt no further concealment. He was a personal friend of my mother's; it was he who induced her to enter the Convent of St. Geneviève, and it was his wise counsels, I don't doubt, which had restrained and quieted her impetuous temper, as long as it was possible to do so. Such a dear old man, papa, he ought to be made a bishop at the very least, instead of ending his days here as Curé and Confessor to twenty or thirty little nuns. I contrived to meet him as he entered the convent garden, and while walking with him towards the house, told him, in as few words as possible, the story of my mother's escape, and my reason for planning it. At first he was very angry, although not so much as might have been expected, considering the heavy sin he believed to have been committed.

"'*La petite Sœur* (that was the name my mother was known by on account of her comparative youth) ought to have consulted me,' he said, 'I have taught her for many years, and she might have relied on my counsels.'

"'Would you have let her go had she done so?' I asked.

"'Without doubt, no,' he exclaimed, earnestly.

"'Was there any other way of saving her life or reason?' I asked again—

“‘My daughter,’ he replied, very gently, ‘you are very young, but I pray that long ere you have reached my age, you will have learned that there are some things to be thought of before life or reason, and that a man or woman must be at times prepared to sacrifice both rather than honour, faith, or the service of God.’

“I felt so ashamed that he should have to speak to me in this way, that I knew not what to say. I felt how wrongly I had acted from first to last. But what was I to do? I was altogether bewildered, and began to wish I had consulted the good Father before. However, it was too late now. I could only repeat I was very sorry to have grieved and offended him, but perhaps if he knew the whole of my story he would not judge me so harshly.

“‘I do not ask for your confidence, my daughter,’ he replied, ‘there may be things in your family history you would not care to repeat, but I had a right to expect your mother’s confidence, and now I find it was but half-given.’

“Then he told me how I had made myself amenable to the laws of the country in thus assisting in the escape of a nun—

“‘But,’ he added kindly, ‘you, my child are too young to be prosecuted on such a matter, and Isola too old. She will return and repent, she is too true a daughter of the Church not to do so, but your mother never will. The world has had her heart throughout her sojourn here, and the world will claim its own.’

“Then he told me I was welcome to stay here as long as I pleased, as guest at the convent, or if I had other friends with whom I would prefer staying, he would have much pleasure in conducting me to them. Was he not a splendid man, papa?” added Amy enthusiastically, “he looked so noble and so good while he was

speaking, he made me feel thoroughly ashamed of my own conduct, and the part I had played throughout. Of course I told him I would remain gratefully with the nuns till I heard from my mother or you, and then determining there should be no further deceit on my part, told him how I expected to hear through Isola's nephew, a young woodcutter in the neighbourhood.

"How anxiously I longed and waited for news you may imagine, but a whole week passed, and still not a word. At length, about ten days after my mother's departure, and when I was feeling positively sick with suspense, and a dread of what was coming, Isola herself, to my great amazement, appeared at the convent gates. I hastened down to her, dreading I knew not what.

"'Where is my mother?' was my first question—

"'I left her in London,' replied Isola, 'she ordered me to return here to thee and await her orders, and I have done so. It was hard to part from her, she looked so young and beautiful, but she told me she would manage now her own affairs; that she was going down to the little country village to see him she loved so well, and that thou wouldst need an escort back to thy own country. I gave her all the money I had, and my old brown hood and cloak, and here I am, my child, to take care of thee.' Then she handed to me a few short hurried lines from my mother, telling me 'she was safe and happy, and knew well what she should do; that it might be some little time before she wrote again, but when all was happily arranged she would send for me, and I know,' she concluded, 'all will be happily arranged. I shall win him back; I have loved him so well I cannot lose him.'

“My heart sank as I read the note. Something told me the worst was to come, and as day after day slipped by, and not a line not a message from either father or mother, my brain began to grow dazed and stupid, and I think I really lost the power of reasoning. I dared not write to you; I felt how justly angry you must be with me, whatever your own fault, for having acted so madly and foolishly. I wandered backwards and forwards from the convent to Isola’s cottage, from Isola’s cottage to the convent, hoping for news, praying for news, and feeling the suspense to be more than I could bear. O, papa, papa!” concluded Amy, breaking down once more, and giving way to a passion of tears, “if you had not come when you did, your poor little Amy would have lost her reason altogether, or else have laid down to die from sheer weariness and sickness of heart.”

Gently and tenderly Mr. Warden soothed his daughter.

“My poor little girl,” he said, “you have been too much tried for one so young. This is the last time we will talk over this sad story, but before we lay it on one side for ever, you must hear one or two things it is only right you should know. Lord Hardcastle has told you no doubt most of what occurred during your absence, and all our grief for your loss, but did he tell you the part he has played throughout; what he has been to me all through our trials; and how it was he who guided us here? Tell me that Amy!”

“No,” replied Amy, “he has never mentioned anything of that kind to me. Indeed he has scarcely spoken to me the last few days, and whenever he looks at me, his eyes grow so large and cross, that I feel sure he is thinking in his own mind, ‘what an immense deal of trouble this self-willed silly girl has given us all! what a pity everyone is not as sensible and clever as I am!’”

Then Mr. Warden commenced from the very beginning, and told Amy every particular, even to the smallest detail, of all that had occurred during her absence. He spared her nothing. All his own grief and despair he laid bare before her, the solemn vow, too of Frank Varley and Lord Hardcastle, and how each had played their part. He recounted to her all the terrors of that dreadful night when death was in the house and the baying hound betrayed her mother's presence. Step by step he led her on through the sad story of the finding of her mother's body, his own broken-hearted sorrow, and Lord Hardcastle's intense grief. Amy never lifted her eyes from his face, but drank in his every word and tone. Like one awaking from a dream, silent and enthralled she sat and listened. As Mr. Warden repeated to her Lord Hardcastle's words in the library at the High Elms, "I want to be able to hold up a picture of the girl I love so truly, in all her innocence, and beauty, and purity, and to say to all the world, this is she whom I have loved in life, whom I love in death, whom I shall love after death, through eternity!" Amy sprang to her feet with clasped hands, exclaiming—

"Papa, papa, what is this, I do not understand." At this moment the door opened and Lord Hardcastle entered the room. Anything more embarrassing could not be imagined. Carried away by his feelings, Mr. Warden had spoken loudly, and Amy's high-pitched voice must have rung the length of the corridor. For a moment all were silent, and Amy, confused and nervous, leant over the window-ledge, dropping stones and dry leaves from the flower-boxes on to the verandah beneath.

Lord Hardcastle was the first to recover himself.

"Mr. Warden," he said, "I have come in to say good-bye; I shall leave, I think, before daylight to-morrow, for a little run through

Spain. I am rather interested in Dr. Lytton's account of the Moorish excavations going on just now. You are looking so thoroughly well and happy, that I quite feel my services are no longer needed."

He spoke carelessly, almost indifferently, but there was a mournful ring in the last few words which went straight to Amy's heart.

"He must not go, he shall not leave us in this way," she exclaimed, suddenly turning from the window, addressing her father, but stretching out her hands to Lord Hardcastle. The old bright look had come back to her eyes, the old imperious tones sounded once more in her voice, "How can we thank him? What can we do for him who has done so much for us. Lord Hardcastle," she continued, turning impetuously towards him, with flushed face and sparkling eyes, "I was very rude to you a short time ago, can you forgive me? You were wearing my ruby ring, will you take it back again, and keep it for ever and ever in remembrance of my gratitude to you? I have so little to offer," she added apologetically, with a little sigh, drawing the ring from her finger and holding it towards him.

"But I want something more than the ring to keep for ever and ever," said Lord Hardcastle, in low earnest tones, for Amy's voice and manner, told him that the icy barriers between them were broken down at last. "Not now, Amy," he added tenderly, as he felt the little hand he had contrived to secure, trembling in his own; "not now, for we have scarcely as yet passed from beneath the cloud of the shadows of death, but by-and-by, when the dark winter days have come and gone, and the bright spring sun shines down once more upon us, then I shall hope to come to you and ask

not only for this little hand, but for all you have to give, even for your own sweet self!"

There was yet one more dark shadow to fall before the travellers started on their homeward journey. Amy had proposed to her father that they should pay a farewell visit to the little brown nuns at St. Geneviève, to thank them for their hospitality to her. Mr. Warden gladly acceded to her request, and the visit was paid the day before they started for England. On leaving the convent, they purposed visiting Isola in her lonely little hut in the valley, intending to make some permanent provision for her comfort for the rest of her life.

"Poor faithful creature," said Mr. Warden pityingly, as they descended by the wild steep footway, "I would gladly ask her to return with us, were it not for the recollection of falsehood and misery which her face brings with it."

Before they reached the hut, however, they were met by Isola's nephew, the young woodcutter, of whom mention has already been made. He looked grave and sad, and lifting his hat respectfully to Mr. Warden, waited for him to speak.

"How is your aunt this morning, André," said Amy, "shall we find her within?"

The young man shook his head.

"She is gone, mademoiselle, she will never return. This morning at daybreak the angels carried her soul away. Since mademoiselle left us, she wearied and sickened, she eat nothing, she never slept. There in the window is her lace cushion with the bobbins untouched, and day and night she sat and moaned in her wicker

chair. Yesterday, when I tried to make her take some food, she turned her face to the wall, 'No, no,' she said, 'the summer flowers are faded and dead, why should the withered leaf hang upon the bough?' She never spoke to me afterwards, and this morning, when I went to her room to ask how she was, I found her lying dead and silent on her bed. Will mademoiselle come in and see her as she lies? She looks beautiful with her wreaths and garlands of flowers."

This, however, Mr. Warden would not permit, for he felt his young daughter had already been tried beyond her strength, and Amy, with the mists of tears hanging over her eyes, looked her last at the Cevenol valley, and said a long farewell to the beautiful solitude.

And so the winter snows and clouds came and went, and the spring sun shone out once more, calling into life and being a thousand sweet sights and sounds. It lighted up the grey house at Harleyford, and fell slantwise through the tall elms on to the tender grass beneath. It shone through the east window of Harleyford Old Church, on to a quiet wedding party assembled there one bright May morning, and played in many coloured beams on two monuments standing side by side in the grassy graveyard.

And far away in the lonely valley of the Cevennes, the same spring sunshine lighted up a quiet weed-grown resting-place, and fell in quivering lines and curves upon a simple wooden cross, engraved in rude peasant's carving, with these few words—

"ISOLA."

"Fidèle jusques à la mort."

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